SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The events of recent weeks presented a wide range of challenges to the global community as the novel coronavirus and the infection it causes, COVID-19, spread rapidly around the world and was declared a pandemic on 11 March by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The initial response by many governments around the world led to travel restrictions, lockdown and curfews, quarantining, panic-buying, and shortages of medical equipment. The initial flurry of action – or in some cases inaction – has had a major impact on INGO staff and operations globally, forcing new ways of working.

However, once the acute phase passes and the world settles into a period of 'new normal' as countries grapple with containment and management, there are likely to be longer term security implications around the world. With INGOs exploring new programmatic responses to areas affected by COVID-19, it's important to look beyond the initial phases of the pandemic; COVID-19 is the most widespread pandemic in the lifetime of most, requiring anticipation of far-reaching and complex consequences.

Emerging Safety & Security Threats

The 'foreign disease' perception
Xenophobic sentiment emerged early on in the COVID-19 outbreak, with Chinese nationals – or those of Asian descent more generally – targeted for intimidation, threats and even violence. The epicenter of the disease has since shifted to Europe and the US, and this has already resulted in similarly targeted rhetoric and threats. From the African continent, there are reports circulating that COVID-19 was introduced to a number of countries by foreigners, including aid workers. Elsewhere, resentment is brewing in social and official media in Afghanistan, where several diplomats returning to Kabul have reportedly tested positive. The accuracy surrounding these events is irrelevant, fear can spread very rapidly in a pandemic context – particularly one occurring in a digital age and with such global reach – where it will be perpetuated by social and other media.

In the case of recent Ebola outbreaks this has resulted in attacks against aid workers, a development that is likely to recur in a number of the locations where INGOs are seeking to scale-up COVID-19 programming. Program staff could become targets in this context, while also facing challenges in getting messaging across that this is a virus that affects everyone. This will likely be a particular concern in Africa where coronavirus has been slower to spread up to this point, which may foster the sentiment that COVID-19 is a 'foreign' disease; communities may focus on attempting to evict foreign nationals rather than adopting infection control measures.

Political Fallout
The coronavirus pandemic will impact political stability in many countries around the world. It is highly likely that governments will postpone key elections in the months ahead, which may be a positive in terms of limited spread via campaign events and rallies; however, in locations where there is already dissatisfaction with unpopular leaders or long-time presidents attempting to hold onto power beyond

constitutional limits, polling delays may generate social unrest and mass protests. Several approaching elections in West Africa are particularly concerning in the months ahead.

This reality is compounded by the fact that attempts to control the spread of the virus – including cancellation of religious gatherings, personal and community events, sports, neighbourhood lockdowns, business closures, curfews and quarantines – may be highly unpopular in many contexts, generating additional resentment against figures of authority. Some leaders may attempt to take advantage of the situation to implement authoritarian practices or restrict freedoms. Such developments will not be unique to developing nations but may also affect typically more stable countries in the US, Europe, and elsewhere. Anti-government sentiment will be increased by the economic fallout from the pandemic, which is set to be catastrophic on a global scale. Eventually this may also affect foreign aid budgets from major donor nations, having a flow-on effect for the work of INGOs.

Economic Fallout

As noted above, the economic fallout – which has already begun in 20-30% stock market devaluations in recent weeks – will expand and have a wider impact in the months ahead. Many countries will fall into recession, and with limited capacity in global financial systems to mitigate the impact by reducing interest rates and employing quantitative easing or mass stimulus – due to already very low base rates and funds needed to address the more immediate needs of pandemic response – this recession will be harder to restrain. Already high levels of personal, corporate, and government debt will compound the impact.

This economic constriction will lead to vast and rapid increases in unemployment; this is already a massive issue for the many casual or gig economy workers in those countries hit hard by COVID-19 control measures, and will only increase as small businesses are forced to close and companies unable to operate effectively go under in the months ahead. In Western countries this may lead to social unrest, but also in the locations where INGOs implement programs it will likely increase resentment towards IDP or refugee populations and/or increase the pre-existing perception of INGOs as wealthy and as purveyors of foreign funds.

Crime

The economic pressures cited above and related social impact will create an opportune environment for crime and exploitation to increase, which will be compounded by the pre-occupation of law enforcement with COVID-19 containment and management measures. This will be an issue globally, not only in locations already known for high crime rates. An increase in crimes of opportunity is anticipated due to fewer police, crimes of need due to unemployment and breakdown of services, and crimes of frustration linked to the shortage of goods or resentment over restrictions and political measures. As just one of many examples, in Kenya there have been reports of criminals posing as Ministry of Health workers to conduct home invasions. Elsewhere, there has been a 70% increase in the online purchasing of weapons and ammunition in the US, suggesting that residents are preparing to take property protection to extreme levels if needed.

More subtle criminal activities such as online scamming and information security issues have already increased. Paranoia is rife in any global event of this nature, and criminals will use misinformation and fear to encourage unwise online browsing, clicking on malware links in emails, or the purchase of crank remedies to 'cure' or prevent COVID-19. With so many people spending more time online amid movement restrictions and work from home requirements, this risk has increased.

Terrorism

It is possible that armed opposition groups (AOGs) may use this time of instability to conduct major attacks or further territorial objectives. In most of the areas where major AOGs are present – including south-west Asia, the Middle East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa – restrictions on movement and activity that might be imposed on major population centres will have little effect in curbing terrorist activity. As with the crime issue, it's possible that pre-occupation with COVID-19 containment will distract the existing counter-terrorism efforts of national governments, allowing space for increased operations by AOGs. There is also a great deal of fear around terrorist groups 'weaponizing' COVID-19, which while not really practical or necessary – since it will spread of its own accord anyway – this is a time where rumours and hysteria will escalate regardless of reality.

What can INGOs do?

It is crucial that INGOs continue to monitor and track developments globally very closely over the coming weeks and months; information gathering and contextual analysis will be central to the ability of organisations to anticipate and mitigate risk. There will likely be new and unexpected threats that emerge, in addition to the few that are addressed above, and organisations need to be adaptable in countering the changing conditions in program contexts. It will also be more challenging to deploy additional resources in-country to manage and monitor changing threat environments, due to travel restrictions.

Teams in-country must:

- Continue to conduct regular security risk assessments, especially for new and expanded programming
- Monitor and update COVID-19 contingency plans, adapting them to changing circumstances
- Ensure that staff safety and wellness are central in all operations, whether work-from-home or expanded program activities
- Ensure strong communications both within country teams and outwards to headquarters to ensure that information flows effectively and support can be provided as needed
- Remain flexible and ensure new humanitarian programs responding to COVID-19 are adaptable to changing contexts
- Abide by instructions from local authorities

Initial assessment of threats and recommended risk mitigation measures are merely the beginning of what will need to be an evolving conversation across all INGOs. How organisations need to adjust will depend on the nature and scale of programming in response to the needs of vulnerable communities. Countries previously judged as low or moderate risk may no longer meet those alert criteria, requiring additional attention to and resources for safety and security. It is crucial that staff are well informed and properly prepared to face new risks, whether medical or security.

Prepared by the CARE Security Unit

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