



COVID-19 in Eastern Africa: impact analysis on conflict and security

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16 July 2020

Question

What is the evidence telling us about the immediate and medium/longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on conflict and security (e.g. peace, mediation, conflict prevention, peacekeeping) across the region?

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1. Overview

In conflict-affected states (such as those in Eastern Africa), the global outbreak can cause chaos, spark widespread unrest and severely test international crisis management systems. Its consequences are particularly severe for those caught amid conflict if the pandemic disrupts the flows of humanitarian aid, limits peace operations and diverts the attention of conflicting parties from the new and ongoing diplomatic efforts. The pandemic may also be used by some leaders to push their targets in ways that worsen conflict, as they crack down on domestic opposition or intensify conflicts on the presumption that they will get away with it while the international community is preoccupied with the pandemic (ICG, 2020a).

COVID-19 arrived in Eastern Africa in a time when countries in the region are busy facing a variety of challenges. Millions of people have been displaced in their own countries by long-standing conflicts, droughts, and insecurity. Millions more have fled to neighbouring countries where they live in makeshift refugee camps. Most countries in the region are in some form of a fragile and conflict-prone state (e.g. Somalia and South Sudan) and/or amidst political transformation (e.g. Sudan and Ethiopia). They have a very low capability to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and to lower the ensuing unemployment, poverty, and hunger (Weber, 2020).

Governments' credibility and the degree of trust that the people have in their leadership are key to battling COVID-19 effectively and dealing with its consequential losses. These factors will decide whether a nation can take measures to save lives or whether conflict and social unrest is breaking out. Even in places where there is robust support for incumbent governments (e.g. Sudan), credibility may begin to decline if infection rates, malnutrition, or riots rise. If the state becomes incapable of offering certain level of social security, it will be difficult to convince the population to accept work bans, limits on freedom of movement, and curfews because of COVID-19, e.g. Kenya and Ethiopia (Weber, 2020).

Some of the key conflict, security and political developments linked to COVID-19 and their implications for countries in the region include:

- **In Ethiopia**, elections that were scheduled for August 2020 have been indefinitely postponed and the government has declared a state of emergency. This could be a major source of conflict as some of the key opposition groups and one of the key regional governments of the Ethiopian federation (i.e. Tigray) have voiced their opposition to these developments. If COVID-19 spreads widely in the country, its mounting economic costs could become sources of major socio-political instabilities.
- **In Kenya**, several small conflicts have been observed (especially between security forces and the public) due to the introduction of curfew in response to COVID-19. Some key security talks with neighbouring governments were also called off earlier this year. Besides, the pandemic has disrupted political processes and national dialogues between the government and the opposition. There are also fears that rising unemployment due to the pandemic (which only adds to the country's already high unemployment figures) could turn out to be a source of unrest and insecurity, particularly among the youth.
- **Somalia** possibly faces the worst conflict and security complications because of COVID-19 – since it was already in bad political shape before the pandemic. It suffers from weak state capacity; involvement of regional powers in its affairs – often supporting different factions/territories; disruptions to the operational networks of humanitarian support

combined with high dependence on aid; heightened terrorist activities by groups such as al-Shabaab; and COVID-19's negative impacts on AU peacekeeping missions.

- **South Sudan** (perhaps the other country poised to likely face worst security implications of COVID-19 in the region, i.e. apart from Somalia) was already suffering from severe conflicts and big displacements among its population. This young nation also heavily relies on humanitarian agencies for the provision of basic goods and UN peacekeeping mission for conflict management. Thus, the disruptions to these because of COVID-19 will have significant security consequences.
- **In Sudan**, the COVID-19 outbreak started as the country was transitioning away from an autocratic regime. The conflict situation was, thus, generally improving due to the ongoing democratisation process. Some of the armed groups have also joined negotiations and political processes. Due to COVID-19, a ceasefire is also being observed by armed groups that have not yet joined the political process. However, there are security concerns linked to acts of disruption by old Bashir regime loyalists. Worsening health and economic situations due to the pandemic (combined with slowing down of the popular democratisation process) may lead to major protests, like the ones that toppled the Bashir regime. Furthermore, this could lend an opportunity to old regime loyalists who want to exploit such scenarios.

However, it is important to note that there is a limitation in the evidence base (e.g. academic studies) around COVID-19's short-, medium- and longer-term conflict and security impact in the Eastern Africa region.¹ Due to the recent/ongoing nature of the pandemic, the literature on the topic (particularly non-health related) is very limited and there is far less academic evidence addressing its conflict/security implications for the region. Some of this evidence base (mainly non-academic literature) deals with the immediate security implications of COVID-19 since it is difficult to produce accurate longer-term impact assessments now. Conversely, much of the available evidence makes no explicit reference to the conflict/security implications over different time horizons. Yet, there are useful academic (and non-academic) publications from earlier disease outbreaks (e.g. the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa) and major natural disasters (e.g. 2010 Haiti earthquake) that could lend some lessons to the medium and longer-term implications of COVID-19. Owing to the scarcity of evidence, this rapid evidence review looks at a combination of different types of available relevant literature – including reports issued by different development agencies, think tanks and some academic publications.

¹ While the COVID-19 pandemic poses severe challenges to public health/economy of Eastern Africa (and the world at large), it is less well understood about its long-, medium- and short-term repercussions for conflict and security. Much remains uncertain, but it is already clear that COVID-19 could cause tremendous harm, trigger instability, and weaken international crisis management systems in the fragile states of Eastern Africa. The disease is already disrupting flows of humanitarian aid, peace operations and crisis diplomacy and may be devastating for civilians ensnared amidst conflict, especially refugees and displaced persons (ICG, 2020c).

2. COVID-19's immediate and medium/longer-term implications for conflict and security

2.1 Conflict linked to COVID-19's adverse effect on the economy

Immediate implications:

Even if the severity of COVID-19's overall impact is still unknown, households in affected areas will experience some severe economic shock (with the greatest impacts probably to be witnessed among the already economically vulnerable groups). These shocks are likely to be substantial. For instance, households may face increased unemployment and/or decreased income levels. Moreover, women, in general, maybe particularly affected by extra unpaid care work, which may further lower the possibility to assume paid work (Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020). Pandemics can cause provisional food insecurity and more stress due to uncertainty about future economic security or general well-being (Peterman et al., 2020; Huber, Finelli and Stevens, 2018).

Medium and longer-term implications:

The devastating economic impact of the disease might still lead to further conflict and disorder in the medium- and longer-term. It might do so whether the countries involved have had a serious disease outbreaks or not, even though the economic risk is higher in countries with severe outbreaks. Reductions in economic growth in Eastern African states and a global recession of yet unclear severity will lie ahead. Trade and food supplies will be disrupted by pandemic transportation restrictions, numerous companies will be obliged to shut down, and unemployment will likely soar (ICG 2020a; Weber, 2020).

Africa was projected by the IMF to have six of the ten fastest growing economies in the world in 2020, i.e. before the COVID-19 outbreak. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 economic shocks could trigger a marked increase in poverty and make it even more challenging for the region to meet the already ambitious UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 (Ryder and Benefo 2020).²

Some countries (e.g. Nigeria) are considering cutting state expenditure – which may result in governments failures to meet minimum wage increases commitments. Such austerity measures, besides other economic consequences of COVID-19 (such as the disappearance of tourists in areas heavily dependent on foreign visitors) might generate economic shocks that go well beyond the short-term, potentially leading to long-term labour unrest, social instability and conflict (ICG, 2020a).

² Already, the historically fast-growing countries with close trade links with China, e.g. economies in East Africa, are feeling the economic slowdown because of the outbreak (ICG, 2020a; Ryder and Benefo, 2020).

2.2 Conflict linked to COVID-19's effect on politics

Immediate implications:

COVID-19 could strain societies and political systems and potentially generate new outbreaks of violence. The prospect of disease is likely to depress widespread violence in the short-term as demonstrators avoid large-scale gatherings. Nevertheless, this may not always be the case (e.g. May-June 2020 US protests, July 2020 protests and riots in Ethiopia, etc.). Public health and economic impacts of the pandemic can be affected by the tense relationship between governments and citizens, in particular where health services are crumbling; preserving public order may be difficult if security forces are undermined and communities become ever more frustrated with government response to the situation (ICG, 2020a).

Another reason to worry is the clear potential of COVID-19 to let loose intolerant sentiments, especially in countries with large immigrant communities. For instance, Chinese workers in Kenya faced harassment early in the crisis due to assertions that China Southern Airlines brought the coronavirus to the region (ICG, 2020a).

Against the background of social pressure, political leaders can either seek and use COVID-19 to enhance domestic power or chase their interests abroad. In the short-term, the pace, scope, and risk of the epidemic appear to be perplexed to many governments (ICG, 2020a).

Some elections scheduled for 2020 have already been delayed (e.g. Ethiopia) and perhaps other delays are likely to follow in the second half of 2020. This may well be warranted on public health grounds, but there could well be a desire for leaders to use the virus as a justification for additional delays and restrictions of political space. In fact, in such cases, there are perhaps good practical reasons for postponing votes. The pandemic will impede the deployment of international electoral assistance and, where possible, observer missions, as well as complex domestic planning. Opposition parties may suspect fraud in states with low political trust, recent instability, or questionable legality of government or an election timetable fraud history (ICG 2020a; ICG, 2020b; Weber, 2020).

Medium and longer-term implications:

Discontent about COVID-19's adverse socio-economic effects, undesirable political repercussions and the belief that governments are mismanaging the crisis could potentially lead to major demonstrations – and ultimately intensify conflict and instability. The economic decline is likely to affect societies in low-income countries – such as those in Eastern Africa – even more immediately. Millions in large parts of the region rely on their daily income to feed their families. Prolonged lockdowns and travel/work restrictions could lead to despair and unrest (ICG, 2020a).

As the crisis deepens and continues to take its health, social and economic toll, some leaders may order restrictive measures and then extend it in the hope of suppressing protesters even when the epidemic decreases. This might involve perpetual bans on big public gatherings – which are first imposed by many governments to avoid COVID-19's spread but then used to thwart demonstrations. During the 2014 Ebola crisis in West Africa, for instance, local civil society groups and opposition parties asserted that governments prohibited gatherings

as a means of repressing lawful protest far longer than they were needed (ICG, 2015; ICG, 2020a).

2.3 Conflict linked to COVID-19's effect on social breakdowns

COVID-19 could have significant and detrimental social implications, particularly to weak and vulnerable populations – which in turn will increase the likelihood of conflict and loss of local/national security. Specifically, COVID-19 may lead to social breakdowns – for instance, as health, transport, food, sanitation, legal, security and other administrative structures may provisionally become non-operational. The conflict scenario may be further complicated by adverse demographic outcomes (e.g. increased mortality, morbidity, and fertility rates) and the detrimental effects of isolation and mental health. These negative societal implications may sometimes be witnessed immediately. However, it may often take some time (i.e. medium- to longer-term) before these factors lead to major conflict and before the full brunt of their adverse consequences may be witnessed.

Immediate implications:

Pandemics such as COVID-19 can lead to a breakdown of societal infrastructure, similar to conflict experiences from post-disaster settings, as functional health, transportation, food, sanitation, legal, security and other governance structures may provisionally contract or become dysfunctional (Peterman et al., 2020; Briody et al., 2018). This can lead to heightened exposure of women and children to unhealthy and unsafe settings – including exposure to sexual assault during the procurement of essential goods like food, firewood, and water (Peterman et al., 2020; Camey et al., 2020; Bermudez et al., 2019).³

In addition, compulsory quarantines and social isolation measures can lead to exposure to offenders, physical and psychological stress circumstances and living in confinement with reduced freedom and privacy. Furthermore, quarantine measures and other movement restrictions may lead to greater food insecurity, economic insecurity and exploitative relationships (Peterman et al., 2020).

While quarantines are usually enforced in the short run, the post-pandemic adverse effects on mental health may linger for years. These may include, but are not restricted to, mental health issues (e.g., PTSD, depression, anxiety, suicidality); sleep problems; substance abuse; and children's emotional and behavioural problems. Poor mental health and associated factors, including alcohol abuse, have in turn been proven to worsen the risk of violence against women and children, with adverse effects during (i.e. in the short-term) and after quarantine periods, i.e. in the medium- and longer-term (Oram et al., 2014; Peterman et al., 2020).

³ The outbreaks of infectious diseases are also associated with increased violence against women and children (IRC, 2019; UNICEF, 2018; UNDP, 2015). While 'sudden onset' disasters and humanitarian settings (e.g. earthquakes and tsunamis) are fundamentally different from pandemics and disease outbreaks, lessons from the former can prove instructive in some contexts in understanding dynamics and pandemic mitigation solutions (Peterman et al., 2020).

Medium and longer-term implications:

Increases in conflict and violence (especially against vulnerable groups like women), may continue for longer periods of time following major natural disasters, which may also be witnessed in the case of COVID-19 (Camey et al., 2020; IRC and GWI, 2015; Peterman et al., 2020). For instance, a study investigating the effects of the 2010 Haiti earthquake discovered that two years later, women living in areas with higher earthquake destruction saw worse physical and sexual intimate partner violence, citing likely economic and social issues (Weitzman and Behrman, 2016).

After the outbreak of COVID-19, where mobility is constrained or communities are forced to relocate, there may be family splits. Research from humanitarian settings reveals that family separation poses an adverse effect on women and children, who are usually economically reliant on others for basic survival needs, and who may already live separately from their families and communities (IRC and GWI, 2015; IRC, 2015; Peterman et al., 2020).

Pandemic induced higher mortality and morbidity amongst the working population may influence the care for children – making them face additional violence and conflict. High mortality levels and morbidity rates alter dependency ratios, regularly placing a burden on large family networks that support children without parents and carers. Close family networks, which are usually the only sources of orphan assistance in low-income countries (such as those in Eastern Africa), may already be sick and/or economically weak, while at the same time taking additional children who have lost their parents or primary caregivers. These factors make it tougher for children to reliably access sufficient and nutritious food, medical care, and education. Furthermore, they may force children to experience new and/or enhanced forms of violence in their new homes. Orphan children may also confront stigmatisation, underinvestment in their basic needs, or increased child labour or domestic labour (Peterman and al., 2020; UNICEF 2006).

Governments have typically closed schools to lessen the spread of COVID-19 and other past pandemics. Even the short-term shutting of schools will affect the long-term opportunities for children and trigger demographic shifts at the margins. For example, the response to Ebola, schools in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone shut down schools for six to eight months, affecting about five million children (Chavez, 2015).⁴ In addition, in numerous settings, women and girls living in poverty face pressure to participate in sexual intercourse with partners who can in exchange offer financial or in-kind assistance, including everything from transportation to food and clothing (Gausman et al., 2019; Peterman et al., 2020).

Pandemics also have been shown to cause higher fertility rates among affected populations (Peterman et al., 2020). For certain parts of Sierra Leone, teenage births rose by 65% during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, with reports of more than 18,000 girls turning out to be pregnant during the epidemic (UNDP, 2015). In Sierra Leone, there were few interventions to ensure that out-of-school girls devoted their time to meaningful activities with other girls, within

⁴ The sudden changes in gender norms can lead to increased (forced) child marriage in crisis settings, which is directly associated with intimate partner violence, including marital rape. Child marriage in crisis settings can be further escalated in a global pandemic which threatens established informal and formal support structures. Other factors, including survival needs, may result in increased abuse and risks to the safety of adolescent girls including the risk of sexual violence (Peterman et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2018; IRC, 2015).

their age group. This has caused pregnancies to rise and the out-of-school girls experienced a 16% decrease in school enrolment once schools reopened (Bandiera et al., 2019).

Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the longer-term are linked to major threats of violence, both during pregnancy and throughout life (Kidman, 2017). The underlying vulnerabilities, especially in low-income countries (i.e. in Eastern Africa and elsewhere), make this a significant mitigation field particularly for young children and adolescent girls (Peterman et al., 2020).

3. COVID-19's risks to conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and mediation mechanisms

3.1 Implications for regional security and international aid provision:

Governments in the Horn of Africa region are facing the challenge of how best to realize two key goals – i) the stability of the regime and ii) the safeguarding of the population from the COVID-19 pandemic. If they concentrate only on remaining in power and disregard the population, the crisis could end in instability. By contrast, investing in their healthcare systems and openly communicating with their citizens would increase acceptance of the measures they put in place and reinforce government legitimacy. The active fight against corruption should also be perceived as a chance to gain the trust of the population, especially in the health sector (Weber, 2020).

In any given context, the COVID-19 outbreak is devastating. However, the dangers of such an outbreak will be magnified for Eastern Africa since the region hosts millions of forcibly displaced people because of conflict and repression.⁵ The region also grapple with high levels of migration (i.e. people leaving their homes in search of better opportunities) often either to Europe or to urban areas where better economic opportunities can be found. While neither of these groups has been identified as key focal points for COVID-19 transmission, the high concentrations of forcibly displaced populations and migrants make both groups extremely vulnerable and thus a priority for reducing coronavirus spread in the region. This will require informed and effective policy commitments and public messaging, as well as tamping down on mistreatment of these groups and fear-based prejudice (UNDP, 2020).

⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic hit as the Horn of Africa was grappling with one of the region's largest ever displacement crises (e.g. in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda). There has emerged a common set of challenges for both the refugees and their host communities. The relationship between the two can often be fragile and complex. False or misleading COVID-19 information has the potential to polarise, as well as any stigmatisation between the two groups. With government lockdowns come the need to disseminate information related to the virus effectively and accurately as many are forced to follow stay-at-home orders and, as a result, this important information may not otherwise come across. The disruption of livelihoods in the informal sector, which is a major pillar of refugees and host communities, is also reportedly causing social tensions. Since the lock-down began in several countries, instances and reporting of gender-based violence and violence against children also increased markedly. The pandemic is threatening to unravel the significant progress made in recent years to improve the accumulation of human capital, economic empowerment, voice and agency among women and girls (OCHA, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

One reason why refugee and internally displaced communities are likely to be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 is because the disease may significantly undermine the capacity of international institutions to serve areas affected by conflict and insecurity. WHO and other foreign officials worry that the disease-related limitations will hinder supply chains for humanitarian aid (ICG, 2020a).⁶

Yet, humanitarian agencies are not the only components of the multilateral system that are currently under stress due to COVID-19. This challenge is also faced by the peace-making process across conflict-affected regions of the world, such as Eastern Africa (ICG, 2020a; see also next sub-section).

There is also a possibility that terrorist organisations that are active in the countries of the region (e.g. al-Shabaab) could take advantage of the pandemic to escalate their activities – particularly in Somalia. Given the contagious nature of the virus and the actions taken by the governments in the region, the terrorist group could spot security gaps and launch an offensive. Al-Shabaab could also use the pandemic panic to stimulate violence and promote their ideologies. Although al-Shabaab has not yet made any statements about COVID-19 (IGAD, 2020).⁷

3.2 Implications for international mediation and peacekeeping:

Because leaders around the world are focused on drastic domestic issues (e.g. donor governments and traditional international mediators), they have little or no time to devote to disputes or peace processes. Restrictions on travel have started to weigh on international mediation efforts. Consequently, the disease can affect the activities of international peacekeeping and security assistance.⁸ The UN Secretariat requested a group of nine peacekeeping troop contributors in early March to suspend some or all of the unit rotations to blue helmet operations due to concerns about COVID-19's spread. These initial restrictions reflected requests from host and transit countries (including Uganda, an important logistical hub for the UN) to prevent COVID-19 from spreading (ICG, 2020a).

⁶ Humanitarian responses are also likely to be severely affected by the pandemic. There are many humanitarian activities in the region with millions of beneficiaries, in particular refugees and internally displaced persons. Disruption of supply chains and movement of people and goods across borders as a result of various COVID-19 response measures, such as the cancelation of flights and lockdowns, may add to humanitarian challenges, as medical supplies and essentials may not reach target recipients. Tens of refugee camps across IGAD countries, including Dadaab in northern Kenya, are likely to be the most affected by this pandemic and its consequences. Fears are rife over the containment of the spread of the virus, given that sanitation precautions would be difficult to implement and even more difficult to implement (IGAD, 2020; UNHCR, 2020).

⁷ However, to draw some lessons from another key terrorist organisation, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) has followed the pandemic since its inception, and most recently, in its Al-Naba newsletter, advocated the exploitation of financial difficulties by launching attacks (IGAD, 2020).

⁸ Lockdown and quarantine measures mean that peacekeeping commitments with civilians will have to be halted. For example, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), whose main task is to maintain constant contact and communication with the Somali public, may immediately have to stop or change its strategy to reduce the spread of coronavirus among themselves and the public. Somalia has already confirmed more than 80 cases of COVID-19, and the government has already prohibited all international flights and public gatherings (IGAD, 2020).

Currently, the Horn of Africa region is one of the continent's most conflict-ridden regions. At the same time, it hosts the largest and most extensive peacekeeping missions, from both the United Nations and the African Union. The situation in societies which are socially, ethnically, or religiously fragmented is currently very worrying. Conspiracy theories proliferate on social media and COVID-19 is used as an opportunity to encourage the use of violence against the alleged culprits (Weber, 2020).

Following COVID-19's global spread, the UN has announced further limitations on peacekeeping rotations. This means that the duty tours of the peacekeepers will be extended in tough mission settings such as South Sudan for at least three months, potentially affecting their morale and effectiveness. A Security Council decision establishing a new political mission to support Sudan's transition to civilian rule seems likely to be postponed due to constraints on the Security Council meeting schedule agreed upon by its members, as part of the COVID-19 containment measures (ICG, 2020a). **A prolonged pandemic could complicate the process of finding and deploying fresh peacekeeping forces.**

The three active peacekeeping missions in the region (i.e. UNMIS in Sudan, UNMISS in South Sudan, and AMISOM in Somalia) will be moderately to severely affected by their rotational nature. Travel restrictions, quarantine measures and border closures are a challenge to their operations, as this is likely to lead to prolonged duty tours for current field soldiers. This may have an impact on their effectiveness. The delayed peacekeepers' rotation has already occurred in South Sudan following the announcement by the UN Department of Peace Operations in March 2020 that nine contributing countries have delayed their replacement for three months due to coronavirus (IGAD, 2020; UN, 2020).

In addition, media outlets and NGOs may also find it difficult to report on conflicts and crises due to travel restrictions. Authoritarian governments in the Eastern Africa region have a long history of using crisis to restrict access to the media (ICG, 2020a).

4. Country evidence from Eastern Africa on COVID-19's implications for conflict and security

4.1 Ethiopia

As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, Ethiopia has delayed the elections scheduled for August 2020 and declared a state of emergency. The Government of Ethiopia is also at times blocking Internet communication in certain parts of the country. This would damage the legitimacy of the government and make reconciliation more difficult in this politically and ethnically fragmented country (Weber, 2020; ICG, 2020b).

The state of emergency could, in principle, allow for greater federal control of regional security operations, including an enhanced role for the military. However, it is not yet known whether the government intends to use that power. Tigray's leaders (one of Ethiopia's federal regions) have continued to strengthen regional security forces and are critical of the federal government. Some young Tigrayan activists even promote secession from the Ethiopian federation. The dispute between Tigray and the central government is such that it could have major destabilising consequences if there is no agreement on how the federal and

regional security forces work together under emergency conditions. Any attempt by federal security forces to increase their presence or role in Tigray without prior agreement risks being strongly resisted by regional leaders (ICG, 2020b).

Key opposition parties have generally agreed to the emergency decree as long as it is not utilized by the government as an instrument for political repression. They also argue that they would like to be thoroughly consulted in the development of an interim arrangement for the government of the country at the end of the parliamentary term. The government should heed their calls and then work with them to address longer-term threats to the democratic transition of the country (ICG, 2020b).

Furthermore, if the national spread of COVID-19 worsens and many Ethiopians find themselves without sufficient resources to care for their families, they could turn against authorities that they feel are incompetent. Alternatively, if the state takes public health measures that make it impossible for people to provide for themselves, they could provoke a similar reaction. The possibility of disturbances makes it all the more important for the government to foster unity among the various electoral districts in support of the political path that it chooses through the crisis, even as it is endowing itself with extraordinary unilateral powers (ICG, 2020b).

The economic costs (and thus socio-political instabilities) associated with a prolonged lockdown would be daunting. It would deprive millions of Ethiopians of their livelihoods, including many who benefit from the informal service economy on a daily basis. It could also constrain domestic food supplies at a time when annual inflation is more than 20%. Vital imports, such as fuel, medicine and fertiliser, may become scarce if dwindling hard-currency reserves are further exhausted due to reduced sales for top-earner sectors such as Ethiopian Airlines (which, while still operating, has seen a dramatic decline in business) and flower exporters, combined with slowing remittances and other inflows. Given these economic weaknesses, the country's leaders have sought a middle course between measures to slow the spread of the disease and ways to minimise its economic consequences (ICG, 2020b).

Ethiopia's particular vulnerabilities to conflict and instability mean that it could still experience social and economic destabilisation if COVID-19 spreads across its population. However, the crisis has also created some potential opportunities. The pandemic has significantly altered the political dynamics and provided the rationale for stopping the scheduled election, which was threatening to spiral into violence. It has also given Ethiopian politicians a reason and a need to come together. This is useful in order to face the immediate health crisis and develop a widely supported plan to govern the country in the interim period (ICG, 2020b).

The government was late in trying to appeal to the people to stay at home. On the other hand, the Ethiopian local manufacturing industry reacted quickly to the pandemic. For instance, textile factories have switched production to protective face masks. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has also turned out to be the regional coordinator of the COVID-19 crisis. Ethiopian Airlines is delivering aid to the continent through Addis Ababa. Abiy Ahmed has also successfully presented himself in the media as a representative of the continent, mobilising the necessary aid for investment through op-eds and letters. However, trust in the government in the country itself is declining, at least among some sections of the population. Stories of authoritarian measures and likely arrests of political opponents are common, especially on the Internet and social media (Weber, 2020).

To prevent the democratisation process in Ethiopia and Sudan (see sub-section 4.5) from being seriously compromised, special emphasis should be placed on social security systems and people's trust. In the short-term, these countries will need a package of emergency aid from the international community so as to ensure their economic stability. However, long-term support should be conditional on ensuring that most of the investment goes towards developing state capacities for critical infrastructure and social security (Weber, 2020).

4.2 Kenya

The high level of unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among young people, will hurt the country's security. Worsening unemployment could alienate young people, who could easily be recruited by militant groups (e.g. al-Shabaab). This could exacerbate terrorist attacks, violent extremism, and youth radicalisation (UNDP, 2020).

Kenya has imposed sweeping restrictions on movement to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The curfew, which requires people to stay in their homes from 7pm to 5am, is stringent and has led to a wave of police violence (UNDP, 2020). Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta has also called off a 16 March summit with counterparts from Ethiopia and Somalia that aimed to defuse dangerously escalating tensions between Nairobi and Mogadishu, with Kenyan officials citing their need to focus on efforts to halt the virus's potential spread (ICG, 2020a).

Due to restrictions on public gatherings, the COVID-19 pandemic could disrupt the timing of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) process and the political processes surrounding it. Before the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 13 March 2020, the public hearings for the second phase of the BBI were expected to close in mid-March, the BBI report submitted to the President at the end of March 2020 and the implementation of the recommendations to begin in the summer. The implementation of the recommendations is expected to be challenging and potentially divisive, a controversial referendum and result in new governance structures (UNDP, 2020).

Nevertheless, the cancellation of public meetings and the government's focus on preventing the spread of COVID-19 seems to have temporarily halted the political tensions in the ruling Jubilee Party. On 21 March 2020, a high-profile BBI event planned for Nakuru, which was likely to stage two hostile factions of the ruling Jubilee Party, was cancelled due to a ban on public meetings due to COVID-19. This development was welcomed because it prevented a potential confrontation between the two factions. Although the BBI Task Force will continue to receive written submissions, public consultations have been held until further notice, the Ksh11 billion allocated by the Government to BBI rallies has been transferred to the recently established COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund. Luckily, the coronavirus pandemic provides an opportunity for unity among Kenyans to stem the risks of a pandemic (UNDP, 2020).

4.3 Somalia

Somalia faces the greatest challenges of security complications linked to COVID-19 among all the countries in the Eastern Africa region. One-third of the 15 million Somalis depend on food aid, 2.6 million have been internally displaced due to war or drought, and just under one million live as

refugees in neighbouring countries. The central government in Mogadishu is in political conflict with some of its federal states. These conflicts are aggravated by hostile camps in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Qatar and Turkey are supporting the central government in Mogadishu, while the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are providing financial support to the splintered states. This situation only widens the gap between the government of the country and its states. As a result, capacity building is impossible, and useful policy measures cannot be implemented (Weber, 2020).⁹

Since 2020 was scheduled to be a major election year for Somalia, the coronavirus was bound to delay the logistical preparations for the elections. However, the opposition is pushing for the election to take place as planned – despite the COVID-19 outbreak. Election delays could inflame ethnic tensions and possibly lead to violence, with serious peace and security implications for the region (IGAD, 2020).¹⁰

The response of jihadist groups such as al-Shabaab has also been devastating for Somalia. With increased attacks on security organs, the activities of the terror group highlight the weaknesses of the government and the AU peacekeeping mission. In March 2020, al-Shabaab members even met publicly for a multi-day strategy conference in Somalia. Al-Shabaab will use humanitarian and medical aid as political leverage for people suffering in the areas under its control (Weber, 2020)

4.4 South Sudan

Apart from Somalia, the conflict and security challenges associated with COVID-19 will be most desperate in South Sudan. Acute conflicts have caused massive displacement, and there is little hope of political rapprochement or truce. Violent clashes between enemy groups are still taking place. More than half of the population is dependent on food aid and a functioning health system has not yet been established. More than 2.2 million of the 12 million inhabitants live mainly in neighbouring countries as refugees and around 1.5 million are displaced in their own countries. Humanitarian aid organisations oversee the provision of supplies, partly under the protection of the UN peacekeeping mission (UNMISS) (Weber, 2020).

The government has outsourced the provision of basic supplies for its population to international aid organisations. Thus, proper COVID-19 crisis management procedures are unlikely to be carried out. The government in Juba is not likely to use the crisis to build confidence, and its legitimacy is likely to decline further. The new government in South Sudan was not officially sworn in until 22 February 2020 at the very beginning of the pandemic. Since becoming independent of Sudan in 2011, the country has been ruled by rivals, President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar. The government alliance failed twice because of the conflict between the two camps. The result was bloody civil wars that left South Sudan in

⁹ Somalia's government is also preventing journalists from being critical in their reporting and entrenching authoritarian tendencies (Weber, 2020).

¹⁰ In late March, Ethiopia postponed the August election until the end of the pandemic given the COVID-19 response measures including banning of large gatherings and travel restrictions made it impossible for election-related logistics to continue such as voter registration and the recruitment and training of observers (IGAD, 2020; also see sub-section 4.1).

extreme poverty, ethnic disparity and no critical infrastructure for health, education, and transport (Weber, 2020).

4.5 Sudan

Unlike other countries in the region, the response of Sudan to the outbreak was rapid. The government closed its borders before a single case of COVID-19 had been identified in the country. Night-time curfews were applied throughout Sudan and a comprehensive lockdown has been imposed in the capital, Khartoum. The Sudanese prime minister still enjoys a wave of popular support. The experience of the recent overthrow of a repressive regime and renewal of the country has largely united the Sudanese people. However, the government's political leverage is limited, as it cannot fully rely on its institutions, which are still mainly staffed by members of the old regime (Weber, 2020).

Acts of sabotage and disruption of the old regime are on the rise. For example, General Hamad, the governor of the capital, recently refused to enforce a ban on the assembly of mosques in Khartoum to combat COVID-19's spread. Islamists from the ranks of the former Bashir regime are holding demonstrations against the government of the Prime Minister and calling for the military to take power. Attacks on state institutions in protest against restrictions on freedom of movement and governance have been reported in the North and could increase nationwide. However, the balance of power between the military and civilians in the transitional government is currently tolerable. In addition, the armed opposition also responded positively to the UN Secretary-General's call for a temporary ceasefire following the COVID-19 crisis (Weber, 2020).

The Sudanese leadership in its urban centres can rely on the sense of unity resulting from the successful revolution against the Bashir regime. This gives it an advantage (in terms of reducing conflict and deepening security) over many of the other East African countries where ethnic, social, or religious differences deeply divide society. There is still a fine balance in the government between civilian and military forces. This forces the different groups to act together. If the government takes on the coordination tasks and starts providing the population with the necessary provisions, this will help to stabilise the country (Weber, 2020).

Some armed opposition groups in the country are engaged in peace negotiations with the interim government and a political solution has become possible. Even those groups that are not currently engaged in negotiations are following the UN Secretary-General's call for a temporary ceasefire. As an unconsolidated regime, Sudan's transitional government is particularly vulnerable to any additional crisis, such as COVID-19. With acute economic problems and a severely underdeveloped healthcare system, there is an increased risk of reversing democratic transition and peaceful development as the virus continues to spread and cause disruption. So far, COVID-19 has seriously tested the civilian-military transitional regime, while also demonstrating its resilience (ISS, 2020; Weber, 2020).

Like other East African countries, Sudan's security forces have played a prominent role in the enforcement of counter-pandemic policy measures. There are fears that this situation will allow the generals to tighten their grip on power, particularly as containment measures are constraining the space to protest such attempts. The pandemic further fuelled rumours of growing tension among the elites. For instance, there were rumours of a dangerous dispute

between the prime minister and the general governor of Khartoum over lockdown measures in mid-April 2020. The crisis also appears to have emboldened supporters of the former autocratic regime to undermine the transitional government, as indicated by protests in support of al - Bashir and in defiance of the containment measures. To date, however, the new government has managed to push back and pursue its transitional agenda during the COVID-19 crisis (ISS, 2020).

Peace talks on Sudan's conflict regions – i.e. Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile – between the rebel alliance and the transitional government have continued, albeit in a teleconferencing format due to COVID-19. Both the transitional authorities and the armed movements have shown a commitment to cease hostilities, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N El Hilu) faction, which has extended its unilateral ceasefire as a sign of goodwill towards ongoing negotiations (ISS, 2020).

COVID-19 has also caused delays in implementing the agreed action on 'Abyei', which is a disputed border region between Sudan and South Sudan that experienced escalating violence amid the pandemic. Unbridled communal violence in parts of the country (particularly the most marginalised areas of which are particularly exposed to the spread of COVID-19) also easily reinforces perceptions of neglect that could undermine ongoing peace efforts (ISS, 2020).

The political pressure on the Sudanese transitional authorities is likely to increase as the negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic increase. Reduced access to food and other basic commodities, as well as increased insecurity, can reduce support for the transitional government, spark outbreaks of civil unrest, and provide an excuse for military factions to take on more power. On the other hand, if international donors have fulfilled their commitments to support the transition to Sudan, this could help the civil authorities to project confidence to the public and combat the COVID-19 crisis and continue advancing their democratic transition (ISS, 2020).

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Suggested citation

Megersa, K. (2020). *COVID-19 in Eastern Africa: impact analysis on conflict and security*. K4D Helpdesk Report 847. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

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