

COVID-19 AND INFORMALITY

GOOD PRACTICES FOR REDUCING
RISK AND ENHANCING RESILIENCE



Cities Alliance
Cities Without Slums

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KEY MESSAGES



The COVID-19 crisis is not just a public health crisis, it has had a wide range of social, economic, and political impacts on the world, and most of these impacts have fallen most strongly on cities. Local governments need to respond to the immediate crisis and its long-term impacts and help lead the recovery process.



The paper reviews good practices in reducing risks and recovering from the negative impacts of the pandemic in informal settlements and the informal economy.



Key interventions include:

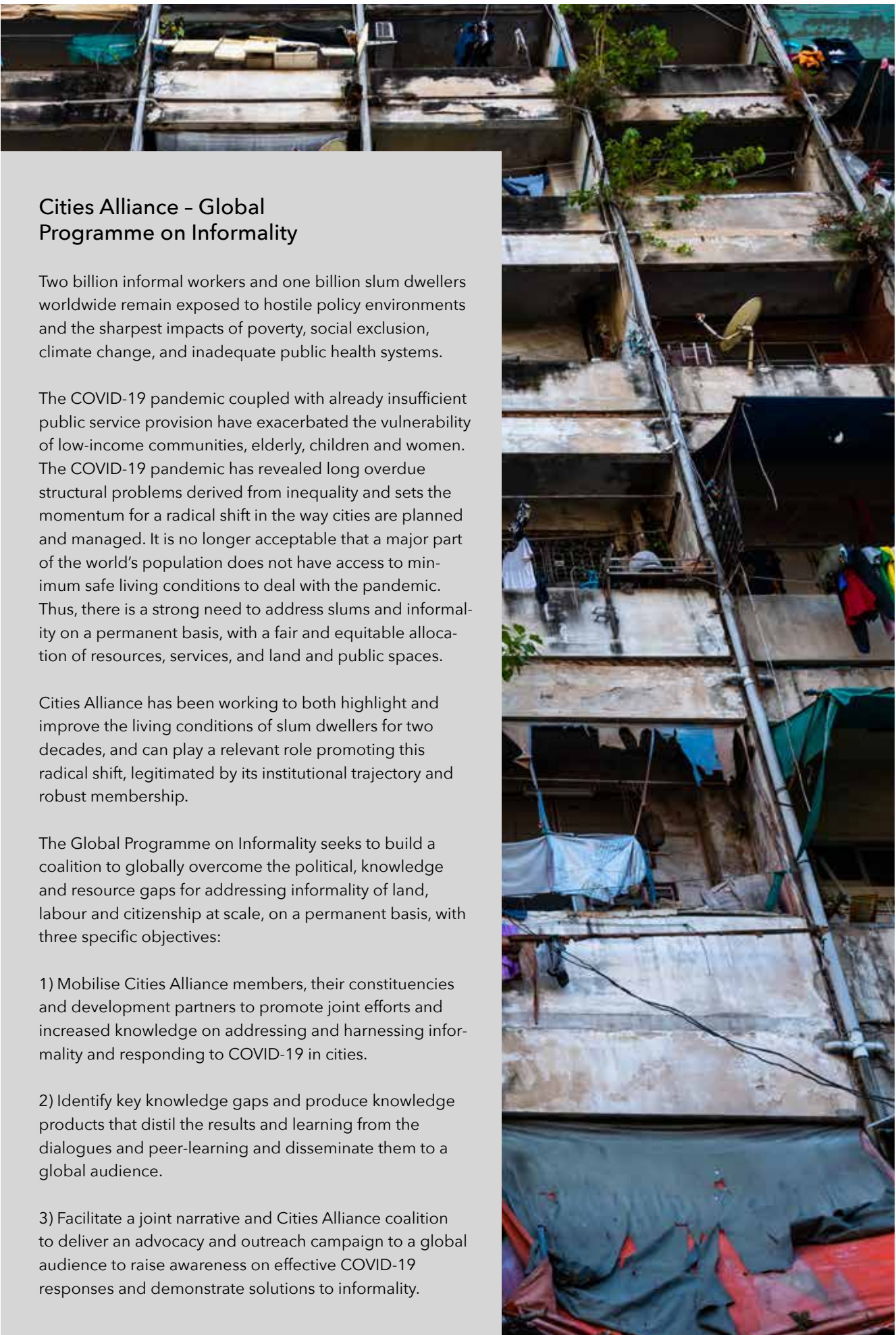
- The development and implementation of integrated and participatory multi-scalar city strategies to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and help lead the recovery process.
- Interventions in informal settlements (such as upgrading water and sanitation infrastructure and reducing overcrowding) support informal workers and their families (such as cash relief payments and food programmes).
- Supporting grassroots initiatives to mitigate risk and help post-COVID recovery.



The post-COVID recovery process is also an opportunity to make fundamental changes towards creating more equitable and more sustainable cities.



In the long term, it is essential to build the resilience of cities to future shocks through the integrated and participatory upgrading of informal settlements and the development of a more enabling policy environment and a comprehensive social protection system for workers in the informal economy.



Cities Alliance - Global Programme on Informality

Two billion informal workers and one billion slum dwellers worldwide remain exposed to hostile policy environments and the sharpest impacts of poverty, social exclusion, climate change, and inadequate public health systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with already insufficient public service provision have exacerbated the vulnerability of low-income communities, elderly, children and women. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed long overdue structural problems derived from inequality and sets the momentum for a radical shift in the way cities are planned and managed. It is no longer acceptable that a major part of the world's population does not have access to minimum safe living conditions to deal with the pandemic. Thus, there is a strong need to address slums and informality on a permanent basis, with a fair and equitable allocation of resources, services, and land and public spaces.

Cities Alliance has been working to both highlight and improve the living conditions of slum dwellers for two decades, and can play a relevant role promoting this radical shift, legitimated by its institutional trajectory and robust membership.

The Global Programme on Informality seeks to build a coalition to globally overcome the political, knowledge and resource gaps for addressing informality of land, labour and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis, with three specific objectives:

- 1) Mobilise Cities Alliance members, their constituencies and development partners to promote joint efforts and increased knowledge on addressing and harnessing informality and responding to COVID-19 in cities.
- 2) Identify key knowledge gaps and produce knowledge products that distil the results and learning from the dialogues and peer-learning and disseminate them to a global audience.
- 3) Facilitate a joint narrative and Cities Alliance coalition to deliver an advocacy and outreach campaign to a global audience to raise awareness on effective COVID-19 responses and demonstrate solutions to informality.



1 INTRODUCTION

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Informality is a complex topic with a long history.

Five decades ago, a study in Ghana resulted in the first comprehensive discussion on informality in a development context.¹ Hart coined the term informal economy that became an important concept to describe national economies in the developing world.² The idea of informality has been used in different knowledge domains and discourses. Several have made important contributions to improving our understanding of the Global South's urbanization processes: informal economy, informal housing, informal land markets, informal law, and informal institutions.

This paper is part of a larger review series on informality launched by Cities Alliance. Since its creation in 1999, this multi-institutional platform has been at the forefront of the debate on slums, slum upgrading, and the role of informality in cities of the Global South. Cities Alliance has recently launched the Global Program on Informality. The overall aim is to fundamentally alter how knowledge is created and shared on informal settlements and related topics. One of its objectives is to build a coalition to globally overcome the political and geographic as well as knowledge- and resource-related gaps for addressing the issue of informality in housing, land, economy, and citizenship at scale, on a permanent basis.

The “Practice Review of Informality” is embedded in the **Global Program on Informality** and proposes a new take on cross-sectoral knowledge sharing. Each paper addresses an important topic of informality by reviewing the literature produced by Cities Alliance, its members, and other important knowledge stakeholders whenever needed. Developed in close collaboration with the restructuring

of the knowledge library, several elements have been developed to enable better access and more targeted impact. The paper and its content have been tagged to unlock the potential of text-based online searches to make the content more accessible.

Our world is changing at an unprecedented pace.

This also imposes new demands on knowledge creation. The authors of this paper perceive the paper as a current snapshot of the practitioner's knowledge on the given topic. We encourage the readers to get in touch with us for further suggestions and comments. This feedback is very valuable to us and may include, among others, specific references to new projects and case studies, missing concerns, and proposals for future review topics. Interested parties can also sign up for the mailing list of the Global Programme on Informality. The papers shall be updated regularly (traceable in the version index) to keep pace with the evolving knowledge of the Global Community of Practice.

by Anthony Boanada-Fuchs, Vanessa Boanada Fuchs, Anaclaudia Rossbach and Susana Rojas Williams

1 - Hart, 1973.
2 - Chen, 2012.



2 SETTING THE STAGE

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The COVID-19 crisis is not just a public health crisis, it has had a wide range of social, economic, and political impacts on the world, and most of these impacts have fallen most strongly on cities. Local governments need to respond to the immediate crisis and its long-term impacts and help lead the recovery process. The post-COVID recovery process is also an opportunity to make fundamental changes towards creating more equitable and more sustainable cities.³ This paper is based on a review of selected literature on COVID and informality, a review of the large amount of work undertaken by Cities Alliance about COVID-19, interviews with selected experts, and a workshop held with experts from around the world on 30th July 2021. The paper first broadly discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on cities in the global South, using Cape Town / South Africa as an example. It then focuses on impacts on informality, i.e., on residents in informal settlements and people who work in the informal economy. The paper then, using selected case studies, reviews good practices in reducing risks and recovering from the negative impacts of the pandemic in informal settlements and the informal economy.

Key Interventions Include

- The development and implementation of integrated and participatory multi-scalar city strategies to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and help lead the recovery process.
- Interventions in informal settlements (such as upgrading water and sanitation infrastructure and reducing overcrowding) support informal workers and their families (such as cash relief payments and food programmes).
- Supporting grassroots initiatives to mitigate risk and help post-COVID recovery.

In the long term, it is essential to build the resilience of cities to future shocks through the integrated and participatory upgrading of informal settlements and the development of a more enabling policy environment and a comprehensive social protection system for workers in the informal economy.

3 – Cities Alliance, 2021b.



3 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CITIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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“

The crisis most affects informal settlements and informal workers, but it doesn't affect them homogenously (e.g. waste pickers, street traders and home-based workers are affected in very different ways)”

This section reviews the impact of COVID-19 on informality in the global South, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on informal settlement residents and people employed in the informal economy. Informal settlement residents are at high risk because of overcrowding and lack of adequate water/sanitation, informal workers are most impacted in terms of inability to work (resulting in loss of income and food insecurity), and the COVID crisis presents unique challenges for local governments due to increased urban poverty and the need to spread limited resources more widely. The crisis most affects informal settlements and informal workers, but it doesn't affect them homogenously (e.g. waste pickers, street traders and home-based workers are affected in very different ways). Cape Town and South Africa are used as examples to discuss some of the impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an urban crisis – one estimate (early on in the pandemic) is that about 95% of total cases were in urban areas.⁴ COVID-19 has many implications for cities, both in terms of health and the economy and society.⁵ Chevalier noted of cholera in 19th century Paris that epidemics deepen and expose existing social imbalances.⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly also done this in cities of the global South, with the impacts disproportionately falling on the poorest and most marginalised residents of cities, particularly residents of informal settlements and informal workers (and within these, particularly women and girls, the elderly, people with disabilities, and undocumented migrants).

This, in turn, presents a major challenge for local governments who have of necessity to be in the frontline in terms of responding to the crisis and leading the recovery process.

4 – UN-Habitat, 2020b.

5 – Simon et al., 2021.

6 – Chevalier, 1958.

3.1 The Impact of COVID-19 on Informal Settlements

Informal settlements, which are settlements in which residents do not have legal security of tenure or adequate infrastructure, can be places with a vibrant social and economic life, but problems of insecurity of tenure, lack of adequate water and sanitation, poor shelter, overcrowding, lack of suitable storage for food, lack of suitable spaces for recreation and hazardous location all intersect to create particularly large and complex burdens of disease and high levels of risk.⁷ Residents of informal settlements are particularly at risk of infectious diseases such as COVID-19, as the lack of adequate water supply and sanitation means that practising good hygiene is extremely difficult, and overcrowded living conditions mean that practising social distancing is often impossible.⁸ Informal settlements are also particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, such as those caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. Many informal settlement residents have precarious short-term sources of income, for example, from informal trade or casual work.

Concentrations of informal housing were not necessarily always the worst affected parts of cities, but at least in some cases, there does seem to have been a higher incidence of COVID-19 in these areas. For example, in Cape Town, the second-largest city in South Africa and one of the first cities in Africa to be badly affected by COVID-19, initially, at least, COVID-19 cases were concentrated in areas with concentrations of informal housing.⁹ In Cape Town, the highest incidence of COVID-19 during the first wave (May/June 2020) was in Klipfontein and Khayelitsha, the two health sub-districts with the highest concentrations of informal housing – 55% of the population of Khayelitsha and 24% of the population of Klipfontein live in informal housing.¹⁰ Both areas consist of a mix of formal housing (with informal backyard shacks) and informal settlements. They have high poverty levels, with unemployment rates of more than 30%.¹¹ As of 6 July 2020, after the first peak in Cape Town, the Klipfontein and Khayelitsha sub-districts both had incidence rates of more than 1.600 cases per 100.000

people, compared to an average of 1.174 for Cape Town as a whole.¹² It is believed that the first wave of COVID particularly affected areas with concentrations of informal housing in Cape Town because of the challenges in practising social distancing in overcrowded conditions with many structures less than 2 metres apart¹³ and with a lack of adequate water supply and sanitation.¹⁴

Around the world, the initial response to COVID-19 was to restrict people to staying at home. This was particularly burdensome for residents of informal settlements, who live in inadequate and overcrowded housing without proper services like water and sanitation. A study of the impact of the lockdown on informal settlements in Tshwane in South Africa found that residents were affected by “lack of space to practice social distancing, over-burdened infrastructure, lack of savings, loss of income and shortage of food, hunger and diseases, anxiety and depression and poor access to education.”¹⁵ The challenge was even greater for women and girls in informal settlements, who faced an increased risk of domestic violence and the burden of unpaid care.¹⁶ Women and girls in informal settlements face “the double whammy of greater exposure to the virus, given their limited access to hygiene and space, while each day of lost income and education multiplies their vulnerabilities and pushes them further behind.”¹⁷ Other vulnerable groups in informal settlements (such as the elderly, people with disabilities, and undocumented migrants) are also disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 crisis.



Judd Irish Bradley – stock.adobe.com

7 – Corburn and Karanja, 2014; Ezeh et al., 2017; Smit et al., 2016; Sverdluk, 2011.

8 – Corburn et al., 2020; Nyashanu et al., 2020; Smit, 2020.

9 – Smit, 2020.

10 – City of Cape Town, 2021.

11 – City of Cape Town, 2021.

12 – based on Western Cape Government, 2018, 2021.

13 – Gibson and Rush, 2020.

14 – De Groot and Lemanski, 2021.

15 – Nyashanu et al., 2020, pp. 1443.

16 – UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020.

17 – UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020, pp. 19

3.2 The Impact of COVID-19 on Informal Worker

The COVID-19 crisis has negatively impacted informal workers, restricting them from working and greatly reducing their incomes.¹⁸ Given that an estimated 90% of all workers in the global South are informally employed,¹⁹ this has had a devastating impact in the global South, greatly increasing urban poverty and food insecurity. The broader economic impact has also been considerable, as the informal sector contributes the majority of non-agricultural Gross Value Added in many countries, for example, 62% in Benin, 56% in Togo and 52% in Niger.²⁰ The virtual shutting down of the informal sector during lockdowns in many countries thus had a devastating effect on urban economies.

A study on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on informal workers in 11 cities across 5 regions of the world concluded that “the COVID-19 crisis had a major negative impact on work and earnings.”²¹ In April 2020, during the peak of the first wave of lockdowns and restrictions, 74% of informal workers could not work. By mid-2020, when the lockdowns or restrictions had generally been eased to some degree, 21% of informal workers were still not able to work; and the average days of work per week and earnings of those able to work were lower than in February 2020 before COVID-19.²² The impact varied considerably between cities and between different sectors. In general, home-based workers and street vendors were the least able to work and had the lowest average earnings during the pandemic.²³

In the early part of the pandemic (and subsequent waves of the pandemic), the main reasons for informal workers not being able to work were, firstly, government restrictions on movement and commerce, and, secondly, disruptions in markets and supply chains.²⁴ Resnick notes that many governments have a history of cracking down on informal traders during public health crises.²⁵ As restrictions eased, the reasons for not being able to work varied across sectors. For example, after the first wave, “disruptions in markets and supply chains had become the most significant factor for home-based workers and street vendors, employer hiring practices had become even more important for domestic workers, and health concerns had become most important for waste pickers unable to work.”²⁶

Informal workers’ inability to work has a big impact on urban poverty and food insecurity. Their decreased incomes mean that they struggle to afford to buy sufficient food for their families. In South Africa, for example, one week into the lockdown, informal-trader leaders across the country reported that many members were struggling to feed their families.²⁷ The lockdown and closure of food outlets also caused a large spike in food prices in many places; for example, early on in the pandemic, the price of staple foods increased in several African cities.²⁸ The danger is that food price increases could lead to social unrest, thus exacerbating the COVID-19 crisis.²⁹

In addition to informal workers having less (or no) incomes during the COVID-19 lockdowns and therefore not being able to afford to buy sufficient food for themselves and their families, a negative impact on food traders also impacts other households, greatly increasing food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition.³⁰ Household food security surveys consistently show that low-income households regularly source a large proportion of their food from informal traders.³¹ The poorer the household, the more likely it is to source food from informal food outlets.³² This is because lower-income households often have erratic income patterns. They often lack refrigeration and storage space. They typically use public transport or minibus taxis, limiting the amount of food they can buy.³³

The broader impact of the COVID-19 crisis on urban poverty and food insecurity has therefore been enormous. For example, in South Africa, the National Income Dynamics Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey, a representative survey of 7.000 South Africans, estimates that approximately three million people lost their jobs over the lockdown period from March to June 2020, representing a decline in employment from 17 million people in February 2020 to 14 million in June 2020.³⁴ Of these 3 million job losses, about 2 million were women. About 47% of respondents reported that their household ran out of money to buy food in April 2020, up from 21% in the equivalent period in 2020; by June 2020, the number of households reporting insufficient money to buy food had decreased slightly to 37% but was still significantly higher than pre-lockdown levels.³⁵

18 - WIEGO, 2021.

19 - ILO, 2018.

20 - UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020.

21 - Chen et al., 2021, pp. 2.

22 - Chen et al., 2021.

23 - Chen et al., 2021.

24 - Chen et al., 2021, p.13.

25 - Resnick, 2020.

26 - Chen et al., 2021, p.13.

27 - Skinner and Watson, 2020.

28 - Resnick, 2020.

29 - Resnick, 2020.

30 - Moseley and Battersby, 2020.

31 - Skinner and Haysom, 2016; Crush et al., 2018.

32 - Skinner and Watson, 2020.

33 - Skinner and Haysom, 2016.

34 - Spaul et al., 2020.

35 - Spaul et al., 2020.

3.3 Impact on City Governments

As the bulk of the impact of COVID-19 has been felt in cities, city governments have been profoundly affected.

They have to play a leading role in the response: “in spite of little global governance recognition, COVID-19 has sprung, or perhaps forced, many cities to act, making municipal authorities the frontlines of global health governance.”³⁶ The typical competencies of local governments with regards to crises like COVID-19 include some or all of the following:³⁷

- Awareness building through information provision, education and communication;
- Implementation of protective measures, delivery of personal protective equipment and preventive supplies (e.g. gloves, masks, disposable, bleach)
- Upgrading of basic health facilities;
- Provision of first aid services to the population;
- Immediate action to bring relief to the people;
- Creation of the enabling conditions for post-disaster resettlement;
- Support local economy and business, and
- Assistance to the post-disaster reintegration of the affected population.

In late 2020 Cities Alliance, in partnership with UCLG, held a series of global webinars entitled “Cities’ Response to Containing and Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19” to document and share experiences relating to the responses of city governments to COVID-19. The role played by local governments in successfully restricting the spread of the pandemic in cities and mitigating its impact has been extensively acknowledged. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the limited mandate, finances and capacities of local governments in most cities. When most countries adopted emergency measures, including lockdowns/ curfews, local governments ensured delivery of WASH services, regular disinfection of shared facilities, guidance on social distancing and measures aimed at mitigating the social impacts of the pandemic, provision of social and economic support, legal advice to women affected by domestic violence, protection equipment, communication campaigns on prevention and access to health facilities, measures which contributed to slowing the spread of infections. The measures were particularly critical for managing the situation in dense low-income settlements where it is difficult to adopt the recommended social distancing and hygiene practices. This platform of cities in the global South identified good

city practices in managing the spread of COVID-19 in the informal sector and mitigating its impacts in vulnerable urban areas, and shared experiences between city officials in different regions. In the long-term, leading the recovery process to repair the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and build more equitable and prosperous cities that are resilient to future shocks will need to be the priority for local governments.

While increasing the burden on local government, the COVID-19 crisis has also decreased the resources available to local governments. The COVID-19 crisis and related policy responses have had an enormous impact on local government finance, “with a dangerous ‘scissors effect’ of rising expenditure and falling revenues.”³⁸ In general, local government expenditure has increased because of short-term emergency expenditure and medium-term recovery programmes. In contrast, revenue has steeply declined as a result of decreases in tax revenue (as a result of declining economic activity, employment and consumption), decreases in user charges, decreases in grants and subsidies from national governments, and declining revenue from property (rent, dividends, etc.). Although data on the actual impact of the COVID-19 crisis on local government finances is incomplete, one estimate was that local government revenue in Africa would decrease by up to 65%.³⁹ In many African cities, fees from markets and street traders are a significant source of local government revenue, so the lockdown severely impacted local governments in Africa.⁴⁰



36 - Acuto et al., 2020.

37 - UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020, p. 22.

38 - OECD, 2020.

39 - UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020.

40 - Resnick, 2020.



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4 RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS: GOOD PRACTICES

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on cities have been severe, and city governments have had to respond to the crisis in multi-faceted ways and have needed to lead the process of post-COVID recovery. Beyond just “recovery”, the post-COVID recovery process is also an opportunity for us to “rethink the future model of economic and social development” and explore how to make cities more equitable, resilient and sustainable, and better able to face future shocks.⁴¹

As discussed above, the Global Advocacy and Knowledge component of Cities Alliance’s Global Programme on Informality has a series of global and regional events to document good practices related to COVID-19 and share experiences through virtual peer exchange.⁴² These resources are available at the Cities Alliance Knowledge Centre.⁴³ Some examples of these good practices are discussed below, in four broad categories:

- The shift to adaptive urban governance, including developing and implementing integrated and participatory multi-scalar city strategies for COVID responses and recovery.
- Interventions in informal settlements (such as upgrading water and sanitation infrastructure).
- Support for informal workers and their families (such as cash relief payments and food programmes).
- Supporting grassroots initiatives to mitigate risk and help post-COVID recovery.

4.1 Adaptive Urban Governance: The Development and Implementation of Integrated and Participatory Multi-scalar Strategies

As part of the response and recovery to COVID-19, local governments need to develop and implement strategies “to address the complex risks facing urban low-income residents – and build on inclusive local initiatives responding to the pandemic.”⁴⁴ Local governments are “the key drivers for an inclusive and integrated response to COVID-19 at citywide level”, and they need to localize mainstreamed measures to the contexts of informal settlements and the informal economy.⁴⁵ The prerequisite for local governments to develop and implement comprehensive plans for responding to the COVID-19 crisis depends, of course, on ensuring that there is sufficient capacity to do so, which depends to a large extent on financial resources. National governments need to ensure that they have national policies for economic recovery and ensure that local governments have sufficient revenue through a range of revenue-side measures and amending rules on expenditure and debt.⁴⁶ Local governments themselves can also optimize their resources through various expenditure-side measures and changed financial management practices, such as setting up special COVID-19 accounts, preparing fiscal sustainability/resilience plans, amending procurement procedures, temporarily loosening financial reporting requirements, and increasing the use of e-governance tools.⁴⁷

41 - Cities Alliance, 2021d, p.18.

42 - Cities Alliance, 2021b.

43 - www.citiesalliance.org/knowledge-centre, last accessed 25.11.21.

44 - Sverdluk and Walnycki, 2021, p.5.

45 - UN-Habitat, 2020a, p.9.

46 - OECD, 2020.

47 - OECD, 2020.

Given all these challenges, **documenting and sharing good urban governance practices relating to COVID-19 within and between regions is essential.** Cities Alliance's Global Programme on Informality is intended to build a global coalition to help address the impact of COVID-19 and build greater resilience and equity in cities. The Programme has three objectives:⁴⁸

- To mobilize Cities Alliance members, their constituencies and international development partners to promote joint efforts and increase knowledge on addressing and harnessing informality and responding to COVID-19 in cities.
- To identify key knowledge gaps and produce knowledge products that distil the results and learning from the dialogues and peer-learning and disseminate them to a global audience.
- To facilitate a joint narrative and Cities Alliance coalition to deliver an advocacy and outreach campaign to a global audience to raise awareness on effective COVID-19 responses and demonstrate solutions to informality.

The Programme comprises two components, the Global Advocacy and Knowledge component and Country Level Activities. The Global Advocacy and Knowledge component has involved a combination of members engagement and e-learning advocacy, mainly through knowledge-exchange initiatives, such as LAV (Laboratorio de Vivienda - Housing Laboratory), UTC (Urban Thinkers Campus), Communities of Practice and Regional Housing Forums. LAVs provide a platform for governments and other stakeholders to share knowledge. The Informality Programme has expanded the LAV model from Latin American and the Caribbean to the African and Asian contexts. The country-level activities are a mix of immediate humanitarian responses through the distribution of protection and health equipment, small infrastructure works, communications and awareness-raising campaigns, and concentrated efforts on advocacy, knowledge and technical assistance aiming at a radical shift in the current context of urban inequalities. These activities have been carried out in Bangladesh, Uganda, Liberia, and Guatemala.

One important strategy for achieving adaptive urban governance is through the increased collaboration of different stakeholders within and between regions through processes such as Cities Alliance's LAVs, with bring together different levels of government and civil society stakeholders from different countries to share experiences and develop collective actions.⁴⁹

The LAVs have been extremely successful in facilitating multilevel participatory governance and collaborative approaches, and collective action. Key lessons from the LAVs are:⁵⁰

- The role of communities, social organizations, and their respective networks is critical. It is impossible to collect information, provide access, coordinate responses, and monitor the situation in informal settlements without the active engagement of local communities. They have been key to offering responses and leading solidarity efforts in support of the most vulnerable in the form of informal safety nets.
- Local governments are on the frontline of response. From access to health care and sanitation to reception and integration of migrants, provision of emergency shelter, and addressing domestic and gender-based violence, city governments play a crucial role in the COVID-19 response. Their action requires strong coordination at the metropolitan, regional and national levels.
- National governments play a key role. They are responding to urgently regulate and concede moratorium for rents, basic services, and mortgages. Laws and regulations concerning land use and rights have already been relaxed in Mexico, Panama, and Argentina. Topics such as land access for new housing needs and the review of slum upgrading approaches, financial schemes, and obsolete legal frameworks have also been put on the agenda.

Another key lesson from the LAVs is that local governments need to develop city-wide COVID-19 response strategies to respond to local needs and drive a transformative post-COVID recovery agenda for making cities more equitable, resilient and sustainable. These strategies need to be integrated across departments/ sectors, multi-scalar and developed in a participatory way. See Annex 1 of UN-Habitat's Leading local adaptation of COVID-19 in informal settlements: Guideline for local authorities for a suggested template for an integrated and inclusive city-wide response strategy with local action plans.⁵¹ Key steps in developing such strategies and plans include:

- Coordination between government departments and community engagement;
- Information sharing and campaigns;
- Data collection and community mapping; and
- Action planning for interventions at multiple scales.

48 – Cities Alliance, 2021b.

49 – Cities Alliance, 2020a.

50 – Cities Alliance, 2020a.

51 – UN-Habitat, 2020a.

Coordination Between Government Departments and Community Engagement

Step one in any local government response to the COVID-19 crisis is to ensure an integrated approach coordinated across different local government departments and different levels of government (including parastatal agencies). Governments that responded well to the COVID-19 crisis set up local task teams, including officials from different local government departments and representatives from community leaders (including from informal settlements), for example, in Costa Rica.⁵²

Metropolitan governance is a particularly complex issue, as numerous local governments usually govern metropolitan areas, and most countries lack adequate frameworks for coordination between local governments within metropolitan areas. In 2021, a series of Cities Alliance's LAVs focused on metropolitan governance in Mexico.⁵³ The main issues that emerged from the LAVs point to the need for more grounded legislative frameworks for the definition, governance, and implementation (including financing sources) of metropolitan areas in Mexico. These are the areas where the incidence of COVID-19 is most concentrated. To face challenges at the metropolitan level, coordination among different levels and sectors of government is necessary, but – although legally mandatory – this is rarely in place. Financing is also a challenge.

In the case of Mexico, the report produced by Cities Alliance based on the LAVs has been presented by the national government to the Senate Metropolitan Commission, and they have agreed to look at improving the national legal urban framework for metropolitan governance.

In addition to ensuring effective government coordination, it is also essential to engage with communities in a participatory way in the development and implementation of these strategies, as else interventions may unintentionally not understand local realities and make things worse.⁵⁴ Local leaders and community representatives identified and trusted by residents must be included in local task forces or committees to develop and implement area-based strategies.⁵⁵ It is essential to understand existing power dynamics and existing community structures within settlements before engaging with communities.

Information Sharing and Campaigns

A prerequisite for effective community participation and buy-in is that all partners must be aware of the COVID-19 crisis, its impacts and possible responses. Only when communities are fully informed can they be empowered to become partners and complement government actions.⁵⁶ For example, see the case study below of how a community information dissemination scheme was set up in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Case Study of Information Dissemination: Freetown, Sierra Leone

In Freetown, Sierra Leone, community groups are instrumental in designing, managing and disseminating information about COVID-19 and how to mitigate its effects. This was done early in the pandemic to bridge information flows from official government channels and residents. In communities within Freetown, information about COVID-19 was curated from diverse sources, including official health channels (World Health Organisation [WHO], the Ministry of Health Services [MoHS], radio and TV channels). Some community groups process and reproduce information from the MoHS and WHO websites, and disseminate print outs to community residents. Community traditional leaders and elected councillors have emerged as trustworthy sources of information and residents depend on them for regular updates from MoHS and other health

professionals. Practical information about social distancing, the use of face masks, and the need to inform health workers when COVID-19 symptoms are noticed are further disseminated throughout the community by residents themselves through their local networks, and done predominantly by word of mouth, moving from house to house, as well as through mass dissemination via WhatsApp™. The proactive information dissemination on COVID-19 builds upon an important lesson learnt from the management of the Ebola outbreak, where the void in information flows led to the spread of misinformation, distorted health messages and the creation of widespread panic. Community groups have therefore aimed to dispel rumours and misinformation and enhance coherent messaging about COVID-19.⁵⁷

52 – UN-Habitat, 2020a.

53 – Cities Alliance, 2021a.

54 – Corburn et al., 2021; Gupta and Mitlin, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2020a, 2020b.

55 – Wilkinson et al., 2020.

56 – UN-Habitat, 2020a.

57 – Based on: Osutuye et al., 2020.

Collection and Community Mapping

Decision-making about the response to the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath needs to be based on the analysis of fine-grained disaggregated data on the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlement communities and informal workers. If not already existing, it is also important to gain a rapid overview of where informal settlements are located, how many people live there, and the immediate needs.⁵⁸ In terms of data on informality, it is particularly important to include a grassroots collection of data “to shape local responses, map emerging hotspots, reorganize informal markets and transport hubs, plan public spaces and buildings for health and emergency services.”⁵⁹

The Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) Know Your City initiative is a good model of how communities can control the process of collecting local data.⁶⁰ Urban poor communities across Africa, Asia and Latin America affiliated to SDI have standardized and aggregated the data they collect at the settlement level as a means to communicate the scale and extent of informality and deprivation in the spaces they occupy in their cities. With the wider coverage of mobile phones in many urban areas, electronic and social media data can capture crisis alerts from communities and support responses. There have been several other notable examples of grassroots community data collection and compilation, such as the Ushahidi Covid-19 Tracker portal in Kenya (see case study below).

Case Study of Community Data Collection: Kenya Covid-19 Tracker Ushahidi

Map Kibera is an interactive community information project that works in the large informal settlements of Nairobi (Kibera, Mathare and Mukuru). Map Kibera identifies key thematic issues (such as water and sanitation, health, security and education) with community members, collects a range of quantitative and qualitative data, tests the validity of the data with community members and amends the data where necessary, and then makes the data available through the Map Kibera website (with its open-source digital map) for community action planning and advocacy

and lobbying. In 2020 Map Kibera launched the Kenya Covid-19 Tracker Ushahidi order to track cases in the country and resources available, especially in informal settlements. It maps suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases, COVID-19 recoveries, COVID-19 deaths and existing facilities, hand washing stations, initiatives within the community, communication hubs, etc. The data is presented in user-friendly zoomable and clickable maps, with the data disaggregated down to a very small scale, and it allows users to add additional data.⁶¹



58 – UN-Habitat, 2020a.

59 – UN-Habitat, 2020b, p.5.

60 – <https://sdinet.org>, last accessed 21.11.21.

61 – Based on: <https://mapkibera.org/>; <https://kenyacovid19.ushahidi.io/views/map>, last accessed 21.11.21.



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Action Planning for Interventions at Multiple Scales

Local governments need to develop and implement integrated strategies for responding to the short-term and long-term impacts of COVID-19 and building resilience for future shocks. These citywide strategies need to be multi-scalar with clear actions at various scales and need to be developed in collaboration with communities and civil society organisations. Some of the key principles learned from responding to previous outbreaks of infectious disease are that:⁶²

- Strong leadership and clear reporting structures are needed to ensure accountability of the stakeholders;
- Community ownership is very important to foster a behaviour change and achieve effective action neighbourhood level. Communities need to be part of the solutions;
- The gap between policy and reality on the ground needs to be closed.

The interests of vulnerable groups must be represented in planning and decision-making processes in COVID-19 response and recovery strategies, such as women and girls; residents at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and suffering severe disease, for example, because of occupational risk or underlying chronic conditions; people with disabilities; youth; LGBTQI residents; and racial and ethnic minority groups.⁶³

Citywide COVID-19 response/recovery strategies include public health measures but need to go far beyond these. Public health measures “need to be underpinned by action guaranteeing livelihoods and food security”, for example, cash relief payments and food aid.⁶⁴ At the city-level scale, strategies need to include a range of interventions to mitigate the economic impact and initiate recovery and urban transformation, such as UN-Habitat’s City Prosperity Index, which can help local governments think more systematically about the six different dimensions of urban prosperity: productivity; infrastructure; quality of life; equity and inclusion; environmental sustainability, and governance and legislation.⁶⁵

62 – UN-Habitat, 2020, p.51.

63 – Sverdlik and Walnycki, 2021.

64 – UN-Habitat, 2020b, p.5.

65 – UN-Habitat, 2013.

The COVID-19 response/recovery strategy needs to prioritise interventions in informal settlements and for informal workers, as these are likely to be particularly at risk from, and most impacted by, the negative impacts of the pandemic. Local-scale action plans for informal settlements need to include interventions such as: making accurate and updated information available to communities; making health care services and personal protective equipment available to communities; improving access to water and sanitation; improving waste management; promoting good hygiene practices; and

protecting most the vulnerable (such as women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and undocumented migrants).⁶⁶ For informal workers and their families, interventions would need to include cash relief payments and food aid programmes, and actions to protect workers in their workspaces (for example, through the supply of personal protective equipment). These potential interventions are all discussed in detail in the rest of this paper. Examples of COVID-19 action planning in Costa Rica and Sierra Leone are discussed in the case study boxes below.

Case Study of COVID-19 Action Planning Process: Costa Rica

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, Costa Rica developed national guidelines for the COVID-19 response in informal settlements to help guide local governments' development and implementation of local action plans in collaboration with communities. The guidelines were developed by a multi-stakeholder national team including the national ministry of health, local government associations, and other institutions in charge of the emergency response, with support from technical institutes, academia, the United Nations, local teams at municipal level formed by local government representatives and community representatives'

groups. The steps to be followed in the development of local action plans are:

- Establishment of local teams responsible for the implementation of the Local Plan.
- Undertake analysis of informal settlements in the area.
- Collectively define the objectives and scope of the Local Plan.
- Selection of actions to be implemented in informal settlements. The national guidelines include several potential good practices which can be selected and adapted, depending on local needs.⁶⁷

Case Study of Public Health Measures at Local Scale: Freetown, Sierra Leone

The government of the city of Freetown quickly developed a strategy for responding to COVID-19, based on its experience with Ebola in Sierra Leone. The action plan includes the following public health measures to reduce COVID-19 risk:

- Behaviour change messaging: through information sharing, local influencers send messages to communities, billboards, audios, posters so that a clear message about prevention and behaviour change can be ensured.
- Behaviour change support: measures to ensure that national guidelines can be implemented in informal settlements such as: ensuring that

community facilities, markets, schools, etc., have access to water for handwashing; adopt policies such as market and street trading restrictions to support the implementation of social distancing; support urban farming to improve food security in informal settlements and adjust city sanitation and cleaning regimes to protect staff and reduce transmission risks.

- Isolation and containment support: identify space for isolation, quarantine and monitoring of cases and contacts. informal settlements. The national guidelines include several potential good practices which can be selected and adapted, depending on local needs.⁶⁸

66 – UN-Habitat, 2020a.

67 – UN-Habitat, 2020b, p.5.

68 – <https://sdinet.org>, last accessed 21.11.21.

4.2 Interventions in Informal Settlements

As COVID-19 is a particularly high risk for residents of informal settlements, it is important to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 (and other infectious diseases). In April 2020, Cities Alliance organized the “Housing Laboratory on Precarious Settlements and Social Housing: Impacts and Answers to COVID-19”, which brought together Ministers and high-level officials from the housing sector in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶⁹ The participants exchanged experiences about the impacts and measures taken by national governments to tackle the crisis across the region, especially in informal settlements. The event provided a platform of dialogue between national governments, civil society, private sector, and international development representatives on the priorities for public action and the strategic roadmap needed for intersectoral coordination in the region, as well as the opportunities that the current crisis may bring to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable communities. In the context of the emergency response, the participants agreed that basic services for the residents of informal settlements must be prioritized. This includes immediate assistance, accurate information, economic support, access to water, and decent housing conditions, in coordination with community-based networks, governments, and urban stakeholders. Key interventions within informal settlements include:

- A moratorium on evictions
- Dedensification/relocation (only where unavoidable)
- Provision of water and sanitation
- Long-term upgrading of informal settlements

Moratorium on Evictions

The consensus is that step one in successfully reducing risk for informal settlement residents is an immediate moratorium on evictions.⁷⁰ For example, at the Cities Alliance “Housing Laboratory on Precarious Settlements and Social Housing: Impacts and Answers to COVID-19” held in April 2020, it was agreed that “No evictions seem to be the general consensus, as a response to the COVID-19 crisis, among Housing Ministers in the region,” as stated by Jonathan Malagón, Colombia’s Housing Minister and President of MINURVI, the Association of Ministers of Housing in the LAC region.⁷¹ This is because “Displacement, eviction, and homelessness are adverse determinants of health and can contribute to susceptibility of infection. Forced evictions, sometimes in the name of hygiene and dispersing dense slum populations to avoid communicable disease spread, have regularly contributed to greater spread of disease among both the displaced populations and the general population. Displacing residents of urban slums cannot only contribute to transmission and acquisition of infections but can have long-term physical and mental health impacts, especially for women and children.”⁷²

In South Africa, for example, in March 2020, the national government announced a national moratorium on evictions for the duration of the lockdown: “All evictions and executions of attachment orders, both movable and immovable, including the removal of movable assets and sales in executions is suspended with immediate effect for the duration of the lockdown.”⁷³ Local government has an important role in ensuring that a moratorium on evictions is properly enforced.



69 – Cities Alliance, 2020b.

70 – C40, 2020; Cities Alliance, 2020b; Corburn et al., 2021.

71 – Cities Alliance, 2020b.

72 – Corburn et al., 2021, p.351.

73 – The South African, 2020.

Dedensification and Relocation in Specific Cases

Dedensification and relocation usually do more harm than good, as they can disrupt social and economic links and increase travel time/cost. Still, dedensification/relocation may in rare cases be necessary, for example, where there are very overcrowded settlements that have high prevalence levels of COVID-19 (or where the informal settlement is on a risky site, such as in a flood plain or on a steep mountain slope). In such a case, relocation of residents to a nearby piece of vacant land suitably laid out and provided with basic infrastructure could have a positive impact. If dedensification is essential to reduce overcrowding within particular high-density settlements, social and economic links mustn't be disrupted, so the relocation should be to vacant land within 3 km.⁷⁴ It is also important that the site that people are relocated to can be permanently developed. Reducing overcrowding does not necessarily need to involve relocations, though, as multi-storey informal structures can also provide more space for households in informal settlements.⁷⁵ Building upwards could effectively double (or even treble) the available floor space for housing and free up open space.

Provision of Water and Sanitation

The lack of adequate water and sanitation is a major risk factor for the spread of infectious diseases such as COVID-19. It is therefore essential that water and sanitation be rapidly improved in informal settlements to reduce risk. In the short term, there is an urgent need for handwashing facilities and toilets. In contrast, in the long term, it is essential to invest in water and sanitation solutions appropriate for high-density settings to help integrate informal settlements into cities and help improve health conditions.⁷⁶

In the short term, the Sphere Humanitarian standards for water, sanitation, and hygiene for all informal settlements need to be met, as "Lack of water, sanitation, and clean energy compromise all efforts for hygiene."⁷⁷ In addition to the obvious health impacts of inadequate sanitation and having to store water, the sharing of water access points forces residents to spend time collecting and queuing for water, affecting health and economic status. Minimum standards for water and sanitation in emergency conditions include:⁷⁸

- An adequate water supply with adequate quality: A minimum of 15 litres of water per person per day is needed for drinking and domestic hygiene. A tap can serve a maximum of 250 people with 7,5 litres/minute flow rate.+
- Handwashing facilities: Handwashing with soap is an important way to prevent the transmission of diarrhoeal diseases. There should be a handwashing station per shared toilet or one per household. Handwashing facilities need a regular supply of water, soap and safe drainage.
- Water collection and storage: Collecting, transporting and storing drinking water safely is key to reducing contamination risks. Households, therefore, need separate containers for collecting and storing drinking water. Each household should have at least two 10-20 litre water containers, one for collection and one for storage.



74 – Corburn et al., 2021.

75 – Visagie et al., 2020.

76 – Parikh et al., 2020.

77 – Corburn et al., 2021, p.352.

78 – Sphere Association, 2018.

Case Study: Provision of Water in Freetown, Sierra Leone

In Freetown, when the pandemic started in early 2020, the city government accelerated plans to install large rainwater harvesting systems in 68 of the city's most water-deprived communities, in partnership with an international non-governmental organisation. An initial assessment of sites was undertaken jointly with communities, represented by councillors,

ward development committee members and other stakeholders, who advised on where the systems should be constructed. The city also purchased and distributed donated handwashing stations and soap to informal settlements and markets, public toilets, and other locations.⁷⁹

“adequate, appropriate and acceptable” sanitation, including that it should be “safe to use for all of the population, including children, older people, pregnant women and persons with disabilities”

The Sphere Association provides detailed guidelines for “adequate, appropriate and acceptable” sanitation, including that it should be “safe to use for all of the population, including children, older people, pregnant women and persons with disabilities; are located to minimise security threats to users, especially to women and girls and people with other specific protection concerns; ...have adequate space for different users; have inside locks; are provided with easy access to water for handwashing, anal cleansing and flushing”.⁸⁰

Provision of Housing and the long-term Upgrading of Informal Settlements

In the longer term, it is essential to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing, including upgrading informal settlements. At the Cities Alliance “Housing Laboratory on Precarious Settlements and Social Housing: Impacts and Answers to COVID-19” held in April 2020, it was agreed that in the mid and longer-term, measures related to migration, land tenure, review of legal frameworks, finance, and public investment models would need to be implemented to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing that informal settlements are upgraded.⁸¹ This implies that, besides short-term interventions aiming at mitigating the spread of infections,

widening access to quality health services, and sustaining economically those who lost their job or cannot work due to lockdown, other medium- and long-term policy measures are needed to integrate informal settlements into the city and to integrate informal work to the formal economy. These include, among others, changes in the legal and regulatory framework for land, land tenure and housing (including rental housing), as well as investments in infrastructure, affordable housing, informal settlements upgrading and environmental protection.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the urgent need to upgrade informal settlements, as this would reduce the risk of infectious disease in these areas and improve quality of life and reduce social inequities. As a result, during 2020, Cities Alliance facilitated numerous online events on informal settlement upgrading, including a series of three knowledge exchanges on informal settlements upgrading and COVID-19 and challenges to upscaling citywide incremental upgrading within the present legal framework of South Africa.⁸² The LAVs encompassed questions of financial framework, the social function of land, and governance issues by discussing how these immediate measures can pave the ground for permanent changes in the post-pandemic era. The second session dealt with the Kosovo Upgrading Project in Cape Town through shared experiences from Bogotá and São Paulo. Participants reflected on the role of financial mechanisms, the social function of land, and good governance for urban integration and alternative housing options. The third LAV highlighted measures and obstacles to address spatial justice in slum upgrading processes against the background of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) in South Africa. Case studies from Brazil (Belo Horizonte) and South African cities (eThekweni, Ekurhuleni, and Mangaung) emphasised an inclusive, flexible legal framework combined with partnerships and peer-exchange as main drivers for sustainable, people-centred slum upgrading.⁸³

79 – Based on: <https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Upgrading-informal-settlements-to-reduce-COVID-19-risk-and-strengthen-cities-recovery>, last accessed 21.11.21.

80 – Sphere Association, 2018, p.116-117

81 – Cities Alliance, 2020b.

82 – Cities Alliance, 2021b.

83 – Cities Alliance, 2021b.

In addition, a multi-stakeholder initiative took place in 2020, the Cities Roundtable on People-Centred Slum Upgrading. This led in 2021 to the gradual construction of a community of practice that started by addressing more in-depth and more concretely impact-oriented topics relevant to the key issue of implementation at scale in South Africa. First, a LAV was organised on citywide upgrading strategies. Next, the recently prepared Plan of Action of the National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP) of the South Africa national government Department of Human Settlements (DHS) was presented and discussed. The three key areas the community of practice currently focuses on are land (private land/acquisition), land tenure and city planning (land emerges as a major issue globally), housing co-production and socio-economic transformation, and provision of services – bulk infrastructure, coordination and technology. In addition, in 2020, two Urban Thinker Campuses (UTC) were held, focusing on slum upgrading at the regional level in Asia and Africa. Cases from the two regions were presented, and best practices were identified on community-based structures and plans, citywide incremental upgrading approach, and innovative housing financing sources.

As these LAVs show, learning from good practices around the world is essential. Examples of good upgrading practice show that processes to upgrade informal settlements need to be participatory, with a range of physical, social and economic interventions to improve people's lives and reduce their vulnerability to risks.⁸⁴ In addition to being participatory and intersectoral, successful informal settlement upgrading programmes generally share the same key features.⁸⁵ Firstly, the security of tenure of residents is increased, even if only through a moratorium on evictions.

Secondly, there are physical interventions such as providing roads, sidewalks, storm water drainage, water supply, sanitation and street lighting. There is often also support for the upgrading of housing. It is important to reduce overcrowding through upgrading processes, but there do not necessarily need to be relocations as overcrowding can also be reduced in other ways, for example, through facilitating the provision of multi-storey housing. Thirdly, there are accompanying social and economic programmes, such as pre-primary education, adult literacy programmes, community health programmes, setting up savings groups, vocational training for income-generating activities, and facilitating access of small businesses to credit and markets. Fourthly, informal settlement upgrading interventions need to be part of a long-term city-wide strategy to upgrade all informal settlements and ensure sufficient affordable land and housing for households that need accommodation within a broader framework of creating more compact and integrated cities. Fifthly, there needs to be reform of urban governance processes to ensure that informal residents and other marginalised groups are included in decision-making processes. The residents of informal settlements themselves must be involved in decision-making about upgrading the areas where they live and work. A key precondition to upgrading informal settlements is to ensure that national governments capacitate local governments with the powers, resources and skills to play a key role in developing and implementing informal settlement upgrading programmes in partnership with civil society. Local government staff need to be equipped with the necessary skills to engage in participatory processes with communities, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) usually have an important role as intermediaries between local government and communities. There are many good examples of local government and civil society partnerships in the successful upgrading of informal settlements that can be learned from.⁸⁶



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⁸⁴ – Smit, 2016.

⁸⁵ – Smit, 2016; Smit, 2020.

⁸⁶ – Smit, 2016.

In addition to upgrading informal settlements, ensuring a sufficient supply of adequate and affordable housing is also essential. This needs to include rental housing, which is a much-neglected topic in much of the global South. In India, Cities Alliance's LAVs helped policymakers grapple with the issue of rental housing within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until recently, rental housing has not been a central issue in the housing policy agenda in India, as the focus has been on property ownership and housing supply for purchase. The COVID-19 crisis dramatically called attention to the large numbers of migrant, informal workers who had neither stable nor safe dwelling to stay and who had been pushed to move back home. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs launched a scheme on Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) to address the residential vulnerabilities among migrant workers. Moving from this, Cities Alliance and several partner institutions decided to support and further promote this paradigmatic shift in the policy agenda. They organised a series of four LAVs on rental housing to inform the ARHC initiatives at the national and local government levels. The laboratories were focused on:

- the legal framework for rental housing in India and how to promote mechanisms to make formal rental market affordable or informal rental market formal
- options and challenges of the government-led rental housing model in partnership with the private sector, for example, the Rebuild-Retrofit-Operate-Transfer (RROT) model
- private-led green field investments in rental housing

Responses Aimed at Informal Workers and Their Families

Informal workers not being able to work during the COVID-19 lockdowns resulted in an enormous crisis in the global South. Immediate responses included waivers on payments, relief cash payments and food aid. In the long term, to assist in the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, it is essential to create a more enabling environment for informal work and develop proper social protection systems for informal workers.

Waivers on Payments

One of the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was that informal workers with severely reduced incomes (or no incomes) could not pay fees or service charges. As a result, many local governments waived fees for water and other utilities for a while. For example:⁸⁷

- In Accra, Ghana, there were free water bills from April to June 2020 and the waiving of past unpaid bills services for very poor households.
- In Delhi (and other cities in India), there was a 3-month waiver of utility bills.

Relief Cash Payments

The best way to help households who have lost their income source is through relief cash payments. Many governments introduced cash grants in response to the widespread loss of incomes of workers; for example, during 2020, there was a one-time cash grant of 500 rupees (US\$ 6,6) in India, a six-time cash grant of 350 rands (US\$ 20) in South Africa (now extended until March 2022), and a three-time cash grant of 5.000 baht (US\$ 159) in Thailand.⁸⁸ In some countries, there were top-ups to existing cash grant schemes; for example, in South Africa, the Old Age Grant and the Disability Grant were increased by 250 rands per month from May to October 2021.⁸⁹

In addition to assisting informal workers to buy food during lockdowns, cash relief grants are also important for the recovery process. They can help informal workers pay off debts and restore savings and assets lost during the COVID-19 crisis (Chen et al., 2021). Cash injections for informal traders are essential as "Many traders have spent their last savings during the lockdown period and without an injection of funds they will not easily be able to restart their businesses" (Skinner and Watson, 2020: 5).

Corburn et al. suggest that COVID-19 relief cash payments should be negotiated at the local scale but should be "a minimum of 3-month living wage salary to the poor which can cover food, rent, utilities, and other basic needs" to "compensate for the impacts of any proposed COVID-19 prevention measures, such as social distancing, that will eliminate day labour, employment as domestic servants in higher-income neighbourhoods, and the street economies of urban slums."⁹⁰ The payments should, where possible, use established electronic cash transfer means and programmes, like Jan Dhan, Aadhaar card, and MNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) in India, m-Pesa in Kenya, Prospera in Mexico, and Colombia's Familias en Acción and BolsaFamilia in Brazil.⁹¹

Food Aid

Although cash transfers are a more effective form of relief, in some cases, direct food aid may be necessary to prevent hunger. This can also help support the agricultural sector and ensure uninterrupted food production during lockdowns.⁹² An example of a local government food programme in South Africa is discussed in the case study box below.

87 – Chen et al., 2021.

88 – Chen et al., 2021.

89 – Seekings, 2020

90 – Corburn et al., 2021, p. 351.

91 – Corburn et al., 2021.

92 – ILO, 2020.

Case Study of Food Aid in Johannesburg, South Africa

In Johannesburg, the City of Johannesburg distributed emergency food parcels containing 15kg of vegetables (to last for two weeks) to vulnerable households previously enrolled in food-aid programmes. The city buys the food from markets, on the advice of a nutritionist. Initially, recipients

were notified about time and pick-up location by text message, but the city later reverted to door-to-door delivery to discourage crowding and reach more vulnerable households. Some 56.000 households had benefited during the first few months of the crisis (i.e. by May 2020).⁹³

Creating a more enabling environment for informal work In the longer term, the policy environment for informal work needs to be more supportive of informal workers to assist the recovery process.

Trading spaces for street vendors and sorting areas for waste pickers need to be re-opened. There should be the provision of protective gear (e.g. masks, gloves and sanitizer) and vaccinations for informal workers to help prevent further outbreaks of COVID-19.⁹⁴ Policy and legal reforms, at both the national and local levels, are required to create an enabling environment for the informal economy, including:⁹⁵

- Regulated access to – and the right to work in – public spaces.
- Simplification of procedures to obtain licenses and work permits.
- Basic infrastructure services at workplaces, including hand-washing stations, water points, waste disposal sites, shelter, hardened ground surfaces, fire hydrants, sanitized toilet facilities, distribution points for masks and sanitizer, information and education stations and health testing
- Redesign trading layouts in consultation with community organizations and street and market traders so that both traders and customers can maintain a two-metre distance.
- The inclusion of informal businesses in government procurement processes.
- A wider informal-economy support programme involving grants, loans, and infrastructure investment is required in the long term. Ensuring that women informal workers have access to suitable childcare is also essential.⁹⁶

Development of a Social Protection System

Ultimately, in the long term, the only way to reduce risk among informal workers is the introduction of universal, comprehensive social protection that provides both social insurance and social assistance to informal workers, in international social security standards and the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work.⁹⁷ This

needs to start with expanding and upgrading existing social assistance programmes by increasing benefit levels and expanding them to cover new groups of people. Similarly, contributory social protection systems need to be reformed to be more inclusive of informal workers (for example, in South Africa, the Unemployment Insurance Fund, which initially only covered formal workers, now includes informal domestic workers).

4.3 Supporting Local Initiatives

At the Cities Alliance “Housing Laboratory on Precarious Settlements and Social Housing: Impacts and Answers to COVID-19” held in April 2020, it was noted by María Eugenia Bielsa (Minister of Territorial Development and Habitat, Argentina) that there is no possibility of overcoming this crisis without strong support and action by social and community-based organizations and their networks.⁹⁸ Community organizations have been very creative in responding to the COVID crisis, and local governments need to find ways to help support, sustain and grow these initiatives. Common initiatives in Latin America, for example, have included the following:⁹⁹

- Housing: the provision of temporary accommodation for at-risk populations (e.g. the elderly), the enforcement of community quarantines, and campaigns for a moratorium on evictions (for example, by the Global Platform for the Right to the City and the International Alliance of Inhabitants).
- Infrastructure: installation of public taps and the distribution of water.
- Food security: Distributing food parcels and establishing public canteens and community kitchens (comedores populares or ollas populares).

93 – Based on: https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Food-and-COVID-19-How-cities-are-feeding-residents-today-and-building-a-better-tomorrow?language=en_US, last accessed 21.11.21.

94 – Chen et al., 2021.

95 – Chen et al., 2021; Skinner and Watson, 2020.

96 – Moussié, 2021.

97 – Chen et al., 2021; ILO, 2020.

98 – Cities Alliance, 2020b.

99 – Duque Franco et al., 2020, p.532.

- Public health: production and provision of hygiene items (e.g. masks, sanitizer), information and prevention campaigns. The focus has generally been on the dissemination of information and items like masks and hand sanitizer. In some communities, there also have been programmes to address issues of mental health and domestic violence: In Colombia, for example, the Ernestina Parra Foundation and the Feminist Legal Network have

developed information and prevention campaigns on gender-based violence and offer psychological and legal assistance to female victims of any domestic violence.¹⁰⁰

A good example of local community-led actions Catalytic Communities in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is discussed in the case study box below.

Case Study of Local Community-led COVID-19 Action: Catalytic Communities, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Catalytic Communities (CatComm) is empowerment, communications, think tank, and advocacy NGO working since 2000 to support Rio de Janeiro's favelas at the intersection of sustainable community development and human rights local-global networks, communications, and urban planning. CatComm supports and empowers residents of informal settlements, evolving strategically to support their needs as they arise. When the pandemic started in early 2020, Rio de Janeiro's favelas were clearly at high risk, but the city government was not monitoring cases of COVID-19 in the favelas. As a result, CatComm, in collaboration with the grassroots organisations working within different favelas, began collecting information on COVID-19 cases in the favelas. The Covid-19 in Favelas Unified Dashboard was launched on 9 July 2020 at a press conference, reflecting data from 123 favelas, with presentations

made by the member collectives. Several activities have been organized by Catcomm as a response to this process, including three campaigns. The first campaign, #DadosSalvamVidas (Data Saves Lives), was launched to communicate the importance of collecting data in favelas and to carry out actions based on the data. The campaign also used the hashtag #DadosSãoPoder (Data is Power) because, without data, there are no effective public policies. The second campaign, #VacinaPraFavelaJá (Vaccines for Favelas, Now!), was launched with the arrival of vaccines in Brazil, drawing attention to the numerous reasons why the vaccine should be prioritized in favelas. The third campaign was against hunger and for food baskets for the collectives involved in the Dashboard, bringing in over US\$ 2.200 in donations for basic food baskets in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁰¹



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100 – Duque Franco et al., 2020, p.532.

101 – Based on: <https://catcomm.org/about> last accessed 21.11.21.

Local governments should support community-led initiatives, for example, through creating enabling regulations and through funding. One particular funding model for community initiatives is through community-managed funds (see the Mtwapa case study below). Supporting food security initiatives is especially important, for example, through the following:

- Supporting existing community organisations, faith-based groups, and others that may already provide food support to the poor and ensuring they can deliver cooked meals to all those in the informal settlements and living on the streets. Efforts should be made to ensure adequate nutritional content, including protein, of all delivered food.¹⁰²
- Supporting community food gardens: As many urban residents struggle with access to fresh fruits and vegetables and continue to face food insecurity, community gardens have helped alleviate these nutritional gaps. Community gardens “help families reduce pandemic-related economic losses by supplementing their diets with nutritious foods. ... They also serve as spaces to cultivate social support and emotional well-being.”¹⁰³ See the Cape Town case study below for an example of where a local government supports community food gardens.
- Promoting urban and peri-urban agriculture more broadly: urban agriculture can potentially contribute to food security, but low-income households usually require support to be able to be involved, for example, “inputs, extension services, credit/financial access, production and marketing infrastructure, and knowledge.”¹⁰⁴
- Developing a city-wide food security strategy for a well-functioning urban food system that provides a high level of food security to residents while contributing to sustainable social and economic development.¹⁰⁵ Belo Horizonte in Brazil is the best-known example of an urban food security strategy in the global South. In the 1990s, the local government of Belo Horizonte launched a food security programme, the three main thrusts of which were: to prevent malnutrition by assisting poor households and individuals at risk; working with the private sector to ensure increased accessibility, affordability and quality of staple foods and fruit and vegetables; and increasing food production and supply.¹⁰⁶

Case Study of Community Managed Funds: Mtwapa, Kenya

UN-Habitat’s Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme (PSUP) is a global programme for an integrated, insitu city-wide approach to upgrading informal settlements. In Kenya, more than 15,000 households have benefited from implementing the PSUP in Mtwapa Township of Kilifi County, with a specific focus on improving the livelihoods of the most vulnerable community members through sustainable funding models that address issues affecting women, girls and children. By adopting the Community Managed Funds (CMF) model, PSUP has catalyzed the empowerment of women and girls. The CMF allocates 10% of the slum upgrading budget to neighbourhood upgrading projects conceptualized and implemented by the communities themselves. The CMF supports communities to initiate and manage their own projects according to their technical and management capacities through a revolving fund that improves livelihoods and enhances the informal economy. The funds invested

in each CMF, combined with the requirement to have women-initiated projects and local project committees with a substantial proportion of women (40% minimum) in leadership roles have led to has led to improved living conditions. In Mtwapa, through the funding from the CMF, the residents of Majengo and Mzambarauni now have three water kiosks that also function as handwashing stations, and local women’s groups produce soap for them at low cost, and PSUP worked with the County Government of Kilifi. A local NGO, “Shining Hope for Communities” to set up 20 additional handwashing facilities. Linked to this, youth groups conducted door-to-door education campaigns, explaining the importance of washing hands properly, wearing a facemask, keeping social distance if possible and recognizing symptoms of COVID-19 in time. They also provide the elderly and those at risk with clean water from the water kiosks.¹⁰⁷

102 – Corburn et al., 2021, p. 352.

103 – Mercardo, 2021.

104 – Frayne et al., 2014, p.187.

105 – Ericksen, 2008.

106 – Rocha and Lessa, 2009

107 – Based on: UN-Habitat 2020a; <https://unhabitat.org/participatory-slum-upgrading-programme-empowers-women-and-girls-through-community-managed-funding>, last accessed 21.11.21-

Case Study of Supporting Community Food Gardens: Cape Town, South Africa

In Cape Town, South Africa, the local government (the City of Cape Town) has an initiative to establish food gardens in areas where the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected households. Approximately ZAR3million (about US\$ 200.000) has been budgeted for the project. The funding will provide targeted beneficiaries with farming kits that include seeds, fertiliser, equipment and training, among others. The aim is to involve a few hundred backyard and urban farms from across the city. Each of the 25 sub-councils within the city was asked to identify 30 participants to start-up food gardens. The Food Gardens Project will support new and existing farmers using areas such as backyards, schools, open spaces around city-owned

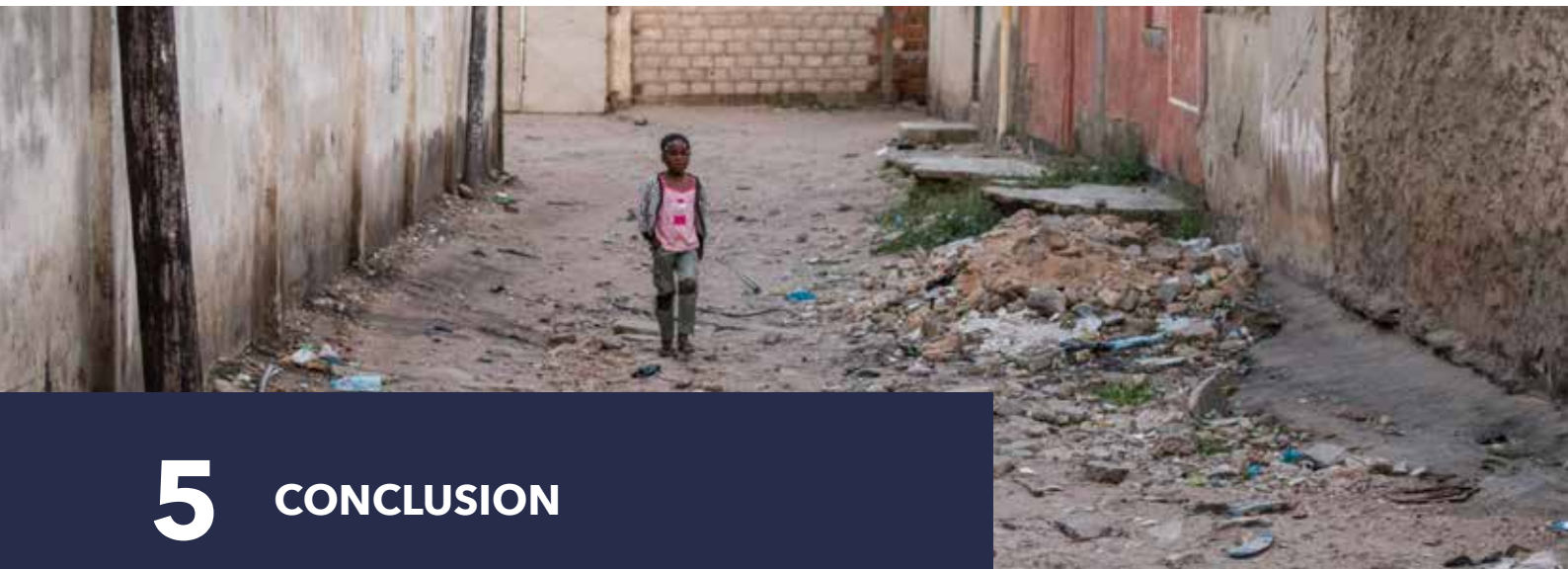
buildings, churches, non-governmental organisations, clinics, and libraries. The venture will not require capital costs.

The initiative is underpinned by a skills development programme to ensure beneficiaries are equipped with appropriate skills for future employment in the sector. A spokesperson for the City of Cape Town said that "This project is aimed at encouraging households to start their own food production units. Owning a garden offers great potential for improving a household's food security. This includes direct access to nutritionally rich foods, savings on food bills and fall-back food provision during lean periods."¹⁰⁸



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108 – <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/sebenza-live/2021-02-23-food-gardens-to-feed-victims-of-covid-19/>, last accessed 21.11.21.



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5 CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis represents a major challenge to local governments, both in terms of the immediate response and addressing its long-term implications. The COVID-19 pandemic reaffirms that the built environment of cities is a key determinant of health and reaffirms the importance of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which includes the upgrading of informal settlements and other types of slums. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of all the other SDGs as well. It has sparked many initiatives that will potentially contribute to meeting targets and indicators of the SDGs, such as the increased roll-out of water and sanitation and social safety net initiatives (such as food aid schemes). There have also been many innovative community initiatives to help mitigate the crisis, for example, social safety nets and bottom-up data collection. However, COVID-19 has also significantly set back the achievement of the SDGs.¹⁰⁹ The huge economic impact of the lockdown, the resulting loss of revenue from decreased economic activity (resulting in less municipal revenue from service charges and in lower national government grant and subsidy allocations), and the reallocation of budgets for the healthcare response will all make achieving the SDGs even more challenging.

Efforts to implement the NUA and SDGs must be reinforced. For example, Cities Alliance, with the Central American Social Integration Secretariat (SISCA) and other partners, organized two high-level LAVs for Central America and the Dominican Republic to discuss the Regional Plan for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda (PRINAU – Plan Regional de Implementación de la Nueva Agenda Urbana) within the framework of the

broader Plan for Recovery, Social Reconstruction and Resilience of Central America and Dominican Republic.¹¹⁰ The PRINAU is structured into six key areas of intervention:

- Urban national policy
- Urban legal frameworks
- Urban and land planning with integrated urban design
- Urban economies and municipal finance
- Local-level implementation capacity
- Monitoring and reporting.

At a local level, the two underlying principles that local governments need to follow in responding to the latter stages of the pandemic, leading the post-COVID recovery process and building resilience against future shocks, are, firstly, to “do no harm” and, secondly, to engage with communities in a participatory way to develop and implement context-specific local strategies. In the words of the global Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) network, local governments should, above all, “Do no harm: Local governments and the police should stop harassing, extorting, evicting and otherwise penalizing informal workers. They should not use the crisis or public health concerns as an excuse to demolish the homes and workplaces of the poor.”¹¹¹

The second key principle is “Nothing for Us without Us”: residents of informal settlements and informal workers “should be invited to help design, implement and monitor relief, recovery and reform efforts. They have the ground level knowledge and experience to ensure that these efforts are targeted to and appropriate

109 – Hamann et al., 2020

110 – Cities Alliance, 2021c.

111 – WIEGO 2021, p.2.

for the poor, including the working poor, and to assist in channeling the resources.”¹¹² The initial response of governments to the COVID-19 crisis was top-down, largely driven by science experts, and correctly so. Still, in the long-term, to recover from the crisis effectively and get back on track in terms of meeting the SDGs, there is a need to shift towards a more participatory and nuanced bottom-up approach to respond to local needs in specific places. “Many local governments have displayed commendable initiative trying to engage other partners, mobilize additional finance and expand the scope of their activities beyond what was established by the Centre. But these governments are few, and their initiative attracted in adequate finance and institutional support. COVID-19 offers an opportunity to rethink the role of local governments and test new solutions.”¹¹³ To be able to use the shock of COVID-19 to transform cities to become more equitable and sustainable, it is essential that political authority with adequate resources is devolved to the local level and that there is a commitment to building dialogue, exploring collaboration and co-producing solutions at the local scale.¹¹⁴

This paper is part of a larger review series on key topics of informality published in 2021. We encourage the readership to also engage with the review of slum upgrading programs, National approaches to slums, informal land markets, informal rental solutions, informal economy, the impact of COVID-19 on informal settlements, and informality concepts.



112 – WIEGO 2021, p.2.

113 – UN-Habitat, UNCDF, UCLG-Africa, & UNECA, 2020, p.22.

114 – Gupte and Mitlin, 2021.



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