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What now for cities?

Population-dense urban areas have been worst hit by the pandemic in terms of damage to health and economy. How can we make urban living safer and more resilient?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact in many countries, affecting millions of people, their livelihoods and the places where they live and work. This infectious disease not only impacts health, both physical and mental, but has dramatically impacted societies,

economies and many other spheres of life. From social distancing measures to the complete lockdowns that severely impact people's ability to work, the daily life of millions has been disrupted.

The pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in several aspects of human existence that need urgent attention, such as societal inequality, the vulnerability of basic service delivery, and the general lack of resilience in our systems, structures and

procedures across various sectors. The consequences of the pandemic (and the potential for other disasters that could strike at any moment) raise the question of how to protect the environment and people while dealing with global challenges like climate change. With urban areas predicted to host

▲ Low-carbon, green residential buildings in Chengdu, China, designed to create a vertical forest

more of the world's population (reaching 68 per cent by 2050, according to UN estimates), there is an urgent and growing need to reduce vulnerabilities in the towns and cities where people live and work.

Today, citizens and experts are asking what the 'new normal' would or could look like. It is time to be creative. There is a clear signal that we do not want to return to unsustainable and discriminatory practices. So how can we protect our fragile systems and cities? What are the essential components of flexible and more resilient urban areas? In short: how can we build back better?

Breadwinners and unemployment

Disruption of the economy has a knock-on effect. Due to COVID-19, some 400 million full-time jobs were lost in the second quarter of 2020 alone, especially in lower and middle-income countries. As a consequence the number of people living in extreme poverty rose by approximately 71 million, according to the UN Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities. Cities and other urban areas have felt the brunt of the impact, including large cities like New York, London and New Delhi.

But the disruption has not only impacted cities. The extent to which urban and rural areas have been impacted has been different and varies considerably from country to country. According to the World Bank, income loss was experienced in Ethiopia in 60 per cent of urban households and 52 per cent of rural households, whereas in Mongolia the statistics show income loss in 81 per cent of urban homes and 19 per cent of rural homes. This loss of income will have an impact on governmental income tax generation. The impact on people and families, meanwhile, can be devastating.

Urban density and service delivery

Dense urban environments encourage more productive economies but also contribute to pollution and diseases. The pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to redesign several aspects of cities, and to make them more resilient to future shocks.

For example, public transportation systems

are typically designed to enable peak-time commuters to go to work and return home. The use of public transport has plummeted since the pandemic, with users uncertain about safety. Many operators have also reduced the number of rides – a counter-intuitive approach, especially considering the need for greater social distancing on the public transport system.

Compared with 2019, the rate of public transport use has decreased by more than 30 per cent in Seoul and Taipei City, and by a staggering 50 per cent in Busan City, according to figures from ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. In the Philippine island of Luzon and cities in Lao PDR, public transport has even been suspended. And the reduction in transport use is not only due to the

research from the International Renewable Energy Agency shows. The share of renewables in electricity generation has grown in many countries. This is good news for all countries on several fronts: renewable power plants have close to zero marginal costs, create new jobs in the green economy and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Redesign, sustainable growth and recovery

Sustainable development creates conditions for healthier, wealthier and more resilient societies. For the COVID-19 recovery process, the redesign of urban areas – from removing zoning that embeds inequality, to enabling access to affordable green housing and clean energy for all – will be the

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reduction of supply: in Jakarta, where informal transport plays a vital role due to the limited capacity of public transport, the income of drivers has fallen by approximately 80 per cent.

Safe mobility needs to find a new middle way, particularly when more people than ever may be working from home, and may continue to do so (at least part time) when the pandemic is over.

Turning to other essential services such as energy and water supply and managing waste, we must ensure their provision is stable and robust. It is interesting to note that the consequence of COVID-19 on each of these sectors has exposed weaknesses but also opportunities. Renewables have emerged as a clean, sustainable energy source, boosting societies' resilience – for example, electricity systems with a high proportion of renewables have continued to operate effectively during the pandemic, as

foundation to rebuilding a strong economy. By embracing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all levels of government can ensure a robust approach is followed. Implementing SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all) – is a key action area when rebuilding and building back better.

In cities, economic activity can be stimulated in a variety of ways: through technology and innovation, by promoting small and medium-sized enterprises, by encouraging decent employment, by championing fairness and inclusiveness, or by promoting sustainable tourism – to mention but a few action areas.

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These goals are interconnected, and implementing them is a priority for all countries committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This brings us to the need for improved local policies and practices that address housing and sanitation, food, air quality, public spaces, sports and recreation facilities, health and medical facilities. The policies, processes and systems that plan, implement and monitor these, as well as the actual infrastructure, need to be more resilient – as the pandemic has shown.

Leadership

Many local governments' recovery plans are being oriented towards sustainable measures. For example, research from ICLEI shows that Budapest and many other cities introduced temporary bicycle lanes to support a safer and more sustainable way to travel during the pandemic – as fewer cars were on the road, the space was available.

In cities like Bristol and Zaragoza, free parking spaces were offered for healthcare workers. Barcelona has rolled out a number of initiatives to support the most vulnerable among its residents. These include home-delivered food hampers for elderly people and individuals with chronic illnesses, distributing electronic devices to enable vulnerable students to access online education, and the creation of support groups for individuals in need.

Opportunities for creativity and action abound. The link between humans and our ecosystems is strong, yet simultaneously fragile. The need for resilience is clear, but often not well understood and not well investigated.

By re-orienting recovery and resilience following the global COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity to plan and implement measures that support sustainable development, tackle climate change and uplift the poor, marginalised and vulnerable – while at the same time allowing economies to recover.

What is the space in which to do this? We must engage in our fragile cities, and co-design and co-create a new future – as citizens, experts, service users and service providers, and as leaders. ●

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable



Over **90%** of COVID-19 cases are in urban areas



Air pollution caused **4.2 million** premature deaths in 2016



Share of urban population living in slums rose to **24%** in 2018



Globally, significant progress was made in reducing slum dwelling during the period 2000 to 2014, reducing the proportion of urban population living in slums from 28 per cent to 23 per cent. That trend has been reversed, in recent years, rising to 24 per cent in 2018, over a billion people, due to increases in Northern Africa, Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Source: Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020