

COVID COLLECTIVE KEY ISSUE GUIDE:

Managing multiple, intersecting crises



Summary

The world is facing the prospect of more frequent complex, uncertain, and harmful compound shocks, which are happening simultaneously or in rapid succession (Martinez-Diaz and Sidner 2021). Crises can come in many forms. Globally, there are multiple, overlapping challenges with the war in Ukraine exacerbating a global cost-of-living crisis, coupled with the lingering effects of Covid-19 and ongoing climate change impacts. Vulnerability shapes people's ability to respond to challenges; those that are most marginalised and therefore least able to cope will likely be hit the hardest by compound crises (Hilhorst and Mena 2021), as was seen in the Covid-19 pandemic (Singh 2021).

The majority of the underlying and interconnected environmental, economic, and social challenges that exist in the globalised world pre-date Covid-19. But the difficulty of managing multiple crises is gaining further attention with the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose 'creeping' character caused additional challenges that made its' management much harder to handle (Boin, Lodge and Luesink 2020). To help navigate multiple, compounding challenges now and in the future, researchers – as well as drawing on insights from the wider disaster risk and crisis management literature – are looking at emerging learnings from managing the Covid-19 pandemic, especially where the pandemic overlapped with other crises. These insights are largely interconnected with one another.

Countries will need to build (further) resilience to adapt to and recover from compounding shocks, especially in developing and fragile states. This call for resilience is not new but is now more pertinent than ever before (Brown 2022). Vulnerable people and marginalised groups will need to be put front and centre in responses. Social cohesion and trust are key to building resilient communities, and the global infrastructure will need to be better able to deal with an increasingly uncertain and 'unruly' world (Leach *et al.* 2021).

Key Issues

More frequent, complex and uncertain challenges

There is growing evidence that the world is facing the prospect of more frequent, complex and destructive compound shocks. Martinez-Diaz and Sidner (2021) define compound shocks as being multiple disruptive events striking simultaneously or in rapid sequence, and can include events such as natural disasters, economic and financial crises, and pandemics. For example, Bangladesh, Fiji, Honduras, India, the Philippines, Mexico, and Nicaragua all faced combinations of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic shocks associated with the pandemic and measures to contain it, and extreme weather events in 2020 (Martinez-Diaz and Sidner 2021). The slowly emerging, or 'creeping', nature of crises seems to be a distinguishing characteristic of many challenges facing the world – including Covid-19, climate change and fragility (Boin *et al.* 2020). This makes managing these multiple overlapping crises much more difficult to handle than those crises that are more sharply delineated in time (Boin *et al.* 2020). Deep uncertainty is another defining characteristic of crisis (Boin *et al.* 2020) – for example, the Covid-19 pandemic forced governments to struggle with how to act when there is an absence of evidence (Das *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, there is some argument that framing these layered, interconnected and complex challenges as 'issues' or 'crises' is problematic, as these imply that either the challenge can be addressed in a premeditated policy cycle, or it requires extraordinary and emergency measures (Strand *et al.* 2022).

Short-term, single-hazard disaster management is still dominant

The governance and management of global shocks and risks has long been recognised as being key to the resilience of societies to disasters, and has been on the international agenda long before Covid-19. However, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed shortcomings in the dominant single-hazard disaster management approaches and crisis response, which are often short-term in nature (Donoghoe *et al.* 2022). Despite previous lessons learned, governments still tend to think of hazards as one-off events with clear start and end dates, often providing a short-term, narrow,

technocratic response that does not encompass forward-thinking long-term recovery planning (Few *et al.* 2020; Leach *et al.* 2021). Systemic risks require systemic responses to build resilience – a forward-thinking, long-term approach to dealing with multiple and evolving drivers and effects of crises unfolding on different timescales and with different magnitudes is needed (Singh 2021).

Intersections in vulnerability

It is important to consider the vulnerabilities that exacerbate the impacts of crises (Williams 2020). Existing social inequities and power relations are a key framing in explaining vulnerability, which shapes people's ability to respond to external stresses (Mangubhai *et al.* 2021). Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis have shown just how much inequality matters, and how it impacts every aspect of everyday life. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities and structural vulnerabilities across the world, often the result of long histories of marginalisation (Leach *et al.* 2021: 3). Minority ethnic communities, women, poorly paid and precarious employment, and the poorest were especially vulnerable to the impacts of Covid-19 (Mangubhai *et al.* 2021). These same groups also tend to be at the forefront of climate change impacts (Singh 2021). Hence, marginalised groups face disparate harm from compound crises (Hilhorst and Mena 2021) – for example, the health and cascading secondary impacts of the pandemic disproportionately impacted internally displaced people, migrants, informal sector workers and women (Singh 2021). Paying attention to intersectionality fosters attention to differences in vulnerability, resilience, coping, and adaptation strategies and abilities in the context of simultaneous crises (such as climate change impacts and Covid-19). In particular, deep understanding of local dynamics and power structures is vital, as well as understanding the broader political economies and political ecologies of overlapping crises (Sultana 2021).

The role of resilience

Much of the literature discusses the concept of resilience. Resilience is a loosely defined term, which means different things to different people,

but largely relates to a community's ability to endure shocks and stresses (Williams 2020). It also relates to addressing systemic vulnerabilities and injustices – many of which were brought to the fore during the pandemic.

Social cohesion is a primary resource for communities to draw upon during a crisis; social capital (including the bonds within communities, the bridges across communities, and the links between communities and formal institutions) plays a core role in building resilience (Jewett *et al.* 2021). Local and community-based responses were critical in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic response across the world, as (mostly pre-existing) community organisations and networks were able to pivot and adapt quickly to the pandemic, identify local needs and reach those most in need (Price 2022).

The pandemic response highlighted the increasingly important role of social protection in response to intersecting shocks, although questions remain around the effectiveness of different policy approaches and how best to integrate responses across agencies and institutions (Donoghoe *et al.* 2022). Specifically, the pre-existence of social protection systems had a strong relationship to the speed of programme expansion during Covid-19 in 2020.

Governance-related characteristics and capabilities that affect a country's resilience have also been reviewed, with three governance 'super-factors' coming to the fore (Brown 2022). These are: high levels of societal trust (so that mitigation measures or responses to a crisis are accepted); low corruption levels (as corruption can erode both a government's will and ability to act); and high-quality political leadership (this underlies both of the previous factors; political leaders at all levels have an outsized influence on whether a period of crisis will bring unity or division). Countries where there were pre-existing high levels of mistrust in authorities (such as in Chile, Haiti, and Zimbabwe) meant that top-down responses during the Covid-19 pandemic were met with suspicion and resulted in a lack of legitimacy for the government's actions (Hilhorst and Mena 2021).

Emerging Lessons

Put vulnerable and marginalised groups front and centre in recovery efforts

The scale of the current intersecting crises needs a more ambitious transformative pathway to zero poverty, which calls for centring 'social justice, peace and the planet' and a focus on recovery (Diwakar and Shepherd 2022). Countries need to address ethical and social justice considerations and the politics of recovery efforts by putting vulnerable and marginalised groups front and centre in the aftermath of disasters. But efforts need to recognise and expect that not everyone recovers in the same way, and that some may become more marginalised through the recovery process. Furthermore, vulnerability is not static during long-lasting or slow onset 'creeping' stressors and may shift throughout. Power and politics also shape recovery agendas, and can lead to poorly designed and targeted interventions that typically exclude marginalised voices (Few *et al.* 2020). Conflict-sensitivity and understanding the broader political economies are also vital in responses to overlapping crises, with efforts being tailored to individual contexts and vulnerabilities (Bousquet and Fernandez-Taranco 2020; Sultana 2021). This also relates to having robust data and analysis infrastructure, which is a lesson highlighted throughout the Covid-19 literature (British Academy 2021; Das *et al.* 2021).

Resilience building is more important than ever but takes time

A key lesson underscored in the literature is the need for urgent action on increasing resilience at various levels, whilst acknowledging that strengthening of underlying systems takes a long-time (Williams 2020). Hence, communities and bottom-up approaches to resilience need long-term investment to be able to respond to crises. Also important to consider is that recovery work does not have to be merely reactive – capacities (especially at the grassroots level) can be strengthened before, during, and after disasters, and in anticipation of future crises

(Few *et al.* 2020). Local and community-based responses to Covid-19 often mirrored or built on past responses to crises and climate impacts and their importance to withstanding future risks and building long-term resilience will likely only grow (Few *et al.* 2020). The importance of having social protection systems that are in place and institutionalised before shocks occur was also demonstrated during the pandemic (Donoghoe *et al.* 2022). However, there was a widespread inability for these systems to meet coverage and demand – highlighting the importance of having flexible systems. The issue of societal trust has been flagged as a key part of state-citizen alliances, which is important in times of crisis (Leach *et al.* 2021). Low or a lack of institutional trust also has implications for the adoption of interventions and recovery programmes after a crisis (Khan Mohmand 2020). Communities are particularly important in establishing and rebuilding trust and cohesion after a crisis (British Academy 2021).

Robust risk-informed decision-making under uncertainty is critical

Now more than ever there is a need for development approaches and a global infrastructure that can anticipate and deal with uncertainty. Complex crises call for analysis that looks at both 'structural political-economic conditions alongside far less ordered, "unruly" processes' considering complexity, uncertainty, likelihood, and context-specificity (Leach *et al.* 2021: 2). Flexibility will be key for future systems to be able to respond to diverse types of disasters (Donoghoe *et al.* 2022). Policy processes will need to adopt an 'active learning mindset' to make decisions under deep uncertainty (clear and decisive, but also flexible and linked to incorporate rapid learning), enable greater collaboration between governance levels and across agencies, and set up a robust data infrastructure (Das *et al.* 2021). To improve responsiveness and resilience to future crises there is a need to build multi-level governance structures based on empowering participation, engagement and cooperation to understand local and vulnerable groups' changing needs (British Academy 2021; Diwakar and Shepherd 2022).

COVID COLLECTIVE PROJECTS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

Impact of Covid-19 on Peace and Conflict

- Global, Syria, Myanmar
- University of Edinburgh, The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep)
- Local Administrative Councils Unit (LACU), Syria
- Nyan Corridor
- Open Think Tank (OTT), Dohuk, Kurdistan Region of Iraq
- Syrian American Medical Association, Dohuk, KRI

This project was comprised of three main strands of work bridging local and global. One strand investigated if and how Covid-19 contributed to the creation of 'peace routes' across conflict lines in Syria. Another strand mapped the actors, institutions, and impact of the pandemic in post-coup Myanmar. The final strand connected varied data sources related to peace and conflict and covid to: track where Covid-19 responses have had lasting effects on democracy and peace; understand the relationship between the nature of the pandemic response and its lasting impact; and recommend good practice for conflict-sensitive pandemic response.

Strategies and Policy Supports to Increase Resilience for Poor and Vulnerable Women and Youth Facing the Addition of Covid-19 to Afghanistan's Multiple Pre-existing Crises

- Afghanistan
- Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
- Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN)

This project explored poverty dynamics and inclusive governance in Afghanistan in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, conflict, and significant return of labour migrants from Iran and Pakistan. Specifically, it examined how Covid-19 has affected labour market precarity and livelihood stability for young women and men and their coping mechanisms, how the state repositioned itself to respond to the pandemic, and how opposition armed groups' legitimacy strategies changed.

Chronic Poverty Report: Pandemic Poverty

- Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Zambia
- Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN)
- BRAC Institute for Governance and Development (BIGD)
- Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI)
- Fate Consulting
- HLC-L4D
- IMPACT Trust Kenya

The Chronic Poverty Report 2023: Pandemic Poverty will critically analyse the contexts of and responses to the pandemic and the multiple crises experienced by poor and vulnerable people, and provide actionable policy and programming guidance for more equitable recovery and better responses to future crises.

Strengthening Advocacy and Mobilisation on the Frontlines: Action-Research to Address Covid-Related and Other Risks in Mathare, Nairobi

- Kenya
- Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC)
- Slum Dwellers International-Kenya (SDI-K)
- International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)

Many residents of informal settlements, like Mathare in Nairobi, struggled to observe Covid's social distancing measures and face increasingly precarious livelihoods, alongside escalating care burdens, inadequate healthcare access, and deepening political exclusion. This project used action research methods to analyse grassroots-led Covid-19 responses in Nairobi's informal settlements and supported community mobilisation and advocacy.

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This brief aims to provide rapid synthesis of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking. It was written by Roz Price, Researcher at the Institute of Development Studies, and commissioned through the Covid Collective.

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Find out more about the Covid Collective www.covid-collective.net

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