

Executive summary

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

**Report on Cities and Pandemics:
Towards a more just, green and healthy future**



From the early days of the pandemic, cities have been on the frontline of COVID-19. The spread of the virus globally through travel, trade and mobility meant that a large number of the first detected infections appeared in urban areas, prompting many to question their future. These concerns only deepened as restrictions to contain transmission, such as lockdowns and curfews, brought local economies to a standstill. Yet in the months that followed, as the challenges of the pandemic have evolved, so too has our understanding of the disease and its complex relationship with cities.

In fact, as with previous public health crises, the key determinants of risk for urban residents are inequality, inadequate housing and lack of access to clean water, sanitation and waste management. Aggravating conditions, such as high levels of air pollution, have also played a role in exposing marginalized communities to more severe impacts. At the same time, it has become increasingly clear that urban density is not in itself a decisive factor in the transmission of the virus. Indeed, studies have shown that in some regions per capita infection levels and mortality were often lower in more populated city centres than in surrounding suburban or rural areas.

The more meaningful distinction, therefore, is often not between urban and rural areas but rather the disparity between balanced density and adequate services – something that even highly concentrated cities can achieve if the necessary governance and resources are in play – and overcrowded, excluded settlements and slums. In practice, these divisions are often acutely evident even within cities or districts, as illustrated by the striking variance in local infection levels depending on poverty levels, ethnicity and other factors.

Only by addressing the underlying issues of inequality and exclusion in cities, then, can COVID-19 be effectively managed and contained. If this task seems daunting, then there are also reasons for tentative optimism: with the right policies in place, the enormous economic and social resources being invested to curb the pandemic could help deliver greener, more inclusive urban areas in the long term. *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future* presents an overview of the situation to date and outlines a range of bold measures that could deliver a lasting and sustainable recovery from the current crisis. The report focuses on four key priorities:

- **Rethinking the Form and Function of the City:** Urban morphologies and systems should be reconfigured at different scales to not only enhance their resilience to the effects of the pandemic, but also make them more sustainable and productive through inclusive planning. Spanning a range of scales, from regions and territories to neighbourhoods and buildings, the promotion of compact design, accessible mobility and mixed land use can support the development of safer, more liveable urban environments.
- **Addressing Systemic Poverty and Inequality in Cities:** Targeted interventions should be designed to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and related restrictions on poor and vulnerable groups through emergency assistance and service provision, at the same time taking steps to address the underlying causes of their exclusion. While overcrowding and the absence of basic services have raised the health risks of the pandemic for poorer residents, lack of access to digital services and the decline in informal sector activities during lockdowns have left them in an even more precarious economic state.

Passengers keeping social distance and wearing face mask inside the MRT. Health protocols applied due to Covid-19 pandemic. Jakarta/Indonesia © Shutterstock



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- Rebuilding a 'New Normal' Urban Economy:** A suite of tailored economic support and relief packages should be developed to help smaller businesses, informal workers and at-risk sectors to survive the crisis, with an emphasis on "building back better" by promoting the transition to greener, more equitable urban economies. Though cash-strapped local authorities may be tempted to respond to these pressures by scaling back their commitments, it is essential that they continue with the support of national governments to maintain services and financial assistance to help residents and businesses survive the crisis.
 - Clarifying Urban Legislation and Governance Arrangements:** Authorities must recognize the need for more integrated, cooperative multi-level governance, with an emphasis on developing more flexible and innovative institutional and financial frameworks. Governments at national, subnational and local levels have been forced to respond creatively to the unfolding crisis in many different ways, whether through greater collaboration, increased autonomy or a recentralization of certain responsibilities. While the outcomes have been uneven and frequently contested, they have also generated new approaches and learning that should not be forgotten once the pandemic has come to an end.
- One year on, COVID-19 continues to produce painful lessons on the shortcomings and failures of many cities to protect their own citizens. However, it also points the way forward for a better, more sustainable urban future. Some of the most effective responses to the pandemic have been designed and led by cities, building on their ability to concentrate knowledge, resources and infrastructure. From enhanced service provision to the repurposing of service, retail and other sectors to meet the changing needs of residents, urban areas have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation in the face of this crisis. While there is no single template for success, a number of factors have broadly characterized the different responses of cities and regions to the virus:
- A clear commitment to enforcing public health protections:** While discussions around COVID-19 have sometimes been framed as opposing policies of lockdown or "opening up", in practice many cities have attempted to balance a return to a degree of normality while taking every possible step to reduce transmission of the virus. In Paris, France, the reopening of the public metro after the first lockdown in 2020 was accompanied by a raft of measures including mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitizing stations, physical distancing of passengers and regular cleaning of shared spaces. As a result, the transport system appeared to have largely avoided major outbreaks on its networks.
 - Multidimensional strategies that address the different dimensions of the pandemic, particularly for the most vulnerable groups:** The impact of COVID-19 has not only had devastating health outcomes, but also disrupted livelihoods and education. Governments have therefore needed to develop wide ranging programmes that also deliver economic protections for low-income and marginalized communities. In Kenya, for instance, an ambitious programme called *Kazi Mtaani* ("Jobs in the Neighbourhood") was piloted in eight slums in Nairobi, Mombasa and other cities to recruit residents as paid workers in a public settlement upgrading programme.
 - A strong emphasis on community-based engagement and learning:** Notwithstanding the importance of central resources and a coherent national strategy to coordinate efforts, these must also be underlined by popular support and locally led. In Kerala, India, one of the key elements in its remarkable success during the first phase of the pandemic was the state's strong decentralized decision making structures. This, combined with its recent experience of the deadly Nipah virus, enabled a rapid mobilization of emergency shelter, health care and food assistance.



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- **An ability to adapt creatively to the changed circumstances of COVID-19:** Flexibility and creativity have been essential elements in meeting the challenges of the pandemic in many cities. In Lima, Peru, where the majority of the population used public transport before the pandemic, the city authorities responded to the reduction in bus by installing emergency bike lanes and supporting the rollout of a low-cost bicycle that, besides providing residents with an affordable model, would also aid the city's economic recovery by being manufactured locally.
- **A focus not only on survival, but also recovery:** While in the early months of the pandemic cities were understandably engaged primarily in managing the immediate impacts, some have subsequently rolled out ambitious recovery programmes that aim not only to reverse the damage caused by COVID-19 but also use this moment as an opportunity to "build back better". Washington DC's ReOpen DC Plan, for instance, plans a path for the capital to emerge from the crisis as "a more equitable, resilient and vibrant city".

Moving from a mindset of emergency to recovery, cities have the opportunity to continue to focus on strengthening public health, economic resilience and service access for all. The longstanding divisions and inequalities highlighted by the pandemic mean that a return to normality is no longer enough: what is needed now is transformative change. With inclusive policies, community engagement and a meaningful transition to a more sustainable approach, cities could emerge from the catastrophe of COVID-19 stronger and more resilient than before.



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