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## COVID-19: Peacebuilders aren't the side dish. We're the delivery service

*written by Mike Jobbins, Vice President of Global Affairs and Partnerships at Search for Common Ground*

With COVID-19 taking the world by storm, infecting more people every day and overwhelming healthcare systems, you might think that peacebuilding should take a back seat. There are bigger things to tackle, right?

But it's not that simple. What if I told you that we need peacebuilding now more than ever — that to stop the spread of the virus, we need trust, information and collaboration? **Peacebuilders aren't the side dish. We're the delivery service.** We lay the foundation so that information, resources, and services can reach their intended destination.

The poorest people, already living amidst chronic crises, will pay the highest price. Consider the havoc that COVID-19 has wrecked on your home country, where you may benefit from relatively dependable infrastructure and health services. Now imagine what will happen as the pandemic spreads across countries with less resources, less opportunity for social-distancing, and more distrust of government and media. To contain coronavirus, we must manage the pandemic wherever it spreads — because what happens elsewhere eventually affects us all.

Healthcare workers around the world urgently need support. Peacebuilders are uniquely positioned to pave the way for humanitarian efforts and prevent the spread of the virus. By bridging social divides, we create access for healthcare workers and safeguard useful communication and resources. **Our efforts are packaged in trust**, as we have long-standing understanding of local contexts and ground-level networks.

Trust allows for the most important services and news to reach people. Without trust, societies splinter, and vital public health information goes unheeded.

We know that **effective healthcare takes trust** because we learned this lesson during the Ebola crisis, when we worked in Guinea, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic Congo to support health workers. Our colleagues and their partners helped save lives. We plan to apply those same efforts and insights to the COVID-19 crisis. **Local peacebuilders will use trust to (1) to stabilize, (2) to inform, and (3) to rally.** Only then can we limit the devastation of coronavirus.

### Stabilize

Think about the urgency for doctors, nurses, and medical supplies. What if the most vulnerable groups couldn't gain access to medical services because of violence and mistrust?

Six years ago, we faced this challenge in West Africa, with the Ebola outbreak tearing through the region. A terrifying health crisis mixed with ethnic tensions, producing explosive violence. For 18 months, health workers in Guinea faced weekly attacks from communities unwilling to grant them access. Certain villages became “no-go” zones for humanitarian workers, with many clinics raided and burned down. One woman in Gitize told us: “The people were reticent, and so we chased them away. After that, the network of Traditional Communicators began to come. We know them already, and they communicate in our languages. They were able to mobilize many people.”

Another health worker echoed her sentiment, explaining the dynamics before Search engaged Traditional Communicators: “Eight months ago, you wouldn’t dare come here in your 4x4 vehicle. People would have burned it.”

In 2014, our frontline peacebuilding teams jumped in **to stabilize fragile areas**, and in 2020, we have the same role to play. While history has seen 23 Ebola outbreaks, the disease has escaped control twice, both times among marginalized ethnic groups in conflict-affected parts of West Africa. As a trusted party, Search teams and partners can address the political complexities of disease control, supporting humanitarian responses and preventing further violence. COVID-19 can wipe out years of progress, but as peacebuilders, we can build resilience by fostering trust and paving the way for health workers.

## Inform

When a virus spreads, misinformation soon follows. To stop the spread of a virus, communities need clear communication. Trust allows vulnerable groups to access not only services but also information.

The source of information matters. If people do not trust the source, they will not trust the information. We saw this in West Africa in 2014 and, more recently, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. People did not trust information from “outsiders,” whether healthcare workers, government officials, or experts. Search teams worked with a network of young leaders and trusted community members to help spread life-saving information. In Guinea, almost nine out of ten residents told surveyors that messages from trusted sources like traditional storytellers, elders, and youth were more effective than messages from the government healthcare workers.

Rumors and misinformation are deadly during a pandemic. Many of Search’s programs around the world already have local networks of credible messengers to combat false narratives and provide urgent information. In Sri Lanka, we’ve trained “Cyber Guardians” to combat online hate speech and fake news after the Easter Attacks in April 2019. Composed of nearly 100 young people, including 20 top social media influencers in the country, Cyber Guardians reached 2 million people monthly and engaged 1 million users monthly with their positive Facebook posts in 2019 through 2020. Such local peacebuilders are a powerful resource — and already, Cyber Guardians are mobilizing to counter hate speech and divisive posts arising from COVID-19. By supporting trusted local groups, we can help prevent the devastation born from false information.

## Rally

Coronavirus does not respect borders. Neighboring countries, even those with a history of conflict between them, will have to work together to protect their citizens. As a trusted party, Search can help to rally cross-border collaboration.

Since 2002, we've supported the Middle East Consortium for Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS), a platform to coordinate efforts across national boundaries in the Middle East to combat infectious disease. Despite major political obstacles, MECIDS has transformed into a respected network of public health officials who are now using virtual means such as webinars and broadcast media to spread information about COVID-19 and support pandemic response in highly vulnerable locations like Gaza.

Uniting against a common invisible enemy holds the possibility to build trust among adversaries and reduce violence in some of the hottest conflict zones. As the world copes with this pandemic, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for a global ceasefire. We've seen humanitarian agreements in the Philippines, promising efforts in Yemen, and early discussions that we are supporting in Afghanistan.

Adversaries sometimes need trusted third parties to open dialogue and support the creation of shared goals and joint-pathways to reach them. That's where Search's frontline peacebuilding teams come in. With COVID-19, we are working again to **rally cross-border cooperation**, linking local virus-fighting efforts with global policy. Over nearly 40 years, we have helped to reconcile warring groups by focusing on their common humanity and mobilizing them around their shared interests. As terrible as it is, COVID-19 is an opportunity to unite the world like never before.

Our healthcare workers need us. Local families living in fragile areas need us. And we need you. Peacebuilders can only do their critical, life-saving work with your help. We need your support! Resources are being diverted away from peacebuilding at this crucial time.

Join our Pathfinder's Community to stay tuned to local voices sharing what's happening on the ground, learn how you can champion local peacebuilders in fragile areas, and gain tips on how to apply our Common Ground Principles to the COVID-19 crisis at home.