

20th session of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration

Remarks by Mr. Paul Jackson

Building strong institutions for sustainable development in conflict-affected countries

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While evidence of the effects of the pandemic is still being generated, it is clear that, in many areas of vulnerability and where populations live in conflict-affected areas, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) creates new challenges and makes existing ones worse.

In conflict affected countries, institutions were already under severe pressure before the pandemic hit and it is clear that Covid-19 has hit those least able to cope, the hardest.

In acting as a multiplier, the pandemic directly affects the health, economic well-being and exclusion of millions of people already existing in vulnerable states. It also creates conditions in which those seeking to take advantage of the specific pandemic conditions are emboldened, which places populations at risk from violence from non-State actors, increasingly repressive government security institutions and transnational terrorist and criminal organizations.

The evidence that currently exists suggests that many people are suffering from an increase in sexual and gender-based violence as well as ongoing conflicts, strains on social cohesion and exposure to armed groups and organized crime. The evidence is clear that both opportunities and threats exist in all of those areas but, while there has been some success, for example in peace negotiations, levels of violence overall have returned to, or are even surpassing, pre-pandemic levels. In some cases, the popular protests happening as a result of the pandemic may lead to wider violent movements.

Public administration and government are critical in managing violence and conflict during the pandemic. However, where that has not been successful, there have been situations in which insensitivity and a lack of inclusive approaches have exacerbated questions of government legitimacy and growing mistrust between populations and governments, sometimes leading to violence.

Taking a conflict-sensitive approach, specifically not further exacerbating the exclusion or alienation of specific groups that may already be marginalized and whose conditions may have worsened during the pandemic, is therefore critical to successful public sector involvement. Building trust between government and citizen, which will also be critical in rolling out mass vaccination programmes and reducing future grievances, is central to conflict sensitivity.

Building trust in conflict-affected areas is something that has been featured in previous reports of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration and, in the present paper, the discussions around local government and other local actors that took place during the nineteenth session of the Committee remain relevant.

Recent experiences with other health crises, such as the Ebola epidemic in West and Central Africa, have shown that local populations may be mistrustful of centralized government programmes, while local community partnerships have been critical in developing trust in the safety of vaccines and health care. The development of local governance networks and community partnerships is therefore likely to be central to any successful exit from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Partnerships are also needed at the international level. The development and administration of vaccines require multilateral frameworks, approaches and policies, as well as significant logistical support for distribution. However, there are still some core problems with multilateral approaches, notably that coordination among all stakeholders is more easily organized than executed.

The United Nations has a critical role to play in bringing countries together to reach a consensus on coordination.

Public administration and governance are at the core of the global response to the pandemic. The technical ability of public officials is a necessary but insufficient condition for high-quality public administration. To be truly effective, government has to be both competent and perceived to be competent. Information is an area in which governments can play a key role. The pandemic has accelerated trends in mistrust of government and the use of “fake news” to provide alternative narratives to established facts.

Clear, verified information backed up by evidence is the key to overcoming that particular set of challenges. Attention to the politics of communicating evidence about vaccination programmes and the need for such programmes is critical, especially in conflict-affected situations in which levels of trust are low.

We have never needed the trusted position of the UN as a critical friend, more. It is therefore imperative that the UN is able to co-ordinate across its structures effectively at all levels so that it can provide a shared, common and evidenced view of the effects of ongoing crises in governance and provide leadership in ensuring that the pandemic does not leave more people further behind.