

**Letter of 16 April 2021 from the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development
Cooperation Sigrid Kaag to the Senate of the States General on the impact of the
COVID-19 pandemic on conflict risks**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is being felt around the world. Nearly every country has been hit by coronavirus, and the measures taken to curb its spread have affected societies and economies everywhere. In response to the question raised by the GroenLinks during the Senate debate of 15 December 2020 on the foreign trade and development cooperation budget, this letter discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on conflicts and on conflict risks, and sets out what we, together with our partners, have done to address this. In addition, the letter offers suggestions regarding Dutch conflict prevention efforts in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the key goals of Dutch Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation policy, as established in the policy document 'Investing in Global Prospects',¹ is to prevent conflict and instability. The policy focuses on tackling the root causes of poverty, irregular migration and conflict, and offers a broad prevention agenda that directly contributes to meeting the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This letter focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Dutch efforts to achieve SDG16: just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the poorest and most vulnerable groups – including women, young people and refugees – the hardest. In addition to the direct health impacts, it has had significant indirect effects. The increase in gender-based violence, fuelled by the lockdowns, has been called the 'shadow pandemic'.² The COVID-19 pandemic has also taken a significant toll on people's mental health. Around the world people are suffering from elevated levels of stress and uncertainty about their own health and that of those close to them, and from physical isolation and economic uncertainty.³ The socioeconomic impact has also been significant. Before the pandemic hit, the World Bank estimated that 588.4 million people would be living in extreme poverty in 2021, that number is now 730.9 million.⁴ And the crisis is far from over.

For some years now poverty has been increasingly concentrated in fragile countries.⁵ The World Bank estimates that in 2022 the total GNP of fragile and conflict countries will be 8.6% lower than it was before the pandemic.⁶ Economic shocks, inequality and economic marginalisation have intensified the battle for scarce economic resources. This is further deepening the divide between groups and increasing the likelihood of violent conflict. As the International Crisis Group (ICG) writes: 'Violence is more likely during periods of economic volatility.'⁷

The choices governments make in tackling the pandemic will have an impact – potentially long term – on the relationship between the people and the government. In fragile situations, the coronavirus crisis could serve to further undermine the public's trust in the government and jeopardise the social contract between the government and the people.⁸ During this crisis people are more dependent than ever on healthcare, social protection, access to justice and economic support – services which in many countries are unevenly distributed. Existing mistrust is reinforced by suspicions of corruption, whether or not well founded. Disinformation about the virus and who is responsible for its spread can also be detrimental to inter-group relations and can result in the further marginalisation of vulnerable minority populations.

In addition, in a number of countries people's civil and political rights have been restricted under the guise of fighting the pandemic. Some countries have used excessive force to enforce the lockdowns and suppress peaceful demonstrations. In certain cases, coronavirus restrictions have been misused to prohibit opposition movements from holding gatherings. The Armed Conflict Location & Event

¹ Parliamentary paper 34 952, no. 1.

² <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

³ https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief_covid_and_mental_health_final.pdf

⁴ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty>

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/publication/world-bank-group-strategy-for-fragility-conflict-and-violence-2020-2025>

⁶ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/global-economic-outlook-five-charts>

⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2021>

⁸ UN Secretary-General António Guterres discussed this in his remarks to the Security Council on 12 August 2020. See <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20204.doc.htm>

Data Project (ACLED), financed in part by the Netherlands, has noted that the pandemic has led to a decrease in protests but also an increase in state violence against civilians.⁹

All of these factors increase the likelihood of social unrest and armed conflict, especially in the context of fragile states.

The international response to the pandemic

The initial international response to mitigate the impact of the pandemic focused on offering humanitarian aid and socioeconomic support. This includes the Dutch efforts, about which I informed you earlier.¹⁰ Such assistance is crucial and must be provided in a conflict-sensitive way; this is also what the UN and World Bank have called for.¹¹ This means assistance that helps bridge social divides, rather than deepen them.

Organisations that are active in the area of security and the rule of law usually have good networks in hard-to-reach areas where there is little trust in the authorities. The Netherlands finances programmes in unsafe and inaccessible regions in partner countries such as Mali. Thanks to networks with solid roots in the local communities, it has been possible to implement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Local NGOs provide legal assistance and information on the right to access to healthcare. The young leaders of a programme for youth implemented by the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), ICCO and Oxfam are committed to distributing reliable information about COVID-19 prevention.

With the help of its numerous partners the Netherlands is also making efforts to mitigate the pandemic's impact on security and rule of law in other countries. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is working to promote local humanitarian ceasefires, in order to encourage cooperation to stop the spread of coronavirus. The Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance worked in Mali with the national human rights institute to monitor respect for human rights by the security services when enforcing COVID-19 measures. A programme from the international branch of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) in Uganda trains local civil servants in inclusive and gender-sensitive governance. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, plans have been made with these civil servants to address the impact of the pandemic – which includes gender-based violence – on the women in local communities. And in Lebanon the Bar Association, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), offers free legal aid to victims of gender-related violence and to migrants affected by the pandemic.

The EU has also adapted its programming as a result of the pandemic. For example, through the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) the EU is trying to mitigate the indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in various fragile settings. In Sudan, for example, EU efforts are aimed at preventing marginalised groups from being blamed for the spread of COVID-19. In the context of an already fragile peace process, such accusations could be harmful to inter-community relations. And in Afghanistan efforts are being made to combat disinformation, improve access to medical services and safeguard humanitarian access, also in Taliban-controlled areas.

The UN and World Bank have also taken heightened conflict risks into account in their COVID-19 responses, and the World Bank has supported more than 30 fragile and conflict-affected states in addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such efforts fit within the framework of the World Bank's new Fragility, Conflict and Violence (FCV) strategy, published in March 2020, which is aimed at enhancing the World Bank's ability – from a policy and institutional perspective – to work effectively in fragile and conflict countries. In response to the pandemic, aid has been scaled up and

⁹ <https://acleddata.com/2020/08/04/a-great-and-sudden-change-the-global-political-violence-landscape-before-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹⁰ Parliamentary paper 33 625, no. 320.

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/covid-19-fragile-settings-ensuring-conflict-sensitive-response>

priorities adjusted, further increasing the focus on the most vulnerable groups, including women and girls.

The targeted peacebuilding funds of the UN and World Bank are also aimed, in part, at effectively combating the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes, for example, the UN's Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) and the World Bank's State and Peacebuilding Fund (SPF), both of which have significantly expanded their efforts in the area of conflict-sensitive crisis management.

During its membership of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) in 2021 and 2022, the Netherlands will also demand systematic attention for the root causes of conflict (such as inequality, lack of access to justice, human rights violations and psychosocial needs), and also specifically as they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will always stand up for the interests of the most vulnerable in fragile contexts (*'leave no one behind'*).

Next steps: boosting our efforts

It is crucial that policy and programming aimed at effectively tackling the pandemic take account of social tensions and conflict risks. As the World Bank and the UN stress, only countries with inclusive and effective governance and that have the trust of the people will be able to successfully get coronavirus under control.¹² These countries can also better address social tensions than countries where people have little say in how they are governed. A successful approach to tackling COVID-19 and efforts to prevent conflict are mutually beneficial. Research has shown that investing in conflict prevention also prevents human, social and economic harm. Although it is difficult to measure, the UN and the World Bank estimate that every dollar invested in prevention saves 16 dollars in future costs.¹³ All of this underscores the importance of Dutch priorities such as inclusive governance, peacebuilding, conflict mediation, access to justice and gender equality. Efforts in these priority areas remain as relevant as ever.

With expressions such as 'building back better' and 'building forward together', there is a lot of talk at the international level about how to strengthen societies in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Current efforts should be focused on building inclusive and sustainable economies and societies that are resilient in the face of threats. Societies with well-functioning, inclusive institutions and accessible justice systems, which prioritise human security and social cohesion and respect the rights of minorities, are more resilient to the risks of violent conflict.

Strengthening local resilience increasingly means taking the perspective of the local population as the basis for development cooperation. It is specifically in fragile and conflict countries, where the social contract between governments and the people is weak, that development efforts must be based on local priorities. This is possible by working together with local leaders, women's organisations, youth movements and other legitimate community representatives and legitimate governments. Taking the needs of the local people as a starting point improves the quality and sustainability of development interventions. Such an approach also strengthens civil society, at a time in which there is diminishing space for it in many countries.

A people-centred approach, based on the perspectives of the local population in matters such as security and rule of law, is crucial in this regard. Such an approach places at its core the needs and experiences of citizens and their ideas for solutions. This could be related to people's experiences with local security institutions or the extent to which they are able to pursue justice. The Netherlands is strongly committed to bringing countries together in a Justice Action Coalition to continue drawing

¹² <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/covid-19-fragile-settings-ensuring-conflict-sensitive-response>

¹³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/publication/pathways-for-peace-inclusive-approaches-to-preventing-violent-conflict>

attention to the importance of a people-centred approach to access to justice, especially in the context of the present pandemic.

Using localisation and a people-centred approach as a basis for policy and programming is possible only with proper analysis. The Netherlands supports organisations that conduct conflict analyses and monitor incidents. In the context of the UN, the World Bank and the EU, the Netherlands calls for joint conflict analyses to be conducted by or together with local experts and organisations.

To conclude, Dutch efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict have become all the more important in the light of the conflict risks exacerbated by the pandemic. Investing in achieving the SDGs, and in particular SDG16, remains necessary to offer improved prospects in the most fragile countries and to prevent violent conflict.