

COVID-19 shows that everything in the world is interconnected¹

Pax Christi International, 22 April 2020

Vulnerable communities made more vulnerable

Pax Christi's extended global network is present around the world in local communities, including in the countries mentioned by Pope Francis in his *Urbi et Orbi* message. All are suffering from or anticipating anxiously the impact of COVID-19. In Lebanon among Syrian² refugees, in formerly besieged communities near Damascus, in Yemen,³ and elsewhere, food insecurity is a significant concern, due to restrictions on movement, the preferential distribution of aid and/or the impending economic crisis.

PAX,⁴ our member organization in the Netherlands with an extensive presence in the Middle East region identified crucial pandemic-related trends that were confirmed and augmented by multiple other regional contacts:

- People affected by armed conflict are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.⁵ Health systems are already overloaded and often, as in Syria and Yemen, badly damaged during violent conflict. For refugees, for instance in Lebanon and on the Greek islands, medical facilities are close to absent as are facilities for basic hygiene; social distancing is nearly impossible; fear of stigma or deportation is high. Ukraine has a broken and corrupt healthcare system. In Palestine, clinics and medical facilities are not accessible to all citizens.⁶
- The impact of the global ceasefire differs from country to country.^{7 8 9 10 11}
- The COVID-19 crisis will affect women in conflict regions differently and harder than men.¹² As caregivers and frontline healthcare workers, women are more likely to be infected by the virus. Quarantine measures lead to an increase in domestic violence and dramatically impact women's livelihoods in informal economies. Cultural norms impede women's access to information, healthcare and aid.
- Prisoners and detainees are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19.¹³ Spread of the virus among the many in prisons and detention centers in Syria, Israel and elsewhere could be devastating.
- Governments and parties in conflict are abusing the COVID-19 crisis. Worldwide, civil liberties such as freedom of movement¹⁴ and assembly have been suspended in an unprecedented way. While measures might be necessary and effective to prevent the spread of the virus, they are only justifiable if temporary and democratically controlled.
- Powerful civil society movements in Iraq, Sudan and Lebanon have been forced to withdraw from the streets. Many of the protestors are now involved in voluntary work in response to the corona virus, but it remains unclear whether they will be able to maintain their momentum. At the same time, amazing citizen initiatives are strengthening social cohesion, reaching out to the most vulnerable groups and supporting people combatting the virus.
- The COVID-19 crisis will likely lead to an increase in violent conflict or even to new conflicts. Negotiation processes and peace operations have come to a halt. PAX is particularly concerned about the situation in South Sudan and the Syrian province of Idlib. Mismanagement of the crisis and potential shortages of food and water will lead to new social and violent conflicts. Turkey's decision to cut off water supplies to the northeast of Syria sets an alarming precedent.
- Access to accurate information about COVID-19 and protection from the virus is essential and often unavailable. Rumors and inaccurate information spread fear and distrust.

From our Pax Christi contacts in other regions of the world, specifically including in South Africa, South Sudan and Peru, we have heard additional and growing concerns about food insecurity. Lack of access to clean water is a threat as serious as food insecurity. Short term and long term solutions need urgent attention in marginal communities everywhere.

Toward a culture that seeks the fullness of life for all

The coronavirus has thrown into sharp relief the contemporary global culture of violence: its interlocking, unjust systems; the suffering it imposes on billions of people; and its incapacity to respond effectively and comprehensively to the current crisis and other monumental challenges facing the whole earth community. Responding to the pandemic, both short-term and longer-term, requires a fundamental shift from the “unjust normal” of systemic and structural violence across the globe, from systems that destroy, dehumanize, and diminish, to a culture that seeks the fullness of life for all.

In this spirit, Pope Francis has underscored nonviolence as a core value of the Church in many public statements and, most significantly, in his 2017 World Day of Peace message entitled, *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*: “In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.”

¹ Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 16, 117, 138.

² *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Syrians: An Analysis by Syrian Civil Society*, Half of Syria, April 2020 https://weexist-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/20200410-COVID19-in-Syria-Comprehensive-Briefing-3.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Cne03sWTxmWMKo5nrrfKEJfIKDQIhxAQmdihIQ7zP_0Wk7MAsJvCZ18

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-6-fiscal-year-fy-2020>

⁴ <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/stay-informed/news/pax-and-the-covid-19-response>

⁵ *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Syrians: An Analysis by Syrian Civil Society*, Half of Syria, April 2020 https://weexist-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/20200410-COVID19-in-Syria-Comprehensive-Briefing-3.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1Cne03sWTxmWMKo5nrrfKEJfIKDQIhxAQmdihIQ7zP_0Wk7MAsJvCZ18

⁶ The COVID-19 crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories and AEI's response, Bethlehem, 19/4/2020, Arab Educational Institute, a member of Pax Christi International, aei@p-ol.com, +972 2-274-4030, www.aeicenter.org

⁷ Ukrainian Joint Forces report <https://www.facebook.com/pressifo.news/>

⁸ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights <http://www.syria-hr.com/en/?p=160813>

⁹ TRT World <https://www.trtworld.com/life/how-covid-19-is-impacting-major-global-conflicts-35292>

¹⁰ Israeli Apartheid Undermines Palestinian Right to Health Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic 07 Apr 2020 - Joint Statement www.alhaq.org/advocacy/16692.html

¹¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-mr-mark-6>

¹² *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Syrians: An Analysis by Syrian Civil Society*, Half of Syria, April 2020

¹³ WHO http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/434026/Preparedness-prevention-and-control-of-COVID-19-in-prisons.pdf?ua=1

¹⁴ OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Rama and Secretary General Greminger call for immediate action about SMM freedom of movement in eastern Ukraine