



**Live Learning Series hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat
Culture and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Speech by the UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif
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Dear City Leaders, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good morning, good afternoon or good evening to all of you!

Two and half months ago, at the 10th World Urban Forum in Abu Dhabi, we came together to discuss the opportunities of sustainable urban development. We declared our actions to connect culture and innovation at the start of the Decade of Action for the SDGs.

We focused on 2030. We were optimistic that urban development would remain a key driver to reduce poverty in the world. We were hopeful that we could regenerate cities, exploit culture and heritage, employ innovative technologies and energy solutions to turn compact urban agglomeration with vibrant inner cities into a force of sustainable development.

I still believe this to be true and that the pandemic is forcing us to look deep into ourselves to find out what is important. I am convinced that culture will remain at the top because it is the one element that helps make society resilient.

Tourism accounts for 10% of the global GDP the creative economy represents 3%, according to UNWTO and UNCTAD. In some countries, the combined count goes up to 25 or even 50%. They were also among the fastest growing sectors and projected to expand significantly in the next 10 years. Yet, with COVID, we can see that tourism by itself is not a sustainable resource. What makes it clear that things will bounce back is the culture and cultural assets that is the foundation for this service-oriented sector.

The crisis in our cities and communities is unfolding in all countries of the world. In countries which plan for the exit of lockdowns, we all know that the culture sector thrives on togetherness and will remain curtailed. And we don't know for how long.

The logistics of urban culture and tourism often depend on minimum wages, temp jobs, insecure and unsafe jobs for women. Inner-city neighbourhoods are now deserted as residents were priced out before while converted houses and flats have currently no tourists.

We have now to think and act beyond the shock.

I believe that through culture, we have the capacity to embrace change and transformation as the future takes root. And it is our diverse and rich culture stretching from the past into the present, built on heritage and common understanding, that can help us build the future and innovate.



The United Nations Sustainable Development Group will soon launch the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-economic Response to COVID-19. The framework calls for social dialogue and social cohesion and stresses investing in community-led resilience.

Cities never have plenty of financial resources, so they should capitalize on the creative capacities and the resilience of communities. These are powerful means for social cohesion.

Cities should now invest in urban design, to imagine new opportunities: more public space, wider bicycle lanes, more pedestrian space – not because it is beautiful but because it essential for health now and later. Local architects, planners and community groups can virtually collaborate.

Cities should invest in bringing local culture online inclusively. They are expanding service platforms which should include performances and events targeting mainstream and minority audiences.

Cities should engage grassroots groups which before serviced hospitality and tourisms. Allow me to highlight UN-Habitat's EU-funded programme on urban eco-tourism in Nepal. The grassroot women groups who started up bed-and-breakfasts as part of urban regeneration projects are now making face masks.

Cities should rethink the economies of heritage districts. Heritage districts should be living districts, with a normal range of community services, with neighbourhood economies capable to survive based on community needs and not only through tourism.

Cities should rethink tourism and recreation, to cater strongly to local demand. The natural heritage should be revalued. Urban agriculture can rediscover aspects of an intangible culture, of local food culture and support farmer markets.

For city leaders, these difficult times are also the best of times to reach out to the cultural leaders in your cities and communities. Ask them to start visioning, to see how cities can move from a culture shock to a culture shift – ending poverty, bringing welfare, providing land and public services to the poorest who now live in decrepit neighbourhoods and slums.



I call this session on live-learning about Covid-19 and culture as an opportunity to think not about our loss of today but what we can gain tomorrow, in terms of a more sustainable future.

I look forward that the speakers and city leaders in this session will get us moving beyond the culture shock of today. Inspire us to get us back into action for sustainable development!