



Adopting a Sustaining Peace Lens to the COVID-19 Response

Céline Monnier

Cover Photo: With the support of MINUSCA, some Central African painters contribute through a series of wall frescoes in the 8 districts of the capital.

UN/MINUSCA / Herve Serefio

NYU | CENTER ON
— | INTERNATIONAL
CIC | COOPERATION

726 Broadway, Suite 543
New York, NY 10003
cic.nyu.edu

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Abbreviations.....	2
Emerging challenges and opportunities for sustaining peace in the COVID-19 crisis	3
A disruption in UN peacebuilding activities.....	4
Silver linings of the current COVID-19 crisis: seizing opportunities.....	5
Sustaining peace while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic: UN approaches	8
Intergovernmental response	8
The Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Fund, and Peacebuilding Support Office	9
The Peacebuilding Commission.....	9
The Peacebuilding Fund	10
The architecture for whole-of-system approaches to the COVID-19 response	11
The rest of the UN system	12
Opportunities to strengthen the sustaining peace and prevention agendas in the COVID-19 response ...	15
Foster peace from the onset of the crisis	15
Adopt more integrated approach to sustaining peace in the COVID-19 response.....	16
Support systematic conflict-sensitive analysis across the whole UN system	17
Annex: Secretariat and AFP approaches to sustaining peace in the COVID-19 crisis.....	18
Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.....	18
United Nations Development Programme	18
Development Coordination Office.....	19
The Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention	20
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).....	20
The World Health Organization (WHO)	21
United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).....	21
World Food Program (WFP)	22
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	22
Box 1: Bringing communities together—the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina.....	7
Box 2: Conflict-sensitive analysis—a misleading name.....	14
Box 3: The role of the PDA in the COVID-19 Crisis Response	20

Acknowledgments

The report is based on 28 semi-structured interviews with member representatives and UN staff to assess how the sustaining peace approach has been implemented in the COVID-19 response.

Interviews were conducted under the rule of non-attribution. This report is a rapid assessment, intending to provide food for thought, but more research is needed to capture the full UN response, and particularly to assess its impact on the longer-term. CIC is very grateful to all interviewees for their time and keen interest in participating in this analysis. We are grateful for the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for this research.

About the Author

Céline Monnier is a program officer with the Peace and Security program at New York University's Center on International Cooperation. Her work focuses on prevention and peacebuilding.

Abbreviations

AFP	Agencies, funds, and programs
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CCA	Common Country Assessment
DCO	Development Coordination Office
DPPA	Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
HDP	Humanitarian-development-peacebuilding
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PBC	Peacebuilding Commission
PBF	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PBSO	Peacebuilding Support Office
PDA	Peace and Development Advisor
PDNA	Post-Disaster Needs Assessment
RC	Resident Coordinator
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Emerging challenges and opportunities for sustaining peace in the COVID-19 crisis

In 2016, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the Security Council adopted twin resolutions on sustaining peace. The resolutions stated that sustaining peace is a process of building a common vision of a society and recognized the primary role of national actors in addressing the root causes that may lead or have led to violent conflicts. When needed, the UN system can provide support through all three pillars to help national efforts to build peaceful societies. These resolutions place sustaining peace at the core of UN work: both as an objective in itself, as well as a lens that the whole system should use to make sure its efforts do not increase risks of violence and, where possible, that they contribute to building peaceful societies.

Adopting a sustaining peace approach is now more relevant than ever. COVID-19 is creating a series of crises: beyond the immediate health impact, the virus itself and governments' response to it have affected economies worldwide, worsening food insecurity and deepening inequality. There have been reports of human rights abuses in many instances, rising political tensions, negative impacts on social cohesion, and effects on mental health. These issues can deepen pre-existing social fractures in any country, creating additional layers of grievance as the most vulnerable people in our societies may be disproportionately affected. Addressing these risks early on and building resilience to them is key to preventing the potential for violence. While the issues might be more urgent for fragile and conflict-affected countries, they are relevant considerations for policymakers everywhere, as no country is entirely immune to violence. Indeed, revisiting and strengthening the social contract is important even during peaceful times, in order to ensure that peace is sustainable. Large-scale social unrest in developed countries reminds us of this universality, as it is a signal of a certain level of conflict within society.

In some parts of the world, lockdowns can give a false sense of peace, as street violence decreases or protests move online. Interviewees pointed out, however, that this decrease in violence is only temporary, as root causes remain unaddressed, and more to the point, some may currently be increasing. Looking ahead, both the socioeconomic recovery phase as well as the distribution of vaccines and treatments will need to be handled with care to avoid feeding into patterns of exclusion (e.g., those based on groups or regions).

A fundamental idea underpinning sustaining peace is that root causes of violent conflict cut across development, politics, and human rights. National actors recognize this, in that their own prevention actions naturally deal with a range of issues in order to address risks and build

resilience.¹ In light of this crisis, the need for sensitivity to interlinkages and more integrated approaches become even more evident.

To address the many impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a system-wide implementation of the sustaining peace approach is critical to ensure that UN response contributes to decreasing risks for violent conflict in the longer term—including efforts to “build back better.” In this context, the value of the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding (HDP) nexus in particular has become very concrete and practical—drawing attention to the need to think about how to build peaceful societies from the onset of the crisis, and avoid institutions focusing only on emergency response.

In this paper, we highlight some of the key challenges for peacebuilding in the immediate COVID-19 period as well as in the longer term, based on interviews with 25+ individuals across the UN system and with member states. We document the ways that entities across the UN have made positive steps toward implementing a sustaining peace approach, and close with recommendations for deepening these gains across the system. The 2020 peacebuilding architecture review provides an immediate opportunity to take some positive steps forward.

A disruption in UN peacebuilding activities

At the same time that social fractures may deepen and peacebuilding needs increase, the pandemic is disrupting activities that are central to the UN’s sustaining peace approach. First, it becomes **more difficult to get a correct assessment of the situation** and its impact on peacebuilding. As an interviewee highlighted, movement restrictions make it often impossible to meet partners and organize field visits to collect information. The fact that COVID-19 is a new problem further compounds the difficulty; it would require identifying new stakeholders and sources of information, which is seriously hindered in the current situation.

The pandemic also disrupts activities that are central to the UN’s sustaining peace approach.

The second issue the pandemic brings, and particularly the restriction of movement, is the **disruption of UN activities at all levels**. At headquarters, **intergovernmental bodies** need to adapt their working methods. While the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) is praised by most interviewees for its swift adaptation to new working conditions, the Security Council for instance has encountered more difficulties. Challenges include loss of a certain interactivity, the need to find a safe virtual platform, and loss of capacity to travel to the relevant countries to gather information and exchange views.

¹ Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, “Nationally Led Prevention: Practical Examples of Approaches to Risk and Resilience” (New York: Center on International Cooperation, June 2019).

On the secretariat side, travel and meeting restrictions are particular hurdles for the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and others engaged in **preventive diplomacy and mediation**, as these activities are heavily reliant on face-to-face interactions. Special envoys and regional offices deal with confidential information and the quality of their work often depends on the trust they can build with partners. Virtual meetings and phone calls are less well suited to fostering confidence, and the conversation can be less open and less forthcoming given the lack of interpersonal connection.

The current situation also disrupts the work of the UN in the field. Lockdowns can **limit movements of peacekeeping missions**, and local populations may become more hostile to foreigners for fear of the virus. This can hinder the capacity of missions to deliver on elements of their mandates related to peacebuilding, for instance the strengthening of public institutions, which is critical during this crisis. Movement restrictions also **create difficulties for peacebuilders to foster social cohesion** within communities, which is particularly essential when trust in government is low. Face-to-face dialogues and workshops are put on hold. On a more operational level, some agencies also highlight that the use of protective gear when delivering services to population often impedes facial recognition and thus increases a sense of mistrust; additionally, there are concerns about a heightened risk of looting of their warehouses as economic insecurity has increased.

Last but not least, at a time when peacebuilding activities are more needed than before, there is enormous pressure to divert funds to answer immediate humanitarian needs, and for peacebuilding funding be reduced in the coming years due to competing priorities as well as a global economic slowdown.

Silver linings of the current COVID-19 crisis: seizing opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic also brings new opportunities for peacebuilding. To start with, we now all have a common enemy: the virus itself. The secretary-general has seized this opportunity to **call for a global ceasefire**. Some interviewees praised this effort, highlighting encouraging progress in certain regions, and a wide international support. Others are less enthusiastic. They point out that most support comes from non-conflict-affected governments and international organizations, rather than countries with ongoing conflicts. Some would have liked to see a more active role for the UN in guaranteeing the ceasefire, and some mention that databases such as ACLED (the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) are not showing strong results of the ceasefire yet.

Some interviewees report that the current crisis makes it **easier for them to advocate for violence prevention, cross-pillar, and nexus approaches**, as the situation on the ground shows the clear need to address challenges across the economy, human rights, politics, and mental health, among other things. As one concrete example, the pandemic hinders access to the justice system at the same time that it is creating an increase in justice problems and grievances for

people (e.g. evictions, loss of healthcare). Remedying these justice challenges will require investing in justice for all in order to protect people from an immediate rise in violence (e.g., a rise in domestic violence) and to ensure that their grievances do not accumulate over time and deepen existing social fractures.² Indeed, the crisis sheds light on the fact that access to justice is an important resilience factor for violence. Additionally, in conflict-affected countries, violence can hinder the health response—meaning that working across pillars and implementing the nexus will be key to delivery—**a triple nexus approach is paramount.**

Countries are presented with the opportunity to renegotiate their social contracts, and the UN is also rallying around the opportunity to **build back better.** The virus highlights patterns of exclusion in a very direct way, and thus provides opportunities to create inclusive dialogue around health and socioeconomic issues, and for the government to reach underserved areas. Given that the risk factors for violence may be increasing during this crisis, building back better is also an opportunity to make the promotion of peaceful societies—in line with sustainable development goal (SDG) 16—a more deliberate effort for governments, to ensure that countries will be able to navigate this health crisis, as well its indirect socioeconomic consequences, while minimizing social conflicts.

Finally, several interviewees suggest that the current movement restrictions provide an opportunity to **think about how to be more inclusive,** since we have been able to work from home but still connect to each other. New actors can be included in the conversation as we create more robust virtual platforms. The divide between the UN in Geneva and the UN in New York, which is repeatedly mentioned as hindering cross-pillar collaboration, becomes less relevant in the current situation, as more geographically distant actors can be included in the conversations. The same is true for the UN in the field. While UN and humanitarian country teams are often based in capitals, the use of virtual platforms can lead to a more systematic engagement of actors based in remote regions, over longer periods. It can also change dynamics within societies. For instance, an interviewee also pointed out that since the disease affects young people to a lesser extent, it gives them an opportunity to be more active and meaningful contributors to their societies. In some countries, youth have been involved in social work, such as purchasing and delivering food to homebound elderly people.

² David Steven et al., “Justice in a Pandemic – Briefing One Justice for All and the Public Health Emergency” (Pathfinders/ Center on International Cooperation, April 2020).

Box 1: Bringing communities together—the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Efforts to bring leaders and/or communities together across divides stretch beyond the secretary-general's call for a ceasefire. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) for instance, the tripartite presidency—comprised of Bosnian, Croat, and Serb members—often struggles to find common ground around critical issues (last year's 13-month governance formation crisis being a case in point). As the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously generated health and socio-economic emergencies, the presidency members, momentarily at least, put aside their political differences and adopted a unity approach to fight COVID-19. On March 25, in a joint statement,* they called on the citizens of BiH to protect people's lives through solidarity and unity. The international community engaged in BiH welcomed the joint statement, along with the UN resident coordinator and Adama Dieng, the secretary-general's special adviser on the prevention of genocide. In his briefing to the Security Council, High Representative Valentin Inzko indicated that the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina managed to prevent a significant loss of life in the face of the outbreak based on their cooperation to enforce mitigating measures and their advocacy of joint efforts of all of the country's citizens, irrespective of their nationality.

Even if the ceasefire does not apply per se in BiH, which is not a country at war, the UN actively worked to advocate for the need for greater cooperation, coordination, and joint action across significant political divides, so as to encourage a more effective response and recovery across the entire country. The need to cooperate around an emergency response and the related technical, coordination, and logistical issues can serve as an important entry point for constructive dialogue and trust building. In turn, this could serve as a basis to approach other critical issues in the longer term. In the particular context of BiH, interviewees acknowledged that a "common enemy" in the form of the pandemic might generate shifts in the political dynamics that have long divided the country.

*Source: Merdijana Sadović, "Bosnia: Coronavirus Forces Rare Moment of Unity," (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, accessed 25 June 2020), <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnia-coronavirus-forces-rare-moment-unity>

Sustaining peace while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic: UN approaches

This section provides a brief overview of approaches taken across the UN system to use a sustaining peace approach while responding to the COVID-19 threat. While not comprehensive, the purpose is to give quick and early insight into what is being done, as well as opportunities for further engagement.

Intergovernmental response

As of mid-June, two resolutions have been adopted by the **General Assembly** on COVID-19, neither of which refers directly to sustaining peace.³ The resolutions do, however, encourage member states to adopt approaches that are critical to preventing violent conflict, such as “leave no one behind,” fostering collaboration rather than competition between member states, and emphasizing the need to respect human rights and prevent xenophobia. COVID-19 is also mentioned in a resolution related to sustaining peace—currently under negotiation—provisionally entitled *Implementation of the recommendations contained in the report of the secretary-general on the causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa*.

More than three months into the crisis, the **Security Council** so far has failed to adopt a resolution on COVID-19. Several interviewees observed with disappointment the politicization of the pandemic and a lack of leadership. Russia introduced the idea of lifting sanctions to alleviate pressure on countries so they can concentrate their efforts on fighting the virus; the discussion has become a political minefield. Additionally, China and the United States continue to disagree on whether the country of origin of the disease should be mentioned in a Security Council resolution. These dynamics highlight once again that the Security Council presents a unique set of challenges in the promotion and discussion of the sustaining peace agenda. As stated in the 2016 resolutions, sustaining peace efforts should be nationally driven, and may be more fruitfully supported through voluntary mechanisms such as the PBC and country teams.

³ “Global Solidarity to Fight the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” A/74/L.52 (2020). “International Cooperation to Ensure Global Access to Medicines, Vaccines and Medical Equipment to Face COVID-19,” A/74/L.56 (2020).

The Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Fund, and Peacebuilding Support Office

The Peacebuilding Commission

In the absence of a resolution from the Security Council, the PBC is the only intergovernmental body that has clearly linked the pandemic to peace. Interviewees consider the PBC an important forum for member state discussion in this crisis, and that its role should continue to be strengthened. The PBC is also considered a more relevant forum than the Security Council by some, as the pandemic increases risk factors for violent conflicts, rather than creating a direct threat to international peace.

The PBC was agile in adapting its working methods, holding an ambassadorial-level virtual meeting on the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding and sustaining peace shortly after the New York shelter-in-place order. The country configuration has been a centerpiece of the PBC response to COVID-19. Reportedly, the chairs of the country configuration held a meeting early on to identify opportunities to react. Since then, the PBC has convened meetings on Liberia, Central African Republic, Papua New Guinea, and the Gambia, as well as two regional ones on West Africa and the Sahel and the Great Lakes. These meetings enabled a context-specific approach, looking into the particular impacts of the pandemic on peacebuilding processes in each country and region. They provided a space for discussion to mitigate the negative impacts on peace dividends achieved over the years, including through a call for more resource mobilization.

The PBC has brought different parts of the system together to discuss the impact of COVID-19, particularly through briefings from, among others, the Development Coordination Office (DCO), to present the socioeconomic recovery framework; the World Health Organization (WHO); the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); and the World Bank. At the beginning of June, the PBC also held an ambassadorial meeting on UN socioeconomic responses to COVID-19. By highlighting links between the pandemic, socioeconomic issues, and peace and security, the PBC has shown its capacity to be an instrument to support the triple nexus and a cross-pillar approach.

Most interviewees want a **stronger role for the PBC to address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on peacebuilding**. Some interviewees suggested that there had been too much focus on the country configuration. They would like to see more space to discuss other countries, as well as to have more thematic discussions—for instance, on lessons learned on the Ebola crisis (which has been touched upon during the regional meetings), and including outside experts (e.g., academic institutions). Indeed, as underlined above, the COVID-19 crisis can increase risks for violence in all countries, not only in post-conflict contexts—and thus the country configuration limits the reach of the PBC. All member states could potentially benefit from broader discussions on how to mitigate those risks. In addition, some interviewees ask whether the PBC could play a more concrete role in mobilizing funding to respond to increased peacebuilding challenges linked to the COVID-19 crisis in the most fragile countries. While these insights are welcome, it is also

important to keep in mind that the PBC faces an inherent limitation in discussing the global impact of COVID-19 for peace and security, since only 34 member states participate in the discussions.

The Peacebuilding Fund

The PBF released its 2020-2024 strategy just before the COVID-19 crisis. The plan calls for an increase of 70 percent of its funding over the next five years, but the global economic contraction underway might make the achievement of this objective more difficult.

Many interviewees believe, however, that the PBF is an important tool for addressing the peacebuilding challenges attached to the COVID-19 crisis. The PBF project in Central Asia on joint management of water channels was given as an example of how its current work is even more relevant now, particularly in a context of increased resource scarcity and border tensions.

In order to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis and its indirect impacts, the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) conducted an analysis on how the fund can reposition itself in the midst of the crisis. The PBF is coordinating closely with resident coordinators to understand how the UN country team is affected, and to discuss how to adjust to this new context. The PBF is a flexible fund by nature, which reportedly enables beneficiaries in the field to adapt their project to the current situation without excessive constraints. The PBF has also invited resident coordinators to submit new programming proposals to mitigate socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.⁴ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, a discussion is taking place on how to utilize the community dialogue platforms established by the secretary-general's peacebuilding initiative, "Dialogue for the Future," to combat hate speech, fight xenophobia, and generate positive stories around collaboration between divided communities in their joint efforts to fight the pandemic. In addition, in May, the PBF finalized a new Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding and Partnership facility project, "Aligning UN-WB risk analysis and COVID-19 response." Its objective is to give resident coordinators access to rapid support for joint analysis with the World Bank.

Reportedly, the PBF has a long-standing practice of coordinating with the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and the SDG Fund, which has continued during COVID-19, and has expanded to include the new UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund. They share lessons learned and ensure complementarity. Resident coordinators (RCs) coordinate these funds at field level. To minimize confusion and fragmentation, fund managers clearly set limits to what they can do. For instance, the UN COVID-19 Response and Recovery Multi-Partner Trust Fund did

⁴ It identifies five areas that may be relevant in the current situation: crisis management and communication; inclusive and equitable response and recovery; inter-community social cohesion and border management; countering hate speech, stigmatization and addressing trauma; and supporting aspects of the implementation of the secretary-general's call for ceasefire.

not invest in countries that had accessed the UN Central Emergency Response Fund for COVID-19 response, and the PBF is not supporting humanitarian and health sector initiatives.

The architecture for whole-of-system approaches to the COVID-19 response

The UN system has adopted three overarching plans: the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, the secretary-general's report "Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity" on socioeconomic impacts, and a "UN framework for the socioeconomic response." The secretary-general also released the "COVID-19 and Human Rights: We are all in this together" report. There is no separate plan on sustaining peace, but different plans mention the need for conflict-sensitivity.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) **COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan** calls for a conflict-sensitive approach and foresees a role for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to address specific risk factors for violence—for instance, by supporting local government to plan and deliver basic services rapidly, and efforts to address stigma and discrimination. The plan also calls for a strategy to prevent risks of violence towards refugees, migrants, IDPs, and persons of concern by enhancing awareness and understanding of COVID-19.

In the secretary-general's report, "**Shared responsibility, global solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19,**" the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic and policy response on the potential for violence outbreak in the medium and long term is overlooked. The report even states "the risk for social disorders and riots is low," without acknowledging that the epidemic and its response can potentially trigger conflict drivers, such as scarcity and competition over resources. Some of socioeconomic impacts identified are risk factors for violence, but the report fails to link them.

The **UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19** is led by RCs at country level. Each UN country team is requested to elaborate a COVID-19 response plan following this framework's pillars. Specifically, the socio-economic response should be anchored in the national development plan, the Common Country Assessment (CCA), and the Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. The framework does not mention "sustaining peace," refers to conflict sensitivity only twice, and does not have a specific section on peacebuilding or violence prevention. However, it acknowledges the risk of social upheaval due to COVID-19 stressors, particularly on fragile communities. The framework also has a specific section on social cohesion, which states that the "UN is ready to repurpose its social cohesion portfolio at the country level, to reinforce peace and stability and strengthen social dialogue and democratic engagement processes."⁵ The framework highlights that peace and development advisors (PDAs) and the UN

⁵ Secretary-General of the United Nations, "A UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19" (New York: United Nations, April 2020), 29.

development system are available to support to national actors in the design of national and local responses that are conflict-sensitive. The document ends with a section on how to “build back better,” which does not include a stand-alone objective on sustaining peace.

The secretary-general’s report “**We are all in this together: Human rights and COVID-19 response and recovery**” acknowledges that “combined with existing instability, the pandemic poses a real threat to peace and security, can undermine peacebuilding gains and heighten conflict risks over time.”⁶ At the end of the document, it particularly mentions that respect for human rights is needed as a preliminary step to navigate this crisis and achieve sustaining peace.

Sustaining peace is considered in most of the documents that create the architecture for the COVID-19 response—even if not named as such. However, it is never an objective in itself—bringing the three pillars to collaborate to reduce risks for violence through a joint plan. Mostly, the architecture encourages different parts of the UN to adopt a conflict-sensitive lens, or to contribute to sustaining peace through distinct programmatic efforts.

The rest of the UN system

Efforts to implement a sustaining peace approach have been undertaken across the UN system. First, several UN actors **engage with governments to mitigate pre-existing risks for violence exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis**. For instance, PDAs support governments in developing risk and resilience analysis, and UNDP encourages governments to strengthen social cohesion through COVID-19 response efforts. DPPA develops scenarios on how the COVID-19 situation could affect political processes such as elections, and then creates mitigation strategies together with partners. The Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is monitoring violations of human rights and engaging with governments through technical cooperation and advocacy to encourage responses that are in line with human rights obligations, including by protecting the most vulnerable. Agencies, funds, and programs (AFPs) such as WHO and the World Food Program (WFP) encourage governments to use the response to COVID-19 to include underserved areas. This has the double benefit of strengthening emergency response, as well as addressing risk factors for violence such as exclusion.

Some interviewees stressed, however, that conflict-sensitivity is still not well understood and its effectiveness is not appreciated, particularly among decision-makers. Some member states are worried that undertaking peacebuilding efforts during the emergency phase will provoke delays and lead to a diversion of funds—particularly to carry out risk analysis. Others argue, to the contrary, that a sustaining peace lens will increase the effectiveness of emergency response measures by helping to build trust in institutions.

⁶ UN Secretary-General, “COVID-19 and Human Rights: We Are All in This Together” (New York: United Nations, April 2020), 16.

Second, an encouraging sign for the sustaining peace and prevention agenda is that the AFPs interviewed were looking at how to include **a conflict-sensitive lens in their programming** in the COVID-19 response. For instance, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is building trust with communities around the COVID-19 response, sharing quality information and promoting dialogue to prevent the spread of rumors and combat xenophobia—thus addressing some risk factors for violence through the emergency response. But interviews also suggest that these conflict-sensitive approaches face important challenges. Several AFPs reported they did not have a conflict-sensitive tool when the crisis started or did not feel the one they had would be fit for purpose for the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, even though policy departments were supportive of a conflict-sensitive approach, most AFPs reported that they did not necessarily have sufficient internal buy-in. Some of them also pointed out that staff in the field did not necessarily have the expertise to conduct conflict-sensitive analysis. To address this problem, some were looking into opportunities to collaborate with outside organizations that have more expertise in risk and resilience analysis for violence. In several instances, interviewees reported that the current crisis laid bare the need for conflict-analysis and that they were seizing the opportunity to strengthen their organization’s approach.

Third, interviews suggest that the COVID-19 crisis has **sparked some level of collaboration among different UN actors around sustaining peace**. Reportedly, RCs are looking at opportunities to implement the prevention agenda amidst the current COVID-19 crisis, particularly through the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19—with the support of DCO. On occasion, PDAs have also developed risk and resilience analysis and conflict-sensitive approaches for the UN country team. While these analyses can be helpful as a general framework, interviewees suggest that they are often not specific enough to guide AFPs programming. To ameliorate this problem, UNICEF, WFP, and FAO have been in regular contact at the global level to discuss developing common approaches, specifically collaborating on a common assessment tool.⁷ Nevertheless, joint analysis and joint programming remain challenging, particularly due to the long-standing problem of fragmentation of funding sources. Interestingly, some donors have also expressed their lack of understanding of how different funding streams are supporting peacebuilding objectives in the COVID-19 response.

⁷ The Post-Disaster Needs Assessments (PDNA) tool has been adapted to include a conflict-sensitive lens and is used to assess socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. The adapted PDNA tool now incorporates a Recovery and Peace Building Assessment tool—which is a partnership framework supported by the European Union, the UN, and the World Bank—to coordinate reengagement in countries or regions emerging from conflict of political crisis.

Box 2: Conflict-sensitive analysis—a misleading name

Conflict-sensitive analysis is at the core of the sustaining peace approach. Its objective is to ensure that all policy and programming decisions take into account pre-existing risk factors for violence—e.g., high inequalities, political exclusion, and dehumanizing narratives and hate speech—to make sure that, at a minimum, the decisions do not contribute to increasing these factors, and ideally that they ameliorate them. Many stakeholders may be reluctant to use a conflict-sensitive analysis in countries that are not seen as “conflict-affected.” But conflict-sensitive analysis can be a misleading name, because all societies have risk factors, not only conflict-affected countries. Preventing violent conflicts is an approach that should be implemented at all times and particularly at times of peace—to sustain that peace. This is particularly important in the case of COVID-19: governments need to take decisions to contain the pandemic, while avoiding actions that increase fault lines such as inequality and xenophobia, and strengthening actions that foster resilience—like building trust in institutions.

Opportunities to strengthen the sustaining peace and prevention agendas in the COVID-19 response

UN system can strengthen the implementation of the sustaining peace agenda in the COVID-19 response in three ways, according to interviewees. First, by making sustaining peace a priority in the COVID-19 response from the onset. Second, by adopting a more integrated strategy to sustain peace as the crisis continues to unfold. Finally, by seizing opportunities to strengthen a conflict-sensitive approach across the whole UN system.

Foster peace from the onset of the crisis

The sustaining peace approach too often remains an afterthought in the UN response to the COVID-19 crisis. There is no call for member states to adopt a sustaining peace lens while responding to the crisis, nor is there a coordinated strategy on sustaining peace. While some positive approaches have been taken in specific instances, overall the role of sustaining peace is ad hoc, fragmented, and underfunded. Too often, it is still considered an agenda that will be implemented at an indeterminate moment in the future.

Most interviewees argue that focusing on the health response only and delaying peacebuilding efforts until a second phase works counter to the purpose of the prevention agenda. It may also be unrealistic, given the fact that peacebuilding needs may be likely to increase, while funding for peacebuilding is likely to decrease given the global economic downturn and competing priorities. There is a sense of urgency as fragile states are at risk of slipping into conflict. As the senior director of the World Bank Fragility, Conflict, and Violence Group and the assistant secretary-general of the Peacebuilding Support Office stressed, “it is important that countries’ immediate response and longer-term investments address these realities to avoid exacerbating existing sources of fragility and instead help build resilience, both to this crisis and future shocks.”⁸

The UN should **place sustaining peace at the forefront of UN efforts in the COVID-19 response, particularly by encouraging member states to explicitly bring an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on peace into their policy decisions.** The PBC acknowledges that the “virus poses a considerable risk to hard-won peacebuilding gains around the world.”⁹ The

⁸ Franck Bousquet and Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, “COVID-19 in Fragile Settings: Ensuring a Conflict-Sensitive Response,” United Nations (United Nations, 2020), <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/covid-19-fragile-settings-ensuring-conflict-sensitive-response>.

⁹ Peacebuilding Commission, “Press Release by the Peacebuilding Commission on the Impact of COVID-19 on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace” (United Nations, 2020).

UN should leverage this language to create a strong narrative encouraging member states to look at the impact of the pandemic on their social contract and to define sustaining peace priorities in their response. This effort should not be limited to fragile states but considered by all: the COVID-19 crisis represents a seismic shock that can deepen social fractures, including in middle and high-income countries. This perspective could be reflected in a General Assembly resolution to encourage all member states to include a sustaining peace lens in their COVID-19 response. Short of a resolution, this message should be highlighted during high-level statements, for instance at the High-level Political Forum or the UN 75th anniversary. One could also hope that it becomes a more central message of the secretary-general.

Adopt more integrated approach to sustaining peace in the COVID-19 response

Several interviewees expressed that they would like to see a clearer strategy around sustaining peace in the COVID-19 response, including stronger cross-pillar collaboration. Indeed, while the UN system has adopted humanitarian, human rights, and socioeconomic plans to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, there is no overarching strategy on sustaining peace. Rather, the different plans encourage efforts to mainstream sustaining peace through the humanitarian, the socioeconomic, and the human rights response.¹⁰ How the different components are coordinated to sustain peace is unclear.

Some cross-pillar efforts have been taking place at headquarters level, through Regional Monthly Reviews and other interagency coordination mechanisms, by including discussions on COVID-19 as an additional layer of vulnerability. At field level, UNDP is leading the implementation of the social cohesion approach for the whole UN system, which it considers an important component of sustaining peace. More could be done, however, to ensure a coordinated, cross-pillar approach to sustaining peace, as highlighted in the 2016 twin resolutions.

Interviewees suggest that the new RC office should be leveraged to strengthen coordination around violence risk and resilience analysis, and that the CCA should become more agile to do quick assessment of the COVID-19 impact and include a systematic sustaining peace analysis, which is so far generally only included if PDAs advocate for it. Additionally, adopting area-based analyses and developing joint programming to address different risk and resilience factors in a concerted way would increase the effectiveness of the sustaining peace approach. To enable these approaches, donors can invest in strategic approaches that include a sustaining peace lens—for instance, through pooled funds and smart, joined-up work that is risk-informed.

¹⁰ UN secretary-general, “COVID-19 and Human Rights: We Are All in This Together,” 3. “This is not a time to neglect human rights; it is a time when, more than ever, human rights are needed to navigate this crisis in a way that will allow us, as soon as possible, to focus again on achieving equitable sustainable development and sustaining peace.”

Support systematic conflict-sensitive analysis across the whole UN system

In the absence of a system-wide strategy on sustaining peace, the UN approach relies on conflict-sensitive approaches being implemented directly by AFPs. Interviews suggest, though, that several of these did not have a conflict-sensitive analysis tool when the COVID-19 crisis started. In addition, even if policy departments are generally advocating for a conflict-sensitive approach in the COVID-19 response, staff at the field level did not necessarily consider it a priority or may not have the expertise to implement it. Several AFPs reported that they do not have a standardized training course on conflict-sensitivity yet; those that do are trying to figure out how to train their staff quickly amidst the crisis.

Indeed, several UN entities reported striving to strengthen their capacity and internal buy-in for conflict-sensitivity during the pandemic, given the obvious needs they were witnessing. Some of them are also looking to build partnerships with outside organizations, such as the International Crisis Group or Search for Common Ground, who have specialized expertise in conflict analysis.¹¹ The UN should continue to systematize and prioritize efforts to develop conflict-sensitive approaches and member states should support them. Donors can provide positive incentives by embedding conflict-sensitive indicators in reporting frameworks.

¹¹ They often have a longer-term field presence, a deeper expertise in the context, and are more specialized in risk analysis.

Annex: Secretariat and AFP approaches to sustaining peace in the COVID-19 crisis

The sections below provide more detailed information on how the secretariat and AFPs are using a sustaining peace lens in the COVID-19 response. They are based on interviews mostly held with policy departments at headquarters.

Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

DPPA's work on prevention focuses mostly on preventive diplomacy and mediation. The impossibility of conducting face-to-face meetings has made its work much more challenging; building trust, holding confidential conversations, and conducting mediation have become particularly challenging.

Since the beginning of the crisis, DPPA has monitored closely the additional political risks created by the pandemic and the measures to address it in each country they cover. They develop scenarios looking, for instance, at how the current crisis could potentially affect elections. They collaborate with other international and regional organizations to develop a shared understanding of the challenges, identify hot spots, and (when possible) develop common mitigation strategies.

United Nations Development Programme

UNDP is playing several roles to ensure a conflict-sensitive approach to the crisis. First, it has inserted language on conflict-sensitivity in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan. UNDP is also leading on the implementation of the social cohesion pillar in the UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. This year, UNDP released guidance on "Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications" and on "Engaging with Insider Mediators—Sustaining peace in an age of turbulence,"¹² which is an organizational effort to frame the issues conceptually and strengthen UNDP practice in the areas of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Both of these guidance documents are important, central resources for UNDPs response to COVID-19, and have informed stronger country support.

¹² UNDP, "Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and Programming Implications," UNDP, February 27, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/strengthening-social-cohesion--conceptual-framing-and-programmin.html>. UNDP, "Engaging with Insider Mediators - Sustaining Peace in an Age of Turbulence," UNDP, April 27, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/engaging-with-insider-mediators---sustaining-peace-in-an-age-of-.html>.

UNDP has developed a practical note for country offices to help them conduct social cohesion assessment and analysis in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and engage mediators/facilitators to deal with issues around conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The note encourages UNDP country offices to embed a social cohesion approach as part of the socio-economic/recovery and humanitarian plans, and underlines that the guidance will help in developing programming eligibility for grant allocation under the COVID-19 Rapid Response Facility. On this basis, UNDP is also supporting governments in developing strategies that account for social cohesion in the COVID-19 response as well as strengthen the social contract. UNDP, working with the UN Sustainable Development Group, is finalizing system-wide guidance on “Conflict-sensitivity, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace,” which could prove relevant to address the current crisis.

Development Coordination Office

UN resident coordinators and UNDP resident representatives are in the lead for the implementation of the UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. DCO perceives the framework as an important contribution to the sustaining peace and prevention agendas given its objective to strengthen social cohesion, community resilience, and the inclusion of the needs of the most vulnerable and most hard to reach people, including refugees, IDPs, and minorities.

DCO has also developed a joint work plan with PBSO to operationalize prevention on the ground through the RCs. DCO is supporting the RCs to carry out this work in the current circumstances, through weekly briefings, as well as providing them with all the UN-wide relevant analytical guidance, documents, and tools—particularly on light assessments.¹³

¹³ Assessments: The Post Disaster Needs Assessment is adapting and preparing a methodological note to support country assessments of the impact and recovery needs of coronavirus. The program criticality framework has developed a COVID-19 assessment guide to support country teams in reprioritizing to inform business continuity while responding to COVID-19. Both are interagency mechanisms. The Global Focal Point on the Rule of Law has also provided a COVID-19 prison communication package, “Preparedness and Response Plan for Prisons” (English version), developed by DPO Justice and Corrections Service, in conjunction with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has produced a position paper on “COVID-19 preparedness and responses in prisons.” A document on police planning during the COVID-19 pandemic and UN Police COVID-19 Operational Guidelines have also been issued. The regional monthly review also includes a COVID-19 response question as part of the survey process.

The Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention

In the Joint Programme, the PDAs support governments and UN country teams in developing risk and resilience analysis and conflict-sensitive approaches in the COVID-19 response. The Joint Programme in New York is supporting PDAs by providing opportunities for peer-to-peer exchange and making available relevant information across the UN system and beyond.

Box 3: The role of the PDA in the COVID-19 crisis response

In **Tunisia**, the PDA was appointed the COVID-19 outbreak coordinator in the RCO, which is an exceptional role for a PDA. On behalf of the RC, the PDA helped the UN to establish continuous dialogue with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund around budget support efforts, which includes a government package to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable at-risk people. Among other things, the PDA has also helped updating the CCA to capture emerging risks and the impact of the crisis on vulnerable groups.

In **Uganda**, the PDA has conducted a political assessment of the preventive measures taken against the spread of COVID-19 and is providing advice on reprogramming/repurposing of existing projects to respond to emerging risks of hate speech and stigmatization recorded in some communities. As a result, the UN country team is focusing on conflict-sensitive communication through social media, as well as traditional and print media, including messaging to build or repair trust and enhance social cohesion.

In the **Maldives** and **Philippines**, PDAs are engaged in analysis of COVID-19's possible socio-economic impact on vulnerable populations (region-wide), including on violent extremism.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

OHCHR's perspective is that respect for human rights will help countries to navigate the COVID-19 crisis without triggering violence, as human rights guarantees offer alternatives to violence by ensuring people's needs are met and by providing peaceful alternatives to violence to address their grievances—for instance, through political participation and access to the justice system to obtain remedies. In principle, human rights guide all UN responses to the crisis through the Human Rights Up Front initiative and the Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights.

In the immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis, OHCHR has been monitoring violations of human rights and engaging with governments through technical cooperation and advocacy to encourage responses that are in line with human rights obligations, including by protecting the most vulnerable. OHCHR discourages the use of disproportionate, heavy-handed security responses to the pandemic and encourages the lifting of emergency measures as soon as the emergency passes. Human rights also contribute to longer-term sustaining peace strategies in the context of COVID-19, encouraging states to reflect on gaps and “build back better” by strengthening the enjoyment of all human rights for all. OHCHR sees the crisis as an opportunity to show governments that it is in their interest to protect human rights to address structural drivers and reduce the risk of conflict and violence at times of stress.

The World Health Organization

WHO’s submission to the 2020 peacebuilding architecture review, “WHO Thematic Paper on Health and Peace,” highlights opportunities to leverage health response to foster peace. This prescient paper takes on a heightened relevance in the current pandemic. It promotes the use of a conflict-sensitive approach during the emergency phase, as well as the use of health activities to address some of the risk factors for conflict. For instance, the current crisis represents an opportunity for governments to reach out to underserved areas, and to extend equitable services. These two approaches are also important sustaining peace components. In the longer term, the WHO has a role to play in peacebuilding with peace-enabling activities extending over the humanitarian-development-peace continuum. WHO’s mandate refers to peaceful societies and acknowledges that access to health care will be an important enabler for peace in conflict-affected countries, while peace will likewise be important to achieve Universal Health Coverage.

United Nations Children’s Fund

UNICEF has adopted global guidance that aims to strengthen social cohesion in its overall COVID-19 response, and it has created a remote support and training package for rapid adaptation in the field. It has also established regular reporting systems on shifts in levels of social discrimination and heightened tensions due to COVID-19. Through its role as lead on Risk Communication Community Engagement, UNICEF is building trust with communities around the COVID-19 response, sharing information and promoting dialogue to prevent the spread of rumors and to combat xenophobia.

Acknowledging that COVID-19 is triggering a rise in social tensions, UNICEF is analyzing and monitoring the anticipated fallout of the crisis in order to adapt its existing strategies and programs to support these anticipated long-term effects. Through its “equity agenda,” UNICEF is working to reduce rising social tensions and grievances by supporting continuity of essential services—such as education, health, and water, sanitation, and hygiene efforts—amidst the pandemic. Inclusive service delivery will also contribute to a long-term prevention approach, by

helping to reduce risk factors for conflict in the face of the severe economic downturn looming worldwide.

World Food Program

WFP is supporting governments in their efforts to address some impacts of the pandemic, for example, in adapting their social safety nets to include marginalized people who had never received support before, while maintaining support that protects vulnerable populations from further shocks that arise from COVID-19. Increasing access to services can contribute to strengthening people’s confidence in the state, thereby decreasing grievances, building social cohesion, and therefore reducing risks of conflicts. In addition, WFP is using its supply chain expertise and capability to advise and support governments in protecting market functionality—injecting resources into the local economy and creating livelihoods which helps (among others) small farmers to generate revenues. Given that movement restrictions and border closures hinder international trade and that, in certain instances, basic food prices have already increased, strengthening production is key to ensure food security. In turn, preventing food scarcity contributes to preventing violent conflicts over resources. WFP is also using its school feeding programs to build trust between citizens and the state, even during the emergency phase.

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, WFP is deploying an Operational Conflict Risk Tool to support its field teams to do a rapid conflict analysis, identify potential conflict risks, including those arising from COVID-19, and mitigation measures to be considered in designing and implementing activities. The tool draws on consultations with WFP’s six regional bureaus and several country offices, as well as with FAO and UNICEF.

Food and Agriculture Organization

FAO adopted a corporate policy on how the organization can contribute to sustaining peace in 2018,¹⁴ followed by a “Guide to Context Analyses: Informing FAO Decision-Making,” which provides the basis for FAO’s conflict-sensitive approach. FAO sees the COVID-19 crisis as a socio-economic shock that may exacerbate existing tensions and conflict lines. The indirect impacts, including value chain disruptions and increased competition over the access to natural resources, have already been identified and can be addressed through existing analysis and assessment frameworks. The conflict and peace analysis unit in FAO headquarters is also collaborating with regional FAO resilience hubs to assess what the longer-term indirect impacts may be—for instance on food security and nutrition, and resilience—and to ensure an effective implementation of conflict-sensitive approaches in responses to the unfolding crisis.

¹⁴ FAO, “FAO’s Contribution to Sustaining Peace: Corporate Framework to Support Sustainable Peace in the Context of Agenda 2030” (Rome, Italy: FAO, 2018). FAO, “Corporate Framework to Support Sustainable Peace in the Context of Agenda 2030” (Rome, Italy: FAO, 2018).