

Housing For All: A Better Urban Future

Housing is a fundamental human right. It has also been central in our battle against the spread of the COVID-19 virus where it can be a matter of life and death. The spread of COVID-19 is spotlighting as well as exacerbating a pre-existing global housing crisis. Without adequate housing, it is impossible to carry out social distancing and good hygiene practices – and around 1.8 billion people, or more than 20 percent of the world's population, lack adequate housing. There are 1 billion people living in informal settlements and slums and more than 100 million people are homeless. By 2030, the numbers of people in inadequate housing could increase to 3 billion.

People living in inadequate housing conditions - in slums and informal settlements - are hit hardest during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to the stressful home stay environment in small and crowded housing, the disruption of social and protective networks and decreased access to services increase the risk of violence for women and children. The absence of basic services and the prevalence of stress and unhealthy living conditions also contribute to poor health.

Throughout the pandemic, many local and national governments have put in place mechanisms to protect those who are most vulnerable, including measures to address homelessness and evictions, as well as the provision of basic sanitary services. However, long-term interventions focusing on reviewing the current approaches to housing and land are crucial, as they could significantly shape the success or failure of urban areas to respond to extreme events and future post-disaster recovery. Housing is as central to the character, shape and socio-economic vibrancy of cities as to public health outcomes.

World Habitat Day 2020 presents the opportunity to engage in a global discussion on the transformative impact of COVID-19 on the housing sector and to explore how to build societies back better, by leveraging the role of housing as a catalyst for progressively delivering human rights and as a foundation of people's wellbeing. Issues around housing must be at the centre of sustainable and inclusive urban development. COVID-19 has brought the housing paradox into sharp relief – at a time when people are in urgent need of shelter, millions of apartments and houses sit empty.

Inclusive, affordable and adequate housing is the key to sustainable transformation of our cities and communities. Sustainable Development Goal 11 aims for resilient, inclusive, safe, diverse cities by 2030 and one of the targets is access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services for all by 2030 and the upgrade of slum. The pandemic offers new opportunities for all stakeholders to participate.

Cities need leaders who will work with local communities and who recognize that it is possible to cater for housing for all. Housing strategies, citywide slum upgrading and prevention strategies as well as the engagement of more than 5 million slum dwellers provide the avenue for scaling and accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in cities and communities in the Decade of Action. Cities must integrate the vulnerable, poor and excluded in overall city development.

Governments need to reshape policies, strategies and legislation for diverse housing solutions for all and respect, protect and fulfill human rights for all in cities. Governments must put people at the core of decision-making, ensuring equity and the fulfillment of the human rights for all.

Non-governmental organizations must help to empower communities and ensure governments implement an inclusive agenda. To assist the most vulnerable, women, men, youth, children, the elderly, refugees, migrants, minorities, people with chronic diseases, physical challenges and the discriminated to become all equal partners for improved housing. Communities should be empowered to participate in shaping the global “housing for all” agenda in countries, cities and settlements around the world.

Public-Private-People-Partnerships (PPPPs) can drive inclusive development and provide access to finance for the construction sector as well as investing in adequate housing. The private sector can come up with innovations that are green, inclusive, affordable, and scalable, and can support and invest in making government’s commitments, visions and strategies a reality.

Meanwhile research and knowledge hubs should look at providing data and innovation. Investors and development partners can partner with governments, private sector and communities to assist in overcoming blockages, providing diverse financing mechanisms and instruments to enable multi-partnership **“building back better”**.

World Habitat Day 2020 will act as a hub to coordinate and share information to promote the idea of housing, shelter and slum upgrading as central to the functions of cities in meeting residents’ needs. The pandemic has shown that cities and local governments around the world **can move towards** reducing inequalities and poverty levels and providing access to adequate housing for all, as a catalyst to achieve other fundamental rights.