Secretary-General's Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World
Key Messages
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Impacts of the pandemic in urban areas

- **Urban areas are at the epicentre** of the pandemic, accounting for an **estimated 90 per cent of cases.**
  - **Urban density does not inevitably correlate with higher virus transmission.** Cities are largely vulnerable as a result of choices about how they are organized and how people live, work and travel in and around them.

- The **pandemic has exposed deep inequalities** in how people live in cities, and how cities serve their residents. The already vulnerable have suffered most.
  - **24% of the world's urban population live in slums**.
  - **Less than half the global population can access open public spaces within 400 metres' walking distance of their homes**.

- COVID-19 shutdown measures have had economic impacts far beyond city boundaries as **urban economies account for 80% of global GDP.**

- **Air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions have fallen sharply**. **Evidence suggests poor air quality is correlated with higher COVID-19 mortality rates.** But environmental gains could be temporary if cities reopen without policies to prevent air pollution and promote de-carbonization.

- **Cities are hubs of resilience and human ingenuity**. This crisis has shown city dwellers at their best, demonstrating extraordinary solidarity and adapting overnight to new ways of working and functioning.
  - Many local governments have created **new or safer bike lanes and pedestrian zones**.
  - **The pandemic is accelerating trends such as digitalization, shifts to remote work, and virtual delivery of essential services**.
  - The recovery is an opportunity to rethink urban living to address the climate crisis and adapt to the reality of this and future pandemics.

Recommendations

1. The response should **tackle the inequalities and long-term development deficits** that have been exposed and made marginalized groups particularly vulnerable.

   Priorities include:
   - **Investing in disaggregated data to better understand inequalities**.

- o **Guaranteeing safe shelter for everyone**. Significant investments in affordable housing and slum upgrading can ensure everyone has access to shelter that facilitates physical and mental health.
- o **Ensuring uninterrupted access to essential public services for all**.
- o **Guaranteeing equitable access to health supplies and resources** and supporting the poor and other vulnerable groups with free or low-cost access to face masks, testing and treatment. Once available, it will be important to ensure equitable access to a COVID-19 vaccine.
- o **Engaging marginalized communities as partners** in response efforts.
- o **Embracing diversity and strengthening social cohesion**.

2. Capacities of local governments should be strengthened to **avoid disruptions to essential public services** and to effectively steer sustainable development.

    Priorities include:
    - o **Deepening collaboration across government** to facilitate coordinated recovery efforts.
    - o **Exploring options to support local government budgetary capacities**.
    - o **Promoting accountability and transparency** regarding COVID-19 policies and their alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
    - o **Designing communications campaigns that build public trust and reach all urban communities**.
    - o **Avoiding disruptions of essential public services**.

3. As cities implement innovative measures, it is becoming clear that **pursuing a resilient, inclusive, gender-equal and green economic recovery** is not only possible — but indispensable to achieving the SDGs.

    Priorities include:
    - o **Supporting local businesses and workers** in responding to the pandemic.
    - o Implementing participatory, tailored strategies for **local economic development**.
    - o **Future-proofing cities** by investing in **sectors with potential for high ecological and digital transformation and job creation**.
    - o Recognizing **compact cities are healthier for planet and people,** particularly when there is **adequate housing and public green space for all.**
    - o **Developing and implementing data-driven resilience plans** to improve preparedness for disasters.
    - o Investing significantly in the **care economy**.

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