About United Against Inhumanity in the UK

United Against Inhumanity in the UK is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organisation. It is a member of the UAI international network. The UAI consists of former senior officials of the United Nations, leading non-governmental organisations, representatives of refugee and diaspora organisations and research institutes. Its overall objective is to campaign against policies and practices of those governments and other warring parties that perpetrate or condone illegal and inhumane attacks on civilians in conflict, as well as on refugees and asylum-seekers.

UAI in the UK is submitting this evidence to the Select Committee because it believes that populations in many countries affected by armed conflict are confronted not only by the daily toll of war, but also by grave, multiple and immediate threats ranging from locust infestation to floods, loss of livelihoods and serious food shortages, all of which are now compounded by the threat of Covid-19. UAI is presenting this evidence to highlight the support required to address the increasing vulnerabilities of those in conflict areas, now and in the longer-term.

A senior representative of the Committee of UAI in the UK would be pleased to offer oral evidence to the Select Committee.

Executive Summary

• The United Nations Secretary-General’s call for a global cessation of hostilities between warring parties to allow vital assistance to be provided for vulnerable people trapped in conflict zones, has had limited impact, leaving many thousands of people desperately vulnerable to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Secretary-General’s call requires more active political engagement, and complementary action from the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

• The space for essential civil society and NGO operations in response to COVID-19 is under threat in many countries affected by conflict, with the pandemic being used as a means for governments to try to assert control. In providing its immediate response package to Covid-19, DFID needs to support a conducive operating environment for NGOs and civil society.

• While the response to COVID-19 is understandably focused on the short-term, the UK government should also begin to consider ways to support social protection (safety nets) and economic and social recovery. The UK should use its partnership with the World Bank and other relevant financial institutions to initiate substantive efforts to support social protection, economic and social recovery, and ensure that civil society and NGOs are fully involved and supported in these recovery programmes.
• The Government should strengthen calls for a collective multilateral response to the crisis and regularly publicise its support for the essential roles played by the WHO and other entities of the UN system.

Protecting the vulnerable in conflict

1. **A critical moment for political and diplomatic interventions.** The United Nations Secretary-General on 23 March 2020 called for a cessation of hostilities between warring parties so that vital assistance could be provided for increasingly vulnerable people trapped in conflict zones. The Secretary-General’s call has had limited impact, and conflicts in general have not diminished, leaving large numbers of people vulnerable to the conflict and increasingly to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Secretary-General’s call requires more active political engagement, and complementary action from the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to increase efforts to improve humanitarian access in war zones and promote the cessation of hostilities.

2. In a number of countries fighting continues unabated and, in some instances, has either increased or intensified. For example, in Afghanistan, the Taliban continues its offensive, and has ignored calls for a Ramadan ceasefire. Houthi rebels in Yemen continue to ignore the ceasefire and threaten pandemic preparations. In South Sudan, some progress has been made to broaden the parties involved in the ceasefire, but that progress is fragile because different warring parties may attempt to use the pandemic for military advantage. And in Syria, calls for a comprehensive cessation of hostilities remain unanswered by all parties to the conflict. Meanwhile the Security Council has not given the Covid-19 pandemic the same attention or focus it did previously with the Ebola virus, nor do the UN peacekeeping mandates adequately reflect the need to address the pandemic in conflict areas.

3. Stronger political and diplomatic interventions are essential, and UAI believes that as a member of the P5, the United Kingdom should use its significant international influence to urge that priority be given to providing Covid-19 assistance. With this in mind, the United Kingdom should consider making use of existing UK Special Envoys who are engaged in peace processes and areas in conflict to work jointly with other governments, as part of a collective international response, to improve access and support for pandemic response activities. In so doing the Special Envoys would use all diplomatic tools available to initiate processes that would result in improved monitoring and support for vulnerable groups facing the threat of Covid-19, while at the same time initiating and supporting mediation efforts.

Preserving the centrality of the Grand Bargain.

4. Local civil society and NGOs are essential as the first line of response in most areas of conflict. The space for civil society and NGO operations is under threat in many countries affected by conflict, with the pandemic being used as a basis for governments’ efforts to assert control. DFID’s immediate response package to Covid-19 in its implementation needs to support a conducive operating environment for NGOs and civil society.

5. Long standing tensions between civil society and governments are increasingly exacerbated by competition for access to aid resources. The Covid-19 response may
well increase these tensions as the competition for resources and legitimacy intensifies between themselves and civil society and frontline NGOs. For example, in Afghanistan, strong statements have been made by those at the highest levels of government to stop Covid-19 assistance being provided through NGOs and at the same time calling for firmer controls over civil society. This in turn raises the prospect of more and more damaging restrictions and controls placed on civil society and NGOs. UAI is concerned that Afghanistan is not an isolated case, and that there are other examples where the response to the pandemic crisis will be used to introduce greater controls and restrictions on the actions of civil society.

6. The programming of DFID’s response to Covid-19 therefore should also look at ways to enhance commitments under the Grand Bargain to further strengthen national NGO capacities and support to civil society. Such strengthened capacities are required now to ensure that civil society and national NGOs can continue to play a significant role in the longer term.

7. In the current challenging operating conditions, it is widely recognised that local humanitarian actors will have an even more critical role to play than is already the case. Thus far DFID’s generous and substantial financial support has invested heavily in multilateral institutions.

   a. DFID should use its influence to urge the UN organisations to ensure that a substantial share of that funding reaches local organisations and that it reaches them with maximum speed and minimum red tape. DFID should also require that UN and INGO intermediaries pass a fair share of their overhead costs to their local partners, whose requirement for overhead costs to sustain their operations is traditionally ignored.

   b. Second, OCHA-led Country Based Pooled Funds have been one of the mechanisms that reach local civil society. As the largest donor to CBPFs, DFID should ensure that the UN allocates a significantly increased proportion of CBPFs to local actors during COVID.

   c. Third, a key criterion used by DFID to determine how to deploy future financial allocations should be how much of the funding will reach local actors quickly and efficiently. Channels that favour local actors should be prioritised.

   d. Fourth, DFID should encourage its country offices who are disbursing part of DFID’s COVID funding to look carefully at the scope for investing in local civil society groups.

Retaining and strengthening capabilities for social and economic recovery.

8. UAI, with its continuing concern for the protection of people in the longer as well as immediate term, would like to emphasise that the response to Covid-19 is primarily focused on the short term. While the reasons for this are understandable, the UK government should also begin to consider ways to support social protection and consequently economic and social recovery. The UK is already involved with the World Bank and other relevant financial institutions. This engagement should reflect substantive efforts to support social protection, economic and social recovery, and to be sure that civil society and NGOs are fully involved and supported in these recovery programmes.

9. The interrelationship between support for civil society and NGOs and the need to support social protection and economic recovery is evident. The way that the immediate response to Covid-19 in conflict situations is managed must inevitably
depend upon the ability of civil society and NGOs to operate in fragile operating environments, and this in turn will enable them to be in a position to support social protection and economic recovery that will be required to support those who are most vulnerable in a society, including refugees and displaced persons, and for the society as a whole. Given the levels of suffering that will result from a massive global economic downturn, the UK should be prepared to make its contribution to a vastly increased global aid programme.

Sufficient evidence about the impact of governments on civil society and NGOs in these situations is not available. In a related vein, there is a gap in the knowledge about ways to move from Covid-19 type pandemic response to recovery and economic security in fractured societies. For this reason, the UAI suggests that DFID puts in place mechanisms for gathering operational information that will result in systematic identification of support that needs to be continued and, where necessary, expanded for civil society and NGOs in areas of conflict compounded by Covid-19.

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