

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief  
Coordinator Mark Lowcock Remarks in Conversation with the Center for Strategic  
and International Studies on Covid-19's Next Cascade of Crises & Choices Before  
the World's Leaders**

22 July 2020

*As delivered*

Julie, thank you, and thanks very much also to CSIS for having me today. It's an honor to be here with you and Steve and Congresswoman Brooks and Congressman Bera. I pay tribute to the important work you've all done on global health security, not just recently, but over the years.

**The COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest international crisis we've faced in over 50 years.**

Some countries are now finding pathways to cautious recovery, but many others are teetering on the edge of absolute disaster. And there are quite a lot of countries which are yet to get to the worst point in their dealing with the problem.

And though the humanitarian landscape has changed in the last four months - and I'll get into that a bit later - the need for a coordinated international response, as you've just said, remains essential. My experience is that that can only happen with US leadership, and it's more important than ever, given the very serious cascade of multiplying crises that I think lie ahead of us.

So, I really want to thank CSIS and members of the Commission on Strengthening America's Health Security for your leadership. Congressman Bera, Congresswoman Brooks, Steve, Julie, your publication last year on *Ending the Cycle of Crisis and Complacency in U.S. Global Health Security* displays exactly what I think is the foresight and creative thinking that the international humanitarian community has come to expect from the US, and is very much in line, I have to say, with the approach I'm trying to take in advocating for anticipatory action to deal with problems.

**I'd like to start by summarising some analysis my office has done on the cost of inaction in response to the COVID-19 crisis.**

**I think we are all familiar with the immediate impacts of the virus itself. But unfortunately, even recognising what some donors have done, what we've got this far is really a grossly inadequate overall response given the scale of the crisis, whose consequences reverberate far beyond the immediate health impact.**

**And a failure to act now will have devastating consequences:**

- If it's left unmitigated, COVID-19 could infect up to 640 million people and kill 1.7 million people in the world's most vulnerable 32 low-income countries. In addition, at least 2 million preventable deaths could occur as a result of disrupted health care through the pandemic. Already, millions of children in 80 countries are not receiving their routine vaccinations. The annual death toll from HIV, tuberculosis and malaria is set to double. Important progress that has been realized by GAVI and the Global Fund and the work of CEPI and others, in other words, could be compromised as a result of the pandemic.
- We are also staring at the spectre of multiple famines. Acute food insecurity could nearly double by the end of the year if no action is taken. And my friend and colleague Governor David Beasley has shared some very compelling analysis on this, which I fully endorse.
- Millions more women and girls are going to be exposed to gender-based violence, caught at home during lockdowns or facing economic difficulty. In recent months, dedicated domestic violence hotlines, in the countries where I work, have reported eight-fold increases in calls from women seeking help. But \$500 million worth of programming developed by the UN and the brilliant NGOs has not yet been funded.
- School closures have a big effect too and not just on education, but also on hunger. A protracted school shutdown of five months could generate learning losses that have a present value of \$10 trillion globally. But in addition to that, nearly 370 million children have missed out on school meals, many in countries where they are hungry most of the time. And we've seen many studies on the impact of stunting and malnutrition on entire economies.

So that summary assessment, which by the way is corroborated by what I'm hearing from leaders of NGOs and faith-based organisations. And I had another meeting this morning with many of their CEOs, off course many of the leading organizations are US organizations. And I heard exactly the same thing from them, especially the leaders of the faith-based organizations.

So, these are the, if you like, the human consequences of inaction. And I know there're lots of numbers going to change. And it is very important to remember that there are real people behind every statistic: parents in Niger losing their child to measles as a result of missed vaccinations, or a mother in Yemen no longer able to feed her family.

**But here's the bad news.**

**In the world's most fragile settings, COVID-19 is still only getting going. We are months away from the peak. If it's not checked, the virus will be free to circle the globe, to undo decades of development, and I think to create a generation's worth of tragic and exportable problems.**

We expect the situation to deteriorate in a number of middle-income countries – including in Latin America and the Caribbean, where a number of countries that traditionally not needed assistance, from organizations like mine, are now requesting help. Populations that haven't required government safety nets before now, are also starting to need them just to survive.

And we know from experience that the economic effects of the crisis and containment measures themselves also have the potential to drive unrest and instability. And I think the risk of civil conflict has increased significantly, especially in Africa.

*So, in summary, without action, we'll see the worst recession since the Great Depression, the sharpest collapse in per capita income since 1870, the first increase in global poverty since 1990, and the first reduction in global life expectancy for a generation.*

**The good news is that the worst outcomes are preventable.**

Wealthy countries have rightly thrown out the rulebook to protect their people and economies. The OECD and G20 countries invested \$11 trillion in their stimulus packages – about 10 per cent of global GDP.

And my office has estimated that the cost of protecting the poorest 10 per cent of the global population from the worst effects, which I've just described, of the pandemic is just \$90 billion – so it's less than 1 per cent of the current stimulus package.

The International Financial Institutions, like the World bank and the IMF can in fact finance a lot of that, if their shareholders give them new rules for these exceptional circumstances. And CSIS I

know has recognized the importance of the role of the IFIs in the Commission's report on Strengthening America's Health Security, and I agree with what you said there.

**But let me emphasise that business as usual is not going to cut it. We need a new approach to face this unprecedented global crisis.**

Against that background, my office just launched the third update of our COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan. It coordinates the action of the UN agencies and countless NGOs and is now targeting 250 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. That's more than double the number we planned six months ago to target this year. And that is what COVID-19 has done just so far.

The updated appeal seeks \$10.3 billion. It's the biggest single appeal we've ever made in fact, and that's to address the immediate humanitarian needs caused or exacerbated by COVID-19. And it's mostly built around action in the affected countries; 63 countries where we are working. It also includes a couple of other things I want to mention:

Firstly, a \$1 billion for humanitarian air transport. Obviously commercial airlines have more or less disappeared in the places where we work, and we needed to replace them with the World Food Programme-run system of air transport, medical evacuation for aid workers, cargo shipments and so on, and that service, which is mostly used by NGOs and faith-based organizations, we have to keep fully funded if we want any kind of operation to be sustained.

We've also got \$500 million in for famine prevention, for reasons I have described. It is possible to avoid famine if we act quickly.

And we've got \$300 million in unallocated supplemental funding for NGOs. The NGOs are essential actors in this response, but many of them have faced serious funding challenges and they've got real liquidity crises.

So, we've raised \$1.8 billion so far, thanks to donor generosity. But obviously more is needed.

**And that really brings me to the final point I'd like to make.**

I've been doing this kind of work for many decades now, and I've seen repeatedly that when the world deals well with crises, it's because the US plays a leadership role.

When the US leads, the rest of the world can be mobilised to follow. And we know that because we've seen it before.

You all remember, 20 years ago now, President George W. Bush's emergency plan for HIV/AIDS, which I think did more than anything to fight that disease, certainly saved millions of lives.

After the financial crisis of 2008-2009, we saw the US taking on the role of global coordinator through the G20.

We saw US leadership on Ebola in 2014 in West Africa, with an interagency effort made by the US to deal with that problem, and which brought others in crucially.

The US remains the largest source of humanitarian funding in the world, including through the multilateral humanitarian system.

So, I really want to thank Members of Congress like Congressman Bera, like Congresswoman Brooks for your efforts to include funding for humanitarian response in COVID-19 budgets. And I know how much work is going on, on that topic at the moment.

**What I would say to you finally is that while we can claim that COVID-19 took us by surprise, we will not be able to say the same about the humanitarian, development and security crises that lie ahead.**

Without adequate funding and leadership, there is a very serious risk that the benefits of decades of US investment around the world will be rolled back – on global health, poverty, education, and women's empowerment.

It's much better, and cheaper and more dignified to frontload the response to the pandemic. Acting now to mitigate the impact will save lives. It will also save money.

The scenarios I have talked about are real, but they don't have to become reality.

With the right leadership, money and fresh thinking – including from yourselves here today – we can fix this.

So, thank you very much indeed and I'm looking forward to the discussion.