

COVID-19 Response

May 2020

Introduction

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic depends entirely on whether societies can come together, unify across their traditional divides and cooperate to do what is needed. Not only has the crisis exacerbated divisions and inequities, conflict – particularly armed conflict – prevents public health and humanitarian efforts from being effective.

This response focuses on the **medium term** - until the end of the 2020 - and seeks to tackle the effects of COVID-19 on conflict-affected communities and countries. Building on the short-term actions which have already been implemented, we will mobilize our substantial presence and network of partnerships to respond. We will both prevent conflict from being a significant impediment to the public health response, catalyze collaboration among all sectors of society, and capitalize on the unique opportunity to prevent violence and build peace that the crisis offers. We will prioritize those most places where the divisions and mistrust are most prevalent and are likely to increase the vulnerability of the public to the pandemic's effects. This will raise broader awareness and attract greater engagement and support for our core mission of turning conflict into cooperation.

This document lays out our overall COVID-19 response at a global level. Programming will be designed at community and national levels to address the specific conditions and needs, building on the core elements of the approach described here.

Conflict and the Covid-19 Crisis

The global pandemic has laid bare the fissures which divide societies; the virus preys on political and ethnic divisions and brings inequities into sharp focus. In conflict-affected countries, it presents both a public health and a public order crisis: there are significant barriers to the health and humanitarian response AND some measures being implemented to fight the pandemic exacerbate conflict, leading to increased violence. A lack of collaboration anywhere creates conditions in which the coronavirus can thrive and the pandemic becomes inexorable.

In conflict-affected states, four key dynamics are shaping our response:

- **The information ecosystem is often fractured leading to different population segments receiving distinct, and sometimes politicized, information.** In the short-term this gives rise to the spread of rumors and misinformation which has a profound effect on the health response and leads to targeted violence against specific groups. Most people left out of information campaigns are women and girls, leaving them more vulnerable.
- **Profound distrust in authorities undermines attempts to effectively respond to the pandemic.** This is particularly true in marginalized communities which have experienced neglect by state services. It can lead to the rejection of government or humanitarian actions and prevent collaboration between authorities and community leaders which are necessary to fight the pandemic.
- **Social cohesion is substantially weakened by the pandemic and its response.** Ethnic, religious and political divisions are laid bare as nationalist narratives about the virus take root and certain identity groups face stigmatization. Within communities, vulnerable groups such as women and youth are likely to be especially impacted by the economic effects of the crisis, leading to further instability.
- **Both government and non-state armed actors are taking advantage of the pandemic.** Heavy-handed securitized responses could lead to entrenchment of authoritarian tools and the closing of civic space. Armed actors have sought to exploit the virus, capitalizing on the distrust of authorities, offering their own interventions, and in some cases escalating violence. These secondary effects are long-term in nature and will reshape many armed conflicts.

Despite this, a number of critical opportunities to build peace are also emerging and are likely to gain speed as the crisis progresses and passes.

- **The pandemic is a shared human experience, and the essential interdependence of people is more visible than ever.** Everyone in the world is feeling the effects of this crisis and there is a growing recognition that people's health and security is connected, no matter the location. This creates an opportunity to create shared narratives and joint action.
- **Youth, women, religious and civil society organizations are mobilizing to respond to the crisis.** Both formal and informal groups have sprung into action, serving community needs and filling gaps where state-led responses are ineffective or not present. Youth are often the first responders.
- **The crisis could create an enabling environment to generate ceasefires and spark peace processes.** The UN Secretary General's call for a [global ceasefire](#) has gained modest momentum and presents a moment for key powers and non-state actors to create conditions for negotiations to end some of the world's most intractable conflicts.
- **The collaboration needed to respond effectively could weave new relationships and trust, upon which broader social cohesion efforts could be launched.** The fight against the Coronavirus is forging new collaboration; scientists, governments, business actors, religious actors and others are transcending traditional dividing lines, and there is an opportunity to leverage these relationships to tackle other problems in the long term.

Search's Role and Value Add

As the world's largest dedicated peacebuilding organization with frontline peacebuilders in dozens of fragile and conflict affected communities, Search understands the risks in a COVID-19 response, and the opportunities for success. Our core expertise in conflict analysis, igniting personal transformation, agency and collaborative relationships is a critical complement to the scientific, security and governance approaches. Our partners and donors have been asking us to engage in a substantive way, signaling a clear demand for our involvement. There is increasing recognition from global and national leaders that collaboration is of paramount importance in the COVID-19 response and that violent conflict is a dangerous consequence of the pandemic. Based on our mission, Search is called to:

- **Leverage our substantial presence and networks in conflict-affected countries** to mount short-term and medium-term responses in some of the most vulnerable communities in the world. Our trusted media production and distribution networks enable us to develop and disseminate messages to tens of millions of people. Similarly, our partnerships with government, civil society, youth and women's groups enable us to mobilize community-based collaborations to prevent violence and support COVID-19 response.
- **Utilize our impartiality and expertise** in conflict-sensitive public health and humanitarian interventions, behavior change communications, and facilitation of collaboration to play a critical role in COVID-19. We convene key government, community, national and international partners to ensure that their responses engage the most vulnerable communities. We will use our convening power to forge partnerships and coalitions, enabling people involved to get past their conflicts with one another to develop well-rooted local responses. We will utilize our capacities in online dialogue and virtual exchange to bring people together digitally.
- **Make use of our influence in the international community** to ensure that there is widespread real time understanding of the actual impact of COVID-19 in conflict-affected areas and that the perspectives of peacebuilders are integrated into the short-term and long-term policy decisions being taken. We are able to formulate ideas which contribute to the post-pandemic transformation, bringing the voices of excluded groups and supporting peaceful transition in fragile states.

Programmatic Priorities

Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3
Disseminate accurate information to conflict-affected communities about COVID-19 and how to respond	Facilitate collaboration among key actors in the COVID-19 response to ensure conflict-sensitive delivery of health and humanitarian actions	Mitigate the potential for violent conflict to emerge as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding responses.

Objective 1 - Disseminate accurate information to conflict-affected communities about COVID-19 and how to respond

We create and amplify credible information. We use trusted, trained and credible people and media partners to communicate through diverse channels. We know the context is ripe for conspiracies, dehumanization and suspicion, and we make sure our understanding is as local and contextually adapted as we can.

- Search will leverage existing radio and television programs, journalists from partner radio stations and social media influencers to manage rumors, misinformation and build trust and acceptance in the COVID-19 response. We will shape social norms, focused on people's responses to the crisis in the near-term and their relationships to one another in the long-term. Search will focus on engaging marginalized communities, particularly youth, so that their concerns are addressed through interactive communication and attractive formats and channels. Search will undertake these communications initiatives in partnership with medical authorities within government and humanitarian agencies, in order to build trusted channels of communication between health experts and communicators including social media platforms such as Facebook.
- Illustrative programming: Search supports youth champions with influence in marginalized communities to create their own videos and audio productions to raise awareness about COVID-19, in Kenya, Central African Republic, Mali, DR Congo, and South Sudan.

Objective 2 - Facilitate collaboration among key actors in the COVID-19 response to ensure conflict-sensitive delivery of health and humanitarian actors.

We incentivize collaboration to tackle the core problems. Everyone will need to be part of the immediate response and the longer term efforts to save lives and prevent future outbreaks of COVID-19. This starts with ensuring that humanitarian and health responses are 'conflict smart' by understanding conflict dynamics. This is critical for preventing people from catching COVID-19, and for the longer-term responses which will need everyone's participation to succeed, including access to testing, treatment, and equitable health services. This will lead to institutional change, normalizing collaboration as a response to crisis.

- Search will strengthen the capacity of key stakeholders in civil society, will support in coordination efforts, and strengthen the relationships with stakeholders in the response.
- Search will support monitoring efforts led by civil society to collaborate with government and security actors towards mitigating human rights abuses which may occur during the response.
- Search will convene multistakeholder fora to continue to focus on the underlying fragility, in particular related to access to health services, and eventual testing, treatment and vaccine.
- Illustrative programming: Search works in Nigeria with civil society, religious, security and government actors in the conflict-affected states to monitor and detect conflict dynamics. These signs feed into engagement initiatives with various stakeholders involved in the COVID-19 response.

Objective 3 - Mitigate the potential for violent conflict to emerge as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding responses.

We strengthen critical relationships to stabilize and build peace. Whether through lockdowns in the short term, or prolonged travel restrictions and social distancing, lines of division are widening. In fragile and conflict-affected communities, allowing polarization and stereotypes to emerge can spark violence which would set back all COVID-19 response efforts.

- Search will focus on strengthening trusting and collaborative relationships across key horizontal and vertical dividing lines. These will include relationships, for example, between security forces and citizens, between governmental authorities and marginalized or opposition groups, and across ethnic and religious dividing lines. We will address key emerging gender dynamics including the increased vulnerability of women and the shifting roles in families.
- Search will deploy online engagement tools, equipping our staff and partners with online dialogue facilitation and adapting our training programs.
- Search will position itself to contribute to the economic recovery processes, aiming to integrate collaboration as a key facet of markets' resiliencies.
- Illustrative programming: Search in Yemen supports community-based mediators, strengthens measures to combat violence against women, and engages stakeholders for an effective health response across the conflict dividing lines.

Policy and Advocacy Priorities

The remainder of 2020 will be consequential for the future of our work; beyond the major disruption caused by COVID-19, it will feature a number of critical policy windows. This will include presidential elections in the US and elsewhere, the shaping of the UK and Europe's global role post-Brexit, ongoing reforms to the multilateral system in the run up to the United Nations' 75 Anniversary, wild economic fluctuations, and political transitions in a dozen other countries where Search operates.

In this context, Search will focus its policy engagement and advocacy on three top-line messages:

- **Advocate for inclusive responses in the short and medium term.** The short term effects of COVID-19 will shape the medium and long-term. At a political level, crisis management centered on ministries of health and security forces and presented visible tests of the authority, capacity and legitimacy of central governments, in some cases justifying decisive, technocratic, authoritarian leadership styles. In other places, it demonstrated the limits of these institutions and undermined their credibility. Economic and social effects will play out over this period across societies, ranging from protection issues to food insecurity, to social cohesion threats. Over the medium-term we will highlight the value of "Common Ground" approaches to the COVID crisis, notably efforts led by women, youth, and non-state actors. We will feature and advocate for innovative, tech-adapted peacebuilding programming and efforts developed in the crisis. We will support our country teams to bring policy visibility and responses to address specific second-order effects of the crisis on social cohesion, armed conflict and politics.
- **Maintain a focus on the conflict-affected states for the next phase of response and recovery.** The financial and human toll of COVID-19 and its after-effects (food shortages, instability etc) in conflict-affected societies underscores the world's failure to end chronic manmade crises. Constructive, effective conflict transformation is needed now more than ever. The "bullets and band-aids" approach of peacekeeping, armies and humanitarian aid that dominated the last quarter-century of international conflict management is neither affordable nor sustainable. We will reinforce efforts to "make the case" for our field as it relates to humanitarian and economic development action, shoring up financial investment in conflict transformation/peacebuilding as integral to the success of the other fields (HDP nexus)

- **Take advantage of the crisis to elevate collaborative leadership in building healthy, just and safe societies.** The exit from the COVID-19 crisis during a period of global flux creates an opportunity for bigger conversations on global cooperation. The shared experience of the COVID crisis brings the world together in some senses: from attempts at global ceasefires on a grand scale to the opportunities for global communication afforded by the explosion of videoconferencing. It highlights and tests social cohesion. We will participate in and shape debates on global cooperation in a post-COVID world, highlighting constructive leadership styles and processes, socializing themes of global interdependence, and ensuring a continued focus on the role that civilian-led conflict transformation can play in building a world that is more healthy, just and safe in line with our 10-year Strategy and advocacy efforts.