



Statement

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACTS –
A CHALLENGE FOR CRISIS PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING

The COVID-19 pandemic is magnifying global problems.

In the context of an increasing number of complex violent conflicts, protracted humanitarian crises, unequal distribution of goods, the lack of access to healthcare, the growing impact of climate change and gender injustice, the pandemic is a threat multiplier.

Early warnings on non-traditional security risks

International and national experts were aware of the danger of a pandemic caused by pathogens jumping from animals to humans and had certainly discussed this risk since the SARS pandemic of 2002 and 2003, if not before. In Germany, detailed scenarios on the development of a pandemic were rehearsed¹ in 2007 in the large-scale LÜKEX exercise, as summarized by the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance. Moreover a risk analysis on civil protection was made available as a briefing to the German Bundestag in 2012.² Nevertheless, it was not possible to prevent Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease resulting from it (COVID-19) from spreading worldwide. The rate of infection has been curbed for now in some countries, but the global number of fatalities is continuing to rise.

Non-traditional security risks such as pandemics and climate change are mentioned in the 2016 White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr and the Federal Government's Guidelines of 2017, "Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace". However, their crucial importance for civil protection was not taken sufficiently into account and political decisions to boost social resilience were not made. The dangers that can arise from non-linear changes were underestimated. The consumption of wild animals and the loss of biodiversity associated with it, and also the extreme exploitation of natural resources and increasing climate change impacts pose threats to survival that can no longer be overcome by reactive ex-post measures alone.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows that the economic and social system in Germany is also vulnerable to external shocks. New ways to contain and prevent international crises through scientific anticipation and political will have emerged. Over the course of the pandemic, it became apparent that political systems that use the established forms of scientific guidance and civil-society

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- 1 Cf. inter alia Christoph Hickmann and Marcel Rosenbach, *Das vergessene Amt*, in: *Der Spiegel*, no. 21, 16 May 2020, p. 47 ff.
 - 2 German Bundestag, 17th electoral term, Bundestag Printed Paper 17/12051 of 13 January 2013, pages 5 f. and 55 ff.

participation were better able to contain the spread and to minimise social conflicts. Countries that had invested in prevention after the SARS pandemic were able to act faster and more effectively, breaking chains of infection and thereby limiting the impact on society.

Unequal impacts of the pandemic

At the same time, it is becoming clear that secondary health, social and economic effects will be far more severe in fragile and economically weak countries than in stable countries, even if the impact of the health crisis cannot yet be entirely predicted.³ Economic losses and a lack of income, particularly in societies with a large proportion of informal employment, will exacerbate supply insecurities and thus hunger and malnutrition. According to the World Food Programme, the number of people suffering acute hunger is likely to almost double to 265 million people in 56 countries by the end of the year.⁴

The rights and participation of population groups such as women, people with disabilities, minorities, indigenous peoples, children and young people, who were already disadvantaged before the pandemic, are particularly curtailed and affected by the infection-control measures and their impact. For example, the pandemic could set the goal of global gender equity and social participation back by decades. Women, who are more often employed in precarious circumstances and undertake most of the care work, are thus hit harder by the social and economic impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, during the lockdown sexual and gender-based violence has increased in many countries.

3 <https://set.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Economic-Vulnerability.pdf>

4 <https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072>

Political repression under the pretext of infection-control measures

The pandemic is revealing trends towards state destabilisation and autocratic repression. A state of emergency is currently in force in over 80 countries. There have been reports of abuses by the security forces and arrests of people who have allegedly violated COVID-19 containment measures or spread disinformation from countries including the Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, Azerbaijan, El Salvador, Morocco and Belarus.⁵ Even EU countries, such as Hungary, are severely curtailing democratic rights of control, citing measures to fight the pandemic. Around the world, election dates have been postponed in order to hold on to power and voting rights have been reduced. Infection-control measures that proved effective in industrialised countries cannot necessarily be applied to developing countries and emerging economies, where they may lead to new potential for conflict.

The Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding is particularly concerned that emergency pandemic measures are being abused in order to curtail the fundamental rights and liberties of the public, media, opposition parties and human rights defenders or to tighten existing repressive measures. This is fomenting new potential for conflict and weakening existing conflict-resolution mechanisms in civil society, which is thus unable to play the monitoring role that is particularly important in times of crisis and only able to observe the impact on society to a limited extent.

The measures taken so far by the Federal Government and the German Bundestag as regards the international impact of the pandemic, including special funding for humanitarian assistance by the Federal Foreign Office, the

5 List of countries based on information provided by the organisations represented in the Advisory Board. General information is available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response#_Toc35446580
Examples can be found at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch>

Emergency COVID-19 Support Programme in the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, greater collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and political support for the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, are positive steps. In the Advisory Board's view, these measures should be supplemented by medium-term measures, new mechanisms and better coordination.

Against this backdrop, the Advisory Board makes the following recommendations to the Federal Government.

1. Improve early warning for external shocks and enhance political coherence

- Non-traditional security threats such as pandemics and climate change should be included in crisis early-warning mechanisms including the Joint Working Group for Early Crisis Detection and the PREVIEW instrument. In this context, scientific expertise must be integrated to a greater extent into interministerial and internal ministry processes.
- The financing of long-term approaches such as crisis prevention, the fight against climate change, adaptation to climate change, poverty eradication and resilience promotion should be continued and ideally expanded. Redirecting public funding for short-term humanitarian assistance should only be considered if the funding cannot be used for its original purpose as a result of the pandemic.
- In the interests of coherence between national and international objectives, sustainability transformation should be a key component of public investment and state aid. Economic stimulus programmes at the German or European level for the car industry, aviation and other industrial sectors should only be carried out in line with strict emission-reduction targets and with the requirement of withdrawing from non-carbon-neutral technologies in order to prevent subsequent environmental crises.

- Concrete criteria for the Do-No-Harm approach in the context of the pandemic should be drawn up on a regional basis and used in international interventions. The focus here should be on tackling socio-economic inequality.

2. **Protect particularly vulnerable groups and strengthen civil-society ownership**

- With regard to crisis prevention, the Federal Government's international measures should serve the goal of supporting particularly vulnerable, marginalised and impoverished groups and addressing discrimination against them, also in the interest of averting crises.
- Public funding for measures to combat COVID-19 should be reviewed in terms of its gender-specific impacts. In view of the effects of the pandemic, the Federal Government should promote more measures aimed at achieving gender equity and protecting people from sexual and gender-based violence.
- Contacts to civil-society networks and independent academic institutions in partner countries where Germany conducts development cooperation should be strengthened via the German missions abroad and EU delegations.

3. **Monitor and sanction state repression in response to the pandemic**

- As part of interministerial conflict analyses and joint early crisis detection, curtailments of fundamental and human rights through measures to combat the pandemic, ordinances and laws should be monitored more closely as potential sources of future conflict.

- Germany should explore which multilateral measures and initiatives can be used under its Presidency of the Council of the European Union, UN Security Council membership and Human Rights Council membership to address the increasing state repression in numerous countries.
- Programmes being carried out under the capacity-building initiative to train and equip security forces in fragile states should be reviewed to see whether they help to foster trust between the state and society in the crisis or exacerbate existing tensions. Measures by the security forces to combat the pandemic are only effective if the public fundamentally trusts the security sector.

4.

Use multilateral crisis-prevention instruments

- Germany's presidency of the United Nations Security Council in July 2020 should be used to put COVID-19 as a threat to international peace and security back on the agenda. This would facilitate United Nations support measures, such as the temporary lifting of sanctions and the opening of borders in order to provide humanitarian assistance and medical care to population groups particularly affected by the situation.
- Political use should be made of the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire in order to launch new diplomatic initiatives for conflict situations in countries such as Yemen, Libya and Afghanistan. Shifting priorities among conflict parties, the need for coordination in order to combat the pandemic, and demands for humanitarian access can provide new leverage for peacebuilding at local or national level.
- The WHO's core funding should be increased. Germany's vote in the WHO Executive Board and during the World Health Assembly should be used in particular to strengthen instruments focused on conflict-sensitive planning and monitoring.

The Advisory Board pools civil-society and scientific expertise on crisis prevention and peacebuilding and advises the Federal Government on its work. Comprised of 20 experts from the fields of academia, foundations and NGOs, the Advisory Board guides the implementation of the guidelines “Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace” adopted by the Federal Government in 2017. The Advisory Board actively promotes exchange between the Federal Government and civil society through its work and can take a public stand on overarching strategic issues.

Members of the Advisory Board to the Federal Government for Civilian Crisis Prevention and Peacebuilding

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