



2020: KEY CHALLENGES AND ASSUMPTIONS

2020 has been a momentous year. The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated people around the world, leaving us with a sense of collective vulnerability and testing our solidarity at community, national and international levels. The pandemic has also thrust us into the midst of a historic socio-economic crisis that is challenging progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), potentially stifling aid budgets and leaving many countries with more debt, poverty and people in need of even the most basic services and commodities. At the same time, the world has continued to witness increasing geopolitical tensions and challenges to multilateral cooperation; a growing urgency to deal with matters of inclusion and race; the devastating effects of climate change; and growing inequality, fragility and vulnerability.

The convergence of these challenges has left no sector, system or organization untouched. Member States, regional and international organizations, the private sector and many communities and civil society organizations have already started to adapt. And so has the humanitarian community—in its priorities, programmes and operations. But what do the challenges and changes of this historic year 2020 mean for the larger humanitarian community going forward? What transformations are necessary for us to be better prepared for future pandemics and other humanitarian crises? How can we build new and strengthen existing coalitions for a better response? Can we realize the ‘promise of digitalization’ for the humanitarian sector? The 2020 Global Humanitarian Policy Forum (GHPF) offers a platform to discuss these questions and related challenges with experts and practitioners from around the globe.

Global Health Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a plethora of new humanitarian challenges while compounding existing ones. As of 1 December 2020, there have been 62,844,837 reported cases of and 1,465,144 deaths from COVID-19.¹ In addition, the pandemic’s stress on public health systems has impacted health treatments and services for other diseases and conditions, disproportionately affecting lower- and middle-income countries and undermining decades of progress.² Advances in reducing mortality rates are likely to be set back by 10 years for Tuberculosis and AIDS, and by 20 years for Malaria.³ Progress in eradicating Poliovirus and reducing Measles through immunization has been severely threatened.⁴

Vulnerable and marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Travel restrictions and lockdowns are hindering women’s access to health services.⁵ Infant mortality rates are expected to rise.⁶ Racial and ethnic minorities suffer from inequities in social determinants such as discrimination, wealth gaps, and health care access and utilization.⁷ Protracted displacement combined with deteriorating health and socio-economic conditions are leading to widespread despair among refugee and IDP populations.⁸ And, as the demand for mental health services surges, the pandemic has disrupted or halted such services in 93 per cent of countries worldwide.⁹

Socio-Economic Downturn

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, with the broadest collapse in per capita income since 1870.¹⁰ Remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to drop by around 20 per cent compared to 2019, and some 33 million people are at risk of facing hunger as a result.¹¹ About 1.6 billion informal workers have lost 60 per cent of their incomes, and 55 per cent of the world's population are not covered by social insurance or assistance.¹² Foreign direct investment is expected to decline by over 35 per cent and, by 2021, official development assistance may see an 85 per cent decline from 2018.¹³ COVID-19 could push 150 million people into extreme poverty, representing the first increase in extreme poverty in over twenty years.¹⁴

Vulnerable and marginalized groups are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's socio-economic impacts. Racial and ethnic minorities have been hardest hit by wage and job losses.¹⁵ Women and girls are at particular risk of secondary impacts, including loss of earnings and livelihoods and increased exposure to violence.¹⁶ Widespread loss of livelihoods and an increase in poverty among refugee populations is expected as access to the labor market, social safety nets, and humanitarian aid deteriorates.¹⁷ And more than a decade of progress in reducing child poverty and deprivation could be reversed. At the height of lockdowns, nearly 1.5 billion students were affected by school closures, and at least one third of schoolchildren globally (463 million) remain cut off from education.¹⁸ Around 24 million children are projected to drop out of school, with children less likely to return the longer they are out of school in humanitarian settings.¹⁹ A further 13 million child marriages are estimated by the end of the decade.²⁰

Inequality

Humanitarian needs are increasingly resulting from acute social injustice, institutional inequality, and state-sanctioned violence against particular groups and communities. Chronic under-investment in public health and persistent barriers to accessing health services have exacerbated vulnerabilities of poor and marginalized groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only to its health and economic effects, but also to environmental harms such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.²¹ The death of George Floyd and global #BlackLivesMatter protests have reinvigorated scrutiny of racism and filtered out issues of systemic inequality, power imbalances and slow progress towards localization.²²

Further, unequal access to technology during the COVID-19 pandemic has created gaping disparities in people's ability to pursue education and livelihood opportunities. Those with the ability to work remotely were able to adapt, while those without internet or access to technology were left behind. Roughly 80 per cent of children in high income countries but only 50 per cent of children in lower income countries had access to distance learning.²³ Realizing the 'digital promise' must not come at the expense of a widening digital divide.

Protection Risks

Urban areas have become the epicenter of the pandemic, with an estimated 95 per cent of all reported COVID-19 cases.²⁴ Displaced populations, particularly urban Internally Displaced Persons, have suffered increased protection risks posed by overcrowded and substandard living conditions and inadequate access to water, sanitation and healthcare. Movement constraints have hindered voluntary returns or escape from insecurity, and asylum procedures have been impeded in some countries.²⁵ Lockdowns

have created a 'shadow pandemic' of sexual and gender-based violence now affecting more than one in three women and girls worldwide, as well as millions of boys, men, and gender-nonconforming individuals.²⁶ As COVID-19 continues to strain health services, essential services such as domestic violence shelters and helplines have reached capacity.

Humanitarian access has been constrained by measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 including global movement restrictions which have resulted in delays, additional costs and the partial suspension of humanitarian activities.²⁷ And despite widespread support for the UN Secretary-General's call for an immediate global ceasefire, further conflict and violence may result from the pandemic as countries face civil unrest, political destabilization, and increases in crime, anti-refugee sentiment and suspicion of humanitarian workers.²⁸

Geo-Political Tensions

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced existing geo-political tensions and continuing challenges to multilateral cooperation.²⁹ As countries focused on the domestic pandemic response, resources were diverted away from international assistance. In some countries, weak central structures shifted the burden of the response towards local actors and contributed to an uneven pandemic response.³⁰ Misinformation and disinformation spread widely over the internet and through social media and hampered the COVID-19 response, with some populations actively resisting public health measures.³¹ At the same time, the pandemic was widely cited as a pretext to limit access to information, censor critical speech, and justify expanded surveillance powers.³²

2021 AND BEYOND: OUTLOOK AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, it could also serve as an accelerator of change that has already begun or become recognized as inevitable over the last decade.³³ The speed, and success of vaccine and treatment research and development could reinvigorate efforts towards multilateral, cross-sector collaboration. Refocused attention on the key role of local actors as front-line responders resulting from travel and movement restrictions could translate into progress on long-standing localization commitments.³⁴ The urgent need to prevent the losses of the socio-economic crisis from becoming permanent could lead to an upscaling in programmes for vulnerable and marginalized groups; accelerated work across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus; and increased focus on preparedness, prevention, organizational readiness and anticipatory action.³⁵ Investments in responsible and inclusive technology could support earlier, faster and more effective action. The spotlight on racism and discrimination could bolster efforts towards achieving true equality, diversity, and equal representation. And targeted investments in governance, social protection, green economy and digitalization could get us back on track to achieve the SDGs.³⁶

¹ World Health Organization, *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, Available at: <https://covid19.who.int/>

² World Health Organization, *Pulse Survey on Continuity of Essential Health Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Interim Report*, 27 August 2020. Available at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-EHS_continuity-survey-2020.1

-
- ³ The Global Fund, *Majority of HIV, TB, and Malaria Programs Face Disruptions as a Result of COVID-19*, 17 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/covid-19/news/2020-06-17-global-fund-survey-majority-of-hiv-tb-and-malaria-programs-face-disruptions-as-a-result-of-covid-19/>
- ⁴ WHO and UNICEF, *Emergency Call to Action for Measles and Polio Outbreak Prevention and Response*, 6 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-11-2020-unicef-and-who-call-for-emergency-action-to-avert-major-measles-and-polio-epidemics>
- ⁵ United Nations Population Fund, *New UNFPA Projections Predict Calamitous Impact on Women's Health as COVID-19 Pandemic Continues*, 28 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/press/new-unfpa-projections-predict-calamitous-impact-womens-health-covid-19-pandemic-continues>
- ⁶ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children*, 15 April 2020. Available at: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf
- ⁷ Center for Diseases Control, *Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*, 24 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>
- ⁸ UNHCR, *COVID-19 Inducing 'Widespread Despair' Among Refugees, UNHCR Appeals for Urgent Support for Mental Health*, 10 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2020/10/5f80502c4/covid-19-inducing-widespread-despair-among-refugees-unhcr-appeals-urgent.html>
- ⁹ World Health Organization, *COVID-19 Disrupting Mental Health Services in Most Countries, WHO Survey*, 5 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-10-2020-covid-19-disrupting-mental-health-services-in-most-countries-who-survey>
- ¹⁰ World Bank, *Understanding the Depth of the 2020 Global Recession in 5 Charts*, 15 June 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/understanding-depth-2020-global-recession-5-charts>
- ¹¹ International Organization for Migration, World Food Programme, *Populations at Risk: Implications of COVID-19 for Hunger, Migration and Displacement*, 4 November 2020. Available at: https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/populations_at_risk_-_implications_of_covid-19_for_hunger_migration_and_displacement.pdf
- ¹² International Labour Organization, *COVID-19 and the World of Work*, 29 April 2020. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743146.pdf
- ¹³ Development Initiatives, *Coronavirus and Aid Data: What the Latest DAC Data Tells Us*, 17 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.devinit.org/resources/coronavirus-and-aid-data-what-latest-dac-data-tells-us/>
- ¹⁴ World Bank, *COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021*, 7 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021#:~:text=The%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic%20is,severity%20of%20the%20economic%20contraction>
- ¹⁵ Pew Research Center, *Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely by Race and Ethnicity*, 5 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/>
- ¹⁶ UN Women, *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic*, June 2020. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=640>
- ¹⁷ Center for Global Development, Refugees International, International Rescue Committee, *Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees' Economic Inclusion*, July 2020. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/locked-down-and-left-behind-paper-71320.pdf>
- ¹⁸ UNICEF, *COVID-19: Are Children Able to Continue Learning During School Closures*, 27 August 2020. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/remote-learning-reachability-factsheet/>
- ¹⁹ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children*, 15 April 2020. Available at: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf
- ²⁰ Save the Children, *COVID-19 Places Half a Million More Girls at Risk of Child Marriage in 2020*, 1 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-places-half-million-more-girls-risk-child-marriage-2020>
- ²¹ United Nations Environment Programme and United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020). *Human Rights, The Environment and Covid-19 Key Messages*. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/ClimateChange/HR-environment-COVID19.pdf>
- ²³ UNICEF, UNESCO, The World Bank, *What Have We Learnt? Overview of Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19*, October 2020. Available at: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/national-education-responses-to-covid19/>
- ²⁴ UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization*, 31 October 2020. Available at: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/wcr_2020_report.pdf
- ²⁵ UN Secretary-General, *Policy Brief: COVID-19 and People on the Move*, June 2020. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/sg_policy_brief_on_people_on_the_move.pdf
- ²⁶ UN Women, *COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic*, June 2020. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=640>
- ²⁷ UN OCHA on Medium, *Humanitarian Access in the Time of Coronavirus: We Adapt, We Innovate and We Adapt Some More*, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://medium.com/humanitarian-dispatches/humanitarian-access-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-we-adapt-we-innovate-and-we-adapt-some-more-ffae3efdec14>
- ²⁸ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021*, December 2020. Available at: <https://gho.unocha.org/>

-
- ²⁹ European Council on Foreign Relations, *How to Repair Multilateralism After COVID-19*, 22 May 2020. Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_repair_multilateralism_after_covid_19
- ³⁰ The New Humanitarian, *This Global Pandemic Could Transform Humanitarianism Forever*, 8 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/06/08/coronavirus-transform-humanitarianism-aid>
- ³¹ Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism & University of Oxford, *Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation*, 7 April 2020. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>
- ³² Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2020 - The Pandemic's Digital Shadow*, 2020. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/10122020_FOTN2020_Complete_Report_FINAL.pdf
- ³³ Gorgeu, Raphael, *The World Tomorrow: COVID-19 and the New Humanitarian*, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/05/20/the-world-tomorrow-covid-19-new-humanitarian/>
- ³⁴ Humanitarian Advisory Group and Care International, *Remote Humanitarian Management and Programming*, May 2020. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HH_PP_Guidance-Note_Remote-Management_electronic_FINAL.pdf
- ³⁵ IASC, *Interim Guidance: IASC Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, April 2020. Available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-04/IASC%20Interim%20Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20-%20ERP%20Approach%20-%20April%202020.pdf>
- ³⁶ UNDP, *Impact of Covid-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2 December 2020. Available at: https://sdgintegration.undp.org/sites/default/files/Impact_of_COVID-19_on_the_SDGs.pdf