



**Written Testimony of Tjada D'Oyen McKenna  
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**House Foreign Affairs Committee**

**“A Year Out: Addressing International Impacts of the  
COVID-19 Pandemic”**

**Thursday, March 18, 2021**

Good afternoon, and thank you Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee for convening this hearing to discuss the global implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and opportunities for U.S. global leadership.

My name is Tjada D'Oyen McKenna, and I am the chief executive officer of Mercy Corps, an international humanitarian and development organization. Our global team of 5,600 humanitarians operates in 40 countries, where our work helps more than 37 million people to improve their lives.

When COVID-19 hit, our team members redoubled their support to communities in need. Despite travel restrictions, supply chain disruptions, and limited funding, Mercy Corps, in partnership with other international and local partner organizations, adapted our programs to continue providing lifesaving relief and critical development programs and to help communities protect themselves against COVID-19. From northwest Syria to Afghanistan's Kandahar province and western Niger, our teams have worked closely with local communities to find creative ways to deliver assistance while keeping people safe. For instance, we have reduced the size of humanitarian aid distributions sites to avoid crowding, instituted new social distancing requirements and installed hand-washing stations at program sites. Where possible, we have shifted to providing food, hygiene, and water supplies home by home to reduce the risk of transmission. I am grateful for the unwavering commitment of our staff and partner organizations, and I hope you will join me in recognizing their courage.

**COVID-19's Ripple Effects on the World's Poor**

The COVID-19 pandemic has sickened millions and killed hundreds of thousands in the 57 countries deemed most fragile by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. These reported figures likely fall well below the actual case count due to limited testing capacity and weak health infrastructure in

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many countries with poor governing institutions. Beyond these tragic numbers, COVID-19 is threatening hard-won development gains by exacerbating **food insecurity, global poverty, gender inequality, and violence** – all of which have the potential to be equally or more deadly than the virus itself.

As we have seen and experienced here in the United States and across the globe, COVID-19 has magnified pre-existing inequities. Society’s most vulnerable groups – the elderly, low income families, and ethnic minorities – have seen the worst health outcomes, and they have disproportionately suffered from the pandemic’s economic fallout. We have seen more and more of our own neighbors lining up at food banks and forced to make the choice between taking on at-risk jobs or going without a paycheck. The inequities we have all seen here at home are also playing out abroad, but without safety nets, stimulus support, and in much more dire economic conditions with fewer opportunities to work from home. When one of my colleagues met with one West African woman at the start of the outbreak, she asked, “Am I supposed to let my family go hungry for a cough?” Millions of people in need around the world are being forced to ask the same question and to choose between their health and livelihoods.

Due to COVID-19, global food insecurity and hunger are on the rise. In part, this is because 114 million people have lost their jobs due to market disruptions and movement restrictions. Another 141 million people have reduced their hours, which has led to an income loss of over \$3.7 trillion.<sup>1</sup> The price of basic staples, such as grains and dairy, has inflated tremendously, triggered by COVID-19’s disruption of supply chains. For instance, in South Sudan, the cost of a standard food basket has increased by 42% over last year.<sup>2</sup> The combination of loss of incomes and higher food prices means that millions of families are going hungry because they can no longer afford to purchase sufficient food to meet minimum dietary requirements. It is important to note that when people can no longer afford to meet their basic food needs, they resort to selling assets, pulling children out of school, or marrying girls away early.

In sum, the World Food Program now estimates that 271.8 million people are acutely food insecure or directly at-risk of becoming so due to the exacerbating effects of the protracted COVID-19 crisis, such as job loss, rising food prices, shrinking remittance flows, and limited capacity of governments to extend safety

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work (25 January 2021), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_767028.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Humanitarian Needs Overview South Sudan (January 2021), [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south\\_sudan\\_2021\\_humanitarian\\_needs\\_overview.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview.pdf).



nets or other forms of support to their citizens.<sup>3</sup> That represents an 82% spike from this time last year.<sup>4</sup> I want to emphasize that this rise in hunger and food insecurity can have a long-lasting effect on the development prospects for the world's poorest economies.

Global poverty is growing. For the first time in two decades, the World Bank projects that the number of people living in extreme poverty – defined as living on less than \$1.90 a day – is increasing. COVID-19 will push an additional 88 to 115 million people into extreme poverty.<sup>5</sup> The vulnerable groups Mercy Corps serves, especially workers in the informal sectors, are most at risk. We work with these groups, such as women managing restaurants at the street corner in Kampala, Uganda or young people involved in petty trade in Nairobi, Kenya.

We are seeing how the pandemic directly impedes the supply chain for farmers, including how they can obtain seeds and fertilizers that often come from neighboring countries or how they can sell their perishable produce to markets that have been closed down. This year, in seven African countries, Mercy Corps' AgriFin program will help 16 million small-scale farmers adapt to the shock of COVID-19 by providing access to market data and insights on where and how to obtain quality inputs, as well as digital financial services to keep their enterprises afloat.<sup>6</sup>

The pandemic is reversing progress toward gender equality. Women and girls are enduring the worst of the pandemic across every sphere, from poorer health outcomes to greater livelihoods and earning losses than men, increases in physical violence toward them and increased care burdens as they tend to family members in need. Additionally, we are seeing how recent global gains in terms of enrollment of adolescent girls in school are beginning to erode. At Mercy Corps, we are helping youth find and keep jobs. So when our team in Ethiopia recognized a spike in unemployment for domestic workers – who are predominantly women – we partnered with TaskMoby, a mobile app that matches service providers with jobs, to help hundreds find work.

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations World Food Programme, WFP Global Update on COVID-19 (November 2020), <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/8162681183bd492ab8e1cfc66435c956/download/>.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations World Food Programme, World Food Programme to assist largest number of hungry people ever, as coronavirus devastates poor nations (29 June 2020), <https://www.wfp.org/news/world-food-programme-assist-largest-number-hungry-people-ever-coronavirus-devastates-poor>.

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, COVID-19 to Add as Many as 150 Million Extreme Poor by 2021 (7 October 2020), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/10/07/covid-19-to-add-as-many-as-150-million-extreme-poor-by-2021>.

<sup>6</sup> Mercy Corps, AgriFin Program, <https://www.mercycorpsagrifin.org/>.



COVID-19 is exacerbating global conflict at every level. In many places, government responses to COVID-19, including more repressive practices and emergency orders, are fraying community trust, deteriorating state-society relations, proliferating misinformation, enabling armed groups to expand their influence, and increasing resource competition.<sup>7</sup> We see a significant increase in public protests and riots against governing authorities at the national and local levels. We are also observing an uptick in falsehoods and rumors likely to demonize and incite violence, particularly against minority, migrant, and refugee communities. According to one forecast, 13 countries are likely to experience new conflicts in the next two years as a result of the pandemic and government responses.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing this trend, we have deepened our focus on preventing local conflicts, including conflicts occurring because of deep distrust in government. For example, in northeast Nigeria, a region plagued by violence and hunger, and long-standing political grievances, Mercy Corps piloted a Rumor Tracker, using mobile phones and radio to understand the misinformation being spread and then responded with tailored educational campaigns and community engagement to combat it.

In short, the changes over the past year among the world's most vulnerable communities have been dramatic: On March 18, 2020, 1 in every 45 people globally were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Today 1 in every 33 people globally – 235 million people total, a 40% increase – need aid to survive.<sup>9</sup>

### **U.S. Leadership amid a Global Crisis**

U.S. global leadership is urgently needed to meet these unprecedented, compounding crises.

First, I thank Congress for its leadership in providing \$10 billion in assistance to respond to COVID-19 globally in the American Rescue Plan. I urge this Committee to ensure that USAID and the State Department obligate these resources as expeditiously as possible. Despite this influx of assistance, the global

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Inks and Adam Lichtenheld, *Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond*, Mercy Corps (September 2020), [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Advancing\\_Peace\\_COVID-19\\_and\\_Conflict\\_Sept-2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Advancing_Peace_COVID-19_and_Conflict_Sept-2020_0.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan D. Moyer and Oliver Kaplan, *Will the Coronavirus Fuel Conflict?*, *Foreign Policy* (July 6, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/06/coronavirus-pandemic-fuel-conflict-fragile-states-economy-food-prices/>.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021* (December 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2021-enarfres>.



need will continue to far outpace available assistance even though the United States is not alone in offering support. I encourage this committee to support increases to the humanitarian, development, and conflict prevention accounts in the State and Foreign Operations appropriations bill in fiscal year 2022. Investment in these accounts is critical to prevent further backsliding and help communities with their long-term recovery from the devastation this pandemic has wrought.

I held the position of Feed the Future Deputy Coordinator at USAID for a number of years, and I know that the emergency accounts are vital to address immediate hunger needs. However, it is also critical that the United States assistance programs address the root causes of hunger, now exacerbated by COVID, by making longer-term investments in agri-food systems. More multi-year funding can ensure food systems endure shocks like COVID-19. These longer-term funds help to improve production practices, enhance supply chain efficiency, and make processing and distribution mechanisms more effective.

U.S. diplomatic action is urgently needed to galvanize global giving and ensure other governments and the private sector step up to do their part. At a time when global need is at unprecedented levels, some are regrettably pulling back from prior commitments and reducing aid spending. The Biden Administration should leverage upcoming multilateral gatherings to win new financial commitments from partner governments and convene private sector leaders at the White House to push for new investments in and charitable contributions to fragile states.

Second, I urge the U.S. government to consider how foreign assistance programs can complement the COVID-19 Vaccine Access Facility (COVAX) dissemination. COVAX and its networks will eventually be able to supply the vaccines, but there will be a lot of work to do beyond capital cities and beyond health ministries to prepare communities to receive these vaccines. Some of the most urgent types of activities that we can begin doing now are empowering local civil society organizations to lead public information campaigns and assisting government agencies in implementing inclusive community planning sessions, both of which are vital to overcoming the trust deficit between communities and the agencies that will be leading the vaccine rollout. In many countries where Mercy Corps works, particularly those affected by conflict, communities have long experienced discrimination, corruption, and neglect. In these “last mile” communities, misinformation is rampant. From our experience working to contain the Ebola outbreaks in western and central Africa, we have learned how supporting efforts to build community trust is key to delivering large-scale public health initiatives.



Lastly, this Committee should ensure the U.S. government takes action to prevent the rise in violence that often drives humanitarian need and undermines development. In December 2019, Congress passed the Global Fragility Act, a law that originated on a bipartisan basis in this Committee, to strengthen the U.S. government's approach toward conflict prevention.<sup>10</sup> COVID-19 has made implementing this law more urgent than ever, and I encourage you to work with the Administration to ensure it is leveraged and funded to address new threats of violence emanating from the pandemic. This will require both diplomatic and programmatic efforts.

Thank you for your leadership, and I look forward to your questions.

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<sup>10</sup> Global Fragility Act of 2019, Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020 (December 2019), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5db70e83fc0a966cf4cc42ea/t/5f6208ed4c84b42901596f35/1600260333957/BILLS-116HR1865SA-RCPI116-44+%28GFA+ONLY%29.pdf>