

UN-Habitat

Cities and COVID-19

- The impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the globe in over 2,500 cities. The vast majority (95 per cent) of people affected by COVID-19 live in cities, making this pandemic an **urban humanitarian crisis**. UN-Habitat is the UN focal point on cities, towns and communities. We are on the ground supporting national and local authorities as they take up this challenge.
- The pandemic will hit the world's **most vulnerable people** the hardest—many of them living in **informal settlements and urban slums**. As UN-Habitat's research has shown, people living in these densely populated areas face multiple challenges including inadequate housing, few health facilities, overcrowded public transport, little or no waste management and an overall absence of basic municipal services. Recommended measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission such as regular hand washing and physical distancing are often impossible.
- **Local authorities including mayors and governors are on the front lines**. UN-Habitat works directly with local authorities and understands how they must balance bringing in measures to stop the pandemic from spreading while ensuring communities have access to health care, food supplies and social services for the most vulnerable. To achieve this balance, local authorities should work with a wide range of partners including public health, water and sanitation experts, government agencies at all levels, social scientists, technology innovators and urban planners.
- National **governments need to work closely with regional and local authorities** to tailor the response appropriately. This requires coordination on deciding what essential businesses and public services should remain open during different phases of the pandemic and recovery.
- **Local governments must be supported as they prioritize the health needs of their most vulnerable communities**. Based on UN-Habitat's experience with mapping urban resources, we recommend that governments **map their health facilities** as a critical measure to improve testing and treatment access. Mapping can illustrate which populations are underserved and help ensure mobile health care clinics are deployed closer to affected communities.
- Local authorities should enlist financial support from national governments and work with community associations to immediately improve access to water, hygiene and sanitation. **UN-Habitat's expertise in water and sanitation, transport, other basic services and slum upgrading can support such measures**.
- The economic consequences for those in informal settlements will be long-lasting. As cities suspend daily activities and restrict movement, day labourers and those in informal employment will lose their income. Without any social benefits such as emergency cash, they will be unable to care for their families. This sudden loss of livelihood can result in people being forced to leave

their homes due to their inability to pay rent. **UN-Habitat's work on housing rights, security of tenure and combatting forced evictions can help to develop effective policy measures and collaborative solutions in this respect.**

- **Communities need to be trained and supported** to recognize signs of illness, facilitate home care and self-quarantining, and engage in community tracing and data collection to prevent the spread of the virus. Existing neighbourhood-level community groups, including slum-dweller grassroots organizations, are the core elements of such capacity building. **UN-Habitat's longstanding partnerships with these community-level groups** can complement the work of local and national authorities and should be developed within national frameworks for action.
- **UN-Habitat works with a wide range of networks to collaborate with and support national and local authorities when working in informal settlements.** These can be mobilized for capacity building, information distribution and exchange, assessment of community health and social facilities and community-led initiatives. COVID-19 is a uniquely common challenge that the world is facing simultaneously. As a result, **cities have an unprecedented opportunity to learn from each other in real time**, a “learning by doing” process that UN-Habitat is ready to facilitate.
- What we do today will change the post-pandemic cities of tomorrow, to make them **safe and inclusive, and resilient against future crises.** Looking forward, UN-Habitat is supporting many cities to develop innovative planning and expansion models for **planned urban extensions** that focus on **resilient levels of compactness and connectivity**, as well as **decentralized local access** to all basic services and infrastructure, including health, which could contribute toward slowing the spread of future pandemics.