



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

How the United States Can Address Global Fragility in a Pandemic

FRANCES Z. BROWN AND MEGAN DOHERTY

The coronavirus pandemic is a threat multiplier in fragile and conflict-affected states. Its devastating health and economic impacts already are fueling [drivers of fragility](#) and exacerbating ongoing [conflicts](#) in places ranging from Afghanistan to Venezuela to Yemen. Yet even as U.S. policymakers continue to learn more about the fragility risks heightened by the coronavirus, they also must mobilize quickly to respond to them. In addition to addressing the ongoing global public health emergency, the U.S. government must marshal its policy tools to address the pandemic's second-order effects: [exacerbated](#) weak governance and state fragility. To do so, U.S. officials should follow five lessons learned in prior public health crises, such as the Ebola epidemic, and from decades of work in fragile contexts.

BUILD ON KEY EXISTING POLICY IMPERATIVES

Though the coronavirus poses many new challenges for governance in fragile states, not all response measures need to be invented from scratch. Two recent policy

initiatives—the [Stabilization Assistance Review](#) (SAR) and the [Global Fragility Act](#) (GFA)—have advanced valuable thinking and guidance that policymakers should apply.

Harness the Stabilization Assistance Review

The 2018 SAR, co-authored by the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), usefully sets out several principles that are as relevant to mitigating fragility amid a pandemic as they are to stabilizing armed conflict. Most importantly, the SAR underscores that addressing conflict and fragility is an inherently political endeavor. The U.S. government should draw on its guidance to ensure that any assistance response to the second-order effects of the coronavirus is linked to a clearly defined political end state and diplomatic strategy for affected fragile states. The SAR also offers useful advice on establishing a division of labor between international and local actors that maximizes comparative advantage, demarcating



roles and responsibilities for different components of the U.S. government, institutionalizing learning and accountability, and operationalizing flexible funding for sequenced assistance.

Activate the Global Fragility Act's Principles

For its part, the 2019 GFA is an important new law that reorients various parts of the U.S. foreign policy architecture to collaborate on data-driven solutions to chronic fragility. Designing an immediate coronavirus fragility response cannot wait until some of the long-term requirements of the law are finalized—individualized multiyear global and country strategies, for example. But the GFA's guidance on the need for multisectoral, integrated approaches, inclusive governance, and multilateral partnerships is timely and instructive, and policymakers should begin operationalizing these principles now.

FOCUS ON COOPERATION NOT COMPETITION

The transnational reach of the virus demands transnational cooperation to fight it. Yet, thus far, great power rivalry and limited global cooperation are undermining pandemic responses, and by extension undercutting efforts to address governance problems. On great power competition, the escalating tensions between the United States and China have only detracted attention from the public health catastrophe and hamstrung the international diplomatic and technical cooperation that is needed. Further, competing donor priorities on the ground often exacerbate weak governance in fragile states.

More generally, the wider lack of global cooperation is also denting the U.S. administration's own broader agenda to secure greater burden sharing from international

partners. A more coordinated pandemic response would yield more efficient efforts, less redundancy, and greater returns on investment for U.S. taxpayers. To strengthen the international response and steer action toward countering fragility, the United States needs to demonstrate leadership in key multilateral forums and work with partners and allies.

Drive Partner Attention

Specifically, the United States should quickly identify an appropriate forum to convene relevant stakeholders around the challenge of mitigating fragility in coronavirus-affected countries and establish a division of labor to do so. Several formats could achieve this goal, including proposals such as building a global coalition along the lines of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS or launching public-private partnerships or multilateral initiatives like the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. The United States should also restore funding and retain membership in the World Health Organization (WHO), leveraging its vote to address second-order impacts in emergency health response.

In addition, the European Union [has raised](#) an initial \$8 billion in pledges for the global response. The United States has made an initial \$1 billion

Step Up in the UN Security Council

Further, U.S. policymakers at the UN should push the UN Security Council for a resolution to galvanize coordinated action on the global response. They may draw inspiration from the 2014 Ebola pandemic, when the Security Council passed a [comprehensive resolution](#) with an unprecedented 131 countries, paving the way for vital assistance and the easing of travel restrictions that impeded the response. In that crisis, U.S. leadership helped drive partner commitments and resources to defeat a deadly cross-border virus.

Security Council cooperation could also help advance several other [urgently needed steps](#), such as advancing the sharing of best practices on virus containment and response and promoting virus surveillance within peacekeeping missions.

Above all, the United States should proactively seek to reinvigorate Security Council deliberations to endorse a global humanitarian ceasefire. Previous efforts at a resolution have foundered over tit-for-tat disagreements between the United States and China over mentions of the WHO. But with [some 660,000 people displaced](#) between when the UN secretary general first issued a call for a [global ceasefire](#) on March 23 and May 15, and with the risks of the coronavirus [rising](#) in many [conflict zones](#), it is urgent that all great powers move past disputes over wording and use the power of the council to prioritize humanitarian access and peace.

Ensure Multilateral Financing Addresses Fragility

As international financial institutions admirably step up to provide [debt relief](#) to lessen the impact of the pandemic on many vulnerable states, the United States should also partner with them to address the drivers of conflict and fragility. For example, the World Bank recently released a robust new [Fragility, Conflict, and Violence \(FCV\)](#) strategy that needs to be swiftly integrated into the bank's broader pandemic response. The bank [has announced](#) it will commit \$160 billion to fight the coronavirus, but unless the FCV strategy is operationalized, the bank risks relying on [problematic practices](#) that can reinforce poor governance, including corruption and marginalization.

U.S. policymakers should provide political backing and technical support to the bank to accelerate implementation of the FCV strategy. The United States should also leverage its influence within the bank and the International Monetary Fund to ensure

that, as they provide much-needed financing and shore up the capacity of healthcare systems and social protection networks, they are also securing partner countries' commitments to transparency, human rights, and inclusion of marginalized groups in national coronavirus responses.

ELEVATE DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

Fragility is a fundamentally political problem, and mitigating it will require the United States to lead with diplomatic and political strategies. In many countries, measures that governments have taken to combat the virus—such as movement restrictions, harsh enforcement of lockdowns, and blaming outbreaks on marginalized communities—will both limit the effectiveness of crisis responses and potentially worsen conflict. In the early days of the pandemic, the State Department rightly focused on consular services and repatriation of American citizens stranded abroad. But as demand for repatriation slows, problematic trends from crackdowns on free speech in [Bangladesh](#) and [Venezuela](#) to police brutality in [Kenya](#) all demand empowered U.S. diplomatic pushback. Elevating the diplomatic emphasis on governance concerns will both mitigate the potential long-term effects of the virus on fragile governance and ensure that U.S. assistance is effective.

Call Out Human Rights Issues

U.S. policymakers should amplify their high-level communications on the imperative for countries' responses to the virus to respect human rights, and they should also call out specific abuses of power. As part of this, officials must be ready to push back on groups that seek to monopolize medical services or to obstruct humanitarian access to specific communities. The bicameral, bipartisan [Protecting Human Rights During Pandemic Act](#) includes some promising steps



in ensuring the United States is ready to demonstrate the consequences for repression and violations of international humanitarian law, including by requiring the State Department to consider partner countries' responses to the coronavirus while negotiating security sector assistance and by strengthening its human rights reporting. In addition, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor's annual human rights report has an important mandate to report on rights violations that presumably should encompass pandemic restrictions and violations this year. However, that document has a significant time lag; in the meantime, the bureau should be encouraged to loudly speak out about abuses in real time, amplify concerns to senior-level officials, and testify about these trends to Congress.

Focus on Trust and Transparency

Effective crisis response **requires trust** between citizens and governments, an especially challenging endeavor in fragile states already beset with accumulated grievances, built-up suspicion, and low service delivery capacity. As the pandemic spreads, citizens will need transparency on what authorities are doing to address the crisis, and governments will require accurate information on local needs. U.S. government representatives should push partner governments to communicate transparently about their response plans and actions. They should encourage partner governments to augment citizen-government dialogue on their pandemic responses and should help provide them with the support to do it. The United States should also bolster citizen watchdog groups to safely monitor response funds and activities.

Diplomatically Engage on National Response Plans

The United States should also push partner governments to attempt to mitigate fragility within their own nationally led coronavirus response planning. For example, recognizing the disproportionate effect this pandemic will have on already vulnerable populations—

refugees, displaced people, women, and girls—U.S. diplomats should proactively work with governments to ensure that they are consulting with civil society and that national coronavirus plans respect human rights and address the unique needs of vulnerable communities. The goal should be for government counterparts to become more comfortable working with civil society and historically marginalized groups to address grievances or conflict triggers that may emerge during the broader public health response.

Work With Security Sector Counterparts

In fragile states, security sector actors can be an instrument of repression, generating new grievances and unrest, or they can be valuable partners in public health responses that respect human rights. The State Department should partner with Defense Department civilian and military officials, who may have more frequent access and potential influence with local security forces by virtue of routine training, equipping, and advising activities, as well as combined exercises and bilateral defense dialogues. Combined diplomatic and defense engagement with security partners can reinforce strong messages on fragility risks and respect for human rights. The Defense Department should also communicate with local counterparts about best practices in assisting aid distribution, the importance of unobstructed humanitarian access, and the imperative to peacefully manage protests that may emerge in response to lockdowns and economic hardships.

ADAPT AID TO FIT THE PROBLEM

U.S. foreign assistance professionals have long recognized the need to ensure that U.S. aid dollars are more flexible, integrated, conflict sensitive, adaptive, and focused on empowering local communities. Now is the time to accelerate progress on these fronts while pivoting to new ways of working to mitigate the health risks of delivering aid.

Enable Swift, Flexible Responses

USAID and the State Department should ensure that they launch and scale up programs in ways that mitigate both immediate threats to stability and long-term fragility risks. Doing so now will protect prior U.S. foreign aid investments: the pandemic **increases** the threat of development backsliding or of “stabilization in reverse.” Both organizations have several flexible mechanisms; empowering and funding these mechanisms will be key, especially the less numerous ones that enable local flexibility. Further, both USAID and the State Department should ensure that programs are **conflict sensitive** and integrate principles of good governance, transparency, and violence prevention. Beyond mechanisms and design, these institutions should prioritize unlocking bureaucratic roadblocks that are causing undue funding delays—through expedited approvals, for example—so resources can flow quickly to the places that need them most.

Emphasize Key Program Areas

Several programmatic areas will be particularly salient. First, the United States should focus adequate resources at the local level, empowering communities and subnational authorities as agents of their own recovery. During the Ebola crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, community groups were instrumental to combating disinformation and hate speech; today, local officials are already at the forefront of the coronavirus responses in many places. By equipping communities and local officials with early warning detection and conflict mediation skills, for example, the United States can help deter and mitigate additional violence and instability.

Second, many fragile states feature poor coordination or outright hostility between national and local authorities, which the pandemic is straining still further. While national-local coordination is always challenging, the United States could help national response organizations strengthen communications with local authorities

and establish mechanisms for redressing grievances. Programming should also help partner governments quickly disseminate credible public health information, especially to remote and historically marginalized communities to help build trust.

Further, several fragile states face contentious elections over the next year in the shadow of the pandemic. The United States should emphasize contributing technical expertise to national bodies to provide voter education on any electoral delays or modifications and helping resolve any legal or constitutional quagmires that emerge.

Adapt Modes of Delivering Assistance

The State Department, USAID, and their implementing partners will need to adapt their delivery of foreign assistance to limit viral transmissions and keep assistance workers and partner communities safe. This will require tolerance for early mistakes as aid implementers and communities experiment with virtual methods and social distancing where possible, building out new platforms for communities to engage with authorities. This task will also demand shifts in the delivery of physical assistance, identifying fewer aid providers who can physically transport goods while ensuring they are adequately protected, even as this may slow processes. Finally, as many of the most dynamic responses to the pandemic are occurring at local levels, the State Department and USAID should streamline procurement and ensure that locally based groups can access U.S. funding and that the United States can capitalize on insights from local efforts to spread knowledge on what works.

Channel Technology

USAID and the State Department need to expand access to technological solutions, while also equipping communities with the tools to fight disinformation and protect themselves. These efforts will require starting with basics: expanding internet access and ensuring



power and connectivity in remote areas, potentially in partnership with the private sector. Where technology permits, this task will also entail investing in platforms to [fact-check rumors](#) and combat hate speech or create protected, anonymous channels for citizens to provide feedback to government authorities. Any technological adaptations must be matched by commensurate investments in data protection, digital security, and digital literacy training for civil society to keep promising innovations from being hijacked as tools of repression.

FORGE A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

To implement the recommendations laid out above, the United States must harness the full range of tools of U.S. foreign policy—diplomatic, security, economic, and foreign assistance—in a more coordinated way. Even solely within the foreign aid domain, the U.S. coronavirus response in fragile states needs to better connect several traditionally disparate professional communities. To break down these silos, the U.S. government needs to identify and empower high-level ownership and management of an integrated coronavirus response for fragile states.

Galvanize Interagency Leadership

The White House should appoint a senior official housed within the National Security Council staff to drive coordination for the global pandemic response.

This model was successful in the U.S. response to the Ebola epidemic and the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009–2010. This official should have the mandate and resources to galvanize the entire U.S. foreign policy architecture to mitigate the coronavirus threat and an explicit purview to consider the virus's implications for governance and fragility. This person should also convene interagency representatives regularly to drive execution and to update the whole-of-government response planning, such as the [SAFER Plan](#), to ensure it adequately emphasizes fragility mitigation and is integrated into all other aspects of the response rather than treated as a separate effort.

Break Down Internal Divides

Even within the U.S. foreign assistance community, the coronavirus demands progress in bridging long-standing divides between professionals focused on the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors; it further requires integrating experts on the public health response and economic recovery into the mix. Encouragingly, one of the four core pillars in the initial USAID and State Department [strategy for coronavirus funding](#) was focused on the second-order impacts of the virus, ranging from challenges to governance, civilian security, stabilization, and economic trends. Less encouragingly, addressing these second-order effects is framed as a discrete, different line of effort from the public health and humanitarian responses. The next iteration of this strategy should address how to better align these efforts.

CONCLUSION

In the first months of the pandemic, the urgent need to respond to the coronavirus's catastrophic immediate impacts on public health and the global economy has limited policy bandwidth to plan for addressing the dangerous second-order impacts of the virus. Yet unless policymakers rise to this challenge, they will see the aftershocks of the coronavirus and its disruptive effects on governance in fragile states for decades to come. While the task is daunting, the United States can course correct now and fight both the pandemic and threats to long-term stability.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Frances Z. Brown is a senior fellow with Carnegie's Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, who arrived at Carnegie after fifteen years as a USAID official, White House staffer, and non-governmental organization practitioner. She writes on conflict, governance, and U.S. foreign policy.

Megan Doherty is senior director for policy and advocacy at Mercy Corps. She previously served on the National Security Council staff, at the State Department, and with the National Democratic Institute.

NOTES

For your convenience, this document contains hyperlinked source notes indicated by teal-colored text.



© 2020 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.