



CITIES AT THE FRONTLINE OF RECOVERY AND IMPACT

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1 – Background

The impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic are still being understood, but it does seem clear that this crisis will make a mark on cities, physically, economically and socially, that will echo for generations. [Both in the north](#) and in the [south of the world](#), cities are struggling to provide adequate access to water and sanitation for handwashing needs, healthcare services are being overwhelmed, [safety net programs](#) are overextended, and [public transit systems are being drastically reduced](#). Low-income populations living in informal settlements, informal workers and migrants are facing the brunt of the pandemic due to poor access to services, lost livelihoods and food shortages. The lack of access to essential services has exacerbated the challenge of responding effectively to COVID-19 in many cities. It is estimated that [over 1 billion city dwellers](#) lack access to affordable and secure housing today. As much as [50-80% of employment](#) in developing cities is informal, from street vendors to minibus drivers to migrant workers. Many of these families are essentially surviving day-to-day, living in overcrowded neighborhoods, making compliance with lockdown orders impossible. The World Bank estimates that [49 million people](#) will be pushed into extreme poverty in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. Recognizing and addressing the stark reality of urban inequality is essential for addressing the current crises. It can also help cities build back better and be more resilient to future crises. Africa, India and South East Asia face the enormous task of shaping the next generation of cities. More than 2.5 billion urban dwellers will be added to the world by 2050, [90% of them in Africa and Asia](#). Population density without adequate public spaces, access to basic services or proper affordable housing provision will lead to similar public health challenges in the future. Urgent change is needed, and COVID-19 might be a wake-up call to get us there.

2 – Analysis

During the emergency phase of this pandemic, cities, states, national governments and relief organizations are focusing on flattening the curve and addressing immediate needs. As the world enters the recovery phase of this crisis, it is imperative to address the underlying challenges. These include existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, at risk supply chains, inadequate preparedness plans for critical infrastructure, poor coordination across jurisdictions, loss of natural habitats due to unmanaged urban development, inadequate and unreliable basic services like water, sanitation and energy for the urban poor. These challenges have intensified the consequences of this pandemic in urban centers. A new path forward for cities must include equitable health and built environment benefits for the urban poor and an increased preparedness and resilience that balances human and planetary health. This requires cities to foster and implement inclusive human settlements planning that takes into account informal settlements, slums and deprived neighborhoods, providing proximity and equal access to primary and secondary care facilities, basic services, affordable housing and sufficient public space. Cities should also play a significant role in reducing the spread of zoonotic diseases such as COVID-19 by protecting forests and regional ecosystems and reducing the pace of climate change. However, the chances for a resilient and inclusive recovery is at risk as municipalities are expected to see a significant [drop in tax revenues](#) as a result of this

pandemic, which will be compounded by the fact that relief funding for local authorities is largely not included in the current design of stimulus packages at the national level. Given that cities are at the frontlines of infectious disease outbreaks, devolved funding to local governments and community groups should be at the center of recovery packages. Such a forward-looking approach will improve the lives of vulnerable communities in informal settlements, safeguard food systems, create sustainable access to water for all, and support local formal and informal economies. Building back better can accelerate both the recovery and resilience of cities. It is imperative to act fast and at scale, while ensuring not to repeat past mistakes of siloed solutions and top down approaches. The focus must be on developing holistic solutions that address social, economic, health and environmental vulnerabilities simultaneously and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable communities, while activating local actors and partnerships to develop innovative [place-based solutions](#). This is not easy. The pressure on national authorities and international institutions to create jobs via ‘shovel-ready’ projects could easily result in more sectoral, non-contextualized infrastructure that does not reach where it is needed most and often exacerbates existing spatial inequalities and ecosystems already under pressure.

3 – Messaging

Potential “Build Back Better” messages to address both today’s and tomorrow’s crisis include:

- ***‘Equitable health and safe & adequate habitat for the urban poor’***: In his *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis drew a link between poverty and the environment, highlighting that climate change disproportionately affects the poor. Like climate change, the effects of infectious disease outbreaks are magnified in cities, and aggregates where people are most vulnerable. Up to [70% of the urban population](#) in the global South is under-served by municipal infrastructure and must rely on informal or alternate arrangements to procure core services, like housing, water, sanitation, transportation, and energy. Closing this urban services divide must be a priority for cities going forward. Large-scale investments in sustainable and resilient infrastructure are needed around the world to provide growing populations with the first line of defense against future disasters and pandemics. Planning that integrates the provision of safe and adequate housing, primary and secondary care facilities, along with adequate open spaces and carefully considered disaster response and mitigation plans that are cognizant of local contexts and actively engage vulnerable residents will address future risks these communities face.
- ***‘Solidarity and resilience to support an interconnected world’***: It is now clear that the cascading economic effect of this health crisis will impact supply, production, and distribution chains in cities and ripple out into global networks as well. The challenges across the health, food, water, livelihood, and transport sectors are interconnected and cities will need to develop risk-based planning approaches and evidence-based vulnerability assessments to address them. For example, cities cannot provide adequate access to water and sanitation for all without addressing the [56% deficit](#) in global water supply by 2030. Similarly, the dependence of city-regions on [global food supply chains](#) are exposing fault lines in the face of transport, logistic, and [trade restrictions](#) - that could be abused to stockpile supplies caused by the health crisis. The resulting food supply disruptions and price hikes threaten the most food-insecure and impoverished regions, particularly in Africa. A more integrated global and city-regional planning around economies, energy provision, transport networks, water systems and food production is needed so that these networks can become pillars of resilience rather than weak points. This approach will bring a broad set of stakeholders to the table, creating a strong coalition for change.
- ***‘Practice integral ecology for human and planetary health’***: Pope Francis’s vision of integral ecology recognizes that human, animal and environmental well-being are interconnected. Considering the current pandemic, the importance of a balanced human and planetary health has

never been more evident. Most outbreaks involve interactions between wildlife, livestock and people, and COVID-19 is no exception. As humans continue to bump up against the borders of wildlife areas due to urban expansion and consumption patterns, and become more mobile, [new pathogens are emerging](#) at a higher frequency and are transmitted quickly. Nature provides cities a last line of defense against climate induced extreme weather events that impact human and animal life alike, destroy habitats, and cause new pathogens to emerge. [New analysis](#) finds that the number of people affected by floods will double worldwide by 2030. Nature in and around cities is a key to flood protection and as such strongly reduces the risk of flood induced urban epidemics and diseases. Nature in and around cities also [reduces air pollution](#) which kills an estimated [seven million people every year](#). A new approach to city planning should centralize the role of open spaces, watersheds, forests, parks and air quality. A more holistic approach combines gray, green and blue infrastructure and considers regional ecosystem impacts like (air) pollution, water insecurity and biodiversity loss to support better health, better water management and climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

- ***'Finance to support inclusion and resilience'***: Cities are the engines of national economies, yet they are most at risk and recovery should start there. [As the International Labor Organization has found](#), the effectiveness of the recovery systems and stimulus packages adopted for the 2008 financial crisis is dubious. As governments reassess priorities and consider stimulus packages, the imperative for more resilient, inclusive, green cities is greater than ever. This requires a different approach to how investments are allocated, prioritized and designed, putting cities, settlements and communities at the heart of these processes. A [report](#) by the Overseas Development Institute identifies that only 5% of the global adaptation finance between 2010 and 2014 was spent on cities, while 65% of the Sustainable Development Goals [might not be achieved](#) without urban and local actors. There is an urgent need for more devolved funding from national governments and international donors to be made available directly to local actors in order to identify, prioritize, implement and monitor response, recovery and adaptation efforts to create more resilient cities

4 – Policy recommendations

- **Human settlement upgrading for the urban poor:** [Upgrading human settlements](#), with an urgent focus on safe, reliable and affordable service delivery for the urban poor, should be at the heart of the development and adaptation plans in cities. In the near-term, city agencies should expand services through existing networks of private and alternate service providers to speed service delivery, as well as communicate key health messages. In addition, multi-stakeholder efforts that establish trusted [partnerships with community leaders and NGOs working in informal settlements](#) can lead to more [responsive policies, budget allocations](#) and fully integrated infrastructure plans that meet long-term upgradation and adaptation needs. Institutional mechanisms should be put in place to coordinate and accelerate action through community-based adaptation planning facilities setup by community-based organizations with support from city governments. Such facilities will help implement place-based solutions through public and private funding that leverages philanthropy and social impact investments. At the national level, governments should focus on creating enabling environments by including community-based climate change adaptation plans and targets for the urban poor in National Adaptation Plans, [unlocking the potential for transformative climate adaptation in cities](#). These measures will serve to support urban poor communities in the medium and long run, while continuing to strengthen mechanisms for immediate relief such as cash transfers, handwashing stations, and food rations.
- **Preparedness and resilience with a focus on local government needs:** Preparedness requires a focused and evidence-based approach that makes future risks visible in order to develop effective response, recovery and adaptation plans. While many decisions on containment of any epidemic,

pandemic or natural disaster are made at the local level, currently most data are aggregated at the national level. To help cities harness the power of data – in response to this crisis but also other long-term sustainability and equity challenges – cities and communities must have access to more granular, regularly updated data streams that can provide better evidence for decision-making, utilizing both community-based enumerations as well as unlocking the power of open and big data. [Faster and locally relevant data systems](#) can also support much needed localized disease surveillance that would allow urban public health policy makers to be more proactive about outbreaks, rather than reactive. [Cities should be aware of their own data limitations](#) and open to new partnerships with community groups, universities, the private sector and concerned citizens to start building more comprehensive, community-based data sets to understand and better address the challenges ahead.

- **Advancing ecosystem restoration in cities:** Nature Based Solutions (NBS) in cities can help improve water quality, reduce heat and flood risks – critical to mitigate the spread of infectious and waterborne diseases – , restore ecosystems and reduce biodiversity loss and provide public health benefits in the form of improved air quality, carbon sequestration, connectivity and recreational opportunities to city residents. [Examples](#) include using mangroves to mediate storm surges and extreme weather and increasing green cover to combat heat island effects and improve health and livability. Resources should be directed to capacity building initiatives that can accelerate the implementation of blue-green-grey infrastructure solutions, create employment opportunities and restore planetary health through better access and use of millions of dollars in green private investments. Specific areas of capacity building include increasing community knowledge and stewardship of ecosystem assets, improving readiness for multi-disciplinary planning, and sharing research and guidance on best practices in planning, design, valuation, financing and governance of ecosystem-based adaptation and mitigation solutions.
- **Targeted finance that goes beyond traditional finance mechanisms and reaches where it is needed most:** By increasing the amount of devolved funding available to cities on a flexible basis, national governments and international donors can enable local actors to identify, prioritize, implement and monitor recovery measures that are specific to local needs. For multilateral financiers and donors this means drastically increasing subnational financial products especially directed at vulnerable communities. In order to support effective investments, a strong evidence base and smart tools for assessing risks, exposure, vulnerability and costs and benefits analysis are needed to help stakeholders prioritize investment and policy decisions. In addition, expanded capacities and structures to deliver and access micro-finance, micro-insurance, direct and conditional transfer and remittance funds will help funds reach vulnerable households during times of crisis. Financial institutions, banks, and NGOs must improve access to such financial services for populations that are currently being left behind by actively engaging them to meet their needs.