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

Speech by the UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif
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City Leaders, Technology Champions,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After a month of working from home, relying on digital platforms to connect and ensuring business continuity of a global organisation, it is time that we think, act and collaborate *Beyond the Outbreak*, together with cities and local governments. Covid-19 is already fundamentally changing the way that we live and work.

As millions of people are asked to stay at home, they turn to their phones and computers as a lifeline and a necessary tool to substitute in-person activities, to stay connected to friends, family and co-workers. Since 16 March 2020, all UN-Habitat staff worldwide have been working from home.

As the UN Secretary-General said recently, the Covid-19 crisis is causing mass digitalization of human relations which will have a longstanding and fundamental change on the world. The transition to automation, artificial intelligence, distributed working and telemedicine will be speeded up.

In February, UN-Habitat launched its Flagship Programme on "**People Centered Smart Cities**". The programme brings technology champions together : cities, companies, academics, specialists and especially those with a vision for people-centered innovation.

Covid-19 is now shaping the future of innovation in cities and society as a whole. We are seeing local governments use digital technologies to respond to the crisis. New citizen information portals are coming up quickly. Contact tracing apps are being built. Medical consultations and educational services are moving online.

As the world is moving rapidly towards a digital response to the crisis, I would like to stress two points.

The first is the digital divide. **As I have said many times before, while half the world's population is connected to the internet – the other half is not.**

Existing inequalities in developed and developing countries will be widened further. Communities with poor internet access are less likely to be well-informed about the virus and what to do to respond.

People without smartphones will not be able to make use of the contact-tracing apps that are now being developed.

Cities can do a lot to ensure that the digital revolution doesn't leave anyone or any place behind. Marginalized communities need help on connectivity knowledge and skills. I applaud cities increasing connectivity in underserved urban areas, providing free wifi , rolling out digital literacy training and engaging youth in low-income neighbourhoods in community hackatons but these efforts need to be scaled up to bridge the widening digital divide.

Secondly, **HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST should apply as much online as offline**. In our haste to find new technological solutions to the crisis, let us not forget the digital rights of all citizens.

In the era of the smart city, much of the world's data is being collected in urban areas. Cities and local governments need to put in place policies on data collection. They need to ensure that citizens and investors trust all digital public services, on privacy and more.

The current crisis highlights the urgency.

Both UN-Habitat and UCLG are members of the *Cities Coalition for Digital Rights*, a group of cities which have come together to build this capacity in the context of digital rights. We are proud to be organizing this session with their support.

More than 60 cities have endorsed the Principles of "Cities for Digital Rights", on universal access and digital literacy, on privacy and data security, on data transparency and non-discrimination of digital platforms, on participation and inclusion in the development and management of ICT in cities and on open standards.

The current crisis is stretching our societies to the breaking point. **Digital technology provides an important lifeline. Let's make sure that all of us have access to this lifeline.**

Cities and local governments can do a lot to make this happen. Let us not miss today's opportunity of building a more equal and inclusive digital world, now and Beyond the Outbreak.