Policy brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Social Cohesion Dynamics in Conflict-Affected Communities

Based on a three-country study of the Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala

PHOTO: Natalija Gormalova for CRS
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About the Authors

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Introduction

More than two years since the outbreak of COVID-19, evidence of the pandemic’s deleterious effects on social cohesion throughout the world continues to emerge. While global attention has focused primarily on the impacts to communities’ health and access to health services, the secondary impacts of the pandemic are playing out in complex ways with implications for both U.S. and global security. Deteriorating levels of social cohesion between citizens and the state (vertical social cohesion), as well as among communities (horizontal social cohesion), in response to policy making aimed at containing the pandemic has exacerbated conflict and increased the stigmatization of already marginalized groups.1

Although it was initially hoped that measures to decrease contacts between people would translate into a call for ceasefires and a decrease in conflict, in many contexts this has not been borne out in reality.2 The pandemic has exacerbated many of the causes of intra- and inter-community conflict that existed prior to March 2020, rooted as they are in inadequate social protection mechanisms, lack of access to livelihoods and services, and state corruption.3 Despite growing evidence from CRS programming that investing in social cohesion has the potential to catalyze and enhance humanitarian and development outcomes, COVID-19 policy responses which prioritize social cohesion have been largely absent.4 This paper aims to help correct that.

Although government-imposed restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 have often undermined social cohesion, they have also demonstrated the importance of intra- and inter-communal social ties as well as vertical ‘bridging’ with government stakeholders.5 Supporting efforts to strengthen social cohesion, especially in communities made more vulnerable by conflict or disaster, should be at the forefront of discussions determining how governments, donors, INGOs, civil society, and other stakeholders can mitigate the broader humanitarian and development impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of writing, the Global Fragility Act (GFA) has yet to be implemented, and details of an implementation plan – including the identification of pilot countries – have yet to be published. Based on a study of six conflict-affected communities in the Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala, this paper aims to inform discussions around how

the GFA implementation plan can more effectively focus on issues of social cohesion that have been exacerbated by COVID-19. It also aims to provide guidance as to how additional COVID-19 foreign assistance funding can be prioritized to ensure that communities are supported to become more resilient to shocks in the long term.

Methodology

The study employed mixed-methods research tools, using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to develop both quantitative and qualitative findings to address the study question. CRS spoke with a total of 312 individuals – of whom 48% were women and 52% were men – across three target areas:

- The Philippines, South Upi and Pigcawayan
- Ghana, Bolgatanga and Tamale
- Guatemala, La Mina and Oquen

CRS interviewed government officials, community and civil society leaders, and community members in each target country to understand perceptions of the current state of social cohesion, and incorporated three interactive components: the Social Cohesion Barometer, a socio ecological model, and a COVID-19 Timeline. More information regarding the study methodology is available in the Full Report.
Findings

1. Restrictions imposed by governments due to COVID-19 have undermined existing social ties, and created opacity in government activities

Across all three countries, the vast majority of respondents felt that COVID-19 and attendant government responses had negatively affected relationships and levels of both horizontal and vertical social cohesion. Restrictions on gatherings – particularly religious gatherings at churches and masjids – had eroded the foundations of horizontal social cohesion. Weddings, funerals, naming ceremonies for children, as well as other cultural festivals, were all stopped in the early stages of the pandemic, doing profound damage to the cohesiveness of communities across the study.

Community gatherings are the primary sites of and intra- and inter-communal dialogue for many people. One community leader in Bolgatanga, Ghana explained that the more people interact and share in each other’s joys and sorrows, the stronger bonds they build together; when these interactions cease, people are more likely to live in an atomised way rather than seeing themselves as part of society. This effect has been exacerbated by people being unable to gather to discuss community level issues, both informally and formally through government-run discussions. Although many such events have returned in a limited way the damage to social cohesion has been pronounced.

In Guatemala, limiting community participation in meetings, whilst arguably justified on the grounds of reducing contacts, decreased government transparency and increased the perception that closed-door meetings were rife with political deal making. In Ghana, the cancellation of in-person meetings by government representatives during the height of restrictions, as well as the failure of officials to reach out in other ways, has contributed to the belief that officials have used the pandemic as an excuse to bypass communities on issues of concern. In the Philippines, dialogue related to the peace process has been ongoing, but only included community leaders rather than a more expansive set of participants as in the past. This has led to a breakdown of information sharing from leaders to the local level, to the frustration of affected communities - particularly those who were already marginalized by these processes such as women and indigenous communities.

2. Devastation of livelihoods coupled with limited social protection has created more competition for scarce resources

As has been captured by research in other contexts such as Niger and Lebanon, restrictions on the movement of people and goods have in many cases driven greater competition over scarce economic resources and livelihoods opportunities, as well as exacerbated economic inequality. The devastating impact of the pandemic on those working in the informal sector and other precarious conditions has highlighted the importance of social protection systems as well as decent livelihoods as key vectors in ensuring social cohesion, and advanced the case for enshrining such protections in national legislation to ensure their sustainability.

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In Ghana, although the government provided public utilities customers with several months of free water and subsidized electricity services and an additional, one-off cash transfer, social protection programmes were not felt to be sufficient to support citizens in the face of the economic shock caused by the pandemic. Alongside this, the distribution of support has been biased by geography and political affiliation, increasing urban-rural tensions as well as those among competing political factions. The perception that government officials have used the COVID-19 pandemic as a smokescreen to avoid meeting commitments – such as distributing subsidized fertilizer to farmers – has also damaged vertical social cohesion at a time when trust in state institutions is arguably more important than ever.

In Guatemala, the government’s response to the pandemic was perceived to be ineffective as it failed to take into account communities’ overall economic conditions and the absence of social protection programming, which lay at the heart of many issues relating to social cohesion. Housing, in particular, was regularly cited as an example of how the government’s assistance overlooked the underlying contextual issues affecting COVID-19 safety. Given the absence of substantive social protection nets, respondents worried that the government would push farmers to increase agricultural outputs to meet nutrition needs regardless of the impact on the environment, which in turn will amplify divisions between investors and indigenous communities who farm the land.

It is worth highlighting, however, that communities in all three countries noted that the provision of substantive social protection was a necessary but not sufficient condition to strengthen social cohesion and aid economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19. While calling on their governments to do more to protect the most vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of crises, respondents also told CRS that it was important for governments to provide access to better, more robust livelihoods opportunities. Tying this into social cohesion, one respondent in the Philippines explained,

“When the community has enough food, the relationship of the people will be good because the envy between the people will disappear.”

Seventy five percent of respondents across the study agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to more competition over livelihoods and scarce resources. In countries such as the Philippines where respondents’ ability to meet debts are reliant on their ability to access livelihoods, this has had a devastating impact. Cognizant that government policy and the social protection that it provides is subject to change, communities were clear that they want to encourage resilience through economic self-reliance. While governments addressing the rising cost of living will assuage some pressures on households, improved access to livelihoods will be necessary if those with access to income are to support more vulnerable members of communities – which lays at the heart of horizontal social cohesion in the countries studied.

3. **Lack of transparency in, and reach of, COVID-19 relief has frayed social cohesion further**

Among the efforts to respond to the pandemic, arguably the most damaging to social cohesion has been the provision of COVID-19 relief. In the Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala, respondents told CRS that local and national government representatives had politicized pandemic relief packages – prioritizing allies and friends for support in spite of clear needs among communities outside of these groups. The perception that officials have favored certain groups over others has also eroded the fabric of horizontal social cohesion. Among the changes which communities want to see moving forwards, community-level accountability mechanisms for government activities was one of the most frequently articulated.
Guatemala’s history of political conflict continues to affect linkages between governance structures at the local and national levels, which in turn have caused communities to struggle to access the funds and programmes designed to alleviate the pandemic’s economic impacts. Only 4% of survey respondents believed their government had the capacity to respond fairly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic, while 81% believed the government could not respond fairly and effectively. The pandemic has had a deleterious effect on communities’ trust in local and national governance actors, as well as in those community-based organizations engaged in the distribution of aid – from community leaders to civil society organizations – who have struggled to demonstrate that their programmes are not motivated by political or self-serving interests. As one respondent explained,

“During the COVID-19 pandemic social ties were affected by the restrictions imposed by the government. Those drastic measures caused distrust between neighbors, unemployment, and food shortages... The government did not take it as a problem to solve, but as a business that arose from the shortcomings of the vulnerable population.”

In the Philippines, COVID-19 relief has been delivered primarily to the barangay level rather than to conflict-affected and geographically remote communities. The widespread perception that the delivery of aid has been politicized and targeted only to those linked to individuals in authority has eroded trust in barangay leaders in South Upi in particular. Although authorities gave priority to those who had been unemployed for a long period, this was not communicated to community leaders, resulting in accusations of favoritism. In addition, these tensions have been exacerbated by the cycles of debt many communities find themselves in as a result of being cash poor. One respondent noted that these tensions have eroded relationships in the community, saying,

“Imagine how discrimination and selfishness became rampant because of the pandemic.”

In Ghana, despite the provision of relief support during the height of COVID-19, communities in both Bolgatanga and Tamale believe that access to this relief – in the form of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), soap, hand sanitizer, masks, and cash support – is conditional on networks of patronage. Respondents told CRS that access to support was dependent on political contacts, or political party membership, and that the disbursement of funds allocated at the national level was “shrouded in corruption”. One community leader in Bolgatanga told CRS, “COVID relief packages are for specific people but ordinary or poor people cannot access the funds.” Communities frequently cited the government’s failure to publish spending figures and lack of transparency as evidence of corruption. Respondents told CRS that the targeting of specific communities has both exacerbated antipathy between rural and urban communities, and eroded trust in the government’s desire to protect citizens equally.

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8 A barangay is the smallest administrative division of the Philippines and serves as the primary planning and implementing unit of government policies, projects, and activities in the community. Barangay offices have been the primary interface for communities seeking COVID-19 relief.
4. **Women and girls faced gender-specific impacts of COVID-19 and were doubly impacted when marginalized in the response**

Across the Philippines, Ghana, and Guatemala, the COVID-19 pandemic and government responses have had a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls. The gendered nature of reproductive labor has resulted in women taking on even more unpaid work at home, in some cases overseeing their children's education following school closures, despite wanting to pursue livelihoods to support their economic independence. In addition, the exclusion of women from decision making spaces has been exacerbated by government COVID-19 restrictions limiting meetings to only ‘core’ stakeholders, who have historically been men.9

In the Philippines, and in South Upi specifically, there was a pronounced gender divide around the question of whether the government was able to respond fairly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the capacity enhancement of government officials there is both a necessary, but not sufficient response, to the pandemic, and that the continuation of programming aiming to improve women’s participation and leadership – such as CRS’ ‘Advancing Inclusion and Political Participation of Women in the Bangsamoro’ programme – is necessary to address this shortfall. Women in Pigcawayan also told CRS that to encourage horizontal social cohesion, they want to have access to TESDA (Technological Education, Skills and Development Authority) to develop their skills, and to promote independence in sourcing livelihoods to support their family.

In Guatemala, similar experiences were voiced by women who participated in the study. Several female participants noted that the political exclusion of women - a problem predating the emergence of COVID-19 - has been worsened by the pandemic, having the effect of further distancing women from centers of power and decision making. Already occupying peripheral roles, restrictions on the size of gatherings provided a public health justification for limiting women’s participation in key meetings, which, owing to gendered norms around decision making, gives priority to male participants.

In Ghana, although there has been an increase in intimate partner violence and / or domestic violence, the normalization of this violence at the societal level – as well as the absence of women in decision making spaces that might affect policy and attitudinal change – provides the conditions for it to continue. A civil society leader in Tamale explained,

> “The biggest challenge I see is that there is little or no inclusion of young people, particularly women and girls in growth processes, decision making and key spaces. Largely the contributions of women and girls and the roles they can play towards a more cohesive society are ignored.”

It is worth noting here that respondents in both Ghana and the Philippines told CRS that one of the most effective ways to support both horizontal and vertical social cohesion at this time is to promote general health and well-being among the public, and women and girls in particular, including through psycho-social support. Respondents also told CRS that civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith leaders have become more active in extending their support both in terms of humanitarian assistance, and psychosocial support for individuals living with depression exacerbated by the pandemic.

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5. **Misinformation is harming both COVID-19 response efforts and social cohesion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained global efforts to manage the spread of misinformation, particularly in online spaces. One of the most deleterious effects of limited vertical social cohesion has been communities’ reluctance to trust state institutions’ messaging in relation to COVID-19, both in terms of its gravity and the importance of getting vaccinated. Disparities between communities who have access to verified information about the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories, driving a distrust of public health officials and resulting in people refusing to seek medical assistance either for COVID-19 related illness or other ailments. These inter- and intra-community differences have also eroded horizontal social cohesion, with tensions developing between those who are vaccinated and those who are not.

In the Philippines, rumors and uncertainty about COVID-19 continue to damage social cohesion. There is a widespread fear that being hospitalized leads to a worsening of the effects of COVID-19 on the patient, and in some cases death. Many respondents do not have access to reliable sources of information about COVID-19 and hospital procedures in the event of testing positive, resulting in people refusing to visit hospitals and other healthcare facilities. The circulation of false information has resulted in some communities being unwilling to receive the vaccine, driving tensions among those who are and are not vaccinated. Importantly, however, data showed that when other people from Pigcawayan started to be vaccinated, others followed suit because they observed that there were no negative side effects.

Pervasive misinformation has exacerbated existing social cohesion schisms, particularly with regard to vertical social cohesion. This has led communities to direct their mistrust of state institutions at various health services. In Guatemala, the long shadow of the conflict’s history has served to undermine trust in government health measures, including vaccination programs, despite acknowledgement that vaccines represent a positive element of the government’s COVID-19 response. In addition to many communities’ long-standing association of the central government with state security forces, mis/disinformation and intimidation have served to cast doubt on government motives.

In Ghana, despite widespread public messaging campaigns by the government, one important corollary of the erosion of trust in the government’s response to the pandemic has been public engagement with misinformation and / or disinformation. Explaining the origin of their distrust of government messaging on COVID-19, one respondent in Bolgatanga told CRS, “The white man wants to kill Africans because we are overpopulated.” Similarly, in Tamale respondents told CRS that people feel that COVID-19 does not actually exist, and that vaccines brought to Africa from Europe cause impotence in the male population. In substantiating these views, respondents cited the lack of transparency in figures relating to COVID-19 infections and deaths as evidence that they were being lied to.

As in the Philippines, declining trust in health professionals and facilities has not only resulted in sick people staying at home rather than seeking help, but also in keeping their illness secret so as to avoid other community members believing they have COVID-19. Alongside this, reported incidents of neglect in healthcare facilities – including one case in Bolgatanga in which healthcare workers reportedly claimed an individual had died of COVID-19 and then extorted their family in order to release the body – have driven the belief among some that it is better to avoid healthcare facilities altogether. This decline in trust of healthcare workers and facilities, the spread of misinformation and / or disinformation, and the perception of the lack of government transparency are often mutually reinforcing and seem likely to affect both horizontal and vertical social cohesion for the foreseeable future.
Policy implications

The US Government’s ongoing support of COVID-19 relief and recovery around the world through funding made available through the America Rescue Plan Act, and existing programming, has made considerable impact for those facing the impacts of the pandemic. The findings in the report have implications for the forthcoming implementation plan which the Global Fragility Act has requested, as well as for the U.S. COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework published in July 2021, and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. In its whole-of-government approach to building resilience more broadly, the U.S. government should:

1. **Bolster support for social protection systems** – including through the provision of unconditional cash transfers – as a means of mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic on communities, building resilience, and allowing vulnerable families to provide for children’s basic needs and development.

   - In addition, help to support social protection systems to ensure that communities are supported in an equitable manner regardless of geography or political affiliation.
   - This could be accompanied by advocacy for and promotion of trade avenues for locally produced goods.

2. In support of the recently-published U.S. Strategy on Countering Corruption - and conscious of the negative effect that the absence of government transparency has on donor-funded programming - **work with, and provide funding for, local CSOs working to mitigate and respond to corruption risks**.

   - Support the strengthening of anti-corruption mechanisms — specifically those which help to ensure oversight and accountability of public spending regarding the COVID-19 crisis response — as a means of promoting citizen-responsive governance.

3. **Work with all relevant stakeholders to disseminate information about how to protect against COVID-19** and practice safe hygiene, improving community engagement to ensure that populations have access to accurate information and to counter misinformation, in turn supporting the wider goals of the “One Health” approach to reduce the risk and impact of emerging infectious disease threats and outbreaks.

   - Attention should be paid to indigenous means of communication, including keepers of oral traditions (e.g. ‘griots’), town radio stations, and even local social media influencers.

4. Conscious of the withdrawal or redirection of funding since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, **expand funding for social cohesion programming that is both stand alone and integrated**.

   - Support and fund CSOs to undertake social cohesion work directly, providing skills training to improve CSO members’ understandings of how social cohesion and inclusion of marginalized communities and individuals contributes to broader development efforts.
5. As part of the U.S. government’s Advancing Women’s and Girls’ Civic and Political Leadership Initiative, support local CSOs and community-based groups encouraging women’s participation and leadership.

- This support should work in tandem with initiatives to reduce gender-based violence in order to help create the attitudinal shift necessary to promote the protection of women.

- Furthermore, provide support for initiatives seeking to close gaps in access to quality learning opportunities exacerbated by the pandemic, and which have severely undermined the protection of girls.

6. **Commit to providing resources to addressing the psycho-social needs of vulnerable groups** — including the forcibly displaced, women, and children — in turn helping to address the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including tensions in the home.

- Collaboration between the government, civil society, community-based and faith-based groups should be expanded and strengthened to provide psycho-social support to both survivors and perpetrators of gender-based violence, to protect vulnerable communities, and to ensure that domestic violence does not continue to undermine social cohesion moving forwards.