



**Live Learning Series hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat
Equality and Accessibility Session
Speech by the UN-Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif
Wednesday 20 May 2020**

City Leaders, dear friends,

A good morning/afternoon/evening from Kuala Lumpur

Four months ago, the city of Wuhan was about to declare a health emergency and since then, the world has changed. The pandemic has affected everybody but unequally. Many are even more marginalized now, with the World Bank estimating that 60 million people will fall into extreme poverty.

The response measures create physical, attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers. **Marginalized communities suffer the most.** Persons with disabilities and older persons face obstacles and discrimination in accessing health care and other essential services. They face social protection challenges, income insecurity and miss out mental health services. Digital communication while staying at home is difficult for those with poor hearing or sight, or other challenges.

UN-Habitat's voice and actions for inclusion and against inequality are of course at the heart of our mission, also in the midst of this Pandemic. In the successive learning sessions we have had since 25 March, together with UCLG, Metropolis and so many close partners, inclusion has been a key benchmark to measure successful actions, of cities and local governments facing the impact of the health crisis and the lockdown responses.

For instance, I recall the first session on adequate housing and its strong message on homelessness. Countless homeless people are extremely vulnerable, with underlying health problems and face social exclusion. Those who have with us in the learning sessions week after week, have heard the testimony of cities responding to issues of exclusion and injustice in the context of migration, local economic development, informality – to recall a few of the many challenges.

Cities are at the frontline of this crisis and they would continue to be in the future when medium- and long-term responses will be implemented. The loss of employment will tend to generate greater social polarization. The impacts will be larger but uneven in cities and region, particularly in those where inequality patterns already existed. UN-Habitat documented in the World Cities Report 2015, that 70% of the cities in the world were growing more unequal, even in



societies that were considered more egalitarian.

In 2015, the World Economic Forum considered that inequality was a universal concern and one of the major threats to world stability; this pandemic will further exacerbate the urban divide.

The intersection of poverty and inequality will become more visible in cities, and disadvantages will concentrate in specific areas and neighborhoods. Policies and actions are needed to avoid and reduce such impact, especially for the most vulnerable. UN-Habitat, therefore started preparing a special edition of the **State of the World Cities Report**, focusing on the impact and solutions beyond the Covid-19 outbreak.

Dear Friends,

We celebrate **the Global Accessibility Day** tomorrow 21 May. We are putting the issue of accessibility front and centre. I am grateful for the intense collaboration with UCLG, World Enabled, international development banks and member states, including our friends from Germany.

Today's focus on inclusive and accessible cities should make our mission for inclusion more tangible. Older persons and persons with disabilities constitute a significant and increasing segment of urban populations anywhere in the world.

I call on all cities to participate in the Cities for All "**COVID-19 Inclusive & Accessible Cities**" Pilot Survey we are initiating together. Lack of disability and older persons disaggregated data makes it difficult to carry out evidence-based analysis of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Disability and older persons disaggregated data in recovery and COVID-19 response must include data on barriers and improved accessibility.

I also urge city managers to work closely with available Disabled People's and Older Persons organisations by giving them a seat at the table. These groups will ensure that their perspectives in the pandemic response are considered and provide idea for more inclusion using their own expertise and experience.

I call on city and regional leaders to ensure legislation and policies establish the necessary enabling environment for disability and older persons-inclusive pandemic response. In many countries, we need to be extra mindful about the needs of the older women and girls with disabilities. Response programmes and



services need to be accessible to, and usable by, persons with disabilities and older persons where they ensure universal design principles are followed.

In conclusion, it is important for states and local governments to ensure more inclusive, accessible and agile systems capable of responding to pandemics and future disasters, by reaching out to those furthest left behind. This will pave the way for inclusive cities, and a better future for all.