

**Live Learning Series hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat
Housing and COVID-19**

**Speech by the UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif
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***'Housing First'* as a central pillar in the response of cities to the COVID-19 crisis**

City Leaders, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must think, act and collaborate *Beyond the Outbreak*, together with cities and local governments. Covid-19 is already shaking our belief that we can save lives as we thought we could. It also shakes our belief that we can continue to plan and manage cities as we thought we should. But, at the very least: we all are now convinced that adequate housing is of utmost importance. All people need adequate housing to **Stay at Home**.

I was reassured in the first session with cities from Guangzhou to Rome and from Durban to Buenos Aires, that local and regional governments have been able so far to continue public services while preparing and responding in the health emergency and in providing social services.

Governors and mayors in urban areas are playing leading roles in slowing the pandemic spreading while keeping their cities functioning. The international response should therefore be decentralized and tailored to the relevant context, by working closely with local governments.

I am moreover convinced that the first Thematic Session of our joint initiative with UCLG and Metropolis must be about housing. The **Right to Adequate Housing**, as a component of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, is a universally recognized Human Right.

Now, it is also **central** in our battle against COVID. Without adequate housing, social distancing and hygiene, are simply impossible. **Adequate housing is now a matter of life and death**.

The economic impact of COVID-19 is creating instability in incomes, particularly for small businesses, low-income and informal workers and self-employed contractors who are facing closure, job loss and economic hardship which could result in **rental and mortgage arrears**, and **the threat of forced eviction**.

People who are living in **inadequate housing** are likely to have poor health due to the absence of basic services and adequate shelter. At the extreme end of the scale, people who are **homeless** are even more vulnerable.

Stay at Home policies also increases the **safety challenges**, of domestic violence and gender-based violence. They are worse if neighbourhoods are already overcrowded or with a problematic safety and security context for women of girls. Mental and physical health, also of children, is more easily compromised in neighbourhoods lacking access to nearby public spaces and green areas.



The pandemic affects us all, yet it is hitting the world's most vulnerable people the hardest - especially those living in informal settlements and slums, in crowded, unhealthy and inadequate living conditions. **Covid-19 exposes more than one billion people living in slums or inadequate housing.**

Regular hand washing and social distancing are among the key measures currently put in place in an attempt to prevent the transmission of the highly infectious COVID-19 disease. However, people living in **informal settlements and slums**, do not have the opportunity to self-protect as water for basic needs is in short supply, housing is inadequate, space is constrained, and access is compromised.

The problem is a human settlement issue as housing, land and property cuts across both urban and rural settings. Growing insecurity in urban areas may result in the movement of people to their rural bases for access to welfare and service.

The movement of people will leave houses locked, or overcrowded, or occupied by others – migrants, refugees in settings while vacant or not. Tenure insecurity and conflicts always arise out of forced displacements and Covid-19 may become a tremendous catalyst for civil unrest.

It is crucial for governments to follow the lead of the current innovators and champions and put in place mechanisms to protect those most vulnerable to the current emergency. For this reason, in the short term, UN-Habitat encourages local governments to – at a minimum - adopt the following **emergency measures**:

1. Provide temporary and emergency accommodation to **all** people without secure housing to enable them to practice social distancing and the necessary health-related measures, by leveraging the use of underutilized spaces and repurposing of buildings for an increased supply of shelter, and other appropriate measures.
2. Put in place emergency safe drinking water and handwashing facilities in key locations in informal settlements and slums by providing water tanks, standpipes, handwashing facilities and sanitizers along with hygiene messages and social distancing instructions.
3. Take extraordinary measures to secure the right to housing for all, inter alia through moratoriums on evictions due to rental and mortgage arrears; deferrals of mortgage payments; extension of winter moratoriums on forced evictions of informal settlements and slums; introduction of rental stabilization or reduction measures; and suspension of utility costs and surcharges for the duration of the pandemic.
4. Explore options for to vulnerable communities or neighbourhoods to access repurposed buildings, land and open space for essential small businesses, food



security, emergency health care and other vital functions needed while people stay at home.

The COVID-19 crisis is indeed terrible, but it also offers **a unique global opportunity** to demonstrate that it is possible to provide housing and land tenure security to all, through increasing the preparedness of urban areas to respond to extreme events through promoting the overall sustainability of the housing sector.

Cities and local governments around the world **are showing the way** in this, the “Decade of Action”, to reach a new milestone in reducing inequalities and poverty levels and move towards access to adequate housing for all, as a foundation for delivering the universal human rights everywhere.