

Dialogue on Cities and Pandemics:

Current issues for sustainable urbanization
and learnings for the further implementation
of the Strategic Plan 2023-2020

High-level mid-term review of the Committee of Permanent Representatives

Agenda item 5: Report of the Executive Director on implementation of the UN-Habitat Covid-19 response plan

Background

Since its emergence in December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has spread rapidly, forcing governments to take drastic containment measures to curb its spread and mitigate its effect. One of the largest global public health crises in a century, it thus also has immense social and economic impacts. It is evident that the current crisis is highlighting and reinforcing existing challenges.

Responses at the city level have proven critical to protect the people, curb the pandemic and set the scene for resilience and recovery. This is an opportunity to depart from business-as-usual, while embracing transformative change to achieve a new sustainable urban realm. However, as before, direction of the change needs to be based on proven policies, legislations, governance and actions. To guide these decisions, UN-Habitat's research undertaking for the Report on 'Cities and Pandemics: Towards a more just, green and healthy future' (March 2021) brought evidence and clarity to commonly debated assumptions on the impacts of the pandemic in urban areas. The report also promotes strategic, scaled responses in urban areas based on new data and recommends responses needed to guide stakeholders in transformative action with focus on four critical priorities for the recovery and futureproofing of cities: urban form and function, urban inequality, urban economy and urban governance.

The multisectoral research and data analysis of UN-Habitat – using, amongst other sources, the UN-Habitat and CitiIQ's COVID-19 Readiness and Response Tracker data for 1700 cities – across these four themes provided a comprehensive overview to acting locally complemented with a well-structured national governance strategy to respond to the pandemic with new resilient urban development pathways.

Findings of the UN-Habitat Report on Cities and Pandemics

Rethinking, the form and function in cities in the face of the pandemic: The first theme of the research addressed ongoing debates on the health dimensions of space: urban density, morphology, public space, housing and urban services and revealed the growing interest of the public in the challenges and opportunities facing urban areas. It concludes that, rather than density, overcrowding and access to adequate services, including health facilities, have emerged as the predominant drivers of, and critical antidote to containing, the pandemic in cities. The spatial analysis from regions and cities to neighbourhoods and buildings scale, brings out the significance of place-based responses in creating economic prosperity, health resilience and advancing sustainable development.

Addressing systemic poverty and inequality in cities: The second theme evidenced the uneven impacts of the pandemic and its containment measures in urban areas, with already marginalized groups left even more isolated in the wake of COVID-19. An analysis of urban inequalities from a spatial and economic perspective revealed key aspects contributing to the overall vulnerability to pandemics of slums, inadequate housing and informality, including the growing digital divide between spaces and communities. On the positive side, the COVID-19 mitigation measures put in place by authorities have shown that governments are capable of rapid transformation when compelled to do so. This report reviews unique windows that the crisis has opened for resolving some long-standing urban social problems and structural inequalities by strengthening the human rights and resilience of marginalized groups.

Rebuilding a 'new normal' urban economy: The economic analysis addressed the ongoing discussion on the fragility of local economies in the face of pandemic. Jobs, markets and the urban economy at large have been heavily impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions of lockdown. The report explored ways to shift to a 'new normal' local financing models for stronger resilience to multisector stresses. The integrated analysis visioned potentials of urban and national economic recovery through the intersection between productive capacities, regional economies, the market, communities and density. These can increase the co-benefits of economic sustainability, social equality, green investments and climate action through recovery and rebuilding.

Clarifying legislation and governance arrangements: The fourth and final theme argued that the severity of the pandemic, its geographic dynamics and the associated crisis requires localized and multilevel governance responses. There are indications that governance systems that work well regarding critical health actions tend to coordinate and communicate their functions effectively and flexibly both vertically and across sectors and apply, for example, accessible e-governance tools. Alongside these measures, the availability of reliable multiscale data has been essential to enable decision-making and impact monitoring, as well as popular confidence in the actions taken and policies enacted by the authorities.

Finally, one of the overarching lessons from the pandemic was that the global agendas and universal human rights obligations must undergird not just public health governance, but the governance of all sectors.

Objectives of the Dialogue

The Dialogue will introduce the key findings and recommendations of the recent global research undertaken by UN-Habitat which focused on relations between cities and pandemics and present the implications of the pandemic on sustainable urban development.

The Dialogue will clarify the implications of COVID-19 to the Strategic Plan as well as the relevance to cities as they are recovering from the pandemic and facing other critical sustainability challenges, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, urban sprawl and growing inequalities. In this regard, the Dialogue will also seek opportunities for strengthening the focus, approaches and partnerships of the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan.

The moderated exchange between Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) and the invited expert contributors will provide feedback on the experiences, priorities and best practices from the member States for further implementation of the sustainable urbanization and the remaining period of the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2023.

Possible issues for discussion

- How do the recommendations of the UN-Habitat research on cities and pandemics resonate with the context of different countries and cities? Are there certain aspects of the pandemic's impacts in cities that would require specific attention in your country?
- The report invites rethinking the form and functions of the city. Has the pandemic been instrumental in supporting more inclusive or integrated urban planning in your country?
- Do you see signs that health is becoming more important in urban policy making?
- Do you see the importance of policies on adequate housing or addressing informal settlements emphasized due to the pandemic in your country?
- UN-Habitat's research addressed the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and related restrictions on the already poor and vulnerable groups. Has the pandemic helped to address underlying causes of social and spatial exclusion in cities in your country?
- Regarding changes in national and local governments' functions and decision-making structures as a response to the pandemic, could some be retained as a 'governance legacy' of the pandemic, due to their positive impact and effectiveness?

Programme

14:00	I. Opening <p>Welcoming remarks to the Agenda item 5 Plenary – Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives</p> <p>Introduction of the Dialogue background and objectives – Maimunah Mohd. Sharif, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat</p>
14:10	II. Introduction to the fundamental impacts of the pandemic on cities and urban living – Eduardo Moreno <p>What are the implications of the pandemic to the Strategic Plan results and implementation? How to turn the global disruption to a global opportunity?</p>
14:20	III. Dialogue on the learnings from the pandemic for accelerated implementation of the Strategic Plan 2020-2023 – moderated by Ms. Victoria Rubadiri, Senior Journalist, Kenya
14:25	Dr. Etienne Krug <p>Director of Social Determinants of Health, WHO HQ</p> <p>Opportunities for healthier environment and social progress by effective multi-level governance, policies and spatial planning: Fostering strong livelihoods, building a productive workforce, creating resilient communities, enabling mobility and promoting social interaction through health actions.</p>
14:35	Prof. Mariana Mazzucato <p>Professor in Economics of Innovation and Public Value, University College London</p> <p>Towards the new Social Contract: Addressing social and economic inequalities through inclusive multilateralism, strong universal rights and local green financing.</p>

14:45	<p>Mr. Parks Tau (TBC) Gauteng Member of the Executive Council for Economic Development, Environment, Agriculture and Rural Development, South Africa</p> <p>Housing and services in the centre of resilient cities and communities in Africa.</p>
14:55	<p>Mr. Balakrishnan Rajagopal (video message) Special Rapporteur on adequate housingg</p> <p>Adequate housing in the centre of achieving sustainable urban growth and protecting and empowering the most vulnerable groups in cities, including digital divide and digitalization of urban services</p>
15:00	<p>IV. Questions from the CPR to the panellists – the Moderator</p> <p>Objective: Clarify and broaden on the most prominent and interesting views and topics from the discussion to prepare for the Q&A with the CPR and the session outcome</p> <p>V. Q&A between the CPR members and the panel – the Moderator</p> <p>Objective: Prioritisation of policies and investments and accelerate the Strategic Plan implementation by application of the new knowledge and evidence emanating from the pandemic.</p> <p>- Brief final comment or response from panel members (strictly 2 minutes each)</p> <p>Possible extension by 15 minutes at the discretion of the Chair, in case of pending questions.</p>
15:35 - 15:40	<p>VI. Conclusions and Closing – UN-Habitat Executive Director</p>

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in an urbanizing world**



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