



In collaboration with:



LIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: BEYOND THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE OUTBREAK

Thematic session 9 – Addressing COVID-19 in informal contexts:
Wednesday April 29th,
15:00-17:00 CEST, 2020





LIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: BEYOND THE IMMEDIATE RESPONSE TO THE OUTBREAK

Thematic session - 9: Addressing Covid-19 in informal contexts

Objective

As of 2020, it is estimated that approximately a quarter of the world's urban population, representing around 1 billion people, lives in informal settlements. These informal settlements are largely inhabited by the poorest of the urban population, many of whom are also workers essential to the daily functioning of cities and territories (such as healthcare workers, waste and transport workers, municipal employees or police officers among many others). These settlements are often characterized by precarious access to basic services, inadequate housing conditions, food insecurity and limited access to formal health services and livelihood opportunities that could contribute to enhancing their inhabitants' prosperity. In addition, it is estimated that 61% of all workers are informally employed - that's 2 billion women and men worldwide deprived of decent working conditions and work based protections.

There is widespread consensus that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the critical vulnerabilities faced by the inhabitants of informal settlements and by workers in the informal economy. The challenge posed by addressing COVID-19 in informal settlements is highly complex, as most of the policy responses that are being adopted to curb the virus' spread in formal contexts are not applicable in informal ones - the fragility of which makes it extremely challenging to handle even modest disruptions to food, water, and energy supplies. How to ensure the fulfilment of the right to the city of populations living in such fragile contexts? The answer is not straight-forward yet, as recalled by the U.N.'s Secretary General's Report on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, swift action and solidarity are required as the immense risk the virus poses to these deeply fragile contexts affects the most vulnerable as well as the world as a whole. A firm human-rights based approach must now be adopted.

In light of the current crisis, governments have put in place important restrictions on the movement of people, the functioning of services, and rules on physical distancing. Yet, how can we implement physical distancing in informal settlements which are densely populated at both the house and community levels? How can we overcome pre-existing infrastructural deficits and provide settlements with water and sanitation to allow for their inhabitants' regular handwashing? How can we ask informal dwellers to self-quarantine when they face evictions and/or rely on the daily cash flows of economic activity that



cannot be developed remotely and the demand for which has fallen drastically? How can informal food and waste collection systems, so critical to food security and the functioning of cities, continue in ways that prevent the spread of the virus?

These are not the only questions that must be addressed, as the COVID-19 crisis continues to fuel food insecurity and violence, particularly violence against women and structurally vulnerable populations, like refugees and migrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. The so-called “triple informality” (in work, housing, and transport) also comes to light, as many informal workers, including street vendors and bus drivers, are losing their daily wages during the lockdown, thus affecting how vulnerable populations access transport, food and secure housing during and beyond the crisis. Furthermore, women, who make up a disproportionate percentage of workers in the informal economy, will likely be hit hardest by the COVID-19 crisis; lockdowns and work stoppages will cause them to lose much needed income while taking on more care responsibilities for family members who are ill and/or for children who are no longer in school. Equally strong will be the impact on migrants and refugees, many of them lacking basic identification and registration, being almost invisible to authorities and agencies coordinating responses to the crisis.

A dedicated look at what informality actually represents in terms of access to land, housing, basic services, health, work and livelihood opportunities, gender equality and citizenship is critical to inform policy approaches that mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in informal contexts - as well as to make cities resilient to this and other disasters by putting people and care at the center.

Local and regional governments (LRGs) are the first responders to this crisis and play an essential role in guaranteeing rights protection for all via local public service provision. They are vital in ensuring that essential public services are maintained at an adequate level and that both formal and informal workers are able to continue subsiding despite the strong restrictions in place – thus preventing informal workers, particularly women, from falling into poverty and having their vulnerability exacerbated. Moreover, they are key in forging longstanding and sustainable relationships between different facets of society, from public authorities to the private sector and non-state actors, amongst which the partnership with the informal communities is absolutely key. In this respect, as iterated in the UCLG Town Hall track policy paper on *Addressing Informalities*, it is vital that LRGs, as the first line of defense against the crisis, recognize that informality is an integral part of cities and that emergency responses to COVID-19 will prove to be futile if unplanned settlements’ communities and markets are not properly accounted for and their initiatives acknowledged.

This crisis is bringing to the spotlight the essential yet long forgotten role that solidarity and communities play in maintaining social cohesion and keeping our societies running.



In this sense, one of the key lessons to be derived from the COVID-19 crisis is that it is vital to acknowledge how the solidarity-based actions of grassroots communities, particularly the most vulnerable, are determinant to mitigate how the virus impacts their peoples. Community members in informal settlements across the world are self-organizing to support each other to the extent possible, undertaking roles related to every aspect of the fight against COVID-19 – be they related to care, to supporting the most vulnerable with food, water and basic hygiene or even to health and safety, sometimes even by organizing patrols that identify resourceless households that have fallen ill and making them visible, be it in need of support or providing it themselves according to their capacities. As a matter of fact these networks have been conforming informal governance arrangements that will play a key role in the medium term, as enablers of more permanent measures and policies aiming to effectively address the long due infrastructure and housing gaps that affect cities, particularly in the global south .

It is thus essential that LRGs work in close collaboration with local communities in informal settlements, not just because it is only fair, but because local peoples' knowledge and capacities are essential to provide a response to the crisis actually fit for the reality of each informal context. The experience shared by LRGs with UCLG, particularly during previous Live Learning Experiences, indicates that preparedness is proving a key dimension for addressing the pandemic in contexts marked by informality, for which collaboration with communities in terms of data collection and mapping of needs and resources is determinant to identify the most effective response measures and related communication strategies. Furthermore, LRGs are also implementing measures to curb the virus' spread in contexts where people rely on daily economic activity for survival, such as recurrently sanitizing the public spaces where such activities take place and ensuring safe mobility means to reach their livelihoods, these initiatives often being implemented by informal settlements' inhabitants themselves.

Nevertheless, beyond the need for close collaboration with local communities, the capacity of LRGs to respond rapidly to the multifaceted and interconnected challenges posed by the pandemic is heavily dependent on the national governance context. Ensuring the provision of basic services, which is making LRGs increasingly incur in local deficits, or calling for the immediate halt in evictions of informal settlements requires collaboration between all levels of government. Policy environments that enable local action by endowing LRGs with sufficient resources and budgetary authority, ensuring multilevel cooperation and providing a regulatory framework that allows LRGs to advance the social function of the land, are key to harness the potential of the local level to become a solid first line of defense against the virus - as well as to advance populations' right to the city (allowing slum dwellers and traders to remain occupying the spaces they currently do). However, there are indeed national contexts where the opposite is true, in which a dangerous dichotomy is drawn between peoples' safety and ensuring economic livelihoods and where vertical coordination is currently out of the picture. It is precisely in



these environments where horizontal collaboration among local governments and alliances with civil society organizations and community networks become even more important to enable responses that effectively contribute to protecting peoples' lives

Action now requires policy coherence that stems from coordination between all levels of government and all relevant stakeholders -- amongst which informal settlements' inhabitants and workers must play a critical role as an essential part of any potential response. The current crisis poses unprecedented challenges, yet also represents an opportunity to break away from the status quo and trigger structural change towards more egalitarian and fairer societies. Yet for such pathways to equality to materialize, it is crucial to collectively reflect and exchange experiences on how to defend the most vulnerable populations – which also includes facilitating how they defend themselves - preventing, to the extent possible, the spread of the virus in informal settlements, building up capacities to respond to the crisis' impacts and thinking forward on how to acknowledge and integrate informalities and build back better cities beyond the outbreak.

Live Learning

UCLG and UN Habitat, in collaboration with Metropolis and Cities Alliance, are launching a **Live Learning Experience for local and regional governments on informalities on Wednesday April 29th, from 15h00 to 17h00 (CEST)** to highlight the essential efforts cities are undertaking to protect citizens who live in informal settlements from the pandemic. During this Live Learning Experience we will bring together cities, civil society and policy makers to discuss the relationship between the pandemic, informality, and the functioning of cities, highlighting pragmatic examples of how informal settlements, workers and their community associations are responding to this crisis on the ground.



Guiding questions:

1. What measures (regulatory but also programmes and practices) are local and regional governments taking to ensure that citizens living and working informally are safe and able to subsist during the crisis?
2. How can LRGs properly acknowledge the vital action of communities in informal settlements in the fight against COVID-19?
3. What institutional mechanisms can be utilized, mobilized (or be created) to increase coordination between all actors and levels of government?
4. How can evictions in informal settlements be prevented?
5. How can we ensure protection to the most vulnerable parts of the population, guaranteeing universal access to water, services, adequate housing and infrastructure?
6. How can informal contexts and the gender divide be more justly acknowledged and better integrated with the formal urban fabric on a permanent basis?
7. What changes to the legal and regulatory frameworks at city and national levels are required to ensure access to land and the right to the city of populations living in informality? Namely, to ensure the holistic development of informal settlements and legitimate workspaces for informal enterprises?
8. The informal food system (from production to retail) is key to food security; how can it be safely unlocked?
9. Similarly, informal waste recyclers play a critical role in municipal waste systems, how can this continue in ways that protect waste pickers?
10. How to integrate social and grassroots movements into the strategies during, and especially after, the outbreak? Could the crisis represent an opportunity in transforming these emergencial collaborative arrangements into permanent governance structures?