



# TOWARDS RESILIENCE: ALIGNING HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT ACTION BEHIND THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT

OLGA PETRYNIAK AND JON KURTZ

MAY 2020

The passing of the Global Fragility Act (GFA) in late 2019 is a welcome development in foreign assistance efforts to stymie the rise in protracted, conflict-driven crises, which threaten to grow with the onset of COVID-19. Alongside the political pressure to reduce perennial humanitarian outlays and bolster national security is the moral imperative to achieve better outcomes for crisis-affected populations. For more than three years, Mercy Corps has worked closely with the Alliance for Peacebuilding in leading the 70-organization GFA civil society coalition to build broad support for this transformative new law. Informed by our extensive experience and evidence base in highly fragile contexts, the GFA's focus on long-term conflict prevention, stabilization, and \$1.15 billion commitment over five years recognizes that the vision of the triple nexus – or the blending of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding assistance – can only be realized if the peace pillar is mandated, funded, and effectively put into practice.



Merely layering peacebuilding funds and activities on top of ongoing humanitarian and development investments in conflict-affected settings, however, will not bring the full promise of the GFA to fruition. In addition to investing in targeted conflict prevention and stabilization efforts, the Global Fragility Strategy (GFS) must leverage its cross-agency mandate to bring greater coherence to foreign assistance, and align humanitarian and development actors behind a resilience agenda that is the antidote to fragility, conflict, and violence.<sup>1</sup>

**Aligning humanitarian and development actors behind GFA implementation:** The \$42 billion annual humanitarian and development assistance to the world's 18 most fragile states dwarfs GFA's \$230 million/year offering. This aid can directly impact prospects for peace, but only if intentionally designed to do so. For instance, a narrow focus on life-saving assistance by humanitarian action in prolonged crises can undercut local coping mechanisms and destabilize sub-national economies, potentially exacerbating the drivers of fragility and sowing the seed of future crises.<sup>2</sup> Development actors' emphasis on economic growth can reproduce the inequalities and resulting grievances that result in violence. Conflict prevention and stabilization will fundamentally be influenced – reversed, stalled, or assisted – by humanitarian and development action. The GFS must insist advancing peace is part and parcel of these efforts.

**Advancing a resilience agenda to further collective action in GFA implementation:** Resilience offers a framework for aligning and improving the coherence of international responses – humanitarian, peace and development – to achieve the aspirations of the GFA. A resilience approach would guide foreign assistance to strengthen sources of resilience to the shocks and stresses defining fragile settings. In conflict-affected environments, this includes strengthening the capacity of institutions and communities to mitigate the drivers and effects of violence, alongside other risk factors – climate events, economic disruptions, and now a pandemic – that exacerbate fragility. Specifically, successful GFA implementation requires collective action in three interdependent areas to drive resilience.

## 1. Pairing short-term violence prevention with efforts to transform structural drivers of conflict:

The GFA focus on addressing the long-term drivers of fragility and violence through “justice sector reform, good governance, and inclusive and accountable service delivery,” is essential to address the root causes of conflict and advance peace.<sup>3</sup> However, the dynamic nature of conflict limits the potential of playing this ‘long game’ to gradually cultivate peace and stability. More frequent and often reinforcing disruptions – drought, food price spikes, a political transition or even an isolated incident of violence – can quickly fuel political and social instability in contexts characterized by systemic exclusion, injustice and grievance.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly evident in a COVID-19 world.<sup>5</sup>

Ensuring longer-term conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts are effective and take hold require peace, development and humanitarian actors to employ proven near-term violence prevention measures – including conflict

---

<sup>1</sup> Petryniak, O., Proctor, K., and Kurtz, J.A. (May 2020). *Towards resilience: Advancing collective action in protracted crises*. Mercy Corps.

<sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps. (2019). [\*The currency of connections: The reconfiguration of social connections in Benitu, South Sudan\*](#); Mercy Corps. (2018). [\*Borno, Northeast Nigeria strategic resilience assessment: Full report and findings\*](#).

<sup>3</sup> This thinking also guides the Bank's strategy for Fragility, Conflict and Violence.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, J. (2016). [\*Protesting power: Ethnic demonstrations continue in Ethiopia\*](#). Council on Foreign Relations.; Human Rights Watch. (2016). [\*Such a brutal crackdown: Killings and arrests in response to Ethiopia's Oromo protests\*](#).

<sup>5</sup> Lindborg, N. (2020). [\*The coronavirus is a call to build resilience in fragile states: How the global fragility act can pave a path forward\*](#). United States Institute for Peace.

sensitive response – alongside longer-term reforms highlighted in the GFA. For example, in 2018 an anti-open grazing law enacted in Nigeria’s Benue state set off a fresh wave of violence between farmers and pastoralists. Yet prior interventions in place to strengthen interaction, dispute resolution, and social cohesion between conflicting groups effectively buttressed communities from the surrounding conflict.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, while the rise of Ebola stoked public mistrust in Liberia, and outright violence in the DRC, partnership with legitimate, local community structures to facilitate citizen outreach helped squelch harmful narratives, built public trust and motivated communities to unite behind disease prevention and response measures.<sup>7</sup> Humanitarian and development investments in such action can prevent states from regressing deeper into violence, and create the positive short-term peace necessary for longer-term transformation.

## 2. Supporting local systems that can strengthen sources of resilience to the causes and effects of violence:

The GFA recognizes that working at local levels alongside a national agenda is essential to preventing and mitigating conflict. But questions remain on what local capacities are most critical to strengthen. Our research shows that strong social networks – kinship structures, solidarity groups, informal institutions – and local markets – such as the exchange among producers, traders, suppliers, and urban entrepreneurs – routinely enable communities to cope and adapt in conflict settings, provide opportunities to reduce violence, and are a requisite foundation for future prosperity.<sup>8</sup> The GFS must direct local investments to strengthen, and not undermine these systems, while deliberately working to expand access to them across gender and age groups.

For example, in South Sudan, crisis-affected communities with strong, diverse social relationships shared information, extended psychosocial support, and exchanged food, labor and cash, allowing them to better adapt and maintain their livelihoods during conflict.<sup>9</sup> Internally displaced populations in designated Protection of Civilians camps were more likely to highlight that they were isolated from both their kinship networks and information sources, thus limiting their ability to return home or re-establish livelihoods in a post-conflict setting – important preconditions for stability in South Sudan.<sup>10</sup> To reinforce the benefits of these social systems, local programming should target existing mutual support groups, often organized around shared livelihoods. Identifying and strengthening groups that support women or youth to cope, or promote their collective action, can further address gender equity in representation and resource access, and help address grievances among youth that give rise to violence.

Investments in conflict settings must also support local markets, which facilitate information-sharing and social connections, as well as financial transactions and trade in goods and services that can limit disruptions to local livelihoods. In Syria and northeast Nigeria, our research showed that economic activity quickly adapted to crises, and functioning markets were strongly linked with greater psycho-social and financial well-being.<sup>11</sup> Such outcomes can

---

<sup>6</sup> Mercy Corps. (2019). [Does peacebuilding work in the midst of conflict? Impact evaluation of a peacebuilding program in Nigeria.](#)

<sup>7</sup> Mercy Corps. (30 May 2019). [Community mobilization essential for halting ebola spread in DRC: Mercy corps publishes new analysis on ways to overcome mistrust](#) [Press Release].

<sup>8</sup> Howe, K., Krystalli, R., Krishnan, V., Kurtz, J., & Macaranas, R. (2018). [The Wages of War: Learning from how Syrians have adapted their livelihoods through seven years of conflict](#); Hemberger, A., Muench, S. & Algosio, D. (2017). [Beyond cash: Making markets work in crisis.](#) Mercy Corps.

<sup>9</sup> Mercy Corps. (2019). [The currency of connections: The reconfiguration of social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Howe, K., Krystalli, R., Krishnan, V., Kurtz, J., & Macaranas, R. (2018). [The Wages of War: Learning from how Syrians have adapted their livelihoods through seven years of conflict](#) .:

reduce support for and participation in violence and extremism in contexts where trauma and economic exclusion fuel cycles of violence. Market and production systems can also offer important leverage points for international responses that lead to better coping strategies, thus creating an enabling environment for stabilization, recovery and peacebuilding. For example in Syria, flour subsidies to local bakeries maintained food supply, kept bread prices stable, and protected social and economic ties within war-torn communities.<sup>12</sup> In northeast Nigeria, a poultry value chain program increased incomes, food security and confidence in the future among conflict-affected households – all essential to prospects for sustained peace.

### 3. Investing in rapid, real-time risk and resilience analysis:

The GFA provides for “an analysis of the conditions that contribute to violence and fragility” in its priority countries, including using proven tools for conflict analysis. However, these may be insufficient to effectively anticipate and manage ongoing outbreaks, emerging threats and longer-term drivers of violence. Many existing conflict and risk assessments have proven too slow, too cumbersome, and too removed from sub-national realities to inform appropriate action in dynamic conflict-affected environments. Mercy Corps’ Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) in Northeast Nigeria painted a vivid picture of how quickly threats evolve, frustrating aid efforts and invalidating strategies.<sup>13</sup>

Rapid and continuous analysis must complement inception assessments with timely and granular insights to inform agile programming that can quickly adapt to rapidly changing contexts. For example, in Niger and Burkina Faso, Mercy Corps’ assessment gauged the likelihood of support for violent extremism at village-level, measuring changes in highly-nuanced and localized indicators.<sup>14</sup> Mercy Corps’ crisis analytics hubs in contexts like DRC and NE Nigeria integrate continuous field-based monitoring with open source data, and analysis by both subject-matter experts and highly sophisticated software. In Syria, this enabled field teams to successfully predict the sites of armed conflict, as well as safe zones, enabling pre-positioning of assistance to conflict-affected communities. Investments in better, quicker risk analysis that leverage technology and human capability can enable GFA implementation to stay ahead of unfolding events and most appropriately respond to evolving threats that directly impact conflict dynamics.

**Conclusion:** The success of GFA implementation will require effective humanitarian and development action aligned behind peace and stability outcomes, as much as it will on standalone peacebuilding measures. Adopting a resilience agenda as part of GFA implementation – focused on strengthening sources of resilience that mitigate the drivers and effects of violence alongside other risk factors – can further the necessary coherence across these funding streams. The cross-agency coordination mechanisms mandated in the GFA, and soon to be elaborated in the GFS, provide a unique opportunity to bring these actors and actions together behind shared goals. In a COVID-19 reality, there is an added urgency to ensure foreign assistance collectively strengthens sources of resilience as the antidote to fragility.

---

<sup>12</sup> Hemberger, A., Muench, S. & Algosio, D. (2017). [\*Beyond cash: Making markets work in crisis\*](#).

<sup>13</sup> Henly-Shepard, S., & Jolicouer, D. (2019). [\*Risk and resilience assessment case study series: Northeast Nigeria\*](#). Produced by Mercy Corps as part of the Resilience Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award.

<sup>14</sup> Mercy Corps. (2018). [\*Vulnerability and resilience assessment initiative to counter violent extremism \(VRAI\): Final synthesis report\*](#).

## CONTACT

OLGA PETRYNIAK

Senior Director | Resilience

[opetryniak@mercycorps.org](mailto:opetryniak@mercycorps.org)

JON KURTZ

Senior Director | Research and Learning

[jkurtz@mercycorps.org](mailto:jkurtz@mercycorps.org)

### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)