

Virtual Press Conference

Launch of UN Secretary-General Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World Monday 27 July 2020

UNDP Administrator, my friend Achim Steiner,
 Representatives of the media,

Thank you for attending this press conference today for the launch of the Secretary-General's latest Policy Brief on **COVID-19 in an Urban World**.

COVID-19 is an urban crisis. More than half of the world's population live in urban areas. And some 90 per cent of all reported COVID-19 cases are in cities and towns. It also highlights the necessity to take urgent action to ensure cities remain resilient to absorb future challenges related to climate change and migration.

The Secretary-General's Policy Brief is a **powerful instrument** to put us on the right path to deal with the crisis and also to seize the opportunity to do things differently in the recovery, so that we can create greener, healthier and more resilient cities. The transformative potential of urbanization towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be lost. Equally, this moment cannot be missed.

Local governments are the front-line responders to this crisis, and indeed, to all others. Local government networks such as UCLG, C40, ICLEI, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and many represented in the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments, have all created platforms to share solutions and learn lessons as we go forward. Their mobilization – and their solutions - have been impressive.

The Policy Brief draws on these positive examples and outlines immediate and long-term action in three vital areas:

1. **Tackling inequalities and development gaps**
2. **Strengthening the capacities of local actors, particularly local governments**
3. **Working towards a recovery that is green, inclusive and resilient**

1. Tackling Inequalities

The pandemic has further exposed **structural inequalities** which divide people by income, service access, race, migration status and the quality of the air they breathe in our urban societies.

COVID-19 has had a disproportional impact on the most vulnerable who are unable to protect themselves against the virus because of where they live.

Staying at home, physical distancing and handwashing are seen as key preventative measures. However nearly 1.8 billion people live in inadequate housing, overcrowding, slums and slum-like conditions, or some are even homeless, with lack of access to clean water, leaving them at a high risk of exposure to COVID-19. Less than 20 per cent of people in Nairobi’s informal settlements have a household water connection.

But this is not just an issue in the global south. In London, per-capita infection rates in poorer boroughs have been three times higher than in more affluent areas.

The urban poor often has no access to social safety nets, leaving them at risk of eviction or having their services disconnected, as their incomes drop. The longer the pandemic goes on, the deeper they risk being pushed into poverty and insecurity.

The Secretary-General’s Policy Brief sets out a number of key actions to tackle inequalities. Short term measures such as access to safe shelter and moratoriums on evictions are essential. However, fundamental policy shifts and investments in adequate housing, slum upgrading and public housing are needed in the longer term.

2. Strengthening the capacities of local actors, particularly local governments

Second, the pandemic has shown the crucial role of local governments as front-line responders but has also demonstrated the need more than ever for a strong alignment and collaboration between national, regional and local governments.

National governments must ensure in their stimulus packages that local governments and public service providers can keep the cities functioning, at a time when they see their revenues decline. In Africa local governments face losses of up to 60 per cent of their revenues.

3. Work towards a green, inclusive and resilient recovery

Thirdly, let's not forget that this health crisis comes at a time when we also face a climate emergency. The pandemic is far from over. Experts say the peak is still to come in Africa and second waves are likely in other places. Any recovery effort needs to put resilience building against all hazards, at the centre.

The pandemic makes it clear that human and planetary health are closely connected. Recovery does not only need to be resilient but also green and inclusive. Sound urban planning, a focus on the circular economy, public space, and sustainable mobility must be central to our plans going forward.

Many city authorities have reacted quickly to provide solutions on all these fronts. Seattle banned evictions for non-payment of rent, local governments in Bogotá, Montreal, Vienna, and Barcelona have made emergency housing available, and Quito is working with local businesses to expand social assistance initiatives to migrant residents.

There is a significant uptake of biking and walking as safe alternatives to public transport and car use, prolonging the improvement in air quality during the lockdowns. We have seen bike lanes being expanded and widened, short-term street closures and temporary bike lanes in Mexico, and streets converted into pedestrian zones in Tel Aviv and New York.

These efforts need to be applauded, but more importantly, they need to be sustained, and they need to be scaled up.

In conclusion, our aim to achieve the SDGs, overcome the climate emergency and manage future pandemics is intrinsically linked to the future of cities.

Density is not the problem. Overcrowding, lack of access to public services and air quality are. In a world where telecommuting and online retail are becoming the new normal, more than ever, we need well-designed cities, neighbourhoods and buildings, that keep us safe, allow for solidarity and inclusion in a green and healthy environment.

This Policy Brief has benefited from a strong collaboration across several UN Agencies and provides a framework for more integrated support to Member States and cities. In this complex crisis, more than ever, we need to act and deliver as one. We will contribute our urban expertise to the work of other agencies in the UN system. Again, I am delighted to be here with UNDP's Administrator Achim Steiner as our partnership is key to that.

This Brief is a strong call for action. If we want to leave no one, no place and no local government behind, we will need to put global, national and local solidarity front and centre.

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