



Leaving No One Behind: Refugee Inclusion in the World Bank's Response to Covid-19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 health crisis will not end until it ends for everyone – that includes refugees and other people caught in crisis. Most likely to be left behind by government responses, these populations are traditionally served by humanitarians, but the pandemic and economic crisis shines a light on the limits of this siloed approach. Multilateral development institutions like the World Bank are needed to help ensure both social safety nets and public health responses reach those most likely to be left behind.

The World Bank should be commended for quickly committing \$160 billion for Covid-19 responses in low- and middle-income countries. But without concerted efforts to reach those most likely to be left out of the response, there is little hope of ending the outbreak and mitigating its worst impacts.

Refugees, who are typically left out of development plans, are at risk of being left out of national Covid-19 response plans funded by donors like the World Bank. They face unique pre-existing policy barriers to self-reliance, such as access to public services and the formal labor market, and have unique vulnerabilities due to their displacement. Covid-19 mitigation measures like lockdowns are likely to exacerbate the impact of these existing challenges. 36 percent of IRC's livelihoods clients in urban Kenya have already lost income due to Covid-19, while 61 percent of clients in Lebanon can no longer pay their rent. Meeting refugees' needs call for a different set of tools, and an unprecedented level of collaboration between governments and humanitarian and development actors.

Building on the last three years of investment in refugee hosting states and on its Fragility, Conflict and Violence Strategy, the World Bank is well positioned to use this crisis to do better. There is a small window of opportunity to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 in fragile and refugee contexts. The World Bank, along with the IMF and G20 countries, must start thinking about the quality of their response – not just how much they can raise and contribute.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The World Bank should:

1. Systematically **include displaced populations in World Bank-funded Covid-19 response plans and activities**, including national healthcare, social safety net schemes, and remote education programs.
2. Leverage this crisis to drive **inclusive national policies**
3. Proactively **coordinate with humanitarian actors**, including UN agencies and NGOs
4. Ensure **programs are adequately and appropriately adapted** to meet needs
5. Through the Joint Data Center, **generate evidence on the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19** in fragile and conflict-affected states and for displaced populations.

The World Bank's shareholders should:

1. **Address existing arrears and frontload financing** committed to the World Bank for IDA19.
2. **Increase contributions to the Global Concessional Financing Facility**
3. Consider **appropriate debt relief measures** beyond the initial moratorium

INTRODUCTION

Ending the Covid-19 pandemic requires ending it for everyone – including for those in fragile and conflict-affected places and for the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society. While countries in Asia and Europe, and states across America, start to relax their social distancing measures and re-open their economies, infection rates are climbing in fragile places around the world, like Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen.¹

Curbing infection and death rates in fragile settings brings new and different challenges than those experienced in more developed countries. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) knows from experience that the tools applied in the developed world will not necessarily translate to fragile and humanitarian settings. Those working in informal sectors cannot simply transition to working from home, and those most marginalized may not be able to access public health services or social safety nets. In Kenya, over 36 percent of IRC's urban livelihoods clients have already said they have lost income due to Covid-19, and in Lebanon, 61 percent of IRC clients reported they no longer have enough income to cover their rent. People in fragile contexts often cannot regularly wash their hands with soap and clean water; in parts of Moria camp, Greece, over 1,300 people share one tap and over 200 share a latrine, while in Kenya, Kakuma camp hosts 190,000 refugees and over 10,000 people get water from the same borehole.² Overcrowded displacement camps and shelters in urban areas make social distancing nearly impossible. Camps in Syria, Greece and Bangladesh represent some of the most densely populated areas in the world -- up to 8.5 times more densely populated than the Diamond Princess cruise ship, where transmission of the virus was four times faster than in Wuhan, China.

Reaching the most vulnerable with international and national responses to Covid-19 will require an unprecedented level of coordination and collaboration between humanitarian and development actors. This global health crisis, which has both immediate life-threatening consequences as well as longer-term socioeconomic impacts, demonstrates the importance of humanitarian and development actors working together on a robust response that meets people's needs over the course of a protracted crisis. For decades, the international community has touted the concept of the humanitarian-development nexus, but has taken only small steps to implement it. Now is the time to make the nexus a reality.

To its credit, the World Bank – the largest world's development actor – was one of the first major donors to announce its financial commitment to Covid-19 responses in low- and middle-income countries. The World Bank has pledged \$160 billion over 15 months.³ The Bank announced it will fast-track an initial \$2.7 billion in new financing for middle-income countries, and \$3.3 billion in new and reprioritized financing for low-income countries.⁴ Despite its typically slow pace of project development and approval, the World Bank already has a number of programs approved and underway. The World Bank's financing will be largely channeled through national governments for both new Covid-19 response programs and existing programs that are pivoting to support

¹ IRC (2020) [Coronavirus testing shortfall in crisis-affected states risks undetected outbreaks, imperilling COVID-19 fight worldwide](#)

² IRC (2020) [New IRC analysis reveals risk that coronavirus transmission rates in Moria, Al Hol and Cox's Bazar refugee camps could outpace those seen on the Diamond Princess cruise ship.](#)

³ For comparison, the World Bank committed \$142 billion in 2009 to developing countries in response to the global financial crisis. See: Independent Evaluation Group (2011) [The World Bank Group's Response to the Global Economic Crisis](#), World Bank Group.

⁴ World Bank (2020) [The World Bank Group Moves Quickly to Help Countries Respond to COVID-19.](#)

Covid-19 response efforts.⁵ In addition to health system strengthening, the World Bank will be focused on safety nets and cash transfer programs; in fact, the G20 finance ministers have delegated responsibility to the MDBs, including the World Bank, to support the poorest countries through such programs. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in coordination with the World Bank and G20, has also committed to debt service relief for 25 countries for an initial six months to ensure that new funding goes to programs, not debt repayments.⁶

But this financing will not mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 without concerted efforts to reach those most likely to be left out and left behind in the response. Humanitarian responses – including the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19 – will not be sufficient to meet the needs of those caught in crisis. The World Bank understands this; it has spent the last four years significantly ramping up its financing and other efforts to reach refugees and other vulnerable populations in fragile and conflict situations. During this time, it has learned important lessons about socioeconomic inclusivity, programmatic flexibility and adaptability, coordination with humanitarian actors, and accountability for improvements in people’s lives. The World Bank’s Covid-19 response must reflect and build on these lessons.

As the World enters into a deep recession, the World Bank must also start planning for the longer-term impacts that the pandemic will have on people’s lives and livelihoods. The Covid-19 health crisis has already become a Covid-19 economic crisis. Low- and middle-income countries – which are home to the vast majority of conflicts and displacement crises – stand to suffer the most; 23 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa and 16 million people in South Asia will likely be pushed into poverty.⁷ While these countries need short-term stimulus financing now, the World Bank and others will also need to lock-in institutional commitment and finds ways to mobilize donors for the next five to ten years to ensure poverty rates do not slip any further.

There are five key actions the World Bank – and other international financial institutions and development banks – should take so that adequate and appropriate support reaches people caught in crisis, including refugees and other displaced populations.

FIVE ACTIONS TO REACH PEOPLE CAUGHT IN CRISIS

1. Include refugees and other displaced people in national Covid-19 response plans and programs.

Displaced populations – who must be reached to bring the pandemic fully under control – typically live in low-capacity states and/or are explicitly excluded from state instruments, such as development plans and national policies that give people the right to healthcare, education and work. As such, they are at risk of being left out of national responses to Covid-19.

National governments around the world are rapidly developing their Covid-19 response plans, which will form the basis for who will receive support and how they will receive support. However, there is a risk that refugees and other displaced populations – which have a different relationship

⁵ G20 (2020) [Communiqué of the Virtual meeting of the G20 finance ministers and central bank governors](#).

⁶ International Monetary Fund (2020). [IMF Executive Board Approves Immediate Debt Relief for 25 Countries](#).

⁷ Mahler, D. et al. (2020) [The impact of COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) on global poverty: Why Sub-Saharan Africa might be the region hardest hit](#), Data Blog: World Bank Group.

than citizens to the state – will be left out of these plans. In fact, refugees are regularly left out national development plans – the most basic of national planning tools – and therefore may also be left out of national Covid-19 response plans.

Refugees also face unique pre-existing policy barriers, such as restrictions on their access to public services, like healthcare and education, and to the formal labor market. In less than 50 percent of UNHCR operations, refugees have access to national health care systems, and in just 10 percent of operations, refugees are included in national or local development plans.⁸ In less than 40 percent of UNHCR operations, refugees have the right to work; and IRC analysis has shown that a complex set of rules and requirements further limit refugees' access to decent work – such as onerous requirements to obtain a work permit and start a business, limits on movement, and gender discrimination against women.⁹ In addition, refugees may face restrictions on their freedom of movement and barriers to obtaining documentation, such as proof of identity; in turn, this can create an obstacle to accessing services in the host community.¹⁰

Restrictive policies and practices can force refugees to operate outside the formal economy, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, and limit them from becoming self-reliant; these negative consequences will only be exacerbated in a pandemic. If refugees are left out of national response plans and if exclusionary policies are not eased, refugees will not be able to benefit from international support aimed at improving public health system preparedness, social safety net programs, and remote learning opportunities.

With support from the World Bank, some countries are paving the way for including refugees and displaced populations in national Covid-19 response plans. In Chad, which hosts nearly 450,000 refugees, a World Bank-financed Covid-19 project will target 14,000 refugee and host community households with cash transfers and improve water and sanitation services, as well as provide prevention supplies and target a communication campaign for refugees and displaced populations.¹¹ However, in other countries, like Ethiopia, home to 1.5 million refugees, the Bank-funded Covid-19 response program does not specifically mention refugees as beneficiaries, making it unclear whether they will be included.¹²

Although each Covid-19 response project will be negotiated with individual countries, the World Bank has an opportunity to ensure that refugee populations are included across the board. The World Bank already provides financing to support refugees alongside host communities in at least 17 low- and middle-income host countries. This creates a natural inroad with governments to support inclusion of refugees in Covid-19 response programs. For these countries, the World Bank should consider a systematic protocol for refugee inclusion in Covid-19 response plans, and elevate its Refugee Policy Review Framework for policy dialogue with host governments.

Refugee Policy Review Framework

Under IDA19, the World Bank committed to develop a Refugee Policy Review Framework (RPRF), which will assess policies relevant to the socio-economic development of refugees and host communities, to inform support through the Window for Hosts and Refugees. World Bank consultations with host governments about the RPRF are an optimal moment to discuss the benefits of inclusive refugee policies, including for mitigating the impacts of Covid-19.

⁸ UNHCR (2018) [Mapping of Social Safety Nets for Refugees: Opportunities and Challenges](#).

⁹ IRC (2019) [Ruled Out of Work: Refugee women's legal right to work](#).

¹⁰ World Bank (2020) [Refugee women face complex barriers to proving identity](#).

¹¹ World Bank (2020) [Chad COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Project \(P173894\)](#).

¹² World Bank (2020) [Ethiopia COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Project \(P173750\)](#).

2. Adapt Covid-19 response programming and relevant policies to meet the needs of conflict-affected people.

Since 2016, the World Bank has deepened its engagement in fragile and conflict-affected countries, as demonstrated by its new Fragility, Conflict and Violence (FCV) Strategy and increase in funding for FCV contexts in the last replenishments of IDA (IDA18 and IDA19). As the FCV Strategy lays out, the World Bank needs to make some internal adjustments to ensure that its diagnostic tools, programs and policy dialogues with governments are appropriately adapted so that they can meet the unique needs of conflict-affected and displaced populations. These reforms need to go into practice now.

On the programmatic front, there are a number of lessons that the World Bank can draw from the humanitarian sector about how to best understand and address needs of the most vulnerable during a crisis. The particular traumas that conflict-affected and displaced populations have faced inevitably alter how all programs – education, health, livelihoods, etc. – should be designed even when not facing a pandemic; lockdown policies introduce another layer of complexity, as they may generate increased mental health issues¹³ and cases of abuse or violence.¹⁴ In Kenya, the IRC has seen a 20 percent increase in women and girls seeking assistance due to gender-based violence, and in Lebanon, after the implementation of a hotline, the IRC saw the number of women and girls seeking support more than double between March and April compared to the first two months of the year. In addition, under Covid-19, mitigation measures will need to be context-driven. Each country has its own mitigation policies, some of which may restrict the movement of humanitarian staff and supplies. Programs must be adapted to these context-specific policies, and also seek exemptions when necessary. In many cases, programs will need to be designed at the local or district level, rather than the national level. For instance, while IRC health clinics in the Azraq and Zaatari camps in Jordan are able to remain open (with adaptations, thanks to humanitarian exemptions), dispersed refugees across Amman will require a different approach that minimizes travel to reach services.¹⁵

Humanitarian actors can also share best practices for quickly pivoting programming in the midst of a crisis like Covid-19. Based on experience from other crises, such as Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in West Africa, humanitarian responders have experience setting up e-learning or radio as a way to conduct remote training and learning, or designing home-based enterprise schemes for vulnerable people who may have lost their job.¹⁶ For example, IRC has long conducted home-based entrepreneurship, which enable women's participation despite barriers to work opportunities. IRC is now designing cash-for-work projects to produce items related to the Covid-19 response, such as cloth reusable face masks and home-made soap, to provide a source of temporary income for vulnerable populations and contribute to local Covid-19 preparedness.

On the policy side, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of progressive refugee policies that enable access to public education, health services and social safety nets. And, when the pandemic subsides, it will be even clearer that refugees need access to the formal labor market so they can not only make a decent wage but also help local economies recover. The World Bank's Refugee Policy Review Framework can be used as a guide for policy dialogue

¹³ Smith, E. (2020) [How to support displaced populations' mental health during lockdown](#), Devex.

¹⁴ UN Women (2020) [Covid-19 and Ending Violence against Women and Girls](#).

¹⁵ IRC (2020) [One Size Does Not Fit All: Mitigating COVID-19 in Humanitarian Settings](#).

¹⁶ IRC (2020) [One Size Does Not Fit All: Mitigating COVID-19 in Humanitarian Settings](#).

with governments; this pandemic may very well open the door for a dialogue on how to ensure that pre-existing and new refugee policies are not exclusionary.

3. Coordinate with and fund the humanitarian system – including UN agencies and NGOs – to avoid gaps in the global Covid-19 response.

Since increasing its investment in and attention to fragile states, the World Bank has developed a much more robust partnership with UN Agencies responding to humanitarian crises. Increasingly, the World Bank has staff in fragile environments and is working with UN coordination structures. In some places, the World Bank is even directly financing UN Agencies, such as UNICEF in Yemen and World Food Programme in Bangladesh, providing longer-term financing for protracted crises. These types of partnerships are proving critical in the Covid-19 response. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that the World Bank is working with UN Agencies to respond to Covid-19. In Lebanon, for example, the Bank and UNHCR are working together to scale-up social safety nets for Syrian refugees through UNHCR crisis centers. However, this is seemingly happening in places where the World Bank and UN already have a strong working relationship, rather than systematized across all humanitarian contexts where the World Bank works.

In addition, the World Bank's consultation of and partnership with NGOs at the country level around the Covid-19 response leaves much to be desired. It is precisely in crises like the Covid-19 pandemic when NGOs can be a strategic and useful partner for the Bank. NGOs like the IRC that have expertise in responding to conflicts and crises can help design and implement programs that are sensitive to local contexts and pre-existing needs to help mitigate further deterioration of health, protection, livelihoods, and food security. Humanitarian NGOs, as impartial actors, also have access to the most hard-to-reach populations; reaching the last mile in Covid-19 response is critical to avoid new waves of outbreaks. Importantly, they can also act as trusted interlocutors with and be a source of vital information for conflict-affected and displaced communities. Humanitarians' access makes them well-placed to understand specific vulnerabilities of different groups, including women and girls, as well as help engage marginalized groups in program design, such as through women-led organizations. Again, systematic consultation with NGOs at the country level could go a long way towards achieving better outcomes. Even more, the World Bank should consider directly financing humanitarian NGOs that can help implement programs, such as cash transfers, in places where the World Bank is not on the ground or may not have access to segments of vulnerable populations.

4. Ensure development financing and global economic policies support refugees in the short- and longer-term

The World Bank and other international financial institutions should not assume that refugees will have all of their needs met by humanitarian financing alone in the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, refugees' needs will far outstrip what the humanitarian system is able to provide. This holds true both in the immediate days, weeks and months of the health crisis, as well as in the years to come as the economic fallout rages on.

The World Bank understands this challenge well. In 2016, the World Bank designed two financing mechanisms specifically to support middle- and low-income refugee-hosting countries – the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) and the IDA Window for Hosts and Refugees (WHR, formerly the Refugee Sub-Window). Together, these mechanisms currently fund programs in 17 countries across a range of sectors, from a health project in Jordan to a social safety net program in Cameroon to an education program in Bangladesh. They are providing much-needed

long-term financing to support socioeconomic integration of refugees within local communities, and have shown to be complementary and additive to the short-term humanitarian resources available in these contexts.

Some of the World Bank's \$160 billion Covid-19 response funds should help countries meet refugees' needs, alongside their hosts, in the immediate and longer-term. In the immediate term, the World Bank should consider creating Covid-19 response programs that are complementary to those financed by the GCFE and WHR and that are specifically designed to include refugees. The Bank should also start planning now for how it can support the socioeconomic development of refugees above and beyond what the GCFE and WHR can fund with current financing levels over the next few years. Needs of refugees and hosts will drastically increase because of Covid-19; new needs assessments will need to be conducted, more financing may need to flow through the GCFE and IDA19 WHR.

In addition to financing, the World Bank and IMF should work with the G20 countries on a broader economic response that involves debt relief for poor and fragile states. Early steps in this direction have been positive; however, the current commitments only extend for the first few months while the economic impacts of Covid-19 will last for years to come. Even before the pandemic, 33 low-income countries were either at high risk of, or already in, debt distress¹⁷ – more than half of which are also considered fragile states¹⁸ and/or are major refugee-hosting countries.¹⁹ Without an extension of debt relief, there is a risk that these countries will put budgetary support meant for Covid-19 response towards repaying debt instead of towards investments to directly help improve people's lives. Indicative of this: 64 developing countries spent more on debt service than on health in 2019.²⁰ Relatedly, it is anticipated that bilateral aid will dip in the coming year, as wealthier countries focus on meeting domestic needs due to the recession. Refugees are the most likely to lose out, as refugees are not typically supported by national development budgets, and the gap between humanitarian aid and refugees' needs is already wide. Broader economic policies like a debt moratorium should take these challenges into consideration. The World Bank, IMF and G20 should determine if international debt relief measures and more inclusive national refugee policies – such as extending the right to work – could go hand-in-hand by way of a compact agreement to help economies recover.

5. Generate evidence on the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 in fragile and conflict-affected states and for displaced populations.

The short- and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on people in fragile and conflict-affected situations must be better understood in order to craft an adequate and effective response to the pandemic. The World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center is well-placed to drive forward an agenda and implement research to garner socioeconomic data on refugees and other vulnerable people. The World Bank's Poverty Group has already started to measure the local impacts of Covid-19 – including job loss, coping mechanisms, etc. – through phone surveys, and these could and should be expanded, in partnership with humanitarian actors, to include refugee populations.

¹⁷ Tew, R. et al. (2020) [Coronavirus and aid data: What the latest DAC data tells us](#), Development Initiatives.

¹⁸ World Bank (2020) [FY20 List of Fragile and Conflict-affected Situations](#).

¹⁹ UNHCR (2020) [Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018](#).

²⁰ Jubilee Debt Campaign (2020) [Sixty-four countries spend more on debt payments than health](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 health crisis will not end until it ends for everyone—and that includes refugees and other people caught in crisis. The already stretched humanitarian system will not be able to meet all of the needs of refugees alongside host communities, especially over the long-term. Multilateral development institutions like the World Bank are well-placed to help meet the socioeconomic needs of these populations now and in the future. There is a small window of opportunity to help countries prepare for the spread of Covid-19 in fragile and refugee contexts; the World Bank and others should start thinking about the quality of their response financing and programs – not just how much they can raise and contribute.

The World Bank should:

- 1. Systematically include displaced populations in World Bank-funded Covid-19 response plans and activities, including national healthcare, social safety net schemes, and remote education programs.** Displaced populations must be included in the short- and longer-term response plans and programs.
- 2. Leverage this crisis to drive inclusive national policies** that give refugees access to national services and the formal labor market.
- 3. Proactively coordinate with and fund humanitarian actors, including UN agencies and NGOs,** who are at the frontlines of the Covid-19 response.
- 4. Ensure programs are adequately and appropriately adapted** to meet the needs of people caught in the double crisis of Covid-19 and conflict or displacement.
- 5. Through the Joint Data Center, generate evidence on the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 in fragile and conflict-affected states and for displaced populations.** World Bank poverty and livelihoods surveys should be extended to included refugees, and analysis of this data should be disaggregated by status.

The World Bank's shareholders, particularly the G20 countries, should:

- 1. Address existing arrears and frontload financing committed to the World Bank for IDA19,** allowing the World Bank to frontload resources to governments in need.
- 2. Increase contributions to the Global Concessional Financing Facility** to support displaced people and hosts in middle-income countries that will be hit hard by the economic fallout of the health crisis.
- 3. Consider appropriate debt relief measures beyond the initial moratorium,** and consider if debt relief and more inclusive national refugee policies could be paired in a compact agreement.

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