

High Level Political Forum 2020
UN-Habitat and WHO
Urban Form and COVID-19: Thinking Through Issues of Density, Overcrowding,
Public Space, and Health
Thursday, 9 July 2020

Excellencies, and distinguished delegates, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen. Warm greetings from Malaysia.

I am pleased to be here with you today on the occasion of the High-Level Political Forum. I would like to thank the organizing committee for hosting this event, bringing together Member States and leaders from around the world to discuss and define strategies to bolster local action to Accelerated action and transformative pathways: realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

The world is living through an unprecedented crisis as COVID-19 continues to spread, with tens of thousands of lives lost and over two hundred countries affected. In just a few months, the pandemic has transformed the way we live, work, travel and socialize.

The world's cities are generally reacting quickly to this urban humanitarian crisis and how they respond is critical to protect their population, halt the pandemic and set the scene for resilience and recovery. Clearly COVID-19 is not just a health crisis, it requires a whole of society response and renewed awareness.

This pandemic has brought into focus the interrelation between health outcomes – and how the pandemic is being managed – and cities development. Not only cities are heavily affected, but they are also in the frontline of defining solutions and organising life after and with COVID

UN-Habitat and the World Health Organization have a long lasting and on-going collaboration regarding urban health that must be of guidance and inspiration to members states to build better urban environments that promote health and wellbeing. The SDGs themselves allow for numerous linkages between health and sustainable urbanization. SDG 3 is about health and well being and we are fully aware human settlements planning and management can contribute significantly.

Last month we launched a joint publication with WHO on ‘Integrating Health in Urban and Territorial Planning’. It is a sourcebook which shows the outcomes of collaboration between urban experts and health experts in various areas of urban planning and how health consideration can shape and find answers in urban planning and design. This collaboration is today, in the midst of a pandemic that is proving complex and lasting, particularly important.

We start to see now that the impact of COVID-19 will be most devastating in poor and densely populated urban areas, especially for the one billion people living in informal settlements and slums worldwide as well as for refugees, internally displaced people and migrants. Population living in overcrowded housing and those essential workers who keep city functioning are also proving particularly vulnerable. Not only because of the contagion dynamics, but also for the mortality and to the economic impact of the response measures.

The impact of the pandemic on cities life, the way we will recover from COVID-19 and how we will further prepare for pandemic crisis in future has the potential to shape our cities. This has been the case for past pandemics, and we expect this to be true this time around as well

Yet not all is well understood and patterns vary significantly across regions. Clearly COVID-19 is not targeting the poor specifically, but its impact is progressively showing how inequalities play out in different contexts, and highlighting new forms of vulnerability and of resilience.

The issue of overcrowding linked to urban inequality and lack of access to services is emerging as very important. Density is also being discussed as we are finding that density with diversity of uses and with adequate housing conditions is not only not associated with higher incidence and impact of COVID-19, but actually supports communities to better endure lockdowns and facilitates public actors to provide health services. Public spaces also have proven to be a lifeline for many, and a key resource also for the delivery of emergency services and support.

Yet we know the debate is not concluded, policies will need to be shaped and long term strategies defined. They will need to be equitable. And will need to keep into focus the other major crisis of our time – climate change and the multiple risks it poses to our world and cities.

As UN-Habitat, we want to understand all these trends and implication better, recognising that if this is not done, countries and cities may lack the evidence to make adequate decisions and we may be working from misconceptions and not from evidence, and missing in the process the opportunity to build a really resilient future for our cities and communities.

Currently, UN-Habitat is working towards a report on the Future State of Cities in a World with Pandemics which will identify key strategic areas of sustainable urbanization and discuss the most significant potential impacts of COVID-19. Driven by new data and indicators, the report will provide a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing urban areas in the aftermath of COVID-19 and help promote strategic, sustainable solutions to rebuilding after the pandemic.

The report is focusing on 4 key areas:

- o Governance and the reshaping of the state that the pandemic brings into focus
- o The situation of inequality and poverty which emerge from this crisis
- o The local economic business model in the face of the crisis
- o And finally, the relationship between urban form and health, which is the focus of this session as we must “think through the issues of Density, Overcrowding, Public Space, and Health”.

The report aims to frame and rethink urban morphology, creating new evidence on density and compactness with the objective to identify the aspects of urban forms that can mitigate the spread of future pandemics, reduce the adverse economic impact, protect the vulnerable, build resilience in the face of pandemics, and achieve sustainable cities from a socio-economic and environmental perspective

As we explore this theme, I am please to welcome the panellist today to bring the perspective of their respective countries and cities and to help us build collective understanding and identify lessons and options. As many of the gains made in building sustainable cities since the New Urban Agenda was adopted in Quito also support a healthier and pandemic resilient world, we need to discuss what acceleration this crisis can impart and what risks need to be mitigated. There is an overall hope that we can make use of this forced moment of reckoning to embrace sustainability more deliberately and with a clearer focus on addressing vulnerabilities.

The path is long, but I am sure that, with your commitment we will build back better together. Our urban and territorial environments define the air we breathe, the food, the water we drink, the spaces we move in, along with other factors that determine a healthy lifestyle. For this reason, health has been set as a cornerstone of the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 11, to ensure that urbanisation becomes a catalyser of good health and well-being, and inversely, to make health a key driver of sustainable development.

□ Thank you all for being here, I wish you a fructiferous discussion and I look forward on the results from this important discussion to build back better together.