

KUNO Covid-Café in cooperation with Oxfam Novib

Episode 3: The geopolitical consequences of the Covid Crisis

A conversation with
Pieter Feith (former diplomat in Aceh and Kosovo) and
Ashish Pradhan (Senior UN Analyst at International Crisis Group)
Moderated by Peter Heintze (KUNO)

The Covid-19 crisis is posing a challenge to the world in unprecedented ways and it is influencing our daily lives. It changes also our work in the humanitarian sector. This is why KUNO in cooperation with partners, is introducing the KUNO Covid Café. Every week we organize an online café, to discuss the changing world with inspiring speakers and a wide audience.

In this episode we talked with Pieter Feith and Ashish Pradhan about the geopolitical consequences of the Covid crisis. The first question was on **the ceasefire called out by Antonio Guterres** in March. Pieter Feith reflected on this, saying that top-down the reactions to this call could be seen as a further erosion of the legal and moral authority of the United Nations. It's becoming more and more clear that certain members of the UN Security Council are failing to live up to the principles and ideals of the Charter. From the bottom-up perspective, because of the failure of the Security Council to endorse the appeal, local and regional peacebuilding efforts will be weakened. The global pandemic is weakening these even more, because social distancing is making conversations more complex (e.g.). At the International Crisis Group the first reaction was critical, Ashish Pradhan indicated because they have seen calls like this made before, by international diplomats, that did not receive much resonance. The surprising thing was, in the immediate aftermath, there was a decent amount of reaction to the call (Philippines, separatist groups in Cameroon, ELN in Colombia e.g.). However, the political endorsement from the Security Council was missing, which led to a lack of follow-up of these reactions.

Both speakers agreed **on a lack of global leadership within this Covid crisis**. Pieter Feith talked about the leadership role of the EU, Europe should not remain a passive bystander in this struggle for influence is his opinion. For example by providing aid in the public health sectors, food aid and mitigation of social economic impact of lockdowns in other countries and continents. Ashish Pradhan's reaction to this is that EU leadership and activism has been appreciated. France has been for example been trying to mediate between the US and China. It's also about institutions though, multilateral collaborations that already exist like WHO or the security council, that could/should step up.

On the role of the state and civil society organizations. This pandemic shows that public health is a responsibility of the state, and people are looking at the state for guidance and rules. The danger in this is that malignant leaders can see this as a chance to use the crisis for other goals, to implement surveillance measures for example. It's then also becoming more difficult for civil society to speak up about democratic principles and human rights. The odds at the moment are against freedom of speech and freedom of expression. In this new reality, the International Crisis Group (ICG) is seeing limitations in key parts of society, for example in journalism. That means that there is extra responsibility for civil society in raising alarm bells and making sure all voices are heard. ICG is working all over the world, and in a lot of them colleagues are not able to go out and about and do their work. At the same time the crisis also brings opportunities, with some people it's easier to get them on the phone (in New York) then on a coffee date. Another reflection, we should also look at

governance at other levels like state or municipality. Which teaches us that we can use different parts of a government system to reach the goal.

The Café ended with the question **what lessons could/should be learned from this crisis**. For Ashish Pradhan pointed at how the pandemic puts different governments in front of different challenges, and hits them at different times and in different situations. Which leads to the reaction of closing borders, using your own resources, and dealing on your own with the crisis. But, the lesson for Ashish Pradhan is that collective response should be the answer to this crisis. Pieter Feith said – besides keep washing your hands – the pandemic shows that some people, some communities, some areas are affected more than others and are at risk of being left behind. From a social-economic point of view it is extremely important that governments and the international community should look after the most vulnerable, and make sure that everyone has the same chances of getting out of this crisis.

This report only highlights a part of the discussion that was held during the webinar. The entire Covid Café can be watched on [Youtube](#).