Building Back Better from Covid-19?

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Crises of governance – exposing fragilities and encouraging resilience[1]

The Covid-19 pandemic is both a health emergency and a crisis of governance, testing health and other public institutions to their furthest limits. The unfolding of the pandemic has been shaped as much by the policy responses to it, as by the advance of Covid-19 itself. **It is structured by the ongoing dynamics of global geopolitics, capitalist production, scientific knowledge, and information. At the same time, it has activated national and local crises and responses, translating global dislocations into country-level risk factors and local deprivations.**

The relationships between Covid-19, fragility,[2] violent conflict and human rights – and the impacts on governance, peace and equality – are plagued by questions of evidence and causality. What we do not know, significantly exceeds what we do know. Covid-19 can be seen as an exogenous shock that worsens fragility, authoritarianism, violent conflict and human rights. But the latter in turn shape how the pandemic plays out in specific national and regional contexts. The relationships are reciprocal and multivariate. Furthermore, changes attributed to Covid-19, for instance towards increased authoritarianism, may be no more than a continuation of existing trends, largely driven by other causes.

Making policy and crafting programmes in conditions of a rapid-onset emergency has proved enormously difficult. **There are numerous examples of bad practice, when interventions have been avoided, delayed, or bent out of shape by authoritarian populism, corruption, vested interests or bad governance.** Major democracies in the industrial North as well as the developing South have been found wanting, to such an extent as **to bring into question the distinctions between fragile and non-fragile systems, democratic and non-democratic governance**.

Key points

- The trajectory of Covid-19 is fast changing, hard to predict and plagued by major evidence gaps.

- Official figures massively underplay illness and mortality amongst the 'silent dead' in the poorest countries and regions.

- The secondary impacts of the pandemic on fragile economies and polities are equally as damaging as the direct health impacts.

- Covid-19 mirrors and magnifies the intersecting inequalities of gender, disability, age, class, race and ethnicity, religion and sexuality.

- Women and girls – and recent gains in gender equality – are much at risk from a 'shadow pandemic' of gender-based violence.

- Covid-19 has exacerbated rather than caused existing trends towards authoritarian governance and violent conflict.

- Local resilience and grass-roots cooperation, where it has emerged, should be fully supported, which requires new approaches to risk.

The Covid-19 pandemic can also be seen as an opportunity to build back better. By revealing fault-lines in the structures of power and profit, it can identify where changes are most needed, how they might happen, and who might emerge as agents of change. Nothing is guaranteed, and in an unequal and dysfunctional world, there are also the risks of building back much the same or worse. At the very minimum, policy should aim to counteract backsliding from existing gains in democracy, human rights and building peace.

Responses to the pandemic point to more transformative possibilities:

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1 This Synthesis Note summarises the key findings of Luckham, R. and Carter, B. (2022) *Building Back Better from Covid-19? What Follows for Peace, Governance and Equality*, Bern: SDC Governance Network.

2 'Fragility' exists where the social contracts which bind states, societies and citizens are breaking apart under the stress of political crises, security challenges, economic shocks, or existential risks like health pandemics, famines and climate change.

- **First, the pandemic demonstrates the importance of mutuality and of networks of solidarity at many levels:** for instance, the sharing of research findings about the virus by scientists; the widespread acceptance by citizens that they have responsibilities towards others, for example by wearing face-coverings; and the agreement in principle that vaccines should be shared internationally.

- **Second, it strengthens the case for reforging the social contract between states and citizens**, as legitimacy and trust in public authority are prerequisites for effective public health measures.

- **Third, it highlights the need for rapid, effective collective action, internationally as well as within national and local boundaries**, as the impacts of the pandemic cannot be addressed solely at the nation state level.

However, these transformative possibilities are at risk of evaporating as the pandemic continues. Policy responses have been compromised by abuses of power, distributional inequities, increased distrust, and the fragmentation of action. To build back better not worse, governments must move beyond electoral advantage and narrow national and corporate interests. **To push governments into action, new and more inclusive forms of political and social mobilisation are required, new channels of information and communication must be opened, and new ways of thinking about the entitlements and responsibilities of citizens need to emerge.** All of this will challenge vested interests and be resisted. Change processes are unruly and do not follow pre-arranged scripts. For all these reasons, policy entry points for donor agencies must be chosen carefully, and require careful navigation of contentious, fast-shifting political terrain.

The main vectors of Covid-19-induced change

The pandemic has been described as a grey swan event. Not a black swan, because it was not unexpected. Not a white swan either because its precise nature and timing were not predicted in advance. Furthermore, it has not run its full course, especially in the poorest and most imperilled countries and regions. **The vectors of Covid-19-induced change include both the direct and the indirect impacts of the pandemic; along with the wider political, economic and social conditions which shape its course, skew its impacts, and determine who most suffers its burdens.** Some of these vectors are better understood

than others. The causal relationships among them are complex and reciprocal. In some instances, Covid-19 has a direct impact all of its own; in others it reinforces existing trends; and in others it has little or no independent effect. Five main vectors can be identified:

1 **The 'silent dead': Covid-19 has put the health and lives of millions at risk, especially where health and care provision are under-resourced and safety nets are frail.** Analysis of these impacts is beset by immense data gaps, especially in the poorest and most conflict-torn countries. According to *The Economist* (2022) estimates, Covid-19-related excess deaths in Africa could be 4–11 times higher than official figures suggest.

2 **The global and national economic dislocations of the pandemic have been at least as damaging as its primary impacts.** Contraction of the major industrial economies has had disproportionate impacts on weak economies in poorer countries: reducing export earnings and tourism; disrupting supply chains; adding to debt burdens; and cutting into aid flows and government revenues. Cuts have diminished their capacity to cope with the pandemic and with other challenges. In addition, there are the economic impacts of lockdowns, travel restrictions and border closures on already faltering economies. The pandemic has aggravated food insecurity and famine, already rising due to conflict, extreme climate events and economic shocks. The impacts have been especially hard upon impoverished people with limited assets and no safety nets.

At the same time, the tectonic plates of the global economy have been shifting (Tooze 2021), partly in response to the pandemic, accelerating wider structural trends: deepening existing and creating new inequalities; shifting the balance between governments and large corporations, including pharmaceutical and media companies; boosting the information economy; hastening the shift in gravity from Western to emerging market economies in East and South-East Asia.

3 **Securitisation and geopolitics have biased policy responses to the pandemic**, in many places reinforcing trends towards fragility and authoritarianism. Well before Covid-19 emerged, the risks of a major pandemic were considered a major global and national security threat (De Waal 2021: chapters 5–6) with the potential to worsen political unrest, population displacements and terrorism. Yet in the event, international organisations and national governments turned out to be woefully

under-prepared. During the initial stages the main priority was tackling the health burdens of the pandemic and containing its spread across national boundaries. But more and more, the pandemic has been reframed in geopolitical terms, linked to the policing of national boundaries, controls over the movement of people, and vaccine diplomacy. National governments in many countries have used the pandemic to justify enhanced security measures, restrictions on civil liberties and the closing down of political and civil spaces.

4 **The pandemic has seen explosions of both information and misinformation, unleashing struggles to control the narrative.** Much attention has been given to the so-called 'infodemic' – the flood of misinformation around Covid-19, which has complicated efforts to bring it under control. This is only one aspect of wider transformations in social connectedness, which touch even the poorest people in poor countries. Social connectedness is

Janus-faced. It has facilitated the efforts of scientists and others to share information about the virus and limit its spread. It has been used by governments and health authorities to monitor the pandemic, track and deal with outbreaks and communicate public health messages.

Civil society has also taken advantage of social media's reach to facilitate grass-roots pandemic responses. Yet these health messages have been thrown off course by fabrications channelled through social media. Governments too have misinformed the public, blocked inconvenient messages, or shut down media outlets, especially those critical of their handling of the pandemic. At the most extreme, as in Tanzania or Brazil, governments have used media restrictions to deny or downplay Covid-19 itself. This matters not only because of the problematic impacts on public health, as it feeds into the wider turn towards authoritarian methods of governance.

Figure 1. Pathways linking Covid-19, fragility, conflict and human rights
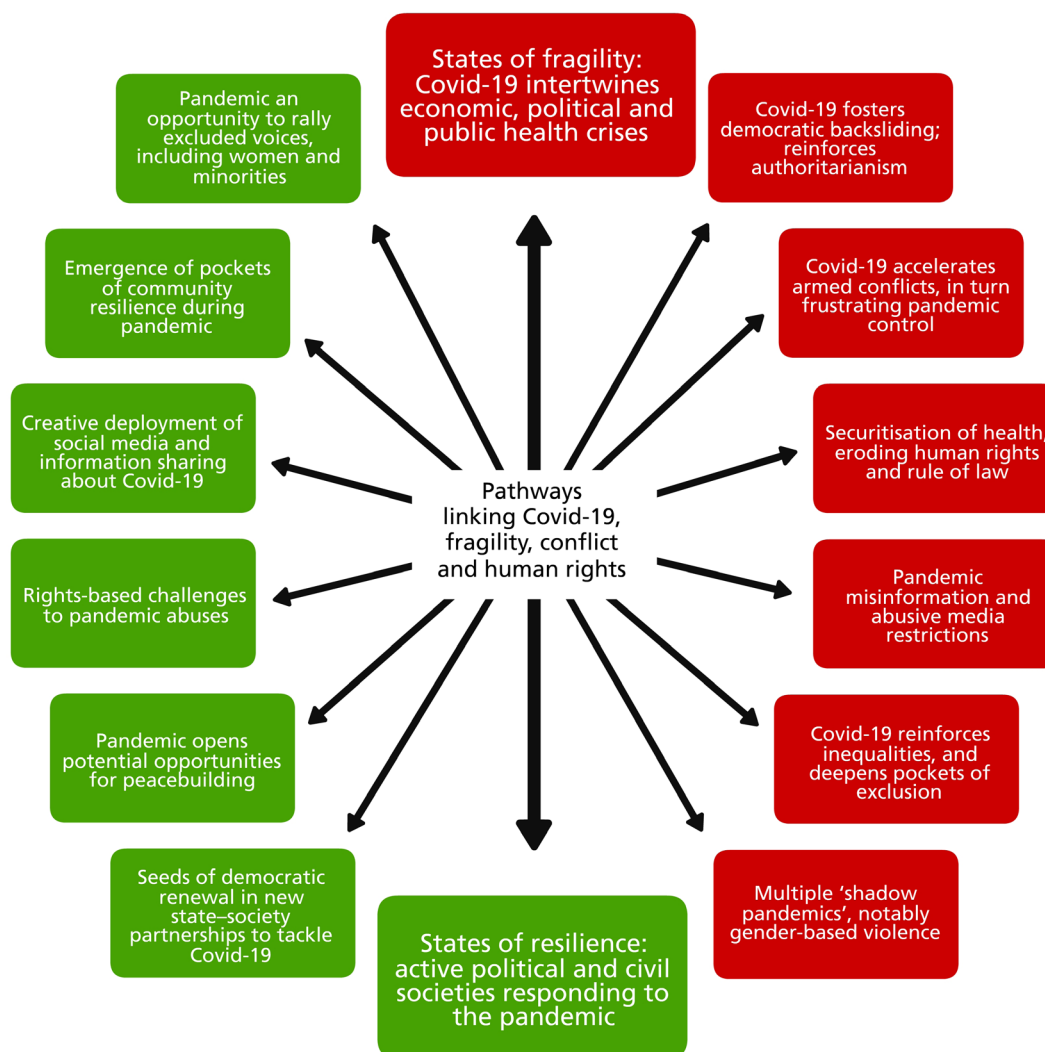
Source: Authors' own.

5   **Far from being 'the great leveller', Covid-19 has exacerbated inequalities everywhere.** It is no surprise that the spread and impacts of the pandemic reflect the major inequalities between poor and rich countries. Rich and powerful countries (and their citizens) have placed themselves at the head of the vaccine queue. Corporate profits have largely been maintained or have significantly increased, notably in the health and information sectors. The risks of the pandemic have been outsourced onto the poorest and most excluded countries, localities, people and groups. They are most exposed to the risks of impoverishment, population displacement, social upheaval and disease. Their already weak and under-resourced public health systems are under severe pressure. Acute and in many cases continuing shortages of vaccines make them especially reliant upon lockdowns and other non-pharmaceutical interventions, often in situations where the latter may be harshly imposed and ineffective. This matters greatly because the right to health is a fundamental human right, health provision is part of the social contract between states and citizens, and health deficits are built into most definitions of fragility.

Covid-19's impacts on fragility, violent conflict and human rights

The trajectory of the pandemic is complex and still unfolding. Figure 1 spells out pathways which may connect Covid-19 to fragility, conflict and human rights. Rather than positing solely negative impacts (in red on the right-hand side of the diagram), it also highlights pathways to building back better (in green, on the left).

1 From states of fragility to states of resilience?
The public health crises triggered by Covid-19 feed into political ruptures that weaken public authority and break states. These ruptures are most acute in the countries where the state has been wholly or largely displaced by competing centres of violence and political authority (as in Yemen or the Central African Republic). Their number is small, though it could be set to increase, for instance in the increasingly violent and unstable Sahel. And in many more countries categorised as 'fragile', state authority is weak and violently contested without being entirely broken.

Yet it is too early to tell whether the spread of Covid-19 will make fragile systems even more fragile and tip still more countries and localities into fragility. We also need to look with a more searching eye at countries that are seemingly less fragile or that have escaped categorisation as fragile altogether. Two recent empirical studies offer tentative conclusions. One compares Mozambique,

Nigeria and Pakistan (Anderson *et al.* 2021); the other Afghanistan, Colombia and Nigeria (Mercy Corps 2021). Amongst these, only Afghanistan is categorised by OECD as extremely fragile. Mozambique, Nigeria and Pakistan are classified as fragile but Colombia, despite a record of armed conflict and criminal violence, is not. In all five national contexts, high political and/or criminal violence predated and continued during the pandemic. In all five, governments introduced restrictions on fundamental freedoms and closed civil spaces during the pandemic in the name of public health. In each country, this has reinforced a longer-term trend towards more authoritarian ways of governing.

Could the pandemic act as a stimulus for needed change towards more resilient states and societies in these and other national contexts? It has reinforced the case for broad-based participation to revitalise weak institutions and overcome the social vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic. But it is doubtful whether existing governance structures will make the necessary changes of their own volition. Where states are indifferent or hostile, the impetus must be supplied by civil activism and struggles from below. The five countries considered above provide many examples of vocal civil societies and resilient local bodies responding to the pandemic, even in bleak political circumstances, as in Afghanistan. The key question is how to scale up such initiatives to make a tangible difference in fragile contexts, where both political authority and civil society are fragmented and weak.

2 The tyranny of the urgent: Authoritarian turn, or democratic renewal?
Almost all countries (democracies and autocracies alike) have introduced emergency measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Drastic action is of course needed. But the boundaries between what is legitimate and necessary and what is not are blurred and disputed. A study of democratic backsliding by V-Dem (Kolvani *et al.* 2021) documents many cases where pandemic restrictions have been used abusively: to shut down political debate; to curtail basic rights; to limit legislative oversight; to restrict media freedoms; and to discriminate against minorities and vulnerable groups.

It is striking that many of the governments imposing unwarranted controls and restrictions on their citizens are (at least nominally) democratic, including – amongst others – India, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and Kenya. Less surprisingly, prominent autocracies like China, Egypt and Myanmar have also been major violators. Nor do violations appear to have been worse in fragile than in stable national contexts. However, in many fragile contexts violent non-state groups have imposed their own restrictions to establish their control over

health resources, including the supply of vaccines and medicines in areas they control (as in North-Eastern Syria; see Gharibah and Mehchy 2020).

There has also been public backlash against restrictions, some of it divisive, as with anti-vaccine protests, but some of it identifying real abuses and demanding greater accountability. In the best cases, judicial bodies and civil society actors have kept abuses in check and acted to protect vulnerable people and groups. Covid-19-related protests have been more widespread in high- and middle-income countries than in fragile contexts.

3 Covid-19 as a stimulus for violent conflict – or is it an opportunity to build peace?

The pandemic has seen a rise in peaceful and in violent protests, as well as in state violence against civilians by state security agencies. But nowhere, so far, have Covid-19 protests escalated into major new outbreaks of violence able to challenge the state or to initiate armed conflicts. Violent conflicts were already on a rising trend worldwide (the number of conflicts, but not battle-related fatalities) before the pandemic.

A more convincing case can be made that Covid-19 has fed into and reshaped existing conflicts in four main ways:

- First, the pandemic has worsened poverty and increased youth unemployment, adding to the incentives for violence and motivating recruitment into armed groups and criminal gangs.

- Second, it has deepened horizontal inequalities, escalating violence around politically polarised racial, ethnic and religious identities.

- Third, it has accelerated the drift towards authoritarianism, encouraging human rights abuses and state violence against civilians.

- Fourth, the stresses of the pandemic have weakened the capacity and legitimacy of already fragile states, making it harder for them to deliver basic security as well as health to their citizens; thus setting them up in competition to rebel groups and criminal gangs operating at their insurgent margins.

Violent conflicts in their turn have had significant impacts on the spread and incidence of Covid-19 and on efforts to contain it. Due to their extreme marginalisation, people and groups in conflict zones have found themselves trapped between armed factions and repressive governments, as in Syria, each trying to control access to vaccines, aid, medicines and health facilities (when not bombing the latter).

The UN Security Council called early in the pandemic for a 'sustained humanitarian pause' to make vaccination campaigns possible, as all sides have an interest in mitigating shared health risks. But to a large extent the potential for peacebuilding has not been realised. Most of the ceasefires declared during the early phases of the pandemic were not followed up.

4 Erosion of human rights and rule of law – or new rights-based approaches?

Coping with the pandemic has necessarily involved measures which limit some rights and freedoms. The exercise of rights cannot be divorced from obligations, especially where it concerns public health. In the best cases these obligations arise from shared perceptions of mutual necessity. In the worst cases restrictions have been harshly enforced, manipulated to serve state security interests or twisted out of shape by inequality and social exclusion. Political authorities in at least 51 countries have used states of emergency, counter-terrorism measures and Covid-19 restrictions to arrest, detain, and prosecute critics including journalists, bloggers, activists, opposition leaders and medical workers (Human Rights Watch 2021: 56).

The UN Secretary-General has characterised the pandemic as a protection and human rights crisis rolled into one (Guterres 2020). The right to health alone includes equitable vaccine access, the right to adequate care of those contracting Covid-19, the rights of health-care workers, and the rights of minorities, of women, of LGBTIQ+ groups, of people with disabilities, of older people, of refugees and of displaced populations. All of these have come under extreme pressure during the pandemic. Pandemic restrictions have placed especially heavy burdens on women and girls. Not only have attacks on them increased but also, shelters and other facilities have been underfunded or shut down (Human Rights Watch 2021: 30).

5 The misinformation pandemic and media restrictions: Are there better ways of sharing information and of building trust?

In a globally interconnected world both information and misinformation have been central to how the pandemic has played out. The politics of pandemic information have been complex. Much depends on who is communicating and to whom, and on who is trusted and seen as authoritative. Trust in public health information (and in the regimes of truth it embodies) cannot be taken for granted, even where governments are relatively accountable and honest. National governments have used mantles of secrecy to cover their failings and to curb dissent, most egregiously in

China, but also in many democracies. Governments in at least 24 countries have enacted sweeping legislation criminalising alleged misinformation about Covid-19, in some cases extending also to misinformation about other issues, including public health (Human Rights Watch 2021: 55).

How to regain control of the narrative and ensure that it is driven by the evidence is the vital question. Yet honest, well-informed storylines are not necessarily enough. Basic issues about the relationship between knowledge and power must be addressed, especially where governments or major commercial interests are economical with the truth. Efforts by big tech companies to limit pandemic misinformation are compromised by their business models, which depend on controversy and social division to maximise corporate profits. Even if governments may have good reasons for cracking down on social media, they are seldom themselves entirely innocent parties. Democratic frameworks are needed to make both governments and media companies accountable for the misuse of information.

6 Covid-19 has intensified inequalities – but could it instead inspire more inclusive, community-led forms of social action?

Intersecting social inequalities, discrimination and exclusion have heightened the exposure of vulnerable groups to the pandemic, left them out from pandemic responses, and exposed them to other protection hazards, including violence. Gender, religious, ethnic, caste, class, disability and other exclusions have been combined to single out alleged Covid-19 spreaders; and to bar minorities from state protection, health facilities and schools. The everyday burdens of the pandemic have been especially heavy in geographical pockets of fragility and exclusion, for instance in urban informal settlements, in marginalised rural peripheries or in conflict zones. Violence against women and girls has become a 'shadow pandemic'. Covid-19 has worsened the plight of displaced communities, already struggling with deprivation, resource competition and limited services. And it has made it harder for humanitarian organisations to operate and meet marginalised and displaced people's compound health, economic and other needs.

However, the pandemic has also inspired local responses uniting communities and creating bonds across different groups, with vulnerable people often actively involved. Pockets of resilience have emerged, with collective efforts uniting communities to cope with the health and socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, as found in urban slums in Bangladesh, Kenya and even Yemen (Collyer *et al.* 2021). Women's rights organisations have mobilised community networks to provide informal

safety nets, with grass-roots movements scaling up support to marginalised urban communities (UN Women 2021: 66–7). There have also been pertinent instances of state–civil society cooperation to deal with shared problems, such as the monitoring of Covid-19 relief funds in Mozambique (Anderson *et al.* 2021).

Navigating a way out of the pandemic: Dilemmas and opportunities

How to build back better is fraught with difficulties, which are as much political as they are technical. The pandemic has reinforced an existing drift towards authoritarian, violent, abusive and exclusionary forms of governance. At the same time, it has opened new opportunities and spaces for change.

The key question for donors and for those with whom they collaborate is how to navigate this complex and fast-shifting terrain so as to build back from the pandemic better not worse. This means finding new ways of working both amongst themselves and with their development partners. It calls for accurate diagnosis of what is politically as well as operationally desirable and possible in fragile, authoritarian and conflict-affected contexts. Being politically savvy requires a good understanding of the limits of, as well as possibilities for, donor interventions. It requires alliances with effective local actors. But at the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the rights and agency of the vulnerable people most at risk from Covid-19 and from the cycles of violence, repression, inequality, and poverty into which it feeds.

Ways in which donors can support fragility, conflict and human rights (FCHR) and peace, governance and (gender) equality (PGE) objectives in their Covid-19 policies and programming include the following:

- **The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) provide a good litmus test to ensure that Covid-19 'Build Back Better' agendas meet the needs of those most at risk.**

- Achieving the SDGs requires **a reinvigorated 'push' to build international support for, and to ensure effective collective action around, FCHR agendas**.

- Governance for building back better should prioritise interventions that **support effective and inclusive institutions that can mitigate the impacts of crises, in particular for the most vulnerable and marginalised people** (Khan Mohmand *et al.* 2021).

- FCHR responses to Covid-19 will require close scrutiny of how best to support rights-based approaches, especially but not only in authoritarian and conflict contexts.

- Integrated support for peacebuilding is a vital yet neglected aspect of building back better from Covid-19.

- Building back better from Covid-19 is an **opportunity to support community-led initiatives and civil society activism** that have flourished in many places during the pandemic.

- There is a strong case for **'transformational' agendas that seek to address the systemic social inequalities exposed by the pandemic**.

- Donors cannot shirk the political difficulties of achieving these objectives in a divided and unequal Covid-19 world. Changes come with risks, and require **new ways of working, including broadly based alliances with empowered local, as well as national and global, actors**.

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