

BRIEFING NOTE No. 127

Simmering tensions: THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FRAGILITY AND CONFLICT IN AFRICA

COVID-19

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This briefing note looks at the long-term impact of COVID-19 on fragility and conflict in Africa. It follows an earlier brief which analysed the immediate impact of COVID-19 on conflict in Africa between March and June 2020. Responding to the long-term challenges highlighted by the pandemic will require sustained and concerted efforts, particularly ahead of the vaccination campaign expected to start later this year.

Countries across Africa are grappling with the health, social and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some African governments took immediate action in response to COVID-19, others were unable to react appropriately and imposed overly repressive measures, fuelling social discontent. Hence, protests in Africa have seen a sharp rise since the first lockdown. At the same time, Africa presents many examples of rapid interventions by governments, community-level responses and resilience measures.

Although it is too early to fully assess the magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on fragility and conflict in Africa, the pandemic is presenting long-term socio-economic and political challenges which could have long-lasting implications for fragility and security in Africa in 2021 and beyond.

Based on existing data, we identified four groups of long-term challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, including (1) economic hardships, resource competition and fraying social cohesion; (2) mistrust between citizens and the state; (3) misinformation and disinformation; and (4) domestic and gender-based violence. These long-term impacts could be further compounded by continued COVID-19-induced constraints to peacekeeping operations and peacebuilding processes across Africa.

Conflict developments until December 2020

Cases of COVID-19 have continued to rise and fall in waves across the world in 2020.¹ In recent weeks, a combination of the winter period in the northern hemisphere and more infectious mutations of the virus both in the United Kingdom and South Africa have contributed to a steady rise in cases and renewed pressures. Figures in other parts of the world are equally on the rise.

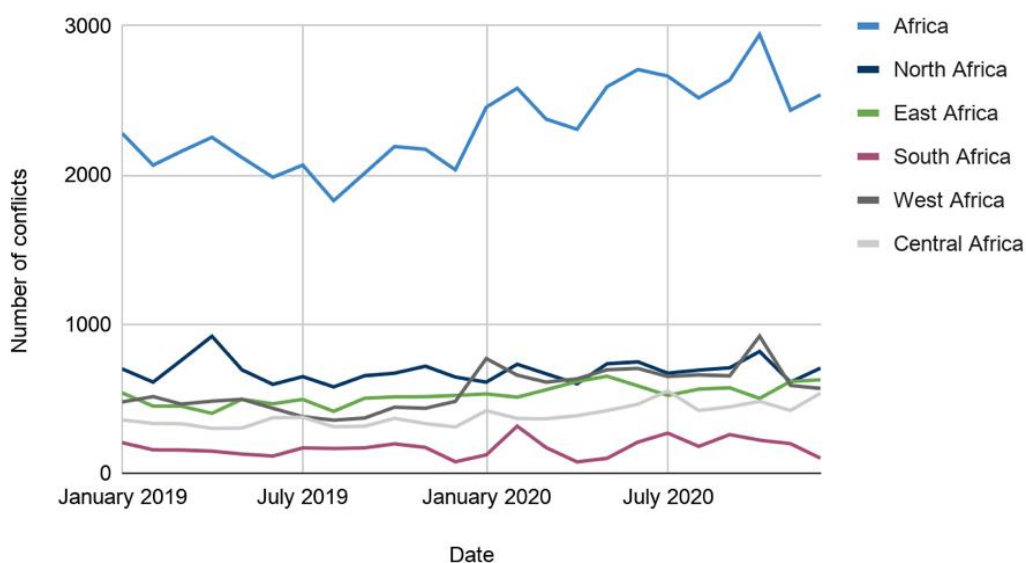
Our previous briefing note published in June 2020 concluded that the data available for the period March to May 2020 did not indicate a clear correlation between COVID-19 cases and an increase in conflict in Africa (Desmidt and Neat 2020). However, the longer-term data produced by ACLED from January 2019 until December 2020, shows that the African continent as a whole has generally seen a rise in the number of conflicts² during this period, with numbers increasing more steadily during the pandemic period (see figure 1 below).

The data is difficult to interpret because the rising trend of increasing conflicts in Africa can be noted since mid-2019, which casts doubt on the extent to which the pandemic has directly led to this increase.

To date, Accord's COVID-19 'Conflict and Resilience Monitor' has found only a limited correlation between COVID-19 and overall levels of conflict in Africa.³ This echoes the notion that causes of conflict are in fact multifaceted and context specific, and that COVID-19 may or may not be acting as a conflict accelerator and additional causal factor on top of many others. Nevertheless, this rising trend has gathered a further, though modest, momentum as of the beginning of 2020.

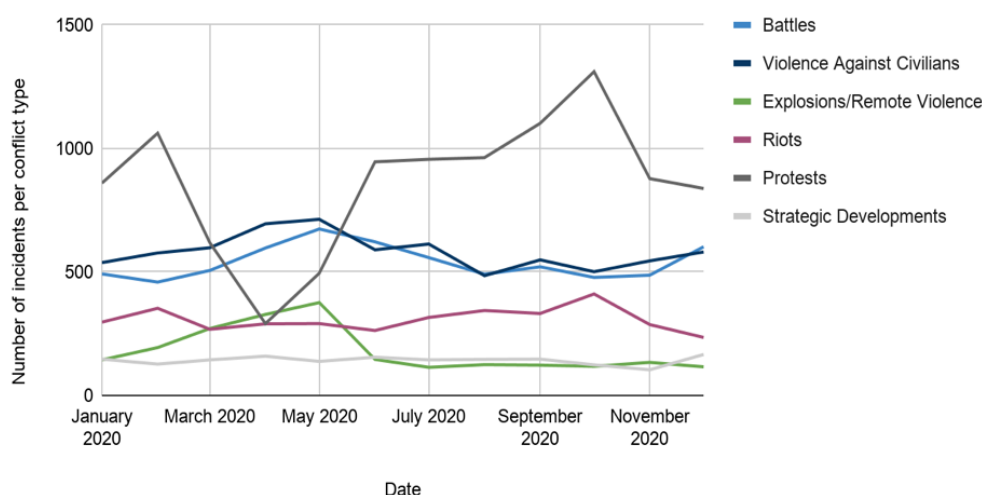
The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to inflict socio-economic damage on a global scale, as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development has projected that the global economy will contract by 4.3% in 2020 (UN 2020a: 13). Experts such as Hafez Ghanem, World Bank Vice President for Africa, have raised concerns that the pandemic will add additional stress onto economic, social and political crises, "and African countries are likely to be hit particularly hard" (WB 2020a). Compounded by climate change and security risks, these pressures risk reinforcing existing forms of fragility and conflicts, and generating new ones further down the line.⁴

Figure 1: Number of conflicts in Africa between January 2019 and December 2020



Source: ACLED data from January 2019 until 31 December 2020.

Figure 2: Number of incidents per conflict type in Africa between January 2020 and December 2020



Source: ACLED data from January 2020 until 31 December 2020.

To assess the impact of COVID-19 in Africa, it would be wrong to only focus on its effects on violent conflicts or wars. When broken down by conflict type, it is clear that protests, although initially seeing a sudden drop in frequency due to strict lockdowns at the start of the pandemic, have seen a significant increase in Africa since April 2020 (see figure 2 above). Both protest and riot events in October 2020 were at their highest level since the beginning of the year. The analysis of trends in low-level conflict events, such as protests and riots, is vital for identifying legitimate grievances, public discontent and drivers of significant social change, which are potential starting points for violent escalation and higher-level conflict (Ide et al. 2020).

Long-term political, economic, and social impacts

Africa as a whole has shown significant levels of resilience in the face of COVID-19 (Ramdeen et al. 2020). Observers such as Ramdeen, De Coning, and Rupiya (2020) have underlined the importance of informal and locally-led efforts in combination with formal measures and relief packages. They note the wide range of community level relief and support actions across Africa, taken by a plethora of actors such as women's and youth organisations, but also the private sector and faith-based organisations.

This has been beefed up by regional efforts, such as the African Union COVID-19 response fund, and formal measures at national level, including social grants, tax relief and ramping up free services (Ramdeen et al. 2020). Experts have also pointed to the importance of Africa's global diaspora, which played a vital role in moderating the impacts by "providing a social safety net, sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines, and food, as well as providing remittances and fundraising for Africa's COVID-19 response" (Chitiyo et al. 2020). Furthermore, many states already had experience with infectious diseases, Ebola in particular, and so were highly sensitised to dealing with public health crises.

While the absolute numbers of fatalities as well as the speed and the scope of formal and informal measures taken bode relatively well for the continent's overall picture, the current evidence tells very little about the potential negative effects in the medium to longer-term (two to five years). Analysts predict that the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 may last longer than the pandemic itself (Chitiyo et al. 2020). Based on existing data, we have identified four groups of long-term challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 which could lead to increased fragility and (violent) conflict in Africa in the future. These include: (1) economic hardships, resource competition, and fraying social cohesion; (2) mistrust between citizens and the state; (3) misinformation and disinformation; and (4) domestic and gender-based violence.

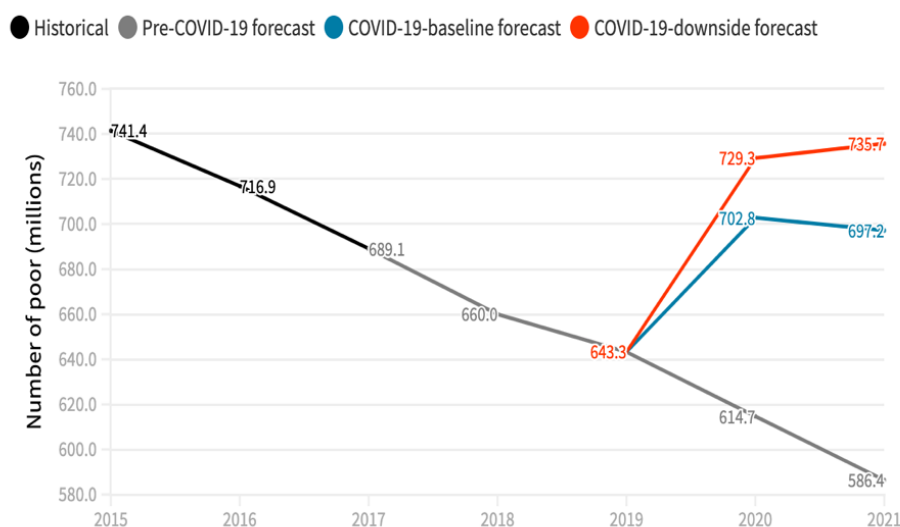
Economic hardships, resource competition, and fraying social cohesion

Poverty effects: The socio-economic shock produced by COVID-19 paints a dismal picture for global poverty rates, with experts predicting that the pandemic will wipe out progress on various Sustainable Development Goals, namely those aimed at eradicating hunger and poverty. Combined economic hardships and resource competition across many already fragile and conflict-affected regions are likely to occur. The latest World Bank projections indicate that between 88-115 million additional people have been pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 due to COVID-19 (see Figure 3 below), forcing them to live on less than 1.90 US dollars a day (Blake and Wadhwa 2020). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) also estimates that an equivalent of 495 million full-time jobs will be lost due to COVID-19 (Eisentraut et al. 2020: 39).

Particularly fragile regions with already high poverty rates and precarious economic structures will be hit much harder than others. According to the latest regional economic analysis by the World Bank, economic activity in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to contract by 3.3% in 2020 due to COVID-19, confirming

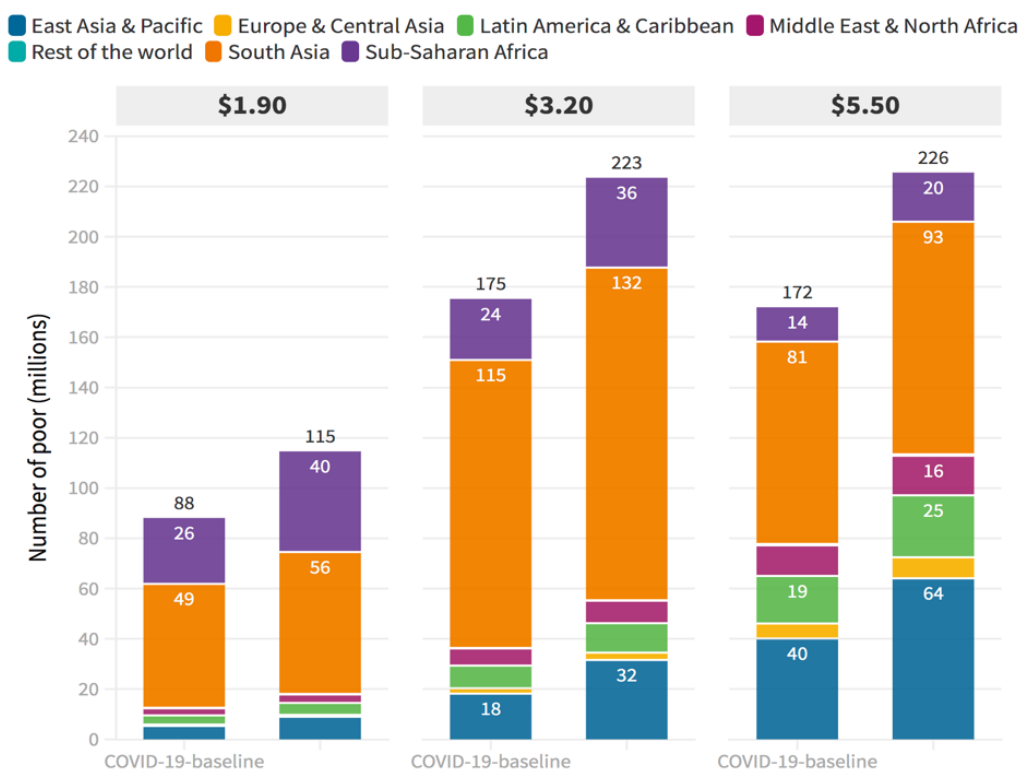
the prediction that the region would suffer its first recession in a quarter-century in 2020. When measured at the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day, the World Bank predicts that COVID-19 will most likely exacerbate poverty in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, with 26 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 as a direct consequence of the pandemic (see Figure 4 on page 4). COVID-19 could also push up to 40 million people into extreme poverty in the downside scenario of GDP growth projections, erasing at least five years of progress in fighting poverty (WB 2020c: 35). In Central Sahel, high economic costs of lockdowns and COVID-19 prevention measures have already driven an additional six million people in the region into extreme poverty (UNOCHA 2020). Across the continent, a total of 300 million people that work in the informal sector also risk missing out on formal social safety nets and compensation packages for loss of livelihoods as a result of the pandemic and lockdown measures, compounding pressures facing those in newfound or worsening poverty (Eisentraut et al. 2020: 29). By mid-September 2020, however, 46 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa had put in place 166 social protection measures, which will prove as critical tools for mitigating the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic (WB 2020b).

Figure 3: The World Bank: “Number of people in extreme poverty.”⁵



Source: Blake and Wadhwa 2020.

Figure 4: The World Bank: “The regional distribution of COVID-19-induced poor, 2020.”



Source: Lakner et al. 2020.

Effects on food security: The pandemic is adding new pressure on existing weaknesses, including food insecurity and malnourishment. Global food stocks remain well supplied and prices remain stable as of December 2020, but the primary risk remains at the country level where COVID-19 continues to disrupt domestic food supply chains, and loss of incomes and livelihoods render food services unaffordable or unavailable, creating strong tensions and food security risks for many (WB 2020d). This is particularly the case for those already living hand-to-mouth in urban contexts. Given the high degree of uncertainty around the virus and its evolution, and depending on the severity and duration of the pandemic, future threats to food security and nutrition cannot be ruled out.

In 2019, some 135 million people across 55 countries were acutely food insecure, the highest global number reported so far in the four years of the existence of the Global Report on Food Crises (IFPRI 2020).

Due to COVID-19, the number of acutely food insecure people is expected to rise further in 2021 and 2022 (IDA 2020), which risks worsening undernourishment. According to a preliminary assessment by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), almost 690 million people were chronically undernourished in 2019, and the pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of people undernourished in the world in 2020 (UNFAO 2020).

For some African countries, although data collection for 2020 is still ongoing, evidence suggests that COVID-19 is already worsening food insecurity. Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Somalia, Lesotho, Uganda and Zimbabwe are all reporting increases in the numbers of acutely food insecure people when comparing data to 2019. Burkina Faso registered the biggest increase with the number almost trebling to 3.4 million in 2020 compared with the 2019 peak situation (IFPRI 2020: 17).

The pandemic is also set to worsen pre-existing food insecurity caused by climate change and environmental disasters, violent conflict, and previous economic shocks. In the Horn of Africa for example, COVID-19 is expected to compound a situation whereby crops and livelihoods have been recently destroyed by unprecedented dry summers and locust infestations, with projections indicating that 50.6 million people in the region will be food insecure by the end of 2020 (Anyanga 2020).

Effects on social cohesion: Deepening socio-economic grievances can worsen insecurity by further undermining social cohesion, which is key for peace and prosperity. Effects will likely disrupt this cohesion in two ways: horizontally, between different societal groups (communities, identity groups, political factions, generations, etc), as well as vertically between citizens and their respective governments. Evidence suggests that where tensions on these vertical and horizontal lines already existed, COVID-19 is now amplifying them. At the horizontal level, the above-mentioned socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 are contributing to an uptick in violence and mistrust between some groups and hardening identity-based divisions that will become more difficult to resolve as the pandemic continues (Mercy Corps 2020: 3).

In box 1 below, we demonstrate how COVID-19 exacerbates already highly fragile regions to compound livelihood and food insecurity and, in some cases, lead to fraying social cohesion and intergroup tensions.

Effects on health services: As the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic worsen, driving more people in Africa into poverty and malnourishment, this, combined with budget restraints, could lead to already struggling health services becoming severely overburdened and under-resourced. Unable to cope with the increasing demand on health services, vulnerable members of society risk being left behind. Particularly in urban settings, this could add fuel to the grievances as populations become frustrated with the ineffectiveness of service delivery. This could have serious implications for administering vaccinations in the coming months, as overstretched health resources will have to simultaneously cope with the health impacts of the pandemic and carry out the important task of nation-wide vaccination campaigns. If vaccinations cannot be delivered quickly and effectively across Africa, COVID-19 will continue to spread unabated and its health and socio-economic tolls could be felt for some time (Cilliers et al. 2020: 5).

Box 1: Rising socio-economic grievances

Lake Chad Basin

The situation in the Lake Chad Basin region is a prime example of the devastating socio-economic impacts that COVID-19 can and will likely continue to have on livelihoods in already fragile contexts. An already multidimensional crisis consisting of extreme poverty, large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, approximately 5.2 million food insecure people, climate change, and terrorist activities is undoubtedly now being exacerbated by COVID-19, presenting additional stressors that feed into conflict triggers and make further instability highly likely (Nuhu 2020).

Nigeria

In Nigeria, restrictions on movements due to COVID-19 have forced herders to remain stationary, increasing competition and conflict between Fulani, Muslim Pastoralists and Christian farmers over natural resources (Mercy Corps 2020 p. 3).

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, areas with increased prices due to COVID-19 border closures have experienced higher rates of conflict and illicit taxation on citizens by armed groups (Nuhu 2020 p.6).

Niger

In Niger, increasingly scarce communal resources due to economic impacts of the pandemic mitigation measures have led to an increase in intercommunal clashes around certain water points (Nuhu 2020 p.6). In a context of rising communal violence, upcoming elections in Niger could escalate the situation, particularly if popular policies focussed on village and rural development are no longer prioritized under new leadership.

Mistrust between citizens and the state

State-society relations: Between 2016 and 2018, results from a survey of Africans carried out by the Afrobarometer indicated varying levels of public trust in government across Africa. In some countries, levels of trust were relatively high. 68% of those surveyed in Tanzania, and 67% in Burkina Faso, trusted their elected leaders ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’. Other countries experienced much lower levels of trust in governance. Only about 33% of those surveyed in South Africa, and in Nigeria, trusted their elected leaders ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’ (Gyimah-Boadi and Logan 2020). In the face of botched responses to the pandemic, there is the risk of a deepening divide between citizens and the state and weakening social resilience across African countries, including in countries with higher levels of trust in government. The increasing fragility of government-citizen relations is clearly a global trend not unique to Africa. Yet, for those countries where public levels of trust in government were already fairly low, we are likely to see more damaging impacts on state-society relations that could have longer-lasting and adverse effects on fragility.

Where government responses to the pandemic have fallen short, this risks exacerbating existing grievances or even sparking new waves of popular protests, especially where previous anti-government movements already exist (Blanc and Brown 2020). In some African countries, dissatisfaction with the government over the handling of COVID-19 has contributed to the sharp rise in protests. This trend is likely to continue as demand for social intervention from governments increases as the economic effects of COVID-19 deepen. In Tunisia for example, under the burden of the pandemic’s economic impact, hundreds of people defied lockdown in May and June 2020 to protest against the loss of livelihoods and to demand greater financial support and fewer restrictions (O’Driscoll et al.: 31). In Libya, activism and protests have reportedly accelerated as citizens have called on both the Government of National Accord and the authorities under Haftar to put aside conflict and focus on governance and service delivery in the wake of widespread corruption and a shortage of basic goods (Blanc and Brown 2020).

Repression and abuse of power: Evidence suggests that violent repression by governments against civilians has also increased on a global scale during the pandemic. Data collected by ACLED reveals a 30% increase in state repression and a slight increase in violence against civilians in the 16 weeks following the pandemic declaration (Eisenraut 2020: 52). In Africa, during the early stages of the pandemic, a spike in civilian targeting was reported in multiple countries across Africa, including Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya.⁶ Several governments used the guise of lockdown measures to suppress their citizens through excessive force, as well as to discriminately target minority groups. For example, in late March 2020, Ugandan police used the pretext of the pandemic to arrest 23 individuals living in a shelter for LGBTI people, accusing them of “a negligent act likely to spread infection of disease” (HRW 2020). In Nigeria, by early April, more people had died as a result of lockdown enforcement measures by security forces than from COVID-19 (HRW 2020: 52-53). Such cases of state repression increase perceptions of injustice by the hands of governments and risk the acceleration of existing trends towards authoritarian rule and backsliding democracy.

COVID-19 has also been used as a pretext for some governments to extend their mandates and consolidate power. Over-extended term limits, postponing elections, and repressing opposition all threaten to erode trust in the constitutional order, with many examples from the past in Africa and beyond of unconstitutional term extensions, giving rise to coups (for example in Burkina Faso in 2014) or intensifying existing and triggering new conflicts (for example in Burundi in 2015). As of 15 December 2020, COVID-19 had already prompted the postponement of 116 electoral events across 69 countries, including 17 African countries (IFES 2020).

Additionally, the pandemic provides opportunities for extremist and non-state armed groups to take advantage of government failures by offering themselves as service providers, thereby gaining a stronger foothold amongst local populations (Di Carlo 2020).

Box 2: Examples of deepening mistrust between citizens and the state

Uganda (state-society tensions)

In Uganda, excessive use of force and torture by police to disperse traders attempting to reopen shops has deepened animosity between citizens and the state (BBC News 2020a).

Nigeria (state-society tensions)

According to data provided by ACLED, Nigeria has seen the largest increase in violence targeting civilians in the post-pandemic period. State forces were responsible for some of the increase as they violently enforced lockdowns, but rioters also fought back against these measures, demanding economic relief and resulting in clashes with police forces (ACLED 2020).

Ethiopia (COVID-19 and democratic processes)

In Ethiopia, tensions between political factions have deepened following the decision to postpone the August 2020 elections due to COVID-19. While COVID-19 is not at the root cause of this conflict, the federal government decided to postpone the national elections due to the pandemic which provoked accusations by some that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is using the pandemic to withhold power beyond his constitutionally mandated time (Davis 2020). The Tigray regional government rejected the postponement to later organise elections at the regional level, and this marked the start of mutual non-recognition between the federal government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which administered Tigray. This is often cited as one of the critical political fallout between the federal government and TPLF, which led to the armed conflict in November 2020 (Demissie and Soliman 2020).

Guinea (COVID-19 and democratic processes)

In Guinea, the government was accused of using lockdown measures as a form of political repression, with opposition politicians being arrested for apparent COVID-19 restriction violations prior to the election. When the election results were announced, protests and violence broke out in objection to the results (Bebington 2020).

In Somalia, for example, al-Shabaab recently reversed course on its initial dismissal of the virus after it realised it would lose popular support and has since begun promoting public health measures and has even opened up a COVID-19 clinic (Blanc and Brown 2020).

In box 2 above, we portray examples of the different ways in which deepening mistrust between citizens and their respective governments in Africa has played out during the pandemic period.

Misinformation and disinformation

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation and disinformation has been rife, amplified through the power of social media and covering a wide range of topics such as the origins of the virus, symptoms, unproven cures, and national and international emergency responses. The continual spread of false information about COVID-19 can pose significant health and security risks in Africa now and in the future.

COVID-19-induced socio-economic conditions and prolonged periods of isolation with strong social media exposure provide a favourable opportunity for targeting vulnerable individuals. Evidence suggests that a wide variety of terrorist and non-state armed groups have continued to integrate COVID-19 into their narratives and propaganda usage, in order to spread disinformation, extremist ideologies, and foster recruitment for their cause. For example, African affiliate organisations have tailored the Islamic State and al-Qaeda's broader message – that the pandemic is God's wrath on the West – to their local audiences. In this vein, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) called the pandemic a "punishment" on France for supporting counter-terrorism operations in Mali, while al-Shabaab blamed the African Union and warned its supporters that the virus has been spread by "crusader forces", and Boko Haram referred to COVID-19 measures put in place by the Nigerian government as a war on Muslims (Columbo and Harris 2020).

Box 3: Examples of the impacts of misinformation and disinformation

In **Somalia**, 42% of more than 3,000 people surveyed believed COVID-19 was a government campaign (Save the Children 2020).

For **Tanzania**, an assessment of 121 people revealed that 86% thought that COVID-19 creates stigma against particular groups (Save the Children 2020).

Figures from **Zambia** reveal that 69% of 400 people surveyed incorrectly stated that daily tooth-brushing prevented COVID-19 (Save the Children 2020).

In **Libya**, rumours have spread of the government using the pandemic as a ploy to embezzle public funds, cementing public perceptions that the government cannot be trusted (Mercy Corps p.4).

The Africa Centre for Disease Prevention and Control found that while COVID-19 awareness is high across the **African continent**, significant misconceptions exist. These include 55.8% of people believing that you should avoid people who have recovered from COVID-19 to prevent the spread of the disease (Save the Children 2020).

Meanwhile, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the IS branch Central African Province has attempted to attract new followers by claiming that the “medicine for that virus is here with us” (Eisenraut et al. 2020 p.55).

The spread of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation both by the general public and extremist actors could also provoke further conflict in Africa through the stigmatisation of certain groups and the stoking of social tensions (Mercy Corps 2020 p.4). Concerning patterns are already emerging that are reminiscent of the stigmatisation of people with Ebola, HIV and AIDS. Recent cases have been reported where people believed to have contracted COVID-19, or recovered from it, have been afraid to return to their communities because they fear being targeted as potential COVID-19 carriers (Save the Children 2020).

Misinformation and disinformation surrounding COVID-19 risks compounding a growing lack of trust and tensions between citizens and the state, as well as undermining government crisis response. This could have detrimental effects on the stability and security of fragile regions and translate into a weakening of trust in public health services and the COVID-19 vaccine campaign, potentially prolonging the transmission of the virus and its long-term impacts on the continent.

Moreover, if state-society tensions rise and regions become less secure, containment of COVID-19 and distribution of the vaccine could become highly difficult, as areas could be deemed too dangerous for healthcare workers to access. Earlier health emergencies have proven this point, as eruptions of violence against authorities during the Ebola pandemic were especially frequent in highly fragile and conflict-affected regions.⁷

In box 3 above, we demonstrate how the COVID-19 “infodemic” has spread throughout Africa.

The ‘shadow pandemic’: the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls

The COVID-19 pandemic has gone hand in hand with adverse gender-specific effects, dubbed as a “shadow pandemic”, including a steep increase in gender-based violence. Current evidence and statistics show that men have a larger share of deaths across all age groups except among the population aged 80 and older. But, although less likely to die from COVID-19, women have faced “additional challenges related to the disease compared to men, including increased risk of domestic violence and abuse due to the isolation measures implemented by governments” (UNDESA 2020).

Women comprise 69% of health professionals and thus face a higher risk of infection than men in the workplace, while women have taken ever bigger shares of unpaid work in their homes (BBC News 2020b). Women also face higher levels of unemployment and loss of income, in particular in the informal economies, where they are generally overrepresented (UNDESA 2020). But also in the formal economy, so-called ‘feminised economic sectors’ such as tourism and retail, have been worst hit by the pandemic, meaning women are disproportionately affected by the economic fallout caused by the pandemic.⁸

For young women and girls, the impact of school closures has been linked to violence, seeing a resurgence of harmful practices such as child marriage, and increased exposure to domestic violence (Eisenraut et al. 2020). The UN predicts that by 2021, some 453 million women and girls will be living in extreme poverty, and 47 million of these will have been pushed into poverty due to COVID-19.⁹ UNICEF has voiced concerns that this trend could reverse the progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights in the past years (Eisenraut et al. 2020).

A particular worry has been the steep increase of domestic and gender-based violence. While gender-based violence is no exception in emergency situations, there are unique factors about the COVID-19 pandemic that make it a particularly alarming situation. With measures of physical distancing and movement restrictions put in place, women and girls face an increased risk of experiencing violence at the hands of family members, intimate partners or others living within their homes (CARE 2020). This risk is exacerbated by factors such as emotional stress, economic strain, and shifting roles and responsibilities among family members (CARE 2020). At the start of the new year, there is no evidence that the rising trend of gender-based and domestic violence is decreasing and the UN expects that because livelihood conditions will be worsening, it is likely that frustrations will be taken out on women, a common and well-studied pattern (UNDESA 2020).

Long-term impacts on peacekeeping, mediation and political dialogue

The above-mentioned socio-economic and political impacts posed by COVID-19 are also being compounded by the delays and obstacles that a range of peacemaking and peacekeeping related efforts are experiencing during the pandemic, and will likely continue to do so as long as COVID-19 is prevalent. This includes the derailing of progress of Silencing the Guns (STG), a rather ambitious initiative adopted as part of the broader African Union Agenda 2063 with the overall goal to end all conflict in Africa by 2020.¹⁰ The pandemic could continue to impact (1) peacekeeping operations in Africa, and (2) political dialogues and mediation processes, in the long-term.

Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on international and African peacekeeping operations in Africa

There are signs of a steady increase in COVID-19 cases in African countries currently hosting international peacekeeping operations (Bizimana 2020). As the pandemic wages on and cases of COVID-19 increase, structural and contextual challenges that have hindered European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations already are likely to continue, and potentially worsen. Based on what we have witnessed so far, and dependent on the severity of the pandemic in the near-future, such constraints include: threats to the health and security of peace support operation (PSO) personnel;¹¹ quarantine measures for staff who contract COVID-19 ();¹² the limiting of peacebuilding activities to those deemed essential only (or in some cases increasing staff responsibilities to provide Covid-19-related support);¹³ the suspension of the rotation of PSO forces; and a further withdrawal of PSO staff.

Despite these constraints, PSOs have so far demonstrated resilience by adapting to the COVID-19 situation. They continue to carry out critical activities, albeit with further restrictions, which bodes well for their ability to navigate COVID-19 in their operating environments in the future. However, future uncertainties over the long-term impacts on PSOs remain.

As the pandemic continues to deepen the global economic recession, and countries look increasingly inward to deal with domestic crises, observers have cautioned that PSOs worldwide and on the African continent could be forced to drastically shrink in size, scope, and capacity, at a time when fragility and insecurity is likely to worsen (Cronje 2020). A mixture of further COVID-19-induced constraints and budget restrictions could be detrimental to the effectiveness of PSOs to carry out their mandates and maintain peace and security activities, especially when exit strategies are designed too hastily, risking a further destabilisation of fragile and conflict-affected regions in Africa.

Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on political dialogues and mediation processes in Africa

Various COVID-19-related restrictions on movement since March 2020 placed a strain on the ability of the AU and African regional organisations to carry out some political dialogue and mediation processes. As long as the pandemic wages on, these constraints are also likely to continue. For example, in 2020, we have already witnessed a postponement of some essential peace and security summits and high-level meetings due to COVID-19.¹⁴ The AU's capacity to prevent and manage new and existing conflicts was also hindered by COVID-19, as the Peace and Security Council (PSC) decided to suspend its work until the end of April 2020, and its planned field visits to the Lake Chad and Sahel regions were also cancelled due to the pandemic (ISS 2020b).

Budget cuts due to the pandemic have already forced many governments and regional organisations to divert resources towards the pandemic response, and some of these resources were used to support small arms control activities as part of the Silencing the Guns (STG) initiative (Small Arms Survey 2020). Postponing and cancelling these types of meetings and field missions due to COVID-19 in the near-future risks further delaying crucial discussions on addressing some of the crisis hotspots in Africa, and setting back progress towards the STG initiative. As economic impacts of COVID-19 continue to take their toll globally, we may also witness additional cuts to budgets used to support African peace and security-related activities.

That said, diplomats and political leaders have overall found ways to allow peace negotiations and political processes to proceed to some extent. In November 2020, a technical committee of the AU PSC proposed to extend “the implementation of the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa [...] for a period of 10 years with a review every two (2) years, in line with the AU Agenda 2063” and that member states would develop national action plans to implement the STG (AU 2020). This is an encouraging commitment to continued mediation processes in Africa, despite the potential challenges posed by COVID-19. By December 2020, the Peace and Security Council had managed to discuss nine of the fourteen country-specific security situations highlighted in the February 2020 AU Assembly decision (ISS 2020b). Political dialogue and mediation processes at the African-level have shown resilience in the face of the pandemic so far, and much of their peace and security work has been able to continue. Lessons learnt from the first waves of COVID-19 will possibly allow African peace and security efforts to function more effectively as the pandemic continues.

A summary of key developments to watch out for

Building on a rising trend already visible since 2019, there has been a slow but steady uptick in violent conflicts in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic period. In particular, the pandemic period in Africa has been marked by a sharp rise in protests and riots against COVID-19 measures, with a risk that government responses could aggravate grievances when implemented in a heavy-handed or repressive manner. Much will depend on how governments will deal with the long-term negative political, economic and social impacts of the pandemic over the coming months and years.

We identified four main long-term challenges to watch out for: (1) economic hardships, resource competition, and fraying social cohesion; (2) mistrust between citizens and the state; (3) misinformation and disinformation; and (4) domestic and gender-based violence.

Economic hardships, resource competition and fraying social cohesion: The COVID-19 pandemic has made things worse for populations already struggling in the most fragile and conflict-affected regions. With a shrinking global economy, this risks pushing millions of Africans into further or newfound poverty, with high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. These economic hardships can intensify socio-economic grievances that risk fuelling conflict further down the line, compounded with overburdened health systems which face significant challenges ahead of the vaccine rollout in Africa, expected as of the spring of 2021.

Mistrust between governments and citizens: The pandemic takes place in a context where Africans overall have average trust in their governments and elected officials, mirroring challenges in other parts of the world. Mistrust in government has been amplified in some cases where governments abused COVID-19 measures to suppress citizens through the use of excessive forces or when targeting minority groups. In some cases, the measures have accelerated existing trends of democratic backsliding and authoritarian rule. With over 30 presidential and parliamentary elections [coming up in 2021](#), there will be a tense balance to maintain in environments where political tension is already high.

Misinformation and disinformation: Africa too has struggled with a rapid spread of misinformation about COVID-19, through the power of social media, covering issues such as the origin of the virus, symptoms, treatment, and national and international emergency responses. Especially in fragile and conflict affected regions with already weak health infrastructure and/or controlled by armed groups, this will continue to present additional health and security risks to vulnerable populations, in a context where the numbers of violent conflicts are (modestly) rising.

The ‘shadow pandemic’: Evidence shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a gender-specific effect, marked by a sharp increase in gender-based violence against women and girls due to COVID-19 specific measures of physical distancing and movement restrictions. Women have faced the crisis as frontline health workers, while also facing the biggest losses in income in both formal and informal economies. These trends are expected to continue as long as the pandemic rages. Concerted efforts will be needed to design recovery plans that are gender-sensitive, and with attention to the impact on young women and girls.

In addition to these long-term social, political and economic impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely have **longer-term impacts on peacekeeping, mediation and political dialogue undertaken by both African and international actors.** Peacekeeping operations and other missions (such as training missions) will continue to face challenges to their operations as long as COVID-19 continues to spread. These missions could potentially shrink in size, scope, and capacity as the global economic recession deepens. Although mediation efforts, field missions, and high-level meetings by the AU PSC and African regional organisations have adapted fairly well so far, the COVID-19 pandemic will present a continuous obstacle in the near-future as new waves of COVID-19 break out across the continent.

Looking ahead

Equitable and affordable access to vaccines for all present a critical question in the coming months, in a context which presents multiple political and economic challenges. Successful vaccination will be a pivotal factor to end continued transmission (and possible mutation) of the virus and prolonging socio-economic hardships which risk deepening fragility.

Maintaining trust between governments and their citizens will prove vital when it comes to successfully administering vaccines amongst large-scale populations. The challenge for governments to suppress misinformation and disinformation surrounding the vaccine will be particularly difficult, while health structures in many parts of Africa continue to be under extreme pressure.

At the time of writing, there was no clarity on exactly when and how many vaccines will be available to roll out the vaccination campaign in Africa. In mid-January, the African Union announced it had secured a provisional 270 million COVID-19 vaccine doses from manufacturers for member states to supplement the COVAX facility. This came amongst worries that the amount of vaccines for Africa foreseen by COVAX, an initiative co-led by the WHO, might not extend beyond the needs of frontline health care workers (Reuters 2021). The prospect of large-scale vaccination campaigns in this pandemic set unprecedented challenges globally, and this will be the case even more so in fragile and conflict affected regions, with more limited access to communities, more limited health infrastructure, and in some cases limited state-control over territory. On the other hand, there are signals that give hope that vaccinations campaigns can be rolled out effectively in conflict affected areas in Africa, building on existing experience and taking into account a number of key determinants of success. Relevant experiences have been gained through, for example, widespread anti-polio vaccination campaigns. Three factors are high on the list of factors

that make vaccination successful, notably information, community engagement and context-sensitive strategies (Chatham House 2020).

Governments and communities in Africa will need to play the long game to respond to the pressures and risks presented by COVID-19 and focus on mitigating the pandemic's immediate and long-term socio-economic impacts. To 'build back better', i.e. the idea promoted around the globe that the world must come stronger out of this crisis, a global priority should be to support Africa's most vulnerable communities. International and national actors will need to increase coordination and base their engagement on localised approaches, including with regards to vaccination efforts. This should include making use of joint analysis, integrated with conflict and fragility assessments to find targeted and tailored responses; and by linking short-term aid to meet immediate humanitarian needs, with investments in countries' long-term resilience, both at the state and community levels.

For the international community, overall, the situation requires a refocus and efforts to systematically take into account the consequences of the pandemic for fragile and conflict-affected countries in particular. International organisations, agencies and NGOs will need to adopt a "COVID-19 sensitive way of working", i.e. to adjust existing approaches, instruments and support mechanisms to tailor their work to meet current and next challenges ahead of us all.

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References

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² These include battles, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence, riots, protests, strategic developments.

³ Accord, COVID-19 Conflict & Resilience Monitor, 2 December 2020.

⁴ Accord, Conflict Trends, Issue 2, 2020: 2.

⁵ Note: Extreme poverty is measured as the number of people living on less than \$1.90 per day. 2017 is the latest year with official global poverty estimates.

⁶ ACLED, [CDT RECAP: AFRICA](#), 22 March - 16 May 2020.

⁷ For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the conflict in North Kivu and Ituri stymied surveillance, contact tracing, and vaccination during the Ebola crisis. Healthcare workers were unable to access those regions deemed too dangerous, and healthcare workers and Ebola Treatment Centres were targets of attacks throughout the outbreak (Wells et al. 2019).

⁸ Notes from webinar on “Ending Violence Against Women: Protecting Gains in Times of Emergency”, organised by The Chair of UN Studies in Peace and Justice on 23 November 2020.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ African Union, [Silencing the Guns by 2020](#).

¹¹ Local populations in some African contexts such as South Sudan, Somalia, and Mali suspect that foreigners, including peacekeeping personnel, are importing the COVID-19 disease. This poses a security risk to PSO staff and also impacts both their peacebuilding activities and efforts to build trust with local populations, a vital enabler for the conduct of PSOs (Bizimana 2020).

¹² In Mali, for example, an entire unit from the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) was quarantined due to one member of the unit testing positive for COVID-19 (Cronje 2020).

¹³ In some cases such as the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), PSO staff responsibilities actually increased during the pandemic as they had to provide further basic services to those living in protection of civilian (POC) sites (Cronje 2020).

¹⁴ For example, the Extraordinary Summit on “Silencing the Guns”, was postponed from May 2020 to December 5 2020 (ISS 2020a). The regional summit to review progress of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was also postponed (Djinnit 2020).

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