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Published online: 28 Nov 2021.

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ABSTRACT

Many commentators predicted that the impact of COVID-19 on Africa, with its high levels of under-development and weak public health systems, will be particularly catastrophic. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and economic sectors have exposed and compounded preexisting social, political, and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in conflict-affected countries and regions, and have severely stress-tested their social cohesion and resilience. Global and local peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in Africa have also been significantly disrupted. More than 1 year into the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, however, the emerging pattern is one of resilience rather than insecurity and chaos. This article assesses the disruption caused by COVID-19 to Africa's peace and security networks and considers how a complexity informed Adaptive Peacebuilding approach can assist in strengthening community resilience and stimulating self-organized adaptive capacity. The spread of the virus is still increasing steadily, and the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. The question is what can African civil society, governments and multilateral organizations do to further strengthen and support the pattern of resilience that has emerged over the first 1 year of the COVID-19 crises in Africa?

The author would like to recognize the invaluable research assistance of Neyma Mahomed Ali and the contribution of ACCORD's COVID-19 Conflict and Resilience Monitor. The engagement with colleagues and contributors stimulated much of the analysis contained in this article.

Introduction

Many commentators predicted that the impact of COVID-19 on Africa, with its high levels of under-development and weak public health systems, will be particularly catastrophic.[1]

However, over the 24 months since the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in Africa on 14 February 2020 in Egypt, the pattern has been one of resilience rather than insecurity, chaos and conflict.[2] The aim of this article is to assess the extent to which Africa's peace and security networks have been disrupted

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by COVID-19, to improve our understanding of the sources of resilience in Africa's communities and social institutions, and to consider how this social adaptive capacity can be further strengthened to mitigate against the medium- and longer-term effects of COVID-19 and other future stressors like climate change-related shocks and setbacks.

The spread of the virus is still increasing steadily, and some countries have experienced several waves of infection. Overall, the situation is likely to get worse before enough people are vaccinated against the virus for the situation to get better. This is likely to take Africa into at least a third year, if not longer, as the current rate of vaccinations are very slow due to the limited availability of vaccines in Africa and weak public health systems. The central question the article will attempt to answer is what can African civil society, governments and multilateral organizations do to further strengthen and support the pattern of social resilience that has emerged over the first 24 months of the COVID-19 crises in Africa? In answering this question, the article will consider how a complexity informed Adaptive Peacebuilding approach can assist in strengthening community resilience and stimulating self-organized adaptive capacity.

COVID-19 infection rates in Africa are still lagging behind East Asia, Europe and America. Nevertheless, projections are that the number of cases will grow exponentially in Africa, as it did elsewhere. COVID-19 has spread slower in most of Africa, compared to the rest of the world, and a number of factors may help to explain this divergence, including, among others, demographics, settlement patterns and governance.[3] The majority of Africa's population is young and the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in the initial stages, seems to have most affected the older generations. In many African countries half or more of the population live in rural areas and they are poorly connected by road, so the opportunities for spreading the disease are limited. The slow onset of the disease and the early lessons emerging from China, Italy and elsewhere, enabled many African countries to follow World Health Organization (WHO) and the AU's African Center for Disease Control (African CDC) guidelines, and as a result most African governments acted much earlier and more decisively to close their borders and to introduce social distancing measures than many other countries did, when they had similar levels of confirmed cases. Examples include Angola in the south-west, Kenya in the north-east, Tunisia in the north and South Africa in the south.[4]

The predictive models suggested that as the overall number of infections starts to increase, the caseload of patients that need medical care is expected to increase until they eventually overwhelm Africa's already limited and weak health systems.[5] This has not happened even in the worst affected countries like Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and South Africa. Economic forecasts in most African countries were downgraded by at least 2–3 percentage points for 2020 and 2021.[6] With approximately 71% of people self-employed in the informal

economy in Africa, the social distancing and self-isolation measures introduced in almost all African countries have had a significant economic impact on people's livelihoods.[7] These effects in the health and economic sectors have exposed and compounded preexisting social, political and environmental vulnerabilities, especially in conflict-affected countries and regions, and have severely stress-tested the social cohesion and resilience of African countries and societies.

The longer-term impact on peace and security in Africa is hard to predict at this stage. We know that in the short- to medium-term the COVID-19 pandemic has added significant additional layers of stress to governance systems that have been already under pressure from existing conflicts, violent extremism, significant refugee and IDP populations, migration, organized crime and climate-related security risks.[8] In some cases, social frustrations related to especially the economic and livelihood effects of the lockdown measures introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19 have resulted in protests and social unrest. In a few others, such as seems to have been the case in Cameroon, COVID-19 have created opportunities for cease-fire or peace agreement negotiations.[9]

This article is focused on understanding the extent of disruptions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on the resilience of the African peace and security networks, as well as what can be done to further strengthen its resilience and adaptive capacity to mitigate against increasingly severe disruptions over the coming months and years, whether due to COVID-19, climate change or other such shocks. The article will first assess the degree to which COVID-19 has disrupted peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding networks in Africa to date. It will then consider how the resilience of African communities and social institutions can be further strengthened by stimulating, strengthening and supporting self-organized social adaptive capacity. To do so we will turn to Complexity Theory and Adaptive Peacebuilding in the last section of the article, as this lens helps us to understand how to influence complex social systems and Adaptive Peacebuilding provides us with a specific methodology for doing so.

Resilience and adaptive capacity

A useful concept that enhances our understanding of how societies react to shocks and stressors and manage change is resilience, but what exactly does it mean?[10] Resilience, in this social context, refers to the capacity of social institutions to absorb and adapt to shocks and stress and to sustain acceptable level of function, structure, and identity under pressure.[11]

The related concept of adaptive capacity is defined as the ability to thrive in an environment characterized by change.[12] In the peace and security context, it refers to the ability of a society to absorb disruptive change, to take

advantage of opportunities, and to adapt.[13] Resilience and adaptive capacity are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The more adaptive capacity a society has, the more resilient it will be.

Resilience and adaptive capacity rely on social capital. Social capital refers to the resources and other public goods that individuals and social institutions can access via networks and communities.[14] Social capital is defined by the OECD as networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups.[15] In other words, it refers to how social networks facilitate understanding and trust, and in the process enable people to work together.

In the African context the social and community resilience shown to date in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and previously in response to Ebola and HIV/Aids, is related to the robust social family and community networks that exist in rural areas, and that are to some extent maintained (today also digitally) and re-created when people urbanize.[16] New networks are also formed in urban settings around shared interests in sport, religion, work, etc.

The World Bank's World Development Report of 2011 defined institutions as "the formal and informal 'rules of the game,' which include formal rules, written laws, organisations, informal norms of behaviour and shared beliefs."-[17] Social institutions thus encompass the formal and informal institutions and networks that individuals, communities and societies can access and use to collectively manage societal change or respond to exogenous shocks.

A society's vulnerability to disruption is gradually reduced as their social institutions develop more complex layers, connections and levels of resilience, which means that they will be in a better position to cope with the shocks and challenges they are exposed to.[18] Resilience is increased when social institutions and networks become more diverse and interconnected, so that the social circuitry that develop as a result can share and process more information.[19] Robust self-organized networks distribute vulnerability across their social networks. If one node fails under pressure, others can carry the load, thus preventing system collapse.[20]

This is why one worrying aspect of COVID-19's impact on peace and security in Africa is that many of the multilateral, regional and national capacities and networks, including those of civil society, that would otherwise have been engaged in conflict prevention, mediation, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding have also been disrupted by COVID-19, or more specifically by the measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus.[21]

Impact of social unrest and violent conflict

Apart from Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, South Africa and a handful of other countries, COVID-19 has not yet emerged as a major public health emergency in Africa. For most countries on the continent, the measures introduced to

contain the virus – whilst they may have prevented the spread of the disease, and saved thousands of lives – had the unintended consequence or side-effect of significantly disrupting the livelihoods of people and the economy more generally. In Africa, a significant proportion of people operate in the informal sector and depend on daily income through labor or small-scale trading to support their families.[22] Their livelihoods have been disrupted by the measures introduced to contain the spread of the new coronavirus. The lockdown measures meant that they were unable to seek work or to access markets to buy the goods meant for small-scale trading. Businesses and factories were closed and many others that work in the formal economy have been unable to return to work or have lost their jobs. International and national travel that sustain tourism abruptly ended and this has severely affected the hotels, restaurants, tour operators, airlines, and related businesses, many of which rely on short-term labor arrangements. In South Africa, for example, it is estimated that approximately 3 million people have become unemployed as of July 2020 as a result of COVID-19,[23] and this figure increased to 7.2 million by February 2021.[24]

The public health emergency and its socio-economic consequences was widely anticipated to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in societies across Africa and to contribute to an increase in social unrest and even violent conflict.[25] However, 6 months into the COVID-19 crisis these trends have not yet materialized. In fact, the lockdown measures have, at first, resulted in a significant drop in most crimes,[26] protests and riots,[27] with domestic and gender-based violence[28] the exception. The lockdown policies, including the closing of schools and working from home policies have increased the risk for those persons who are in abusive relationships.[29] There has been a steady increase in public unrest as people voice their frustrations at the COVID-19 containment measures and other political tensions since the first lockdown lows.[30] Initially, there was also an increase in arrests associated with the enforcement of the lockdown measures, which in several cases were enacted through emergency powers.[31] Many countries deployed their armed forces to support the police[32] and in some cases this led to the use of excessive force and other abuses.[33] In countries, such as Kenya,[34] Nigeria[35] and Uganda,[36] it has been reported at times that more people have died from security force action than from COVID-19.

The introduction of the COVID-19 containment measures also posed a challenge for countries that have had elections scheduled over this period.[37] Some postponed their elections, and in some cases like in Ethiopia this further increased political tensions. In others like Liberia it creates a constitutional crisis. Others went ahead with their scheduled electionsfor instance, in Burundi, Mali and Malawi, but as COVID-19 limited campaigning and

participation, many of these elections were also criticized for both their lack of adequate preparations, credibility and the way they endangered the health of voters and electoral officials.

As many commentators predicted, all of these economic and political tensions, coupled with the public health crisis could have resulted in much more political unrest and even violent conflict than what have actually materialized over the past year and months.[38] In a few cases we have witnessed stigmatization and discrimination,[39] heightened political tensions coupled with social unrest, security force actions, and deaths. Most countries that have suffered from armed violent conflict before COVID-19 have not experienced a significant increase or decrease in violent conflict over the last few months.[40] Apart from a few border-tensions, mostly related to trade,[41] there were no serious COVID-19 inter-state tensions.[42]

The pattern emerging out of Africa's first year under COVID-19 is rather one of resilience. We have seen communities and neighbors rendering support to each other.[43] In many African countries there has been higher levels of public trust than anticipated, with most people following the measures to contain the virus as best they can.[44] There has been an increase in social cooperation and support provided by community organizations, women's groups,[45] youth organizations,[46] organized religion, the private sector, and international partners, and many governments have introduced formal relief packages in the form of social grants,[47] tax relief,[48] free services,[49] etc. Overall people, families and communities have found ways of adapting, and instead of turning to violence or other negative coping mechanisms as many predicted, have found new ways to cooperate and support each other, in the spirit of *ubuntu*[50] and African solidarity.[51]

The way in which some governments, state institutions, the private sector and civil society organizations have responded to COVID-19 have built public trust and bolstered social cohesion, and as a result the resilience and social adaptive capacity of those countries.[52] There were also examples of actions taken by other governments that have undermined trust and weakened resilience. Heavy-handed enforcement of COVID-19 containment measures and countrywide lockdown measures that did not take into account local risk factors and the socio-economic or cultural needs of specific communities, or vulnerable groups, have damaged public trust and undermined the social resilience of those countries or communities. On the other hand, measures aimed at easing the impact of the containment measures – such as free water in Ghana[53]; tax relief in Kenya[54]; economic stimulus initiatives for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa[55]; and other such social protection measures – have boosted public trust and resilience. Transparency, consultation with key stakeholders (for instance, in the corporate and education sectors) and good communication have also played important roles.[56]

Impact on peace operations

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted African Union (AU) and United Nations (UN) peace operations in Africa. In the short- to medium-term activities like patrols and meetings have been reduced to the most essential, rotations and leave-related travel have been frozen, and most headquarters staff have been working remotely. Despite these significant and unprecedented disruptions most of the missions have adapted remarkably well. However, even more disruption is likely in the medium- to longer-term as the COVID-19 situation further worsens in Africa and when the global economic recession, that is expected to follow in the wake of the virus, may force peace operations to contract in size and scope.

Impact on operations and mandate delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the AU and the UN to develop new adaptive contingency plans for their peace operations. Among others these plans identify which activities need to be carried out, despite COVID-19, to meet mandated responsibilities. These typically include support to peace processes, patrols and activities related to stabilization and the protection of civilians, convoy escorts and other forms of support to humanitarian assistance, force protection, protecting key infrastructure, and support to host state institutions and local authorities. These essential activities had to be adapted to minimize the risk of spreading the virus to both the people these missions are tasked to protect and to the peacekeepers themselves.[57]

It is important not to associate "essential" or "critical" functions only with hard-security or military activities like armed escorts. Many of the activities that distinguish multidimensional peace operations from other international military operations is linked to its civilian capacity to support political processes, to create conditions conducive for protection, to support the negotiation of local peace agreements, to observe and promote human rights and to support national, regional and local government capacities. Some of these civilian functions are still being carried out, but most of them are now done remotely using digital and video-conferencing technologies.

The AU's peace support operation in Somalia (AMISOM) is a good example. The mission is continuing to undertake essential operational tasks, but it has also established a COVID-19 task force that has developed measures aimed at preventing and containing the spread of the virus.[58] The movement of personnel have been reduced to the essential. Initially, all rotations and new deployments have been suspended until the end of June 2020, both for the safety of the troops and to reduce the risk that new arrivals may bring the virus into the country. Civilian staff who were outside Somalia when the borders were closed, are working from home and non-critical staff were moved out of

Mogadishu. In the AMISOM headquarters in Mogadishu essential staff work in decongested offices and from their accommodations. There are limitations on the size and number of meetings that cannot be done remotely.

The headquarters of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) mission to counter Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin have introduced similar measures.[59] Only essential staff is in the office on a rotational basis, and only mission-critical operational tasks are supported. Other staff work from home.

One of the priority areas for AU and UN peace operations is supporting host authorities and communities. Quick Impact Projects and programmatic funding have been repurposed to help local institutions and communities prepare for and cope with the virus. For example, in the Central African Republic, the DRC and elsewhere, missions have supported local mask production by women's groups.

Financial impact

The most severe disruption to AU and UN peacekeeping is likely to be caused by another side-effect of the COVID-19 crisis, a global economic recession. The United States, which is one of the countries most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, is also the largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. Many of the more than 120 countries that have contributed peacekeepers in the past, including big contributors like Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Senegal, may also come under domestic pressure to reduce troop numbers for financial or new coronavirus risk-related reasons.[60]

In the medium-term, the AU and UN may thus be faced with a situation where peace operations have significantly less capacity than they do today. The burden on AU and UN peace operations will only increase. On the one hand, missions are under increasing pressure to improve the effectiveness of their operations whilst on the other, they have to simultaneously cope with shrinking budgets and even more complex operational environments further constrained by the coronavirus and climate change.[61] Hopefully, the AU and UN member states that have to make decisions about the funding of peace operations will show the same agility that missions have demonstrated over the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. Peace operations will need flexibility as they continue to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances in the coming months.

The AU and UN headquarters, and their respective peace operations, have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the way they have coped with, and adapted to the crisis to date.[62] Some of the new innovations and practices that have emerged in this process are specific to the virus and will change over time in response to the severity of the risk the virus poses. Others are likely to be more lasting, including a more essential-scale approach to mandate implementation and a more adaptive approach to planning and mission

management. The COVID-19 pandemic may also help the UN to focus more on the social and economic drivers of conflict.[63] The most dramatic change, however, is likely to be a significant reduction in funding and troop numbers over the medium- to long-term as peace operations contract in lockstep with the global economy.

Impact on peacemaking and peacebuilding

The COVID-19 pandemic has also significantly disrupted peacemaking and peacebuilding.[64] All travel has been halted, most borders have been closed and new ways of working have had to be developed. Mediation initiatives and peacebuilding programs have had to be reviewed and adapted to the new circumstances. In most cases, international staff are now working remotely, and national and local peacebuilders now have to continue the work on their own.[65]

In just a few weeks, COVID-19 completely disrupted international peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts. The social distancing measures that everyone adopted and the lockdown policies that governments implemented to stop the spread of COVID-19 significantly disrupted the pattern of work[66] that peacemaking and peacebuilding organizations have developed over decades. In the short term, international mediators and peacebuilders could no longer travel to meet with partners on the ground, or to make assessments, conduct trainings, facilitate negotiations, and implement programs. They could no longer engage in person with the communities or groups with whom they worked. They could also not meet with their international peers in workshops or seminars to take stock of new developments, learn new skills or co-develop new tools or guidelines. In the short to medium term, it meant that the prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding programs that multilateral organizations like the AU and UN, governments and civil society had embarked on could no longer be carried out as planned. The commitments made to partners and funders had to be adjusted, and new ways of working had to be developed.[67]

Conflict resolution and peacebuilding is about relationships between people, and about how social groups and communities interact with each other. There is only so much one can do from a distance. To truly transform relationships, one needs to build trust in each other through face-to-face dialog, and this is an iterative process that has to take place and be consolidated over months and years. This is why some peacebuilders see COVID-19 as a temporary disruption, which they can use to regroup, until they are able to return to the kind of in-person and in-country work they have done before. For them this is an opportunity to reflect, update their learning, familiarize themselves with recent research and to review their policies, training material and plans.

Other peacebuilding practitioners are of the view that at least some of the changes brought about by COVID-19 may have a more lasting disruptive effect on peacebuilding. For example, in a post-COVID-19 future there may be less international travel because COVID-19 has shown that a large percentage of meetings and seminars can take place virtually. Some see this as a positive adaptation that will reduce costs and the negative impact travel has on the environment. Another adaptation that has been accelerated by COVID-19 is the increasing digitalization of peacebuilding work.[68] The sharing of information, the development of networks, coordination and division of work and consultations on reviews or reports and evaluations are among the many aspects of peacebuilding work that can be facilitated by digital platforms.[69]

One constraint is the degree to which the people that peacebuilders need to communicate with, have access to the internet.[70] Digital inclusion has thus emerged as an important factor. Existing initiatives to promote digital inclusion[71] have been accelerated, and this is likely to be a growth area for peacemaking and peacebuilding in the medium term. For example, in South Sudan, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have established internet cafés where people can access computers and the internet. Many people – especially those community, women, and youth leaders with whom peacebuilders liaise in countries affected by conflict – now do have smartphones, but connectivity is still a problem. For those with internet access, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become important sources of news, and have helped with the sharing of information, coordination, and mobilization. Providing free internet connectivity is thus likely to be a major development and peacebuilding priority in the coming months and years.

Another adaptation that is emerging is a shift in agency to local peacebuilders. For years, there has been a growing emphasis on local peacebuilding, local ownership and context-specific approaches, but empowering local peacebuilders was still something that international or national-level peacebuilders did for local peacebuilders.[72] Now that COVID-19 has closed borders and disrupted travel, national and local peacebuilders may finally get the peacebuilding space to themselves.[73] COVID-19 has provided us with an opportunity to truly build and strengthen national and local capacities for peace. International support can be provided from a digital distance, and national and local actors can, for the first time, truly have the room to self-organize. In some cases, this means that the national and local offices of international NGOs are now managed exclusively by national staff. In other cases, it may mean that national and local NGOs which suffered from being relegated to a local implementing partner role in the past, now have the opportunity to become leading peacebuilding actors in their own right.[74] This does, of course, also mean that international donors and peacebuilders have to adapt the way they engage with and support national and local peacebuilders. In addition, it

means the scaling up of resources, in terms of expertise, personnel and technical capacities, that will be required for effective national efforts to be undertaken. In the past, many of these international partners were slow to make the actual changes needed to align their practice with their local ownership policies, but COVID-19 may now help them to overcome their own internal inertia.

One major concern, however, is the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding funding. One does not have to be clairvoyant to see that the extent to which COVID-19 has disrupted the international economy will result in a significant economic recession over the coming months. At the same time, there will be a growing demand for life-saving humanitarian assistance, direct support for public health expenditure and debt relief – which all implies that there will most likely be less money available for peacebuilding. Peacebuilders will thus have to adapt to a situation where there is less international funding available.[75] This may mean less net peacebuilding overall, but the local and international peacebuilding organizations that survive the economic downturn may be more innovative, specialized and local.

Thus far, the public health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa has been minimal, but the spread of the virus on the continent is still increasing. The social and economic impacts of the measures to contain the virus in Africa have had a more direct impact to date on political uncertainty, and social unrest and protest actions are increasing. The anticipated decrease in international funding available for peacebuilding may thus be matched with an increase in social unrest and violent conflict, partly because the global economic recession will have local effects, such as the rising costs of basic necessities and the inability of governments to increase social spending. The demand for peacebuilding will thus increase,[76] but due to limited funding for local peacebuilding and the disruption of international peacebuilding, the overall supply will most likely contract.[77]

Impact on the African union's peace and security architecture

The African Union is coordinating the effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Africa, but the measures introduced to contain the spread of the virus have also significantly disrupting the reforms, programs and operations of the AU. From the time when COVID-19 was detected in Wuhan in December 2019, the AU's African Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) worked to advice and build the capacity of African governments to prepare for the arrival of the virus. The African CDC also helped to coordinate international support to Africa. For example, in March 2020 the CDC oversaw the distribution of the laboratory diagnostic test kits and personal protective equipment that Jack Ma's Alibaba Foundation donated to African countries, and subsequently the AU and CDC have

developed a partnership to accelerate COVID-19 testing (PACT)[78] and launched a new consortium to coordinate and facilitate COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials (CONCVACT).[79]

In the process, the African CDC has become the most visible face of the African Union in this pandemic. By pooling expertise at the multilateral level, the AU has provided technical assistance to its member states, played a critical role in supporting coordination among them, and helped to mobilize support on their behalf with international partners.

It would have been natural, faced with a global pandemic of this scale, for African countries like some other countries have done worldwide, to prioritize domestic needs like public health expenditure, economic stimulus, and public order. From the onset most Africa countries have recognized, however, that they will not be able to cope on their own with the potential magnitude of this pandemic, and they have thus turned to the African Union, the United Nations and others for assistance with coordination, prevention, preparedness and containment. African countries also realized early on that they have to pool resources and efforts when it comes to procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies, or to obtain a potential future vaccine, as these are commodities that the whole world was trying to secure and obtain at the same time.

African Health Ministers started to meet already in February 2020 to coordinate the African response. African Finance Ministers – who have developed a strong network in the context of the development and management of the AU's financial reforms over the last 2 years – started to meet virtually in mid-March 2020 to coordinate their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among others, they have called for debt interest payments relief to increase liquidity, so that African countries can be in a better position to increase health spending and stimulate their economies. The G20 has subsequently agreed in April 2020 to a debt service suspension[80] but this agreement does not include multilateral and private lenders and thus far falls short of African expectations and needs.

At the end of March 2020 South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, as chair of the AU, convened the first of several meetings of the AU Bureau – which includes the chair of the AU Commission and the outgoing (Egypt) and incoming (DRC) chairs of the AU – dedicated to develop a common African response to the virus. Among others, the Bureau decided to establish an Africa Coronavirus Response Fund and appointed a number of special envoys tasked with mobilizing international support for Africa's COVID-19 response.[81] In November 2020 the Chairperson also established the COVID-19 African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT).[82] AVATT coordinated and pooled African capacity to buy vaccines and helped to develop a common African position on vaccines. In the context of porous borders and a history of pan-

African cooperation, there is thus a strong recognition that this pandemic cannot be managed without regional, continental and international coordination and cooperation.

The impact on the African union commission

The travel restrictions and social distancing measures introduced by the African Union and African countries to prevent and contain the spread of the virus have also significantly disrupted the ability of the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC, to help contain the pandemic. On 13 March 2020, the African Union Commission announced a suspension of all AU meetings until further notice.[83] The AU is an intergovernmental body that is reliant on member state direction and engagement. The suspension of meetings and travel had a considerable effect on the work of the African Union. Several of its high-level strategic initiatives, such as the 2020 flagship Silencing the Guns campaign, AU reforms including the roll-out of new 0.2% import levy, and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), have been affected. For example, the extraordinary summit scheduled for May 2020 in South Africa was postponed and this has caused delays in both the Silencing the Guns campaign and the AfCFTA timetable. The commencement of trading within the AfCFTA wass originally slated for 1 July 2020 but had to be postponed.

The work plan and daily functioning of the African Union Commission has also been significantly affected by the measures taken to ensure the health of staff, member states personnel and partners that engage with each other at the Commission's headquarters in Addis Ababa. The Commission's headquarters and its offices across Africa has been locked down and only essential staff is allowed access, on a rotational basis. All operations and travel were initially suspended and later limited to the essential. African Union staff is working from home on those aspects of their work that can be done remotely, but frequent electricity cuts and unreliable internet access in many countries, including Ethiopia where the AUC is based, makes that difficult.

The measures taken to prevent the spread and contain the virus will also, however, limit and hinder the African Union's capacity to prevent and manage new and existing conflicts. The African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) has initially suspended its work, but it has subsequently resumed meeting.[84] The PSC is overseeing several ongoing operations and missions and has a number of critically important issues on its agenda. For example, following the AU Summit in February, the PSC was working on an initiative to deploy a 3000 strong African Union force in the Sahel. Other key issues include the AU operation in Somalia, the situation in Libya, the implementation of the peace agreements in CAR and South Sudan, the political transition

in Sudan and the closure of the joint African Union-United Nations mission in Darfur. The PSC is also responsible for overseeing the development of common African positions on key strategic issues. For example, in April 2020 the PSC's technical committee was due to consider the AU position on the financing of UN-authorized African Union peace support operations. All these issues require the urgent attention of the PSC, but COVID-19 has reduced the workload of the PSC and it is has not yet been able to bounce back fully to pre-COVID-19 levels of productivity.[85]

Similarly, the African Union Commission's peace and security staff, like the rest of the Commission, had to limit its work to the essential. Staff is on a rotational basis continuing to, for example, run the AU's situation room, but even this was initially done remotely. Most of the staff is working from home on those issues that can be managed remotely. These may include continuing to monitor and report on conflicts, supporting AU missions and offices, updating and developing new policies, revising and developing new guidelines, standing operating procedures and training material, and revising contingency plans in light of emerging and anticipated COVID-19 related effects. For example, one of the options the staff were considering was when and how to deploy relevant African Standby Force (ASF) capacities in support of COVID-19, e.g. military hospitals, medical staff and aircraft, or some of the ASF's strategic stocks from its logistics depot in Douala.

Geopolitical implications

Key partnership engagements have also been delayed and postponed. The AU and European Union ministerial-level meeting that was planned for early May 2020, to prepare for their summit in October, where a new Africa-Europe strategic relationship was due to be agreed, has been postponed. The African Union saw the negotiation of a new AU-EU partnership agreement as an opportunity to move away from a donor-recipient relationship with the EU, and to replace it with a strategic partnership between two Unions.[86] There is now a risk that the COVID-19 crisis may make African countries more dependent on foreign assistance and thus strengthen the aid dimension of the relationship between the AU the EU and other partners.

The global response to the spread of COVID-19 in Africa has highlighted recent shifts in the global order and its implications for Africa. The USA, India and the Gulf states have been less visibly present, compared to, for example, China and the EU, in African forums where COVID-19 responses were being coordinated and discussed. Africa was on the top of the EU agenda until February 2020, but since early March 2020 the migration crisis and subsequently the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have dominated the EU agenda. The Nordic countries have, despite being significantly affected by COVID-19 themselves, spearheaded the creation of a COVID-19 UN multi-donor trust

fund and are stepping up their support make vaccines available globally.[87] China seems to be over the worst and is now in a position to help the rest of the world (as opposed to January 2020 when they received help from the EU and others). China has visibly stepped up its medical diplomacy and has been very active in sharing its COVID-19 containment experience, as well as distributing medical supplies and equipment to countries in Africa. In fact, COVID-19 may be the trigger for China to also become a major humanitarian actor in the future.

The African union needs to adapt and develop new ways of working

The African Union and its member states have been relatively quick to take measures to prevent and contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions have saved many thousands of lives. However, these steps also had an adverse effect on the work of the African Union. No one knows at this stage when the social distancing measures at the African Union Commission can be removed. If Africa follows the global pattern, the number of people infected in Africa will continue to increase over the coming months. It is estimated that Africa will probably need another 12–18 months for vaccines to be sufficiently distributed and administered. It is thus unlikely that these measures can be removed for several months.

The African Union needed to adapt to this new reality and it had to develop new ways of working for at least the first few months that did not require traveling and physical meetings. This was a challenging transition for an intergovernmental organization whose programs are dependent on member state inputs, validation, approval, and funding. In the first few months the African Union switched from physical meetings to written inputs, remote meetings, and digital processes. A good example is the way the AU Bureau has met virtually on several occasions over the last two years to coordinate the African Union response to COVID-19 and to address other continental issues. Through a number of virtual meetings, the AU Bureau acted decisively to prevent an escalation of the tensions among Nile river basin countries, which showed that even serious diplomatic crises and potential inter-state conflicts can be managed digitally over this period.[88]

Utilizing complexity to enhance resilience and adaptive capacity

This article has argued that despite significant disruptions to date, the catastrophic COVID-19 scenarios that many analysts predicted would befall Africa have not materialized. After the first 24 months of the pandemic on the continent, the emerging pattern is one of resilience rather than collapse, insecurity, and conflict. In contrast to the worst-case scenarios that are popular in films and books, disaster research reveals that this kind of resilience is more

common that we realize. Rebecca Solint documents with examples from the Mexico City earthquake, the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, among others, how many ordinary people rose to the occasion, organized themselves, and demonstrated altruism, resourcefulness and generosity amid the grief and the disruption of their everyday life caused by these disasters.[89] She argues that these kinds of crisis give rise to opportunities for purposefulness, a sense of community, and meaningful work that most people desire, but that is often unmet. Charles Fritz explains how this sense of purpose comes about:

> "The widespread sharing of danger, loss, and deprivation produces an intimate, primarily group solidarity among the survivors ... People are thus able to perceive, with a clarity never before possible, a set of underlying basic values to which all people subscribe. They realize that collective action is necessary for these values to be maintained and that individual and group goals are inextricably merged. This merging of individual and societal needs provides a feeling of belonging and a sense of unity rarely achieved under normal circumstances".[90]

However, Solint also discusses other cases that show that the effects Fritz describe are not universal or automatic to either every disaster or for everyone in any disaster. In many of these cases no community converged because people were displaced, dispersed and isolated, and much of the rescue and recovery work was done by outsiders.[91] COVID-19 differs from an earthquake or hurricane in that it is a slow-onset disaster. Disasters causes harm, but they can also stimulate much needed innovations, adaptations, and transformations. Resilience or collapse is not pre-determined. The outcome depends on the social capital and adaptive capacity of a community or society and its social institutions. The challenge for civil society, governments and multilateral organizations is thus to find ways to strengthen social resilience, mitigate against harm, counter those that exploit disasters to enrich themselves and to facilitate the positive social transformations triggered by the COVID-19 crisis.

What can we learn from the study of complexity that can help peacemakers, peacekeepers and peacebuilders increase the likelihood, that faced with a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, people and their social institutions will find the resilience to cooperate and support each other, rather than to compete or lapse into violent conflict?

Complexity Theory offers insights into how the behavior of individuals and groups leads to the emergent behavior of social systems like communities or societies. We are interested in how these systems function, and especially how they react to shocks of the kind we anticipate when a crisis like COVID-19 manages to cause a major disruption to the normal life of society. Complexity Theory provides us with a theoretical framework for understanding how societies and communities function under stress, including how they react to

disruptions.[92] It also helps us understand how to influence complex systems, for example, how to strengthen the resilience and adaptive capacity of a social system.[93] By applying some of these insights, we may be able to strengthen the ability of our societies to prevent, manage, withstand and recover from the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social systems are empirically complex. This means that they are a particular type of system that can adapt, and that demonstrates emergent properties, including self-organizing behavior. They emerge, and are maintained, as a result of the dynamic and non-linear interactions of the individuals and institutions that make up the system, based on the information available to them locally, and as a result of their interaction with their environment, as well as from the modulated feedback they receive from others in the system.[94]

As social systems are highly dynamic, non-linear, and emergent, it is not possible to find general laws or rules that will help us predict with certainty, how a particular society or community will behave in the future—for instance, in response to the spread of COVID-19. For example, in 2019 the Global Health Security Index rated the United States as the least vulnerable and most capable country in the world to prevent, detect and manage a pandemic-like COVID-19.[95] This uncertainty is an intrinsic quality of complex systems, not a result of imperfect knowledge or inadequate planning or implementation.[96] This recognition has significant implications for how we can optimally plan for and attempt to manage the COVID-19 pandemic or other natural or man-made disasters. We will highlight three such implications.

Firstly, uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent characteristics of complex systems. That means that risk mitigation and response plans that are based on linear casual assumptions and pre-determined plans or response templates are very likely to be ineffective, because as COVID-19 has shown, the actual disaster we may face is likely to be different in important ways from what has been planned for. The way people and social institutions respond are also likely to differ from the way the plans and models assumed they are likely to behave. That does not mean that we cannot plan and invest in preparedness, but it does imply that our disaster response plans and our peace and security networks need to differ from conventional approaches in that they need to reflect a mind-set and matching capabilities that enable them to anticipate and cope with uncertainty, and that allow them to be resilient, regardless of the type of crises faced, and adaptive to the changing needs of the emergent situation.[97]

Secondly, the study of complexity has shed light on how complex adaptive systems self-organize. Self-Organization in the social context refers to the various processes and mechanisms a society uses to manage itself, including in times of crisis. It speaks to the ability of a society to manage its tensions, pressures, disputes, crisis, and shocks without collapsing into disorder and violence. The implication is that responses to slow-onset disasters like

COVID-19 that manage to leverage the self-organizing ability of a society or community are much more likely to be effective than responses that rely on a predetermined plan or a top-down coordination system. It means that in addition to the traditional public security and emergency response capacities, relevant national and local authorities need to invest in the skillsets and methodologies that can help them to stimulate and facilitate the resilient capacity of societies to self-organize in slow-onset disaster contexts. This is one area where those involved in disaster management or public health emergencies can learn a lot from peacebuilding.

Thirdly, the theory of complexity shows us that the optimal way complex social systems cope with uncertainty is to employ an adaptive approach. We can prepare for fire, floods, earthquakes, etc. because although we may not know when they may occur, they are natural events that follow certain known patterns. A public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic differs in that it is a complex social rather than a purely natural phenomenon. The behavior of a virus is natural and although it may also adapt, mutate, and evolve in complex ways, its behavior can be sufficiently understood to contain it. The way a community or society responds will to a stressor-like COVID-19, or the measures to contain it, is much more unpredictable and uncertain. Preplanned response strategies are thus unlikely to fully anticipate the way people may react to the spread of the disease or the measures introduced to contain it. The implication for those engaged in public health disaster preparedness and other slow-onset disasters that are dependent on social behavior is that the optimal way to effectively manage such a crisis is to engage in an adaptive process with the affected community, that is context- and time-specific, and that generate solutions that are emergent from an engagement with the community.[98] Planning and preparedness thus need to shift away from a preplanned step-by-step response strategy planned and carried out by emergency management officials to an adaptive approach, where emergency officials, relevant authorities, civil society and the private sector engage in a collaborative process with relevant communities designed to find emergent context-specific solutions.[99]

Adaptive peacebuilding

Adaptive Peacebuilding is a process methodology aimed at coping with complexity and influencing social systems at risk of lapsing into violent conflict to sustain peace.[100] It has been established earlier that social systems are complex, and that their behavior is thus highly dynamic and non-linear. The implication is that the way a particular social system will respond to attempts to influence it will be uncertain and unpredictable. We also know that if we want the

outcome to be self-sustainable, then the changes we want to bring about have to be context- and time-specific and have to be emergent from the societies themselves.[101]

The focus on resilience and adaptive capacity reflects a shift away from the aspiration to control how a society will respond to an unfolding disaster or conflict. In its place the emphasis is on supporting and enhancing the self-organizing capacities of social systems to cope with, adapt to, and bounce back from disruptive changes. One can attempt to modulate or strengthen the constructive or positive effects of self-organization in a society or community by facilitating and modulating the flow of information and by stimulating the emergence and interconnectedness of networks. This will help a society or community to develop enough of a shared understanding of the crisis to respond coherently, and to continue to adapt together to the unfolding situation.[102]

It is difficult for authorities, emergency agencies and security services that have been professionally trained to take control in a disaster, rescue, or public security context to trust an adaptive process that relies on self-organization. The key is to recognize the essential difference between natural disasters and man-made complex emergencies, and the difference between saving lives in a sudden onset disaster setting and maintaining social cohesion and public trust in a slow onset disaster. Social cohesion and public trust have to be maintained and sustained by social institutions, civil society, the private sector and government authorities working collaboratively together. Preexisting levels of public trust and social cohesion is an important indicator of potential social capital,[103] but actual actions during the unfolding crisis, and the degree to which people are participating and co-shaping the outcome is critical in determining the degree to which potential resilience is realized, under stress, in practice.

Local authorities and emergency management officials tend to respond to sudden onset disasters by tightening command and control, in the belief that in the face of potential chaos and civil unrest, formal hierarchical organizational responses, often linked to emergency powers, are needed to take back control in the aftermath of a natural or man-made disaster. The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach provides those that need to engage with and influence a complex social system with a methodology designed to cope with this complexity and uncertainty. Instead of using a pre-designed blueprint, or a top-down control model, the Adaptive Peacebuilding approach is a conscious method for engaging with a particular society to develop an intervention together with them from the bottom up, in a continuous iterative adaptive learning process. The aim is to stimulate self-organization, not to control how a community will act. A self-organized social system cannot be directed to achieve a specific pre-determined result. However, it can be nudged or influenced using positive and negative incentives.

The Adaptive Peacebuilding methodology involved undertaking several different interventions simultaneously, and then monitoring which of these, if any, seem to be having the desired effect. Based on the feedback, those that showed no effect, or a negative effect should be discontinued, whilst those showing some effect toward the desired outcome can be expanded or scaled-up. Further variety should be introduced at each cycle to explore which approaches have the most effect. This is a process that needs to be undertaken together with the community in question, and as such the process itself acts as a further enabler to encourage information sharing. The end result is likely to be more appropriate to the context than what any predetermined plan could have foreseen. The use of "may," "usually" and "often" is deliberate because there may also be other factors (both endogenous and exogenous) at play that may be more influential and that may result in other outcomes. The adaptive methodology will help to uncover these influences and provide options for countering their influence or mitigating their effects. The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach is thus a specific methodology for coping with the complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability we encounter when attempting to influence complex social systems.[104]

The key differences between an Adaptive Peacebuilding approach and more conventional top-down disaster management approaches are: (1) recognizing the role of resilience and adaptive capacity in a slow-onset disaster, and (2) understanding that optimal responses have to be emergent from the context and affected community. In other words, it is understood that the optimal coping strategy for a slow-onset complex social emergency is to mobilize and encourage local self-organized adaptation.

The conventional approach would be that in a crisis situation there is no time to discuss the problem, one just has to act according to a pre-designed emergency plan, managed by trained and experiences emergency officials. This approach may be valid for life-saving actions, such as firefighting or search and rescue operations in the wake of a sudden-onset natural disaster. However, in the context of a slow-onset public health crisis-like COVID-19, where saving lives depend on sustained social cooperation over an extended period of time, the emphasis has to be on investing in, further strengthening and mobilizing the resilience and adaptive capacity that exists in the society. An Adaptive Peacebuilding approach does not imply that expert or scientific knowledge is not important, but one needs to draw a distinction between what experts say needs to be done, and how to actually achieve that in the context of social complexity. For example, the science may tell you that you need to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 by avoiding close contact between people, but how you achieve that it in a densely populated slum community in a typical African city is something you can only find out through adaptive practice and learning in partnership and collaboration with that community.

The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach provides a methodology for this kind of community engagement, and for developing together with the community, in a collaborative process, a structured action-orientated response. The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach also recognizes that a pre-determined response plan is unlikely to match the realities of the crisis at hand, and therefore relies rather on an iterative adaptive learning process to generate a context-specific set of actions that involves, and thus generates the co-ownership of the people that will execute the plan, in the development and adaptation of the plan. As what works best is uncertain, the aim is to generate a variety of responses and to learn from them.

This approach is also based on an understanding that a single or uniform approach will not meet the needs of diverse communities, and that every specific community also contains its own diversity, including women, youth, the elderly, the disabled, and others, each of whom may have different needs and attributes.[105] There needs to be a structured learning process where the effects of the different initiatives on the community, taking into account its diversity, are assessed, and where decisions are made regarding continuing or not with specific policies or interventions, and about further adapting or scaling up those initiatives that show promise.

Adaptive Peacebuilding thus provides civil society, governments and multilateral organizations with a methodology that can help them, in collaboration with the affected communities, manage a slow-onset disaster-like COVID-19, through a continuous process of adaptation based on experimentation, feedback and collective learning. Most governments, international and regional organizations, and civil society institutions are already making use of some form of adaptive approach. A few has started to explicitly and consciously employ adaptive approaches in governance, development and peacebuilding contexts, spurred on in part by COVID-19, and related systemic stressors like climate change. It is anticipated that we will learn from, and further refine approaches like Adaptive Peacebuilding, once more lessons learned and organizational learning-type studies have been undertaken.

Conclusion

In this article, we have assessed the extent to which the COVID-19 crisis, and especially the measures adopted to contain it, has disrupted civil society, governments and multilateral organizations that are engaged in peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding in Africa. We have found that the work of global and local peace and security networks have been significantly disrupted, but that the people and organizations involved in these efforts have also shown remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity.

Thus, far Africa has been spared the brunt of the pandemic, but this is likely to change in the medium-term as the number of people infected continues to increase.[106] The more likely scenario is that the effects of the new coronavirus, coupled with other factors, such as climate change, will further increase instability and risk.[107] Despite significant disruptions to date, especially in the area of livelihoods and food security, the catastrophic COVID-19 scenarios that many analysts predicted have not materialized. After the first 24 months of the pandemic in Africa, the emerging pattern is one of resilience rather than insecurity, chaos, and conflict.

The spread of the virus is still increasing and the situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. One wonders how much more stress the affected communities can endure. This raises an important question, that this article aimed to partly answer, namely what can civil society, governments and multilateral organizations do to try to further strengthen community resilience and adaptive capacity? How we can use these emerging lessons in resilience to prepare our societies for the next phase of the COVID-19 crisis?

To help answer this question the article turned to Complexity Theory and Adaptive Peacebuilding. Complexity theory demonstrates that uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent characteristics of complex systems. That does not mean that we cannot plan and invest in preparedness, but it does imply that our disaster response plans and our peace and security networks need to reflect a mind-set and matching capabilities that enable them to anticipate and cope with uncertainty, and that allow them to be resilient and adaptive to the changing needs of the emergent situation. The study of complexity has also improved our understanding of how complex adaptive systems self-organize. The implication is that responses to slow-onset disasters like COVID-19 that manage to leverage the self-organizing ability of a society or community are likely to be more effective than a response strategy that relies on top-down imposed control. The optimal way to effectively manage such a crisis is to engage in an adaptive process with the affected community, that is context- and time-specific, and that generate solutions that are emergent from an engagement with the community.

The Adaptive Peacebuilding approach provides those that need to engage with and influence a complex social system with a methodology designed to cope with this complexity and uncertainty. It is a conscious method for engaging with affected communities and societies to develop a response together with them from the bottom up, in a continuous iterative adaptive learning process.

Over the first-year COVID-19 has significantly disrupted Africa's peace and security networks, but they have proven to be more resilient than many analysts predicted. By utilizing a complexity informed Adaptive Peacebuilding approach, Africa's peace, and security networks, in close collaboration with the affected communities and societies, may be able to further

strengthen community resilience and adaptive capacity. Adopting this kind of approach aimed at boosting national and local capacities for peace may help Africa survive the next wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and other such shocks and setbacks, without significant insecurity, chaos, or violent conflict.

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