

Learning from the Fight Against Ebola to More Effectively Tackle COVID-19 in Fragile States

These messages are taken from the virtual roundtable “Using Lessons from Ebola Response to Address COVID-19” hosted by Search for Common Ground on 15 April 2020. You can find the recorded session [here](#).

*Moderator: Charline Burton, Executive Director Europe
Panelist: Lena Slachmuijlder, Senior Vice President of Programs
Panelist: Laurent Kasindi, Global Program Quality Specialist*

It is difficult to overstate the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies around the world and the challenges ahead for stopping the spread of the disease and beginning to recover. There have been over [2 million confirmed cases](#) of the disease in nearly every country in the world. Over the next few months, the epidemic will continue to intersect with situations of violent conflict, inequality, weak government institutions, and various levels of mistrust in authorities. This will only complicate the response and exacerbate the challenges to recovery.

The spread of the Ebola Virus Disease in West Africa and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) offer important lessons learned to tackle the spread of COVID-19 in fragile and conflict-affected states, where it has had devastating effects. As a peacebuilding organization, Search for Common Ground built on its long-term presence in the countries affected by Ebola to provide accurate and trusted information to communities, mobilize new champions, and foster trust and social cohesion during a time of crisis. From this work, we learned five key lessons that will also help to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. An effective public health response requires multi-stakeholder collaboration and trust. In situations of conflict and fragility, health and humanitarian response may not be trusted by local populations. If the response does not consider conflict dynamics and local context, it may be met with resistance, sometimes violent.
2. Trusted civil society, including non-traditional partners (radio DJs, artists, social media influencers, religious leaders) play a critical role in bridging trust deficits between government, health care workers, and communities.
3. Young people are particularly important partners to ensure buy-in of the response measures and contribute to a credible recovery phase. Young people often have both knowledge and credibility that more formal actors lack, particularly with their peers and harder to reach communities.
4. The response needed to control the disease will have severe economic, social, political, and security impacts. These will be especially acute in situations of ongoing conflict and fragility. The stakes are high. Mishandling the response can leave wounds that last a generation. But there are also opportunities to be transformational.
5. Ongoing violent conflict, as was the case in DRC, and legacies of violent conflict, as was the case in West Africa, undermine the ability to effectively respond to health crises. Effective responses must consider these constraints and seek to reduce them where possible.

The current COVID-19 is a transformational moment in history. Despite social and economic breakdowns taking place as countries respond to the crisis, this moment can also give way to breakthroughs. We recommend the following for donors and practitioners deploying the emergency response to stop the spread of COVID-19 and those addressing the social impacts of the response.

Recommendations for deploying emergency response:

1. **Underscore the need and create incentives for warring parties to lay down their weapons when designing and implementing health, humanitarian, and security response.** COVID-19 is a uniting factor which can incentivize ceasefires and new approaches to ending violent conflict. Ending violent conflict would play a critical role in enabling more effective health response.
2. **Ensure that health and humanitarian response are context-specific and conflict sensitive.** Responses that do not take social cohesion into account risk being ineffective. This multi-sectoral and inter-disciplinary approach should continue after emergency response and into recovery.
3. **Support access to reliable and trusted information.** This may include empowering and training trusted local actors to facilitate the health sector response, uproot channels of misinformation, and prevent the formulation of social stigma around infection and recovery.
4. **Partner with and support young people responding to the pandemic and ensure the response does not make them feel even more excluded and let down.** COVID-19 is a defining cultural and political moment for today's generation of young people and will influence the paths they take for years to come. It is vital that the international community recognizes and harnesses the power and potential of this moment to amplify the positive potential of young people.
5. **Focus on getting all influential political leaders on board with the response.** Invest in tested tactics like Track II mediation to ensure their buy-in to response and recovery efforts.

Recommendations for a multi-sectoral approach to recovery:

1. **Continue support to programming and initiatives that build social cohesion and address underlying drivers of conflict.**
2. **Take this opportunity to build trust between citizens and governments and protect against shrinking civic space and encroaching authoritarianism.** Develop a multi-sectoral response and begin scenario planning for how the pandemic will influence pivotal events, such as elections, and for public reactions to changes in the political and social space.
3. **Break the echo chambers of isolation in divided societies.** Traditional/social media and social impact entertainment can create bridges between marginalized groups physically separated by isolation to prevent backsliding into identity-based conflicts.
4. **Train and engage security forces to protect human rights and understand the human security implications of a heavy-handed or overly militarized response to this pandemic.**
5. **Respond to the heightened risk of domestic abuse and gender-based violence.** This includes support for monitoring, prevention, and response services for sexual and gender-based violence within the home.
6. **Create and implement multi-sectoral strategies for recovery.** The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be severe across all sectors. Recovery should focus on strengthening systems and infrastructure, including the health system, to build resiliency against future crises.