Secretary-General’s Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World
Key Messages
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EMBARGOED UNTIL
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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.
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.

Ensuring uninterrupted access to essential public services for all.

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.

Engaging marginalized communities as partners in response efforts.

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:

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

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

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