THE NEED FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE AND PEACEBUILDING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Lessons from Northeast Nigeria

SEPTEMBER 2020

Overview

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to fragile and conflict-affected contexts, there has been an impulse among some donors to focus on public health and humanitarian assistance, while cutting back on peacebuilding and governance programs that are not viewed as producing immediate, tangible impacts on the spread of the disease. However, when strained state-society relations are part of ongoing conflict dynamics, responses to COVID-19 that fail to incorporate governance and peacebuilding approaches run the risk of undermining their intended public health goals and further exacerbating cycles of violence.

In such contexts, long-standing political grievances and mistrust inform the narratives through which communities understand the spread of the disease and responses by international actors and the government. These perceptions can simultaneously limit the willingness of communities to comply with public health regulations and can amplify other drivers of violent conflict, including increased resource scarcity, opportunistic behavior by armed groups, fraying social cohesion, and rapidly proliferating misinformation and disinformation.

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This interaction between the pandemic and pre-existing sources of fragility is a threat multiplier, magnifying existing grievances and posing lasting challenges to disease containment, resilience, and peace.

To prevent this vicious cycle, donors and implementers with programs focused on the link between governance and conflict should **make any needed adaptations to safely continue programs focused on strengthening state-society interactions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic**. In addition, donors and implementing partners focused on the health response should layer and integrate **conflict sensitivity** and **good governance principles** into the public health and humanitarian responses to the pandemic to ensure that **aid builds resilience rather than unintentionally exacerbating conflict drivers and accelerating the spread of the virus**.

This report presents a close analysis of the ongoing crisis in Borno State, Northeast Nigeria and a set of broader lessons about why and how donors should invest in governance and conflict prevention programming as part of the COVID-19 response.

This report proceeds as follows. We first provide an overview of the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Northeast Nigeria. Next, we briefly outline existing theory and evidence about the connections between governance, peace, and public health crises. We then illustrate these dynamics using a case study of the COVID-19 response in Borno State. This case study draws on qualitative observations from Mercy Corps' **conflict analysis workshops (Box 1), program monitoring data**, and **reports and analysis from other organizations** active in the region.

The case study highlights how pre-existing tensions in state-society relationships have interacted with the spread of COVID-19 and the public health and humanitarian responses to the pandemic. Throughout the case study, the text boxes highlight examples of how Mercy Corps' programs in Northeast Nigeria have attempted to address the linkage between governance, conflict, and COVID-19. The purpose of these boxes is to highlight a core set of promising programming approaches that merit further rigorous evaluation and scale-up. We conclude by articulating a set of broader recommendations for how donors and their implementing partners can help ensure that the pandemic response supports goals of building peace by strengthening state-society relations and vice versa.

Box 1. Utilizing Participatory Analysis to Inform Local Peacebuilding Efforts:
Conflict Analysis Workshops

⟩   **What they are**: Participatory analysis sessions engaging community representatives to assess local conflict dynamics, conflict drivers, stakeholders, and peace capacities.

⟩   **Aim**: To foster **collective ownership** of local conflict management efforts by ensuring an inclusive process, creating a shared understanding of conflict dynamics, and building confidence of community actors to serve as local peace agents.

⟩   **COVID-19 Adaptations:** Mercy Corps' local partners were able to safely continue holding participatory group workshops during the pandemic with masks and social distancing. Workshop facilitation guides were adjusted to include discussions of how COVID-19 is shaping conflict drivers. These workshops were then used to develop further program adaptations and new activities around the lived experiences and needs of communities.

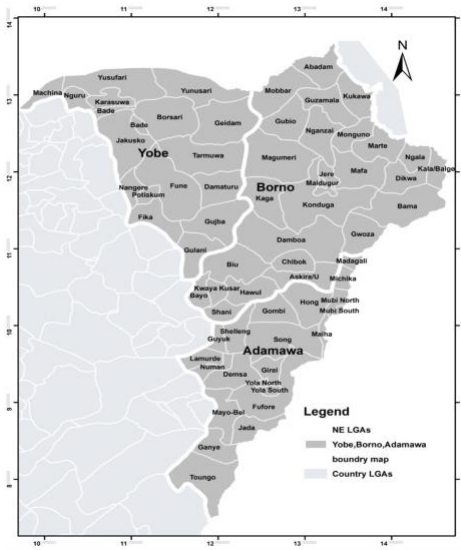# Context: Ongoing Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis in Northeast Nigeria

Figure 1. Northeast Nigeria

Since 2009, Northeast Nigeria has witnessed a brutal uprising by the armed opposition groups (AOGs) *Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (JAS, more commonly known as Boko Haram) and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), which split from JAS in 2016. The violence has caused a humanitarian emergency, with more than 36,000 people killed since 2009, 1.8 million displaced, and 1.2 million cut off from humanitarian assistance. In response, the Government of Nigeria (GoN) has relied heavily on the military to drive its counter-insurgency campaign, initiating operations in 2011. Despite success routing JAS from most population centers in 2015 and claims that the militants had been "technically defeated," the Nigerian military maintains only limited security around garrison towns, where large numbers of civilians remain surrounded by military fortifications.

From their inception, JAS and ISWAP have exploited existing grievances among communities regarding rampant corruption and poor service provision by the GoN in order to rally support and drive recruitment and retention of members. Borno State, the epicenter of the crisis in Northeast Nigeria, has long been subjected to political conflicts around regionalism, tribal 'protectionism', and nepotism that has further weakened the state's accountability to the people. Underpinning these dynamics are a range of socio-cultural conflicts within local communities – including interethnic, intergenerational, interreligious, and IDP-host community conflict – which pre-date the insurgency. Shifting dynamics around displacement, resource scarcity, and identity associated with the crisis have only further exacerbated these conflicts.

Within this fragile context of weak governance, insecurity, conflict, and displacement, the situation in Borno State is highly precarious and ripe for the rapid transmission of COVID-19. As of August 30, Borno recorded 740 cases and 36 deaths from the virus. Unfortunately, testing rates have remained extremely low and contact tracing has widely failed, with 73% of all confirmed cases as having an unknown source of transmission.

Box 2. Mercy Corps NE Nigeria Governance and Peacebuilding Programming at a Glance

Mercy Corps has operated across Nigeria since 2012 and has had a permanent presence in Northeast Nigeria since 2015, implementing a range of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding programs. Mercy Corps' Northeast Nigeria peacebuilding portfolio aims to address the root causes of the conflict and build the long-term resilience of communities, with integrated programs focusing on good governance, community dialogue, citizen-centered advocacy, trauma healing, civic engagement of women and youth, and peace media. Mercy Corps is deeply embedded in communities, with a strong network of civil society partners and local committee structures that Mercy Corps collaborates with and serves in order to nurture stability from the bottom up.

Understanding the Connections Between Governance, Conflict, and Public Health Crises

Throughout the course of adapting to the ongoing pandemic, Mercy Corps has used observations from program teams in more than 40 countries to identify five pathways through which the spread of COVID-19 and the implementation of containment measures are shaping conflict: 1) deteriorating state-society relations, 2) armed groups seeking to expand their activities and influence, 3) increasing scarcity and economic competition, 4) fraying social cohesion, and 5) proliferating misinformation and disinformation. Figure 2 summarizes the hypothesized connections between COVID-19 and violent conflict that have emerged from an inductive analysis of the lessons from this broad cross-section of cases.
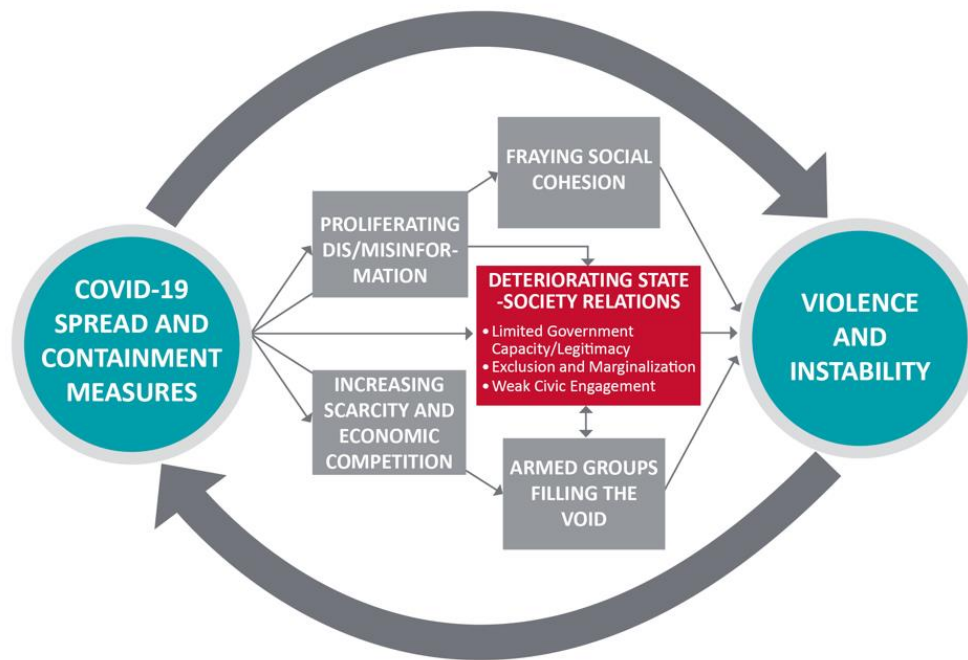
Figure 2. Pathways Connecting COVID-19 and Conflict, With Added Detail on the State-Society Relations Pathway. Source: Inks and Lichtenheld 2020.

While the broad cross section of country-specific observations that informed this framework indicate that these five pathways are widespread, our analyses also indicate that not all factors are present or equally important in every case. At present, there are substantial evidence gaps about exactly **how each of these pathways influence the timing and severity of violence and instability** during the pandemic and **what interventions are effective at preventing and mitigating these impacts**. As a result, future research and analysis needs to focus on developing better theory and evidence about how each type of linkage between COVID-19 and conflict works in practice. This report uses a focused case study of Northeast Nigeria to understand **how pre-existing weaknesses in state-society relations interact with insecurity, economic scarcity, fraying social cohesion, and dis/misinformation** throughout the pandemic and the local response. The case study also highlights examples of the types of programming approaches that Mercy Corps uses to help support good governance and peacebuilding in Borno State and how each program component has been adjusted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How Weak Governance Can Increase the Instability from Health Shocks

[Research by Mercy Corps on the link between state-society linkages and conflict](#) indicates that there are three broad types of governance factors that can activate and intensify connections between health shocks and the other economic, social, and security-related drivers of instability in a given context.

1. **Limited government capacity and legitimacy –** Governance institutions and norms may contribute to conflict where the state is unable or unwilling to respond to citizens' needs. Weak service provision, persistent insecurity and corruption, and lack of dialogue between citizens and authorities can contribute to persistent mistrust and legitimacy gaps that may drive opposition to the state and an openness to recruitment by violent actors. Limited capacity and legitimacy of governance actors can be addressed with programs that build norms and institutions necessary for responsive service delivery, and which strengthen trust and feedback channels between communities, politicians, civil servants, and non-state actors.

2. **Exclusion and marginalization –** Actual or perceived marginalization of identity groups by the state may inflame ethnic and sectarian divisions, and risk facilitating recruitment by armed opposition groups. Exclusion and marginalization can be addressed with interventions that help leaders to understand and value inclusion of youth, women, and other marginalized groups and increase the capacity and influence of excluded groups.

3. **Weak civic engagement –** Disengaged citizens and weak civil society can contribute to the risk of conflict by decreasing willingness to engage with government institutions and increasing reliance on violent non-state actors to resolve disputes and provide basic goods. There are many factors that can contribute to weak civic engagement, including lack of access to basic information, lack of social capital needed for meaningful political participation, and constrained civic space. Weak civic engagement can be addressed with interventions that mobilize communities to engage in collective action and build the capacity and connections of local civil society organizations.

The rapid spread of an infectious disease and the public perception of the government's response are simultaneously fueled by these factors, and also potentially exacerbate the linkages between governance and conflict. An inability of a government to provide adequate testing and treatment can highlight weaknesses in the public health system and failures in accountability. Unequal impacts of a disease or unfair targeting of response measures can intensify grievances and reduce social cohesion among those groups. Lockdowns and social distancing measures can have the effect of curtailing political participation and closing civic space by cancelling elections, curtailing free speech, and restricting public demonstrations. All of these types of public health-related governance stresses can exacerbate COVID-19 epidemiology, undermine the legitimacy of the state, and deepen the risk of recurring violence in contexts in the midst of conflict.

Weakened government legitimacy and increased conflict can also increase the spread of infectious diseases. If citizens view the government as untrustworthy and unjust, they will be less likely to comply with lockdowns and social distancing guidelines that could slow the spread of disease. They may also be less likely to seek healthcare from state health facilities or engage with disease surveillance architecture, including contact tracing. They may also be more likely to believe rumors and conspiracy theories about the disease, which can mute the impact of behavioral change messaging and intensify the risk of violence against healthcare responders. Marginalized individuals and communities who are most at risk of disease transmission may be the most distrustful of the state and most reluctant to engage with government services and resources out of a fear of ulterior motives.

In contexts where one or more of these governance factors are underlying causes of conflict, a widespread disease outbreak is exactly the time where additional resources and support are needed for governance and peacebuilding programming. By this same logic, implementing humanitarian, public health, or economic recovery responses that are blind to governance and conflict dynamics not only eschew effective disease containment measures and response, but can also intensify conflict risks and miss opportunities to build long-term resilience.

Case Study: Governance, Conflict, and COVID-19 in Northeast Nigeria

Northeast Nigeria is a particularly relevant context for examining ways in which fractured citizen-state relations, conflict, and the COVID-19 public health crisis are connected to one another. It also provides a case study for identifying how donor funding and programs can be oriented to address the intersection of the immediate COVID-19 public health crisis and broader governance and peacebuilding goals.

Public Health Responses Interacting with Pre-Existing Government Legitimacy Gaps

Pervasive mistrust of the government, resulting from longstanding community perceptions of mismanagement and corruption, has often been cited as one of the primary root causes of the decade-long insurgency in Borno State. JAS and its martyred founder Mohammed Yusuf have long used government corruption as a rallying cry to shore up public support. In the context of COVID-19, existing tensions in the relationship between citizens and the state not only frustrates the pandemic response, but also is further exacerbated by the pandemic.

While the GoN was highly proactive in instituting prevention and control measures in domestic hotspots of Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun states in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, citizens nationwide continue to disbelieve that the state has their best interests at heart. On February 27, 2020, the day of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Nigeria, many people suspected that the report was a hoax by the GoN to attract international assistance, from which politicians could use to enrich themselves. As the crisis has persisted, communities in Borno State have suggested that malaria cases are being intentionally misdiagnosed as COVID-19 to fuel the same corrupt ends. On April 24, two days after Borno State initiated lockdown measures, the Borno Special Task Force on COVID-19 announced that three imams would face disciplinary action for holding Friday prayer services in violation of the lockdown. Social media erupted with accusations of double standards, noting that these rules were not being applied to ruling elites in contravention of the lockdown during the same period.

Community attitudes towards the government have been further inflamed by the disruptions to livelihoods and access to food resulting from state and national-level lockdowns. Across Nigeria, residents have decried the quality of this assistance, with widespread cases of expired and animal-infested bags of rice being distributed by the GoN or woefully inadequate quantities being supplied to neighborhoods. In Borno, communities participating in Mercy Corps-supported conflict analysis workshops have noted the extreme politicization of government aid distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In these workshops, it has been suggested that palliatives including rice, cooking oil, and other food items were channeled through political parties and their loyalists, instead of existing community structures, such as distribution committees that enlist diverse local actors to identify the most vulnerable families to be targeted for assistance. As a result, communities aligned with the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) Party have been the primary beneficiaries of COVID-19-related aid, while communities aligned with the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) have been left out. These instances only deepen existing political cleavages that undermine neutral COVID-19 assistance to communities and highlight the distance between the GoN and its citizens.

These effects are felt most acutely in the local government areas (LGAs) beyond the Borno State capital of Maiduguri. The LGAs have long suffered from minimal presence of government institutions, as state authorities and traditional leaders alike have yet to return to post since fleeing to Maiduguri at the outset of the insurgency. Existing local government councils are populated by appointees at the behest of their political patrons and susceptible to high turnover. As a result, communities suffer from a dearth of basic services, including water, shelter, clinics, sanitation, or schools. Borno State also hosts 1.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) living in camp settings and host communities, placing further strain on already weak services and significantly exacerbating COVID-19 risks and vulnerabilities. Without access to state officials, communities have few pathways to advocate for rehabilitation of such vital community infrastructure or for locally sensitive COVID-19 response measures and resources. In the meantime, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Borno State

has postponed local government elections initially scheduled for June 2020, leaving communities at the LGA level without accountable representation.

Box 3. Building Legitimacy Through Advocacy and Dialogue:
Good Governance Committees at a Glance

〉 **What they are**: Local committee structures that utilize citizen-centered advocacy to demand government action to rehabilitate community infrastructure and provide essential services. Mercy Corps trains these committees in dialogue and advocacy skills, including lobbying, community mobilization, and media engagement. As a result of these approaches, community interactions with the government have dramatically shifted from individual requests for personal assistance to collective petitions for investment in the wider community.

Mercy Corps also trains state- and local-level government officials in participatory and conflict-sensitive governance principles and dialogue skills. Mercy Corps convenes quarterly dialogue sessions between Good Governance Committees and local government officials as a consistent communication channel where community members can convey their concerns and expectations and government officials can communicate progress and barriers to implementing participatory governance and community rehabilitation initiatives.

〉 **Aim**: To nurture **civic engagement** and **trust in government** by creating opportunities for transparent governance systems, active citizen-led accountability, and constructive citizen-state relationships.

〉 **COVID-19 Adaptations:** During the pandemic, the existing activities of the Good Governance Committees have been expanded to identify and address community needs related to COVID-19 and its secondary impacts by advocating for effective Borno State government response. Mercy Corps is also providing direct technical assistance to the Borno Special Task Force on COVID-19 to adapt their response plan to address local community priorities and complaints.

Security Threats Intensifying Amidst COVID-19 Movement Restrictions and Lockdowns

In the midst of these persistent governance gaps, the Nigerian military often serves as the primary embodiment of the government at the local level. Although inter-state travel bans to curb the spread of COVID-19 were lifted on June 29, communities reported that the movement restrictions resulted in a surge in military profiteering, including extortion of commercial traders permitted to continue supplying essential goods across state lines, as well as residents seeking to evade official lockdown measures. Security analysis suggests that the frequency and value of bribes along key routes in and out of Maiduguri also increased during this period. In conjunction with the ongoing theft of cattle, fish, and agricultural produce by the military from local communities, downstream supply chains remain severely constrained and local livelihoods uprooted, with particular impacts for those within the informal sector. These dynamics fuel longstanding tensions between the military and local communities, as part of the extensive militarization of the region since the inception of the insurgency. As such, the military too often views local communities as potential suspects in its battle against armed opposition groups (AOGs), leading to widespread concerns of sexual exploitation, forced labor, arbitrary detention, and even torture against civilians, as documented extensively by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. In their role enforcing COVID-19 movement restrictions and lockdowns, the Nigerian military serves to further conflate public health considerations with political and security concerns, further entrenching issues of lost or lacking trust amongst COVID-19-affected communities in the government's response to the pandemic.

Security has also deteriorated significantly since late 2019, when the Nigerian military introduced its 'super camp' strategy to redeploy forces from forward operating bases into the main garrison towns across Borno State. This trend has only worsened now that the military is being asked to absorb more responsibilities related to COVID-19 enforcement. Increasing numbers of AOG vehicle checkpoints have filled the security vacuum. Most notably, in early June 2020, ISWAP abducted five Nigerian humanitarian workers and a security guard who were traveling by road from Maiduguri to Monguno. On July 22, suspected ISWAP militants released a video in which they were executed. While there is no evidence to date that the number of AOG attacks has

increased since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, AOG attacks are becoming increasingly predatory and fatal. In Gubio LGA on June 9, ISWAP claimed an attack resulting in the killing of 81 civilians and abduction of 7 others, including a local traditional leader. On June 13, ISWAP launched another coordinated attack on Monguno and Nganzai LGAs killing an estimated 40 civilians and 20 soldiers. Analysts suggest that this shift in ISWAP's strategy to directly target civilians may be a result of an internal leadership coup in February 2020. Continued large-scale violence remains highly probable, with local communities most exposed to attacks.

Meanwhile, communities also face insecurity from within. Since the inception of the insurgency, informal militia groups, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), have formed to combat AOGs and protect local communities in the absence of effective military presence. Youth make up a large proportion of their ranks. As their influence has grown, the CJTF and other vigilante groups have become increasingly predatory against their own communities. This has led to escalating conflict between CJTF and other local youth, who often struggle with a diminished sense of status in society, access to viable livelihoods, and even finding romantic partners, compared with their peers who have taken up arms. In the context of COVID-19, the CJTF and police have further leveraged their coercive power to crack down violently on youth who are not abiding by lockdown measures in Borno State, especially in urban areas of Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC) and Jere LGAs. In Gwoza LGA, where the first case for COVID-19 in Borno was recorded, communities also report that the CJTF forcefully detained individuals believed to have been in contact with suspected COVID-19 patients. This behavior risks further inflaming tensions between communities and local security actors.

COVID-19 Secondary Impacts Amplifying Exclusion and Eroding Social Cohesion

In contrast to community perceptions of government and security officials, traditional and religious leaders are among the most trusted actors within Borno State and a vital element of social cohesion at the local level. Nonetheless, over the past year, communities participating in Mercy Corps-supported conflict analysis workshops have increasingly raised concerns about traditional leaders acting as gatekeepers to humanitarian assistance, openly accusing them of favoring family members and friends and failing to involve the broader community in transparent identification of the most vulnerable individuals. Ethnic and religious minorities remain particularly at risk of exclusion from aid opportunities. In the context of COVID-19, community participants in recent conflict analysis workshops further note the politicization of government-sponsored palliative support and believe that traditional leaders are complicit in allowing politicians to select recipients without clear and impartial criteria. They also cite specific cases of traditional leaders co-opting personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer, and hand washing stations directly for their own use. This suspicion and disaffection fuels political party conflict, undermines the credibility of traditional authorities within their own communities, and risks eroding social cohesion.

Communities have also decried the disruption to traditional and religious activities caused by COVID-19 lockdowns and mitigation measures, including Juma'ah prayers, church services, weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals. These activities are the social bedrock of many communities, serving as a critical space for embedding cultural norms across diverse local actors – so important are they that by adhering to COVID-19 lockdown measures, traditional and religious leaders are increasingly seen as pandering to political demands. According to recent conflict analysis by Mercy Corps, communities in Borno State are increasingly viewing traditional and religious leaders as compromised in their ability to deliver impartial conflict management functions, which is especially vital during this period of social upheaval wrought by the insurgency, displacement, and COVID-19.

The fabric of society is under further strain from the extensive trauma experienced by local communities as a result of ten years of persistent violence. Access to mental health services and community healing events remains extremely limited, and many individuals maintain considerable fear of outsiders, who they feel could be affiliated with AOGs. The specter of COVID-19 represents not only a new biological risk that exacerbates excess mortality in these vulnerable communities, but also a new emotional and social stress, which transitively increases the likelihood of stigmatization within communities and marginalized groups. Already, communities are reporting that collective support to relatives and friends with illnesses is waning under social pressure, undermining an important local norm.

Youth have also been a primary target of stigmatization. This trend is underpinned by enduring intergenerational conflict across Borno State, whereby community elders feel disrespected by youth, while

youth feel marginalized in decision-making and under-supported in their livelihoods needs. As a result, many youth are viewed as lazy and violent, using drugs, and perpetrating criminality in the community, according to recent conflict analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated these perceptions. With schools shuttered and employment disrupted, many youth who had traveled for educational and livelihoods opportunities have returned to their home communities where they are viewed as possible carriers of the virus. Meanwhile, communities also note an increase in antisocial behavior among youth, including looting of government-sponsored food assistance and widespread refusal to adhere to COVID-19 public health guidance from community leaders.

Box 4. Encouraging Inclusive Participation:
Community-Led Consultations and Action Planning Sessions at a Glance

〉 **What they are**: Participatory, community-led discussions to identify grievances, needs, and opportunities, and to prioritize actions to address identified needs. The sessions utilize a peer-to-peer approach, so that women, youth, and men have separate safe space for communication their unique perceptions.

〉 **Aim**: To foster **inclusion**, **civic engagement, and local ownership** by creating space for marginalized groups to meaningfully participate in community decision-making and demonstrate their capacity to directly serve as positive change agents.

〉 **COVID-19 Adaptations:** As with the Conflict Analysis Workshops, Mercy Corps and local partners were able to safely continue holding consultations and action planning sessions during the pandemic by utilizing masks, hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and social distancing both at and in transit to workshops. Consultation and planning were oriented to identify specific grievances, needs, and opportunities related to COVID-19.

International Humanitarian Aid Colliding with Local Norms and Conflict Dynamics

In the midst of these complex challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have been working to provide a range of life-saving services across the health, food security, shelter, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and protection sectors. However, the delivery of humanitarian assistance for COVID-19 also risks fueling underlying conflicts within communities as well as new conflict dynamics. These tensions are pervasive across Borno State and undermine the ability of humanitarian actors to fulfill their missions and uphold their commitment to the principles of Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity.

There is also a widespread perception among communities that INGOs prioritize IDPs for assistance, despite data indicating that assistance consistently reaches more host community members than IDPs across all sectors, except for shelter and protection. OCHA's Humanitarian Response Plan has maintained this targeting ratio for 2020. Nonetheless, there is an information gap in the way that local communities believe INGOs are directing their assistance, resulting in escalating IDP-host community conflict, such as borehole disputes in Dikwa LGA and shelter disputes in Gwoza LGA. In areas where IDP-host community tensions already exist, stereotypes that IDPs have poor hygiene are fueling additional stigmatization of IDPs as likely carriers of COVID-19.

Similarly, communities have regularly complained about the perceived disproportionate cash and voucher-based assistance targeting women over men. INGOs justify this approach by citing that 30% of households across Borno State are now female-headed as a result of the crisis, as well as improved outcomes related to food security, health, education, and livelihoods for the broader household when women are the direct recipients of cash-based assistance. However, communities consistently note that this choice undermines traditional norms around male control of resources and decision making within the household, resulting in increased levels of domestic violence against women, heightened rates of divorce, as well as cases of men identifying new wives on the basis of their access to cash assistance. In the midst of COVID-19, communities have reported a spike in domestic disputes and violence due to lockdown measures, exacerbating existing tensions over shifts in gender norms.

Box 5. Using Dialogue to Address Conflict Drivers:
Conflict Management Committees at a Glance

〉 **What they are**: Local committee structures that utilize community-based dialogue to address social tensions. Mercy Corps trains these committees in conflict analysis and dialogue facilitation skills and collaborates with local partners to mentor them in the planning and facilitation of local dialogues and joint community initiatives between relevant conflict parties. These activities have generated tangible successes in improving local relationships between IDP and host communities, traditional leaders and their constituents, INGOs and communities.

〉 **Aim**: To foster **intercommunal social cohesion** and **trust between communities and aid organizations** by facilitating opportunities for mutual understanding of perceptions and needs and relationship building.

〉 **COVID-19 Adaptations:** As with the other programming approaches used by Mercy Corps and our partners, Conflict Management Committees continued to hold dialogues sessions through the pandemic by utilizing masks, hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and social distancing both at and in transit to dialogue sessions. Based on the findings of the Conflict Analysis Workshops, the Committees specifically identified dialogues topics focused on conflicts arising from the delivery of humanitarian assistance in response to COVID-19 and its other secondary impacts.

Mistrust Fueling Rumors and Misinformation about COVID-19

According to a May 2020 listener assessment by Radio Ndarason (a local radio station in Borno State), 96% of its listeners had heard COVID-19 messaging on its station, but only 45% believed that the virus was 'real and can cause death.' In another recent rapid assessment by Media Insight, community members reported that they have 'no proof' of COVID-19, especially while violence perpetrated by AOGs is still a daily and verifiable reality. Without tangible evidence of the virus, communities fall back on assumptions that the entire crisis has been manufactured by the government to enrich themselves at the expense of local communities

Meanwhile, the Borno State Government and INGOs are primarily responsible for disseminating COVID-19 sensitization messaging, but these groups are trusted to varying degrees by local communities. This lack of trust compromises the efficacy of risk communication, health promotion, and public health messaging campaigns, which seek to exchange information that can enable communities to take informed decisions about their wellbeing related to COVID-19. Although the Borno Task Force has identified and trained local actors to conduct sensitization initiatives in their respective areas, it admits that few actions have been taken and that even basic communication between Maiduguri and the LGAs.

Widespread belief in COVID-19 rumors and conspiracy theories has filled the void created by mistrust in government and international actors and the limited role that credible actors have played in information campaigns to date. Communities are especially susceptible to misinformation because 64% of Nigerians trust social media, with a particular reliance on WhatsApp, where audio messages can overcome barriers of illiteracy. Communities cite myths including that 5G networks can cause COVID-19; that the government is dropping chemicals from a jet to spread the virus; that the virus can be cured by lemon, ginger, or garlic; and that the Nigerian immune system is too strong to succumb to the virus, among many others. As detailed in the

above sections, these rumors continue to provoke suspicion of the government, incite intra-communal conflict and stigmatization, and undermine vital attempts to protect vulnerable communities from COVID-19.

Box 6. Harnessing Community Feedback to Counter Misinformation:
Radio Listening Groups and COVID-19 Rumor Tracking at a Glance

〉 **What they are**: Mechanisms for participatory community engagement with strategic risk communications. Radio Listening Groups are local committees that convene regular meetings to collectively listen to radio programs and discuss sensitive topics in a safe space based on the radio content. The groups provide regular feedback through radio call-in segments, monthly in-person discussion sessions, and quarterly focus groups. These activities ensure that radio programming is responsive to emergent conflict dynamics, audience reactions and recommendations, and trends in attitudinal and behavioral change.

The COVID-19 Rumor Tracker is a digital tool to monitor emerging local rumors about COVID-19 and send accurate information back to community members. Data from the rumor tracking tool will be used to engage communities in participatory sessions to analyze trends and provide recommendations for more effective government and INGO messaging campaigns, as well as direct community sensitization initiatives.

〉 **Aim**: To promote the **effectiveness of communication campaigns** for attitudinal and behavior change by ensuring active community input and feedback, safe spaces for community discourse and shaping of local norms, and proactive countering of **misinformation and rumors**. These activities ensure that communications campaigns reflect and elevate the concerns, interests, and perspectives of local communities.

〉 **COVID-19 Adaptations:** Radio Listening Groups have added specific content on dispelling rumors about COVID-19 and addressing conflict drivers that have emerged and intensified during the pandemic. The COVID-19 Rumor Tracker is a new program activity created specifically to respond to the widespread community disbelief in COVID-19 and limited effectiveness of current sensitization efforts.

COVID-19 Response and Secondary Impacts Playing into the Hands of Armed Groups

This failed messaging around COVID-19 also fuels AOG narratives. On April 14, JAS leader Abubakar Shekau released an audio message blaming the virus on the evil of secular world leaders and claiming that lockdown measures are part of the war on Islam by preventing Muslims from gathering for prayers, travelling for Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Meanwhile, he claims divine protection in JAS-controlled areas, enabling them to avoid such restrictions as well as vulnerability to the virus. While there is no evidence to date suggesting an increase in recruitment, communities in Maiduguri town are fearful that out-of-school youth are highly susceptible, especially in areas that saw a heavy concentration of AOG sympathizers at the outset of the insurgency.

Similarly, communities suggest that existing road insecurity, military movement restrictions, and the resulting barriers to local livelihoods have long served as push factors compelling local communities to relocate to AOG-controlled territory. Communities note that while garrison towns and IDP camps across Borno State offer safety and some degree of access to services, conditions are poor, food is critically insufficient, and they remain unable to invest in their livelihoods. Even when they are able to conduct some basic farming activities, the military regularly confiscates agricultural products being transported to market. With COVID-19 further inflaming these dynamics through both lockdown measures and the problematic implementation of them, there is a grave risk that an increasing number of community members may opt for freedom of movement in AOG zones, where they are permitted to continue fishing, farming, and herding their livestock, despite having to pay steep taxes to AOGs. Even if these individuals are not active supporters of violent opposition causes, the increased population living under AOG control contributes to the financial clout of AOGs, which could translate into more insecurity in the future.

Drawing Broader Lessons from the Interplay of Governance, Conflict, and COVID-19 in Northeast Nigeria

The case of Northeast Nigeria demonstrates the relationship between COVID-19 and conflict-induced instability, whereby existing state-society tensions undermine the fight against the pandemic, and the pandemic further exposes and exacerbates existing factors and unleashes new conflict drivers. While many of the specific grievances and conflict dynamics described in the case study are unique to the specific context of Northeast Nigeria, there are **three interconnected lessons for donors and implementers responding to COVID-19 in other contexts where state society relations interact with the economic, social, and security aspects of conflict.**

Lesson #1: Linkages between mistrust in government and other causes of conflict predate COVID-19, but also interact with the pandemic and the response on an ongoing basis. In the Northeast Nigeria case study, the core underlying governance factors that fuel the conflict map closely onto factors that Mercy Corps has identified in other contexts: pervasive mistrust in the government, widespread marginalization of a variety of groups, and limited confidence by community members that they can meaningfully engage in local decision-making and peacebuilding. Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these underlying governance factors were connected to violence and instability through a number of interconnected channels, including widespread insecurity, strained social cohesion, humanitarian assistance that unintentionally sparks conflict, and communications campaigns that fail to address community needs. The COVID-19 pandemic only further fuels these dynamics by reinforcing the relationship between the political, social, economic, and security-related factors that cause violence and insecurity.

Lesson #2: Strained state-society relations inform ways that communities and armed groups react to the COVID-19 pandemic and containment measures. Given the importance of state-society relations in the ongoing conflict in Borno State, new developments in the pandemic serve to reinforce existing beliefs by community members about the untrustworthiness of government, international organizations, and local actors. As a result, public health measures are ignored or resisted, behavior change campaigns get distorted into rumors, and patterns of humanitarian aid distribution are used by local conflict actors as examples of further favoritism and exclusion. These reactions limit the effectiveness of efforts to combat the COVID-19 crisis and increase the risk of rapid outbreaks of the disease. At the same time, these dynamics also accelerate and intensify many of the proximate conflict drivers in the context, increasing the likelihood of instability and violence. The international community's failure to address governance dynamics in COVID-19 response in fragile contexts increase the risk of recurring cycles of strained state/society relations, disease spread, and violence, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lesson #3: To be effective in contexts where governance is an underlying cause of conflict, COVID-19 responses need to adapt participatory community programming approaches to the realities of a public health emergency. In order to effectively change governance and conflict dynamics, it is necessary to use a mix of programming approaches that addresses the specific governance factors that underpin ongoing conflict dynamics in a given setting. For Mercy Corps in Northeast Nigeria, this means using an integrated portfolio of trainings, consultations, and dialogue sessions that cumulatively address mistrust, exclusion, and weak civic engagement by fostering constructive dialogue and meaningful participation in decision-making. During the pandemic, Mercy Corps has adapted these approaches by adding specific modules on COVID-19 and its secondary impacts to training materials and working with local partners to adapt community engagement and dialogue sessions to allow for social distancing and other measures that reduce the risk of disease transmission. These participatory planning sessions serve as an entry point to help communities reassess their collective needs and grievances related to governance, conflict, and inclusion in light of the pandemic and to help identify new program activities and adaptations. Adapting governance and peacebuilding approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic creates the opportunity to simultaneously model good public health behaviors and start building positive state-society interactions and peace infrastructure.

Recommendations

This report provides evidence that in fragile contexts, existing narratives about government ineffectiveness, corruption, and exclusion shape community perceptions of the pandemic and mitigation measures, leading to recurring cycles of disease transmission and intensified drivers of violence and fragility.

It is vital for donors such as USAID's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization, the State Department's bureaus in the Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Under Secretariat, and relevant sections of the new UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to maintain and increase investments towards addressing the governance, conflict, and security factors that are exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, and which threaten to undermine the public health response and long-term peace and stability if not addressed.

At the same time, organizations implementing public health and humanitarian responses (including the WHO, UNICEF, and INGOs) should find ways to deeply integrate community engagement, dialogue, and conflict sensitivity into their programs.

To make the most of governance and peacebuilding investments, donors and implementing organizations should:

> **Prioritize COVID-19 response activities that strengthen state-society interactions.** Donors and their implementing partners should function as facilitators to enhance existing lines of communication between communities and government actors, or develop new ones where pathways are broken or absent, and the former should require such considerations by every funded agency. Participatory planning activities are fundamental to building the trust that is required for successful and effective COVID-19 response, regardless of whether the stated objective of a given program is focused on public health, humanitarian response, peacebuilding, or governance.

Approaches to strengthening state-society interactions that merit further testing and scale-up include:

- o Government-community dialogues,
- o Town hall forums,
- o Community score cards,
- o Participatory design workshops for COVID-19 response led by local governments,
- o Building local capacities for citizen-centered advocacy.

> **Begin adaptations and new initiatives with a community-led analysis of the shifting needs, grievances, and conflict dynamics resulting from the pandemic.** All COVID-19 response activities should include deeply engaging local communities in mapping changing conflict dynamics, basic service needs, governance pitfalls, and potential public health risks. This will ensure that implementing partners can continue investing in communities, while managing concerns around virus exposure. While traditional needs assessments are an important starting point, they are often highly extractive in nature and risk disempowering communities in the process. Rather, communities should identify not only their needs, but also be given space to articulate recommendations for how they want that assistance to be delivered and how they can participate actively in the delivery.

Placing communities at the center of the design process enables INGOs and government actors to ensure that COVID-19 assistance is genuinely conflict-sensitive and nurtures community ownership and empowerment. Meaningful and inclusive participation in the design and delivery of activities is also critical to effective programming. Implementing partners – UN, INGO, and governmental – should conduct these community-led analyses jointly with community actors, while accommodating safe spaces and principles of confidentiality. Donors should expect reports of these analyses and regular reporting by implementing agencies as to how community feedback is being considered and acted on through ongoing and future programming.

Community-led approaches to program design and adaptation that merit further testing and scale-up include:

- o Participatory analysis and appraisals,
- o Human-centered design processes,

⟩ In-depth qualitative social science studies conducted by and with community-based organizations.

⟩ **Build local capacities to convene dialogues and public spaces for exchange while also limiting the risk of disease spread.** As pervasive mistrust across a range of relationships continues to undermine the effectiveness of the COVID-19 response and fuels conflict dynamics, restoring these relationships is a precondition for addressing the public health crisis and investing in long-term stability. Dialogue remains an important approach for mitigating conflict escalation by serving as a pressure release valve on local grievances. Fostering mutual understanding and trust are the basic building blocks for not only peacebuilding but also an effective COVID-19 response. In addition, facilitated dialogue can help to rebuild the social contract by neutralizing imbalanced power dynamics between government officials, security actors, INGOs, and the communities that they intend to serve.

While public gatherings increase the risks of spreading the virus, implementers should work with local partners to manage risk jointly by integrating public health guidelines into facilitation plans. These kinds of adaptations are vital opportunities for reinforcing positive public health behaviors and dispelling rumors in a safe space.

Approaches to adapting dialogue programs that merit further testing and scale-up include:

o Socially distanced dialogue forums,
o Using videoconferencing applications and social media platforms to convene dialogues virtually.

⟩ **Harness direct community feedback mechanisms and technology to design and implement social and behavioral change communication campaigns.** There is a tendency among many implementers to take messaging from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, or a national health authority, translate it into local languages, and disseminate it. This approach is based on the implicit assumption that a copy-pasted soundbite is culturally relevant and compelling for all populations.

Implementers should attempt to understand how to best adapt messaging so that it resonates with local communities in a way that can meaningfully promote social and behavior change in personal and community public health practices.

Communication initiatives should also include opportunities to incorporate feedback form communities, rather than simply broadcasting messages. Incorporating feedback ensures that communities know that their concerns are being heard. These concerns should tangibly influence response activities and communication, and donors should expect reporting on this programmatic feedback loop. Participatory approaches actively engage communities and reinforce the relationships that are critical to long-term peacebuilding and governance ends and help avoid an over-reliance on top-down messaging that risks further alienating audiences, eroding trust in the state, and exacerbating the spread of COVID-19 in these vulnerable communities.

Approaches to integrating community feedback into communications plans that merit further testing and scale-up include:

o Radio call-in segments,
o Radio listening/discussion groups,
o Phone-based surveys using text messages or interactive voice response,
o Town halls that are synchronized with communications campaigns.

CONTACT

Ryan Sheely
Director of Research | Governance and Conflict
rsheely@mercycorps.com

Selena Victor
Senior Director, Policy & Advocacy (UK/Europe)
svictor@mercycorps.org

Richmond Blake
Director of Policy and Advocacy (US)
rblake@mercycorps.org

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

96/3 Commercial Quay
Edinburgh, EH6 61X
Scotland, UK
+44.131.662.5160

mercycorps.org