

Live Learning Series hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat

Beyond the Immediate Response to the Outbreak Building the Community

Wednesday 25 March 2020

Participants, city leaders, colleagues, a very good afternoon from Nairobi.

I would like to thank the President of UCLG, and Emilia, for setting up our first joint virtual meeting and this community of city leaders.

We are together in the frontline of this epic battle against Covid-19. We do this for the families of those who died and for those who are already gravely ill in China, Iran, the Middle East, Europe, the United States; in cities throughout the world.

In my capacity as Executive Director, I would like to draw your attention to the most vulnerable communities and the urban poor in developing Asia, Africa and Latin America. They really need us to be equipped and be fit for purpose.

In the coming weeks and months, these vulnerable communities is projected to expand, face hardships not seen since World War II. There is already a large homeless population and this challenge will grow as the economic impact of COVID-19 tips even more people over the edge as they can no longer pay rent or mortgages or utility bills.

As we can see around the world, measures needed to slow down the rate of infection include social distancing and even curfews. What if advocacy and social distancing requires mobile communication – Can the internet cope? Can poor people buy phone credit?

Can people safely wash their hands if water operators become understaffed; or when poor people can no longer buy overpriced gallons of water? What about public safety? A city in lock down also needs to be a safe city.

Will people insist on traveling out of cities to regions, for work and subsistence? Globalisation has helped to spread Covid-19 around the world but we must remember that local economies are also mobile. Food security, for example, requires mobility.

What about the long-term health impacts on people and communities ? Will community resources be needed for health support at the expense of environmental initiatives and similar endeavours to improve the quality of life of people ?

At one point in time, we will have to review the organisation of neighbourhoods, cities and regions on the basis of what happens now.

First, however, cities have to repurpose buildings for medical and care purposes. Thereafter, will tourism revenues disappear for years ? Elderly care will be much more difficult.

In 2017, I was still a mayor. I now wonder how I would have dealt with Covid-19 if I had been in Penang, Malaysia today. Would I have been able to ensure that health professionals and my colleagues in the city council be able to work effectively together to deliver services to those most in need in all parts of the city?

I would have asked that humanitarian organisations would deliver assistance to the poorest in collaboration with both health officials and other city departments.

I would have sought extra budgets for immediate cash support to the poorest, as they would lose their daily and weekly income instantly, working on minimum wages in the service sector and the daily-wage economy.

Today as Executive Director of UN-Habitat I have to ask what to do tomorrow, next week and next month? The challenges are daunting.

I reached out to UCLG to start this dialogue today. We should not lose any opportunity to understand what is happening at the frontline of cities and regions. I want to listen to the needs and the challenges. We should all help each other to seek solutions to the challenges that no one city can solve by itself.

Local governments of cities and regions are closest to communities. Their resilience is our strength and source of inspiration. We need to build on this special relationship and I believe that together we can discover the solutions we need.

Let us share what we have learned with cities and regions who are desperately preparing, responding and recovering. How to test, trace and treat!

I welcome the participation of recovering cities : Guangzhou and Xi'an. Of cities under siege : Barcelona, Madrid and Rome. For regions under siege now for years and facing Covid : Lampedusa, host of countless refugees. And cities preparing for the inevitable onset : Durban, Bogota, Buenos Aires.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this meeting signals UN-Habitat's commitment to sit down with you, to seek your collaboration, your help, your wisdom, your commitment that global action matters. We start by listening to you.

With UCLG, we will distil the take-aways and the learnings, advocate the do's and don'ts, develop guidance and reach out to those facing the gravest challenges. Real-time learning will need to be scaled up.

Thank you for coming forward today, for your people, for all people.