

## The Extreme Poor Cannot be Left to Fight Covid-19 Alone

On the 11th of March, the WHO characterised COVID-19 as a pandemic citing its assessment of “alarming levels of spread and severity and alarming levels of inaction<sup>1</sup>”. The pandemic brings with it a global economic, financial and social shock. The whole world needs to prioritize containment and strengthen health systems, as the faster the virus is stopped, the quicker and stronger the recovery will be<sup>2</sup>.

### COVID-19 and Extreme Poverty

World hunger levels have been on the rise since 2018, with over 820 million people going hungry on a daily basis. Prior to the rapid global shutdown caused by the Coronavirus, 3.4 billion people, almost half the world’s population, already struggled to meet their basic needs<sup>3</sup>. The global shutdown has been catastrophic for low-skilled workers and those in the informal working sector, most of whom cannot survive without a daily wage. These changes are catastrophic on low-skilled workers, most of whom cannot survive without a daily wage and have no access to a social safety net. Of the 736 million people living on less than \$1.90 a day, 413 million are in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>4</sup>.

East Africa and South Asia is already reeling from swarms of locusts that have devastated crops, a grave threat to food security and livelihoods in these regions<sup>5</sup>. Coronavirus restrictions are delaying the delivery of pesticides and equipment to control the locusts. As global food production slows, food prices will rise placing more stress on poor families. With no money to pay for health care, these families will be devastated by the impact of this global crisis.

The world’s poor, increasingly located in urban areas, and 71 million displaced people, especially camp populations, cannot practice social distancing. For most, access to basic health services is a pipedream and precautions like regular handwashing with soap is an unaffordable luxury. Urgent action is needed to protect the world’s most fragile populations from this unfolding threat.

### COVID-19 and Conflict

On March 24th, the UN Secretary General called for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world, stating that “It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.<sup>6</sup> Peace must be used as a weapon to fight COVID-19.

In countries which are already dealing with conflict, the long term impacts of previous conflict, or countries with a high potential for conflict, the government’s ability to manage public health crises may already be compromised. The disproportionate impact

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/03/23/pr2098-imf-managing-director-statement-following-a-g20-ministerial-call-on-the-coronavirus-emergency>

<sup>3</sup> <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/911401537279777945/PSPR2018-Ch1-Summary-EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-01/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.fao.org/ag/locusts/en/info/info/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/fury-virus-illustrates-folly-war>

of COVID-19 on the urban poor in contexts already affected by conflict could exacerbate existing tensions. The risk of violence is high in countries where the economy was already floundering, with high unemployment, frustration at government performance and pressures created by conflict in neighbouring countries.

## Collective International Responsibility to reach the furthest behind first

COVID-19 is a global humanitarian challenge. Countries with healthy economies and well-resourced systems are struggling to stay ahead of the virus. In the 23 countries in which Concern works, health systems and safety net mechanisms are already under pressure. Based on Concern's Ebola experience, we know that humanitarian responses must protect the most vulnerable, those without access to services, information and livelihood security and ensure that women and girls can access appropriate ongoing care, with referral pathways for survivors of violence maintained and safeguarded. Extensive sensitization efforts and sharing facts on the virus saved countless lives.

The humanitarian system must be adapted and strengthened to respond and support national government health providers. With additional support, NGOs can strengthen and expand efforts to control the virus in these communities, by supplying basic vital supplies such as water and soap, supporting livelihoods, enabling local care committees and providing or strengthening mobile, dedicated medical treatment.

## COVID-19 Recommendations to governments, donors and policy makers

**All countries must unite behind the UN Secretary General to secure an immediate global ceasefire.** Every country must show leadership to silence the guns, stop the artillery and end the airstrikes. Peace is a necessity to create corridors to deliver aid, strengthen diplomatic efforts and reach those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

A concerted global effort is needed to minimise the impact of COVID-19 in already vulnerable humanitarian contexts, with context-relevant responses. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work in complex settings such as camps, high-density urban settlements and situations of ongoing conflict. COVID-19 responses must be urgent and well-resourced and context specific, supporting the agency of communities on the ground. International NGOs expertise in Ebola response is an essential resource in responding to this new crisis. NGOs must be facilitated by the United Nations and donors to deliver assistance to the hardest to reach places.

**All donors and partners must maintain ongoing support to programmes for the most vulnerable.**

- It is imperative that humanitarian programmes remain operational as far as is possible so as not to compound existing need, thus potentially generating even further global upheaval, conflict, displacements, resource depletion and the spread of other diseases in the coming months;
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- A diversion of funding from current services will undermine progress in some of the world's poorest countries and extend the breeding ground for COVID-19. Flexible conditions for current committed funding is necessary to support ongoing programmes to manage pre-existing needs.
- Full funding of the COVID-19 UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan, full and proper inclusion of NGOs in all processes and efforts, and investment in scalable actions that can curtail the spread of the virus must be prioritised where required, preferably complementing and strengthening existing programmes;

**Life-saving humanitarian activities such as the distribution of food and cash must be considered essential services and be exempt from restriction or impediment by authorities.** As humanitarian staff provide life-saving assistance to the most vulnerable people in crisis, essential staff must be allowed to continue to work safely, and unrestricted by local and national authorities.

Donors must work with the humanitarian community, as well as with national governments to ensure responders have as much access as possible to vulnerable communities. Governments in fragile contexts will struggle to respond as the outbreak

accelerates. The commitment to reaching the furthest behind, on which the Sustainable Development Goals are based must dictate responses as governments and the entire humanitarian sector implement change and step up responses at an unprecedented level of urgency across the globe.

**Governments and private sector, especially social media platforms and technology companies must put profit and politics aside to ensure factual, clear and unambiguous COVID-19 information is shared.** These efforts to inform communities must be led by national government, supported by Heads of State and supported by community leaders, celebrities, and influencers.

International cooperation, investment and accountability must be strengthened. We are only as strong as the weakest health system: therefore If we are to make progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, the global recovery must be more inclusive and we must 'recover better'<sup>7</sup> than efforts made the 2008 financial crisis.

COVID-19 responses should be cognisant of existing conflict dynamics and ensure that responses target people in greatest need, following the principle of impartiality. COVID-19 requires a global response to treat and protect everyone, across borders, and across frontlines.



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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/above-all-human-crisis-calls-solidarity>