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## The UN's Pandemic Response: The Beginnings of a Real Global Plan?

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Describing the coronavirus pandemic as a “[global health crisis unlike any in the 75-year history of the United Nations](#)” the UN has in recent days called for the launch of a large-scale, coordinated, and comprehensive multilateral response to combat the virus and its attendant economic and social consequences. It has published a set of action plans that aim to avert the potentially catastrophic impact of the virus, especially on the world’s most vulnerable and impoverished communities.

- First, on March 25, the organization published a Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) that aims to address the urgent health and humanitarian needs of populations already caught up in humanitarian crises.
- Then, on March 31, the secretary-general issued a report outlining a plan of action for combatting the social and economic dimensions of the crisis. The UN further announced the creation of a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (RRF) to support low- and middle-income developing countries to combat the virus.

These plans come at a time when the world urgently needs greater global leadership and global solidarity. Governments have thus far responded to the virus through a patchwork of unilateral measures. Earlier this month, [CIC underscored](#) the necessity of overcoming such unilateralism in favor of global, multisectoral approaches. The purpose of this commentary is to assess whether and to what extent the two new UN plans further this objective. The analysis builds on previous work on the “[new way of working](#)”/triple nexus, which underscores the importance of approaches that prioritize localization, prevention, and “[building back better](#),” as well as approaches aimed at building and [maintaining peace](#) in these trying times.

Overall, we think the combination of the two reports provides a promising framework. The secretary-general’s report, in particular, is broad and strategic in its coverage, and frank and to the point in a refreshing and rather un-UN-like way. This note makes 5 points:

- The plans get it right on partnership with governments and local civil society
- Both plans adopt a strong and strategic multisectoral lens
- This global multidimensional framework now needs specific strategies to manage complex triple nexus risks such as food price volatility and conflict
- It is important that the two plans work together and avoid dividing the world into “humanitarian crisis” and “development crisis” countries
- Despite efforts to be more strategic, the plans still risk being too UN-centric in their funding frameworks

*Conclusion: This is a good start. Let’s build on it at the IFI Spring meetings and keep the focus both globally and nationally on platforms and partnerships that the UN can convene, not narrow UN system activities.*

## **1. The plans get it right on partnership with governments and local civil society**

The secretary-general’s report calls firstly for urgent support to be provided to and through local health systems, especially in fragile countries with weak institutions. Additionally, it calls for an unprecedented global stimulus to be provided to developing countries to help them stem the economic and social fallout of the crisis. It offers a series of recommendations (such as universal health coverage, expanded social protection, and wage support) aimed at strengthening national service delivery while diminishing threats to social cohesion. The GHRP places a similar emphasis on supporting local solutions. It aims to complement and support existing government response plans and national coordination structures, “with due consideration paid to the respect of humanitarian principles.” Many of the agency-specific response strategies prioritize working with and through government systems, for instance by helping to scale up national cash transfer programs. The central role of local NGOs and of community-led responses is emphasized throughout.

On the other hand, the GHRP does not envisage much, if any, funding going directly to local NGOs, and does not cover governments (see point 4 below). In contrast, the secretary-general’s report advocates a range of measures to get funding flowing to developing countries. It also calls for debt relief, a potentially critical lifeline for poor countries facing a triple burden of declining economic activity and tax revenues, rising expenses to fight the pandemic and its secondary impacts, and rising borrowing costs.

## 2. Both plans adopt a strong multisectoral lens

The secretary-general's report offers a multidimensional response and incorporates issues from both the request for a global ceasefire as well as the humanitarian needs as outlined in the GHRP. It has a strong focus on vulnerable populations and refers repeatedly to the special circumstances of migrants, refugees, and persons affected by conflict and disaster. It calls for efforts to address disinformation—a problem severe enough that WHO has described COVID-19 as an “[infodemic](#)” as well as a pandemic. It urges swift and decisive measures to stem the macroeconomic fallout of the crisis, and to address the underlying inequities that left today's economies so vulnerable in the first place. The GHRP similarly adopts a multidimensional outlook. Although it prioritizes the emergency health response, it urges conflict-sensitivity and calls for social cohesion approaches to prevent outbreaks of conflict and violence. It underscores the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic and anticipates major knock-on effects on sectors from agriculture to livelihoods to protection. It calls for close attention to be paid to the psychosocial and mental health dimensions of the crisis, which are too often neglected in humanitarian operations.

## 3. This multisectoral framework now needs specific strategies to manage complex triple nexus risks such as food price volatility and conflict

Both plans appreciate the threat that the pandemic poses to efforts to sustain peace. They call for preparedness measures aimed at decreasing social tensions and discrimination. The secretary-general's report calls for a human-rights based approach to be pursued across the preparedness, response, and recovery spectrum. Both plans rightly stress the need for leadership—at all levels—to chart the way forward and minimize the risks of social upheaval, particularly in fragile contexts. Yet neither of the new plans contains a strong linkage with peacebuilding. The word “peace” appears not once in the 80-page GHRP, and just three times in the secretary-general's report. At the same time, while the secretary-general's report refers to SDG16, it does so mainly in the context of conflict and populations affected by conflict, even though these challenges are relevant universally. SDG16, which calls for the promotion of justice, peace, and inclusion, forms the backbone of the required prevention and peacebuilding strategies.

There are two types of linkages with peacebuilding that could be stronger. The first relates to civil conflicts and peace processes, some of which may be deeply affected by the pandemic. It is clear, for instance, that the virus will [greatly complicate](#) efforts to implement the Afghan peace process. Secondly, the plans underestimate the chances of major social unrest – in particular due to second-

order effects of popular unrest in urban areas, rising tensions and violence along existing fault lines, and breakdowns in security and justice systems. The secretary-general's report, for instance, assesses that "the risk of social disorders and riots is low." This is a slightly puzzling conclusion. While we cannot predict if such events will happen, certainly the risks for them are rising daily – especially in countries that were experiencing volatility before the crisis hit for a variety of reasons. The morbidity and mortality shock of the pandemic could also weaken security systems while simultaneously placing stresses on social cohesion. And then there is the risk of supply chain breakdowns combined with huge losses in employment and income that could further threaten the social fabric.

There are other issues where neither plan contains clear strategies for addressing the nexus risks they identify. For instance, the secretary-general's report notes that the pandemic is already impacting elections but then does not offer potential strategies for responding: should authorities postpone elections, and if so how do they deal with constitutional requirements? Can remote voting be scaled up or other accountability mechanisms be introduced? The report cites the risk of stigmatization and violence—a problem that is already [becoming apparent](#)—but contains little guidance on what can be done to address this risk. Technology companies are charged with the responsibility to address disinformation, but the report doesn't specify how, or how they will work with governments. Similarly, the GHRP does not contain a clear strategy for adapting traditional humanitarian approaches (such as monthly distribution of food rations in camp settings) that cut against strategies to mitigate disease transmission, like social distancing. It plainly states that it "does not attempt to deal with secondary or tertiary issues" even as it identifies such issues as crucial accelerants of humanitarian need.

Likewise, both plans recognize the possibility of food shortages and food price shocks, but neither provides a comprehensive strategy to combat the risk of a full-blown hunger crisis. The GHRP calls for active monitoring of food prices and food insecurity. The secretary-general's report warns that volatility is starting to impact the price of food and urges that the effects will be calamitous unless measures are promptly put in place. But it does not describe what those measures should be. This is an important omission. The prospect of a food price crisis akin to the 2007–08 crisis, in the midst of a pandemic, is extremely worrying. Already, a number of countries have instituted export bans and more seem poised to do so. While price signals are moving in different directions at present, there is a real risk of both a global surge in the price of rice (and possibly also of wheat) and major urban and subnational shortages due to inflation as well as transport, trade, and production bottlenecks. A multilateral response is urgently needed to prevent uncoordinated export bans as well as to address hoarding and price gouging, boost production, and rapidly address localized hunger outbreaks.

#### **4. It is important that the two plans work together and do not divide the world into “humanitarian crisis” and “development crisis” countries**

We are complementary in general about the plans, but there is still a valid question to ask about why there are two separate plans. Why not one global response? We know from prior epidemics that simultaneous humanitarian-development interventions are a crucial success factor. In theory, close alignment between the two initiatives could ensure that immediate needs are addressed together with longer-term challenges. Indeed as noted above, both frameworks call repeatedly for such complementary action. But there is no obvious platform or mechanism for ensuring coherence. Perhaps more worryingly, the RRF is designed specifically to focus on countries and populations *not* included in the GHRP.

This geographic separation risks dividing countries into two worlds: one targeted with humanitarian instruments and one with development instruments. This is not what we know will work. Many countries will end up with new humanitarian challenges as a result of the pandemic. On the other hand, countries already covered by GHRP still need significant and immediate development support, spanning a range of sectors. We are all in a simultaneous humanitarian and development crisis now.

#### **5. Despite efforts to be more strategic, the plans still risk being too UN-centric in their funding frameworks**

While both plans try not to be UN-centric, the GHRP is too much like a traditional UN humanitarian appeal in its funding framework. It brings together appeals from eight UN agencies and reserves only a fraction—roughly 5 percent—of its funding for NGOs. By contrast, Oxfam recently published a [policy paper](#) that is more broadly focused in its calls for funding, for instance for 10 million additional health-workers worldwide, irrespective of how these are funded. Other humanitarian NGOs have begun to issue their own appeals and develop their own response strategies. There is a potential for overlaps and gaps between these various initiatives as well as increased competition over funding and turf. Likewise, it is unclear that the new Trust Fund whose launch accompanied the secretary-general’s report will contain a national window for government or local civil society implementation, or be able to work with non-UN international partners.

## 6. This is a good start – let’s build on it at the IFI Spring Meetings and keep the focus on platforms and partnerships that the UN can convene, not narrow UN system activities

The UN has put out a solid framework for a coordinated, multilateral response to the coronavirus pandemic. Several additional steps are needed. First, neither plan contains a section on immediate next steps. There is a real need for a roadmap in terms of sequencing and coordination in the near-term. For instance, what progress can be made at the IFI Spring Meetings? Second, it is crucial that the UN focus on platforms and partnerships to implement the response. A broad coalition is urgently needed to address the complex and interlinked challenges identified in both plans. Platforms and partnerships are needed that span all levels, linking the UN with governments, local and national NGOs, the private sector, and the IFIs. The essential role for the UN here is to convene, orchestrate, and galvanize, far more than to implement.

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