

PRESS RELEASE:

Local Democracy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic

#BeyondTheOutbreak

COVID-19 has had a strong impact on local and regional governments and has affected electoral processes, meetings of municipal councils and political bodies, and decision-making processes at the local level.

Local and regional governments met in the Live Learning session, organized by UCLG, UN-Habitat and Metropolis to show their political commitment to decision-making at the local level to achieve their role as drivers of change. The solidarity, local democracy, and protection of the common good shown by local and regional governments will be vital to rethink our societies in the wake of the pandemic.

Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of UCLG, facilitated the dialogue, noting that the debate on local democracy during the pandemic had added difficulties, due to its intangibility, in the face of public services that were traditionally the banner of learning experiences, but highlighted the concerns of local and regional leaders around the world in this regard.

"How has the pandemic affected our systems of governance, and trust between institutions and citizens? These questions must be addressed, and we must do so from the ground up to re-establish relationships of trust."

Thembisile Nkadimeng, Mayor of Polokwane, President of SALGA and Co-President of UCLG, introduced the session by pointing out that it is important to change how we approach urban and regional governance to adapt to the challenges of the post-COVID-19 world by carrying out governance reforms that accelerate responses from the local level to global crises, socio-economic and political shocks.

"It is the task of the international system to recognize the difficulties we will face and to contribute to the transformation of the current international system into an inter-urban system that will take advantage of the strength of our territories and that can contribute, through dialogue between the spheres of government, to the next generation of multilateralism."

Octavi de la Varga, Secretary General of Metropolis, addressed how the pandemic had forced many governments to make decisions of a technocratic nature in pursuit of efficiency and due to urgency, but that it is essential to continue taking decisions - and carrying out political processes - of a political nature, and pointed out that true multilevel democracy implies that local governments are seen not only as service providers, but also as key agents in the decision-making process.

"Are emergencies and crises going to be part of the way politics are done at the local level? It is necessary to develop new ways of doing things and for this a true local democracy is key, which cannot be understood without decentralization, without communities and, of course, without financing".

Elkin Velásquez, UN-Habitat Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean, said innovation and joint collaboration are key to overcoming the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding solutions together, with the framework of local agendas, and through collaboration between local governments and their communities, is the only way to rebuild societies in a sustainable way.

"Uncertainty requires humility, adaptation, collaboration. We need to learn from these ideas, return to the starting point and develop tools to review, protect, and update our local social contract."

Johnny Araya, Mayor of San José and Co-President of UCLG, warned of the great setback that the pandemic represents for the logos of global agendas such as the SDGs, both at the economic and social levels, revealing weaknesses on many levels and great imbalances. In view of this, he pointed out that the discussions *"must begin from the local level and close to the citizens, starting from the numerous avenues of opportunity opened up by the crisis,"* and he focused on the environment, on the progress of technological tools, and on alliances with civil society as the engine of solidarity and the fight against vulnerability. He also called for the framework of action of the SDGs as essential for reducing inequalities, particularly in the technological field.

Carola Gunnarsson, Mayor of Sala and UCLG Vice-President for Europe, pointed out that it is the municipalities that are most affected by the decline in economic production. She advocated for the need to respect the principle of subsidiarity and democratic local self-government, together with adequate financial autonomy, to transform the democracy of the future, and as the way to ensure that local and regional governments are able to respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

Paola Pabón, Prefect of Pichincha, linked the discussion on democracy with the necessary debate on equality by addressing the challenge of the technological gap and how it affects social exclusion, in particular with the youngest. She pointed out that it was crucial to give more competence to local and regional governments, and to articulate sub-national levels of government so that they could carry out coherent policies. She pointed out the danger of defusing elections without meaningful agreements from all political actors, as this potentially weakens the voice of citizens.

Laia Bonet, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, highlighted the value of democracies in the face of populism, since the former combat inequality, guarantee the rights of the entire population and protect the most vulnerable, such as women, and the LGBTQ community in the face of the lack of services. She pointed out that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of public services, and explained that local autonomy, also key to democracy, allows local authorities to guarantee these services. He added that autonomy is not to the detriment of multilateralism, in which territories must also be present.

Valérie Dumontet, Vice-President of Aude, shared the project "Defending the youth for the world of tomorrow", starting with the unequal socio-economic effects of the crisis, which is disproportionately affecting this sector of the population. This project crystallises the mobilisations for youth solidarity, and aims to bring together inhabitants of Aude, Sousse and municipalities of Burkina Faso to make recommendations based on UCLG's Decalogue. She pointed out that in order to fight against citizen mistrust and authoritarianism, it is necessary to promote the transversality of local and regional authorities, combine their governance with other spheres of government, and articulate representative and participatory democracy.

Camilo Romero, former Governor of Nariño and winner of the 2019 IOPD "Best Practice in Citizen Participation" Distinction, warned that Colombia, one of the most unequal societies in the world, is facing a socio-economic situation with this crisis that would aggravate this reality even more. In the face of this, he said that participation and innovation must be used to tackle authoritarianism and the "every man for himself" approach that is promoted by those that have most resources. He emphasized that the solutions will come from defending the public sphere and decisions for the majority, which must restart the system to create new citizens and governments with clear priorities.

Pascal Clouaire, Deputy Mayor of Grenoble, presented the actions implemented by the city to maintain and deepen local and participatory democracy since the beginning of the pandemic thanks to online tools: participatory budgets via video conferences with project promoters, a citizen collaboration platform (*Grenoble*

Voisins Voisines) that brings together people who offer and require help of any kind, and a citizen jury to fight against the isolation of older people,

Nelly Ouassenan, Deputy Mayor of Cocody, expressed her pride in how the pandemic, in Cocody, had served to strengthen local democracy, as they understood that in order to fight the former, the latter could not be dispensed with. However, she argued that they were not unaware of the socio-economic effects of the crisis and had therefore carried out campaigns and programmes to raise awareness, support victims of domestic violence, street children and businesses

Imen Ouardani, Vice-Mayor of Sousse, pointed out that local and regional authorities and the exercise of participatory democracy have been tested during the pandemic, and claimed the need to strengthen them and continue decentralisation. In this sense, she explained that Sousse has become aware of the role of new technologies and is working on their application for citizen participation, which will allow the creation of new relationships with citizens. On the other hand, he explained the relevance of the problems of migrants, with respect to which Sousse collaborates actively with Aude.

Edwin Miño, Executive Director of CONGOPE, focused on the need to continue working to achieve global agendas, which are fundamental to reducing inequalities in the wake of the pandemic, and warned of the danger of the judicialization of politics and the politicization of justice.

Emilio Jatón, Mayor of Santa Fe, explained that the pandemic has not changed reality, but rather made it disappear, so the great challenge is to reinvent and manage reality through new criteria that put an end to the great inequalities. He pointed out that since the beginning of the pandemic he had not made any decisions, but had dedicated his time and his team to building them with the citizens.

José Manuel Ribeiro, Mayor of Valongo, focused his intervention on the need to resist and avoid the fear that is emerging more strongly than ever from the current situation: on the one hand, cities and their inhabitants must resist physical, mental and democratic problems, but also previous problems such as inequalities, often ignored and now aggravated and unmanageable; on the other hand, fear, which no politician can manage, but which helps people to discern what is right (strengthening democracy, human dignity) from what must be fixed (permanent suspension of freedoms, market without limits).

Shi Qi, Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of the city of Xi'an pointed out the primary role of UCLG as an organisation focused on local governments. In

reference to Xi'an, he indicated that they are in the post-COVID-19 phase, focusing therefore on restoring the economy, which will allow citizens to return to normality in terms of their professional projects.

Gennady Ryabov, President of the Public Chamber of the city of Nizhny Novgorod, emphasized the importance of ensuring the transparency of the institutions, and regretted that at the beginning of the pandemic not all information was available. In response, he explained that the Chamber launched a platform to broadcast 12 sessions online on key issues such as volunteering, schooling, entrepreneurship and workers' rights. She noted that this experience had helped them to renew relations with the public and represented a unique opportunity for the advancement of democracy.

Amalinda Savirani of the Universitas Gadjah Mada (Indonesia) contributed to the conclusions by focusing on democracy at the local level, which is characterized by prioritizing the demands of citizens. She explained that, by ensuring that democracy works, the crisis opens a window of opportunity for local governments to strengthen themselves and make themselves heard at more levels, and pointed out that all the experiences presented in the session attest to these multiple opportunities. Finally, she pointed out that local democracy should not be subordinated to other priorities such as the economy, since without the former, growth can only be weak and vulnerable.

Annika Silva-Leander, Head of Democracy Assessment and Political Analysis at International IDEA, stated that before the pandemic, the quality of democracy was already declining at the global level, including in the most advanced countries, and she regretted that the current situation is deepening this damage. Although often conceived at the national level, she explained that these restrictions are comparable at the local level. He noted that innovative practices based on technology and solidarity will bring citizens closer to local governments, allowing them to emerge stronger from this crisis.

Mohammed Saddieh, UCLG Vice President for the Middle East and East Asia Region closed the session by calling for the reinforcement of equality and women's empowerment in his region as a critical instrument for recovery. In the face of further crisis, more democracy and inclusion are needed.

Elkin Velásquez, **Adrià Duarte** and **Emilia Saiz** closed the session by emphasizing the role of local governments on the front line of the effects of the pandemic. They pointed out the importance of a new commitment to democratic renewal for a sustainable world.

About Live Learning Experience Series:

The **Live Learning Series** hosted by UCLG, Metropolis, and UN-Habitat, has brought together more than 2,000 participants over the course of ten sessions in which participants from local and regional governments, the UN system, and partners from civil society shared their experiences, initiatives, and actions to support their communities facing the pandemic through the provision of key basic services. The series started late March and cities across the globe have shared their experiences, initiatives and actions in response to the pandemic. They also shared their frontline views on how cities may transform beyond the outbreak.

About United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)

UCLG is the global organization of local and regional governments and their associations that represents and defends their interests on the world stage. Representing 70 per cent of the world's population, UCLG members are present in all world regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Eurasia, Middle East-West Asia, Latin America and North America - organised in seven continental sections, a metropolitan section and a regional forum. This network covers more than 240,000 cities, regions and metropolises and more than 175 local and regional government associations present in 140 countries. UCLG includes among its main areas of political interest local democracy, climate change and environmental protection, the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, the role of culture in sustainability, local finance, urban development and city diplomacy for peacebuilding. Visit www.uclg.org and follow [@uclg_org](https://twitter.com/uclg_org) for more.

About UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat is the UN agency focused on our cities, towns and communities. UN-Habitat works in over 90 countries supporting people in cities and human settlements for a better urban future. Working with governments and local partners, its high impact projects combine world-class expertise and local knowledge to deliver timely and targeted solutions. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a dedicated Goal on cities, SDG 11 – to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Visit www.unhabitat.org and follow [@unhabitat](https://twitter.com/unhabitat) for further information.

For more details contact:

Alejandra Salas

UCLG World Secretariat, Barcelona

communication@uclg.org

Susannah Price

Chief of Communication, UN-Habitat

susannah.price@un.org Tel + 254 722 719867