

**BRIEFING NOTE No. 118**

## **COVID-19 in Africa: DRIVER OF CONFLICT, OR TOO EARLY TO TELL?**

**COVID-19**

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COVID-19 has caused disruptions across the globe on a scale not previously imagined. This brief looks at the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for conflict-affected areas in Africa, as well as measures taken against the pandemic, which are likely to be even more profound and far-reaching. But as the virus continues to spread, the impact of COVID-19 on ongoing conflicts is still uncertain.

The debate is currently divided. On the one hand, we hear more alarmist tones from those experts who warn of 'expanding footprints' of mainly terrorist groups while international troops 'scramble home', and violent and extremist groups advance. On the other hand, there are more skeptical views, arguing that the effect of COVID-19 on activities of violent and extremist groups remains to be seen, and that there is no evidence that the rise and fall of attacks by violent or extremist groups in recent months is the result of the Corona crisis.

Trying to make sense of all this, we call for a cautious pair of eyes that avoids being blindsided by the 'headline' impact of the COVID-19 crisis on conflicts, and weighs the impact of this crisis on deeper, longer-term causes and drivers of conflicts and inequality, in particular gender inequality. Fragile and conflict-affected regions – but also stronger economies – are reporting a rise in gender-based violence, compounded by an economic fallout and increasing stress on public services. These effects risk deepening inequalities and grievances. In the attempt to 'Build Back Better' following the COVID-19 crisis, these should be taken into account, supported by a rigorous conflict- and gender-sensitive data gathering, which can inform an adequate recovery and response.

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## COVID-19 and conflict: emerging evidence globally

In an empirical study on the impact of COVID-19 on armed conflict in nine different conflict-affected countries (Afghanistan, Thailand, Yemen, Colombia, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Philippines, India), results demonstrated that, besides its immediate economic and health effects, the pandemic can also have an impact on armed conflicts to either increase or decrease conflict risks (Ide 2020). During the first few months of the pandemic, three of the nine countries under study saw a decrease in the number of armed conflict events, whilst five of the nine countries analysed saw an increase in armed conflict prevalence. For those countries that saw declines in armed conflict, these were mostly related to strategic decisions and less favourable opportunity structures for armed groups, such as logistical difficulties and attempts to increase popular support in the face of COVID-19.

Crucially, in these cases, the strategic decision by armed groups to minimise conflict has been mitigated by their manipulation of the pandemic for propaganda purposes. For example, in a ploy to gain public support, the Taliban in Afghanistan have deployed personnel to deal with the pandemic (rather than to its spring offensive), through public information campaigns and distribution of goods (Jackson 2020). Similarly, in Thailand, as their operational capabilities were severely weakened by travel restrictions, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) declared a cessation of hostilities to help inhabitants deal with the pandemic (Keating 2020). In Colombia, the armed conflict de-escalated considerably in March and April as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) declared a ceasefire on March 30 as a “humanitarian gesture” to ease coping with COVID-19 (BBC 2020b). This study further concluded that Yemen was an outlier and that COVID-19 had no impact on the country’s civil war. According to Blanc and Brown, however, the Houthi movement has treated the pandemic as a recruitment opportunity, stating in their media discourse that “it is better to die a martyr in heroic battles than dying at home from the coronavirus” (Blanc and Brown 2020).

Conversely, for the countries that saw increases, COVID-19 cannot be seen as the sole factor affecting the course or dynamics of the armed conflicts. The notion behind this is that armed conflicts are complex

and multi-faceted phenomena: “Their onset, intensity, and duration are driven by a wide range of factors” (Cederman and Vogt 2017). Instead, COVID-19 acted as a contributing element in these countries: an accelerator of existing trends that provided opportunities for armed groups to exploit. Two factors were identified as particularly key. The first was **the weakening of state institutions** which provided opportunities for armed groups to intensify military pressure. For example, in Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) sought to exploit the current weaknesses of the Iraqi government under huge strain from the crisis by expanding its territorial control and launching additional attacks (Qantara 2020). In other conflict areas such as Pakistan, Libya, and the Philippines, a rise in conflict was likely linked to more prominent factors irrespective of COVID-19 and the exploitation of weak state institutions by armed groups. This is where more subtle influences of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics were revealed through a second factor, notably **a lack of international attention** which allowed the extension of military operations whilst the focus remained on the pandemic. For example in Libya, the civil war intensified regardless of the pandemic, but the conflict escalated in a minor way as COVID-19 distracted the world’s attention from the ongoing war (Wintour 2020).

## Impact of Corona on conflicts across Africa

Given the budding evidence that there is some type of influence as a result of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics globally, whether it be through increasing or decreasing armed conflict in one way or another, this begs the question on whether COVID-19 would have a similar impact on conflict settings in Africa. The sample study mentioned above included only one conflict in Africa (Libya). In what follows, below, **we aim to contribute to the ongoing assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on conflicts in Africa** by pulling together a range of databases and resources.

The debate with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on conflicts in Africa seems to be split between two discourses that have emerged over the past months: the more alarmist discourse that violent, armed and extremist groups are making widespread abuse of the current pandemic, expanding their footprint across the

continent (Columbo and Harris 2020), and the more cautious narrative that evidence (until now) is too scarce to paint a clear picture (Thurston 2020b).

### Alarm bells ringing?

Some sources suggest that, based on data provided by ACLED, a steep upsurge in violent attacks in March and April 2020 has taken place because terrorist and non-state armed groups capitalised on the pandemic to increase attacks. They note with concern that “If these trends continue, sub-Saharan Africa is at risk of losing ground to violent groups following years of counterterrorism advances alongside regional and international security partners” (Columbo and Harris 2020). Several attacks took place across the continent in recent months. In the Sahel, Boko Haram insurgents launched an attack in Boma, a peninsula on the Lake Chad Basin in Chad, against an army base which claimed the lives of nearly 100 Chadian soldiers (BBC 2020a). In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab continued daily attacks on civilian populations and Somali and AMISOM troops, with two high-profile suicide attacks in late March and May (Carboni 2020). In Southern Africa, the Islamic State (IS) have recently stepped up their brutal attacks in Mozambique (West 2020). Amidst the spread of terrorism and violent attacks on the continent, terror groups are said to manipulate the outbreak of COVID-19 through propaganda by spreading disinformation, extremist ideologies, and fostering support/recruitment for their cause (BBC 2020c).

According to this view, this has been further compounded by the UN’ decision to suspend the rotation and deployment of all international peacekeepers until 30 June 2020 (UN 2020). **Peacekeeping operations face multiple challenges, as critical operations and rotations have been delayed or cancelled as military and police forces are quarantined** (Coning de 2020). The withdrawal of international peacekeepers, as well troops from bilateral military training programmes, for example in Kenya (Kimuyu 2020), Mali (Gallagher 2020), and AFRICOM (Babb 2020), reportedly threatens to hinder operational support to peacekeeping missions and the training of state security forces. Additionally, these forces across the continent could be distracted and overstretched, with **military personnel that are usually earmarked for counterterrorism measures now being**

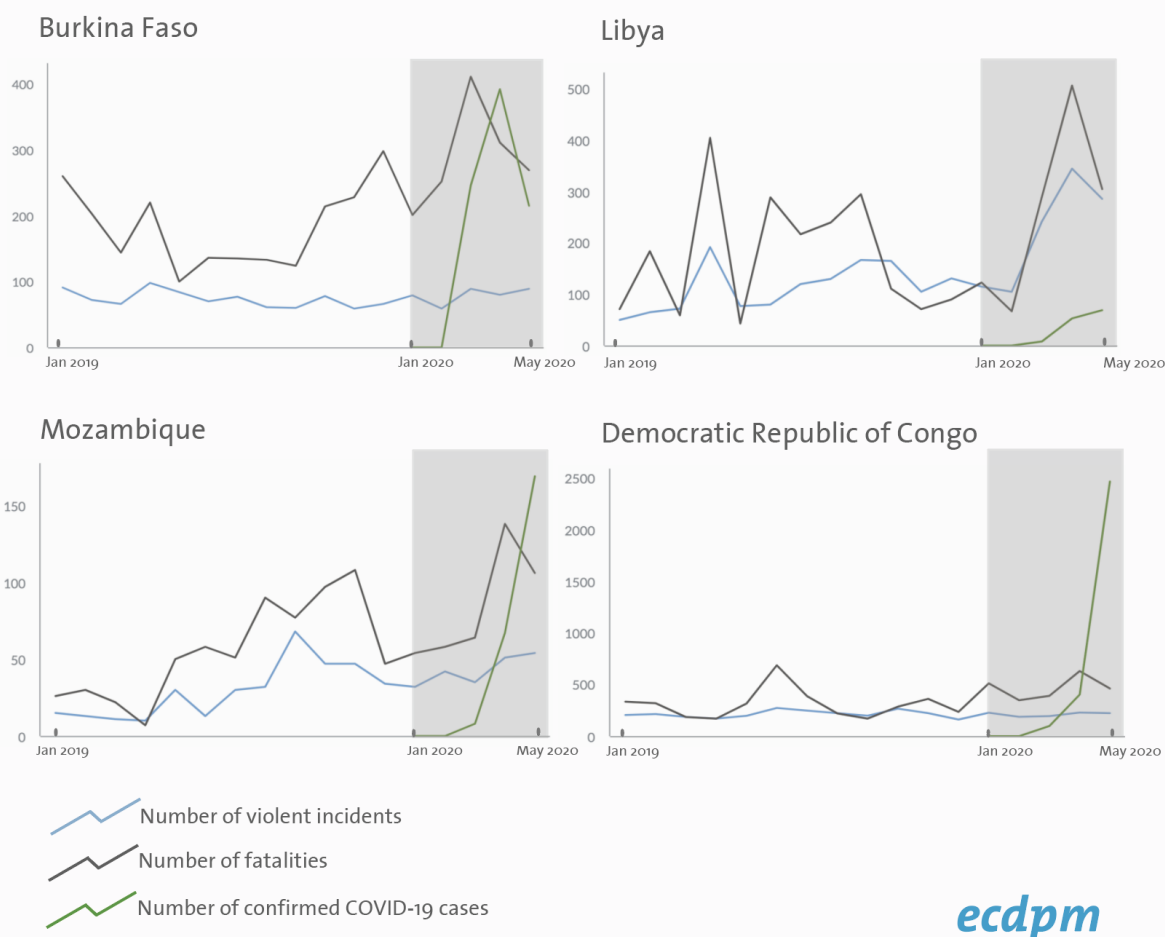
**deployed to enforce lockdowns** or implement pandemic response measures, such as in Nigeria (Carsten 2020), Kenya (Gisesa 2020), and South Africa (BBC 2020d). For example in Burkina Faso, observers noted a series of attacks in late May which in their view highlight the expanding sway of terrorist groups over larger parts of the north-east of the country, and which happened ‘in an almost total silence, [with] the localities being difficult to access and the news turned towards the COVID-19 pandemic’ (Douce 2020).



Photo courtesy of [MONUSCO/Michael Ali via Flickr](#)

Worried about the potential impact of COVID-19 on conflict affected states in Africa, and the fear of spiralling violence, the United Nations Secretary-General launched a call for a global ceasefire to support the response to the crisis (UN 2020). The call for a global truce did not gain momentum (Burke 2020). According to the UN, a ‘substantial number of conflict parties’ in several countries in Africa initially expressed their agreement to a cessation of hostilities, notably in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Libya, South Sudan, and Sudan. But those declarations did not materialise in actual ceasefires. **In Libya, parties to the conflict initially responded positively to the call for a humanitarian pause to tackle COVID-19, but the truce did not hold and fighting flared up again** (Brzozowski 2020).

## Number of violent conflicts, fatalities and confirmed COVID-19 cases in four African countries



Sources: WHO 2020 and ACLED N.d.

### Keeping an eye on the bigger picture

By contrast, supporters of the more cautious discourse are skeptical of the narrative that COVID-19 influences conflict settings fundamentally, and benefits jihadists and/or armed groups. Some sources claim that it is simply too early to tell what, if any, influence COVID-19 has on conflict in Africa, and that **possibilities should not be conflated with actualities** (Thurston 2020a).

At the time of many attacks cited as evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on conflict, for example in Mali, Nigeria, and Chad, cautionary commentators note that confirmed COVID-19 case counts in these countries were very low (Thurston 2020b). Assessing the causal role of COVID-19 in recent attacks in Africa is therefore difficult, and other context-specific factors are likely more prominent.

ACCORD's latest analysis currently sees limited correlation between COVID-19 and overall levels of conflict in Africa (ACCORD 2020). Figures produced by ACLED illustrating an increase in violent attacks in Africa do not necessarily indicate an anomaly brought about by COVID-19. Indeed, there have been instances of sporadic increases in violence in some African countries recently, but **violent incidents and attacks in several African countries had been on the rise for several months before the pandemic**, including in Libya (Crisis Group 2019), Mozambique (Almeida dos Santos 2020 and Atlantic Council 2019), Mali and Burkina Faso (The New Humanitarian 2019), and by expansion the Sahel (ACLED 2020).

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The graph above, using data by ACLED on violent incidents and fatalities and COVID-19 cases in four countries (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burkina Faso, Libya and Mozambique) shows that in various conflicts, the rise in violent incidents happened prior to the onset and spread of Corona across Africa. In fact, the peak of infections has not yet been reached. Numbers of infections and deaths are still rising in many African countries, although slower than expected for reasons that are still unclear (Chitiyo, Rupiya and Wadi 2020).

Martin Ewi, Southern Africa Regional Coordinator for ENACT, recently highlighted in a webinar on the impact of transnational organised crime in East Africa, that terrorist and armed attacks tend to follow a zig-zag curve of high and low frequency periods. To date, he claims, no studies have been conducted that provide empirical evidence of COVID-19 being responsible for the recent increase in attacks throughout Africa (Ewi 2020).

Some claim that **armed groups are exploiting the pandemic by increasing propaganda and delivering services to win support**. But opposing views argue that this is not necessarily a determinant of success, but simply evidence of propaganda use. Propaganda by violent groups is not always masterful. The example from Al-Shabaab's response to the 2011 famine in Somalia shows that the group mismanaged the famine, especially in South-central Somalia (Abdi 2011) and were seen as complicit in the suffering of victims in their disaster response (Thurston 2020b), as a result of their acts of sabotage (BBC 2017). This could not be covered up by the spread of images of Al-Shabaab distributing food and medical supplies. Similar botched propaganda usage and pandemic responses by armed groups during the COVID-19 pandemic could have serious implications for their cause (BBC 2017).

Regarding the withdrawal of international peacekeepers and bilateral military support and training missions, some analysts note that the repatriation of Irish troops from the peacekeeping mission in Mali, or the suspension of the British training mission in Kenya, does not add up to a fundamental shift (Thurston 2020b). Furthermore, **international peacekeeping activities have not altogether halted, but have simply adapted, with the most critical activities including patrols, civilian protection, and**

**force protection still taking place**. In Darfur, for example, the exit of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), scheduled for 31 October, will be postponed but not cancelled. The closure of airports, seaports and land crossings along with the suspension of all peacekeeping rotations severely impacted UNAMID, and will "significantly impact the sequencing and overall timeline" of its drawdown". The exit is planned to happen in close conjunction with the establishment of a new political support mission, the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), meant to backstop the ongoing peace process and mediation efforts, which will start its work as of 1 January 2021 (UN News 2020b).

As an unintended positive outcome, **constraints on the movement of international staff provides local actors, organisations, and communities directly affected by conflict with the opportunity for increased local ownership of peacebuilding processes**. These formal and informal local peacebuilders can continue to work on peacebuilding processes even when international peacebuilders are unable to gain access to conflict-affected areas (Marclint Ebiede 2020).

Finally, while the call for a global ceasefire by the United Nations Secretary General did not materialise, several peace processes and mediation efforts continued, unabated by COVID-19. In Sudan, peace negotiations between the Sudanese government and the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) resumed in May. This happened online via video conference between Khartoum and Juba to comply with precautionary social distancing protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Dabanga 2020a). By early June, parties in the peace talks agreed on a population census and the holding of elections, amongst other things, while a deadline to sign a peace agreement has been set for 20 June (Dabanga 2020b).

## Measuring the real impact of COVID-19

Now, what does this mean for our analysis of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on conflicts in Africa, and what does the evidence thus far tell us? The data tells us that **in some cases, violent extremist and armed groups have made use of the pandemic to launch additional attacks, including in Burkina Faso and in Mozambique. But prognosis for further escalation of conflict in these regions was already negative.** Already in 2019, ACLED assessed that the Sahel was “most likely to be the geopolitical dilemma of 2019” as violence rates in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger doubled compared to 2018 (ACLED 2020). COVID-19 might have provided additional opportunities for violent activity, which might have happened with or without the onset of COVID-19. Across the board, **the data collected so far by experts does not show conclusively that the pandemic has led to a widespread increase of conflict across fragile and conflict affected regions.**

Beyond the impact of COVID-19 on military attacks by violent extremist and armed groups, **the COVID-19 crisis is set to have a further reaching effect across a wide range of African countries.** A significant number of conflicts on the continent are resource-based, fueled by climatic shocks, structural governance deficits and the lack of institutionalised dispute resolution mechanisms. In many countries, health and education services were already saturated. According to the UN, COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of communities to global systemic shocks such as diseases and climate change (UN News 2020a). The COVID-19 environment is likely to exacerbate these tensions as communities grapple with government responses that directly affect their ability to feed their families. The most vulnerable will remain at-risk with more than 30 million refugees and internally displaced people spread across the continent (Fröhlich 2019).

### The impact of COVID-19 on gender, and the ‘shadow pandemic’

Data currently being gathered shows that **COVID-19 is exacerbating humanitarian crises across fragile regions, but also stronger economies and states. This is leading to an additional burden on communities already facing conflict, especially on women and girls.** International Alert (and others) has warned of a

**‘shadow pandemic’ as huge increases of gender-based violence are reported globally** (Laruni and Nuckir 2020). UNFPA expects the COVID-19 pandemic to cause a one-third reduction in progress towards ending gender-based violence by 2030. Research from the Ebola epidemic in West Africa shows that loss of livelihoods can risk leading women to engage in negative coping mechanisms such as transactional sex. This in turn increases their exposure to further sexual exploitation and abuse, unwanted pregnancies, and contracting sexually transmittable diseases (Young and Adib 2020).

The effect of Corona, and measures to counter it, on issues of safety, gender-based violence sexual health services amongst others, vary across different countries in Africa, both conflict affected countries and more stable economies. Some sources project a loss of jobs and revenue streams for 85.5% of Africans that work in the informal sector as a result of the pandemic (Chergui 2020). More than 80% of women in the labour force are employed in the informal sectors in Sub-Saharan Africa, making them more vulnerable for loss of income.

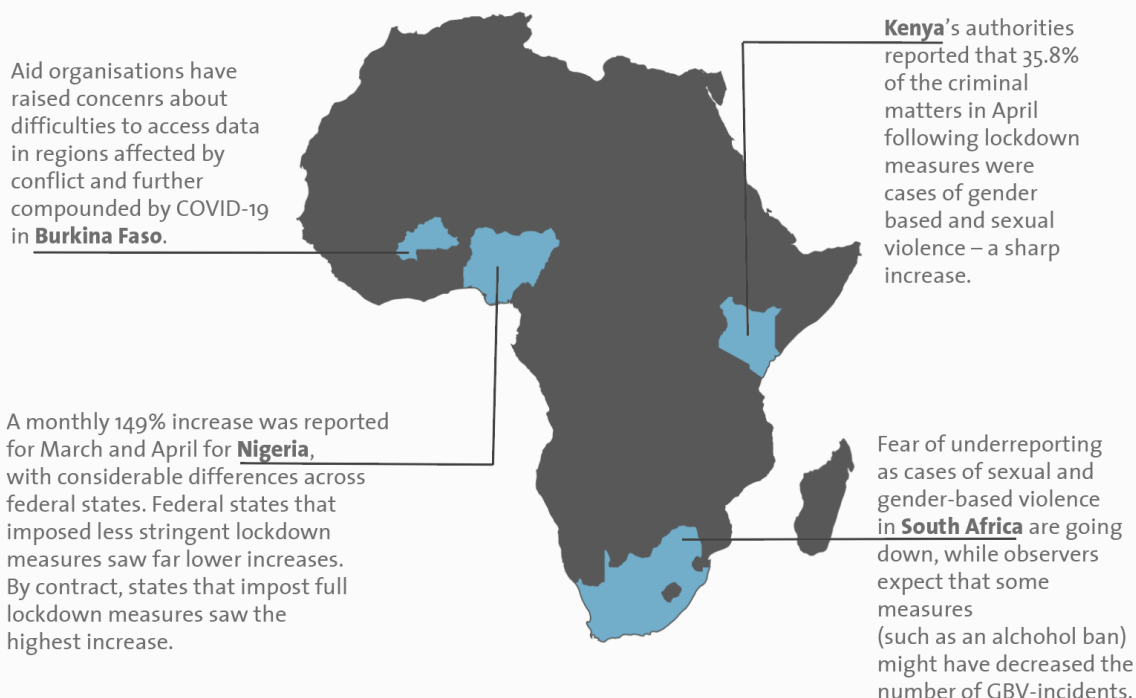


Photo courtesy of [IFPRI/Milo Mitchell via Flickr](#)

Alongside the sharp increase of gender-based violence seen in some countries, there is also the worry of underreported cases, or lack of, and access to, data. In early April, the Kenya National Council on Administration of Justice reported ‘a significant spike in Sexual Offences in many parts of the country in the past two weeks’ with offences constituting “35.8 percent of the criminal matters reported during that period” (Maraga 2020). In Nigeria, there has been a steep increase in reported cases of gender-based violence, showing a monthly increase of 149% in

## How the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting gender-based violence

In Africa, countries are reporting either a rise in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) since March 2020, or concern that cases are not being reported, or data collection is being severely hampered.



**85.5%**

of Africans are projected to face a loss of income or work in the informal sector due to COVID-19.



**58.1%**

of the global workforce employed in the informal sector are women.  
**For sub-Saharan Africa, it's 89%.**

Source: ECDPM

reports of gender-based violence following the introduction of lockdowns at the end of March (Young and Adib 2020). Worries about increases in sexual violence against women and girls due to COVID-19 restrictive measures were also reported in Uganda (Xinhuanet 2020) and Ethiopia (Adriaanse 2020). In South Africa reports of domestic abuse and sexual violence have gone down. Observers say the alcohol ban might have made some forms of abuse less severe. Others fear that due to restrictions, women are not able to seek help, shelter or report to the police (Gould 2020). Also men are facing societal and economic pressures that risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes of

masculinities. This can happen, for example, by resorting to violence to protect, and with frustration and violence potentially being directed within the home (Laruni and Nuckhir 2020).

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## Global and regional policy responses to COVID-19 and conflict

Regional and international organisations have proposed different response measures, both on conflict and COVID-19 and also when it comes to the effects of COVID-19 gender.

The **UN** has launched a call for action to “Build Back Better” (UN 2020b) and **ensure key challenges are not left out in the global economic and social recovery**. This includes incorporating measures to address **climate change**, but should also pay due attention to promoting **community resilience, conflict sensitivity and gender equality**.

In the **African Union’s** Joint Continental Strategy for the COVID-19 outbreak, response measures explicitly aimed at ensuring peace and security during the pandemic have not been established. A continent-wide and coordinated response to tackling the potentially increasing impact of COVID-19 on conflict settings in Africa does not yet exist, with African member states enforcing their own security protocols (AU N.d.). However, the AU has specifically stressed the potential consequences of the pandemic for women and girls in conflict affected countries, in particular for displaced women, migrants and those living in refugee camps. This includes for example, shortages of essential supplies such as sanitary pads and contraception as funds are redirected to address the pandemic, and shortages of qualified staff in those camps to address women’s specific needs. In its guidelines for gender-sensitive responses to conflict during the pandemic the AU has therefore called for the inclusion of women in peace-making processes, prioritising the needs of women in conflict zones, and continuing to implement National Action Plans on UN Resolution 1325 (AU 2020). The **regional economic communities**, for example ECOWAS and IGAD, are closely monitoring the situation through daily updates or tracking systems (IGAD N.d.), but have not yet issued similar guidelines on the impact of Corona on conflicts (ECOWAS 2020).

The **EU** has mobilised a 36 billion euro (EEAS 2020b) “Team Europe” financial package to support those most at risk in partner countries, and it has offered direct support to health, police, justice, and social

protection sectors for women and children, as well as curbing xenophobia and hate speech by tackling disinformation around the pandemic (EEAS 2020a). However, the EU does not have a dedicated strategy or guidelines for a conflict and gender-sensitive recovery beyond a support and financial package.

While the ‘Team Europe’ response package was seen as a good start, it focuses mainly on traditional diplomatic, humanitarian and development instruments. This would have to be complemented by other financial, humanitarian and regulatory tools – with additional political and technical work on ‘how’ to the EU will roll out the global response in a coherent manner (Jones et al. 2020). For example, for the moment, the EU does not yet have a dedicated strategy or guidelines for a conflict and gender-sensitive approach to the roll out of the global response package.

## Conclusion

Considering the rapidly changing nature of the crisis and uncertainty about its development, this note is a snapshot of a situation that requires monitoring and attention in the context of further evolving crises and conflicts in Africa. Based on the emerging evidence, two different interpretations have arisen with regards to the impact of COVID-19 on conflict. But so far, the data available does not show conclusively that the pandemic has led to a widespread increase of conflict across fragile and conflict affected regions.

As data is still being collected, **we caution against jumping to conclusions about the current short-lived impact of COVID-19 on conflict dynamics and the opportunity it creates for attacks by violent and extremist groups**. There is risk, in the global recovery and responses to the COVID-19 in conflict affected regions, that focusing on the surge of armed incidents by violent extremist groups will provide a push for further deploying military measures against violent extremism. Experts have questioned the wisdom of such approaches (Diatra 2020), especially when not complemented by humanitarian response, socio-political reform, reconciliation and economic recovery and reforms. In particular, we looked at the impact of Corona on gender inequality, women’s livelihoods and the ‘shadow pandemic’ this is creating, which could fuel grievances down the line.

That is why we also vote for closely monitoring the situation as COVID-19 infections are on the rise in Africa, even if this will pose considerable difficulties in conflict affected regions (Mednick 2020). We note the importance for continued data collection and close monitoring on the deeper impacts on communities across fragile and conflict affected regions, but also stronger African economies. In the attempt to 'build back better' following the crisis, due attention to conflict and gender sensitivity, but also attention for (climate) resilience, will be crucial.

#### **COVID-19 and international cooperation**

This brief is part of ECDPM's work on the impact of COVID-19 on Africa-Europe relations and development and international cooperation more broadly.

As the situation unfolds, we will look at how the spread of the coronavirus affects policies and processes related to trade and investment, migration, peace and security, regional integration, climate change, food security and the private sector.

To have a look at our work, please go to:  
[www.ecdpm.org/corona](http://www.ecdpm.org/corona).

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## About ECDPM

The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) is an independent think tank working on international cooperation and development policy in Europe and Africa.

Since 1986 our staff members provide research and analysis, advice and practical support to policymakers and practitioners across Europe and Africa – to make policies work for sustainable and inclusive global development.

Our main areas of work include:

- European external affairs
- African institutions
- Security and resilience
- Migration
- Sustainable food systems
- Finance, trade and investment
- Regional integration
- Private sector engagement

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Making policies work

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