

Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

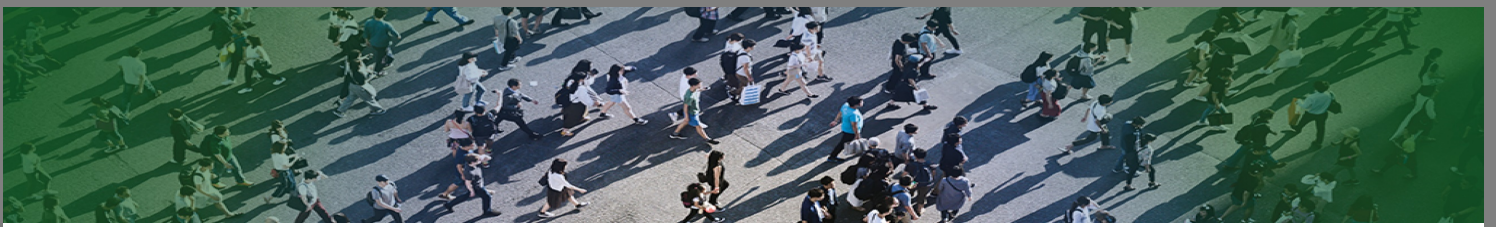
Housing: ensuring everyone can safely #StayAtHome

Briefing & Learning Note

April 1st, 2020



For more information, please
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Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim to bring together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the **first thematic LLE**, co-organized by UCLG's Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, held on Wednesday, April 1st, was devoted to promoting a **collective reflection on the relationship between housing and the COVID-19 crisis**.

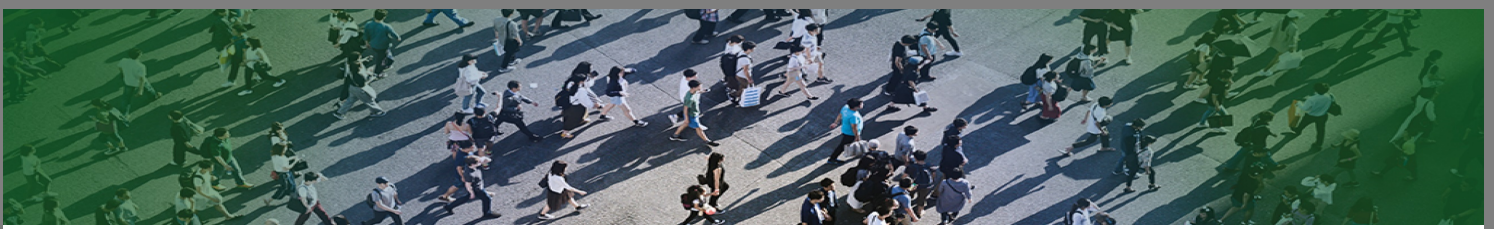
Local and Regional Governments' long-standing efforts to ensure their populations' right to housing

Home confinement has become one of the main measures taken across the world to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and prevent the collapse of health systems while there is no official medical treatment for the virus. Nevertheless, this policy entails different challenges for LRGs around the world as a result of the different realities they face.

Particularly since Habitat III, the constituency of LRGs highlighted the importance of ensuring populations' right to adequate housing as a necessary precondition for the fulfillment of many other human rights. Through The Shift campaign led by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, and the "*Municipalist Declaration of Cities for Adequate Housing*" (2018) promoted by UCLG, LRGs articulated their call for increased capacities to combat the financialization of housing markets, increase and improve the stock of public housing, promote new partnerships and community-led housing and mobilize planning tools to implement inclusive housing policies as part of urban development strategies. These efforts were reflected in the launching of the Community of Practice on Housing, and UCLG's Report "*Rethinking Housing Policies: Harnessing local innovation to address the global housing crisis*" (2019).

Nevertheless, the velocity and ferocity with which COVID-19 has hit our societies reveals and amplifies housing inequalities, impacting more existing vulnerable groups. This crisis entails a point of no return. It is showing that having access to adequate housing is instrumental in the management and mitigation of the pandemic and that it is LRGs who, being at the frontline of the fight against the virus and the sphere of government closest to the citizens, are stepping forward and providing solutions to the real needs on the ground.





COVID-19: Housing challenges and initiatives in the face of the outbreak

Different realities around the world make it imperative to acknowledge that #StayAtHome policies pose great and diverse challenges to LRGs. What do these confinement policies mean for those who do not have a home? And for those who live in settlements where housing is overcrowded or where there is no access to water and sanitation? Or those populations for which confinement entails danger? In these different contexts, what may LRGs do to enhance their populations' safety and make emergency housing available? What challenges do they encounter to do so? What can they do on their own and what do they need support with?

An interactive consultation held during the meeting allowed to identify what issues were key for participants in answering these questions. Consensus was widespread on the importance of measures such as emergency housing, continuity of social service provision, adequate shelter for homeless and vulnerable populations, moratoriums on evictions, and measures regarding rent, mortgages, and affordability. The capacity of local and regional

governments to implement such measures on their own, however, was perceived very differently among participants, reflecting the different levels of competences, capacities, and resources available when it comes to housing policies, the pressure that the crisis is putting on the continued provision of key social services, and the importance of partnerships and coordination.

COVID-19 and housing: Identifying entry points to addressing the crisis

Addressing homelessness through the provision of emergency housing and the prevention of evictions

In situations in which it is possible to advance confinement measures, LRGs are working to ensure the safe confinement of their inhabitants. As was highlighted by the live consultation held, LRGs are taking the lead to address and prevent homelessness when people do not have a home or are at risk of losing the one they





inhabit. LRGs like Bogotá, Montreal, Valencia, Vienna, and Barcelona are all making **emergency housing** available in order to house people who do not have a home and allow for their safe confinement. Valencia and Barcelona have developed **new partnerships** with the private sector so as to mobilize vacant housing units, while Vienna has extended its winter package programme.

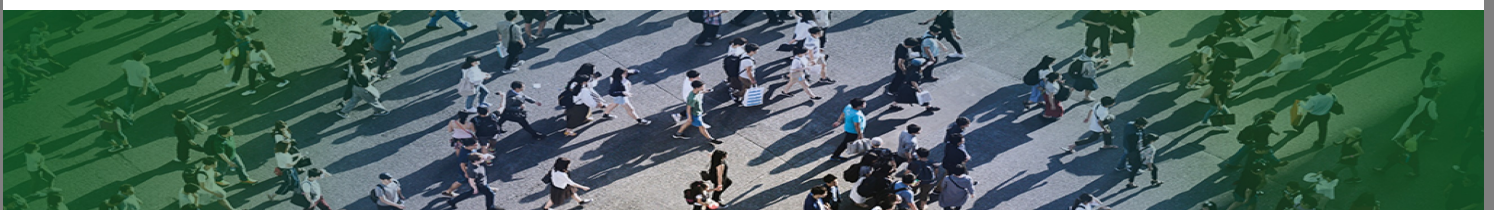
Through an agreement with a touristic platform, Barcelona is housing people at social risk in over 200 apartments of the platform's empty housing units. Valencia has followed a similar model, reaching agreements with the private sector to allocate vacant units to increasing the local social rental offer. However, as Bogotá pointed out, increasing the available emergency housing stock is not as easy and fast as could be due to the existing regulatory frameworks for social housing production, which are not flexible enough.

When people are at risk of losing the house they inhabit, LRGs are supporting vulnerable populations to pay their **rents and mortgages**. Bogotá is making unconditional monthly transfers to those who were already identified as vulnerable and at risk of the eviction, as well as to those identified as at risk of becoming so due to the crisis' impact on their economies. Montevideo, Barcelona and Valencia are making efforts to **prevent evictions** or push for moratoriums by working with national government to ensure the permanence of people in their homes when this depends on banks and the private sector, or implementing a moratorium on rental payments for the cities' public housing.

Ensuring safe confinement: Implementing #StayAtHome policies and the challenges that doing so entails

Mitigating the spread of the virus necessarily requires to ensure that, to the extent possible, people are confined to ensure physical distancing. LRGs are **raising awareness** of the necessity to stay at home to contain the spread of the virus, which is not obvious in all contexts. In that respect, some LRGs, such as Grigny, Valencia, and Cocody, are combating fake information and encouraging people to stay at home. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has also put in place a website to support local governments in communicating about confinement measures. Vienna is also developing **psychosocial assistance initiatives** to prevent the impact of confinement over mental health issues.

Yet confinement measures also entail challenges when people do have a home to stay in, as sometimes it might not be **adequate to ensure their safe confinement**. Sometimes, inadequacy may arise from the physical conditions of the housing stock, which may be overcrowded or not provided with connection to basic services. Grigny made the point that, due to the economic impact of the crisis





on populations that were already vulnerable, the cost of the proper maintenance of buildings is an important aspect to plan for. In order to condition available housing for safe confinement, Bogotá and Montevideo are partnering with civil society to undertake the necessary upgrading works. In Iztapalapa, the local government is focused on preemptively ensuring **access to water and sanitation** so that people do not have to leave their houses during the quarantine period.

In other cases, the challenges of #StayAtHome policies directly derive from ensuring that confinement does not **exacerbate existing vulnerabilities**. This is the case of women, children and structurally vulnerable populations like the LGBTQIA+ community, for whom confinement can intensify the **domestic violence** they may suffer. LRGs, such as Valencia, are opening hotlines and calling for physical distancing but social proximity, with the aim of propelling neighbours to be attentive to signs of domestic abuse, report them and support the victims by letting them know they are not alone in confinement.

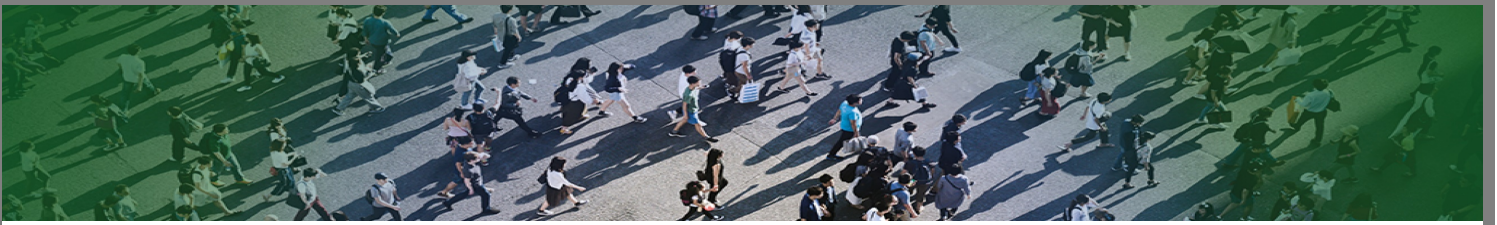
LRGs are also protecting the **elderly and people with medical needs and dependencies**. LRGs, such as Grigny, Barcelona, Iztapalapa and Montevideo, are ensuring these populations' access to food by delivering it to their homes. Nevertheless, LRGs are reporting that they are beginning to struggle with resources. LRGs in other parts of the world, such as Cocody, are bringing the attention to the impossibility of their populations to preserve food at home. In that respect, the local government is planning ahead and increasing, according with their capabilities, their reserves of **food and medical equipment**. Other LRGs like Montevideo point out that the lack of a registry of vulnerable populations (who have until now been invisibilized) makes it difficult to reach all of those in need.

LRGs are also trying to ensure the most vulnerable populations have **access to healthcare services**. Guangzhou is monitoring COVID-19 patients' health status from their homes via an app, which also allows for medical consultations ensuring the provision of medical services while in confinement. LRGs are working to prevent, to the extent possible, that the confinement exacerbates **educational inequalities**. This poses significant challenges in contexts marked by social vulnerability and limited **access to the internet**. It also raises the question of how to provide support to children also during the periods of school breaks.

How to mitigate contagion when confinement measures can only be partially implemented or cannot be implemented at all

The contexts in which informality is a central component of the built environment and economic activity pose challenges to containment measures based on confinement. Households in **informal settlements** often rely on the daily income





that they make through developing their economic activity in the public space. Some LRG, as is the case of Iztapalapa, are putting efforts in sanitizing **public spaces** to mitigate the spread of the virus, acknowledging that parts of the local population do not have the means to survive in total confinement. In Bukavu, for instance, the only measure available to the local government is to prevent the mobility of people within the jurisdiction to limit contagion.

Although the density oftentimes presented by informal settlements represents a critical concern to mitigate the virus' spread, this is no justification for evictions, which only exacerbate the already critical situation of the populations living in the settlements. LRGs are deeply concerned by the threat posed by the virus in these contexts and the complexity of responding to it. Consequently, a specific Live Learning Experience will be devoted to addressing the issue of COVID-19 and informality.

Lessons learnt so far: Key messages and identified ways forward

1. LRGs are taking the lead and providing bold responses to the local housing challenges triggered by the COVID-19 crisis.

Participants to the LLE emphasized that the response to housing-related challenges triggered or exacerbated by the pandemic needs to be decentralized, responding within the shortest delay to the real needs on the ground -- as shown by the above mentioned examples of local leadership and successful multi-level coordination to address the pandemic. As noted by UN Habitat's Executive Director, "*Governors and Mayors are playing leading roles in addressing the crisis while keeping cities functioning*". It was also recalled how, in order to support local service provision, national leadership should provide resources, including information, financial resources and workforce.

2. The COVID-19 emergency is putting already existing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the spotlight, emphasizing how local and regional inclusive housing systems that ensure adequate housing for all are key for sustainable urban development and disaster preparedness.

There was clear consensus that the housing-related challenges brought about by the crisis affected particularly the most vulnerable and exposed pre-existing inequalities. Emergency responses and long term transformations in housing systems should recognize these vulnerabilities, including "*those for whom staying at home might add additional stress and those for whom staying at home was*





simply not possible” as noted by HIC President Adriana Allen. As noted by Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, *“the current crisis has exposed what happens when the right to housing is not implemented: it puts the whole world at risk of contracting a deadly disease”*.

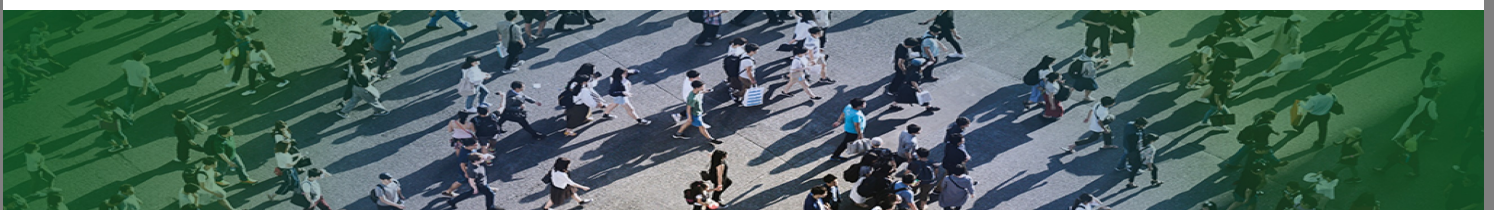
LRGs’ previous responses to housing-related challenges in previous crises and epidemics - as illustrated by the experience of Bukavu with previous Ebola outbreaks - have showcased that adequate housing provision is key to increase cities’ and regions’ disaster preparedness. It is necessary also to recall the important point raised by Xi’an and Montevideo that measures to support vulnerable groups should be implemented both during and after the outbreak. As pointed out by the Public Service International representative Daria Cibrario, the COVID-19 emergency is also highlighting the ill-effects of previous privatisation trends of basic services and weakened public housing strategies -- which are now reinforcing the perilous impact of the virus on the most vulnerable. The interdependency between the right to housing and the enjoyment of all human rights was illustrated by the solid policy developments shared by representatives of “human rights cities” attending the meeting, such as Vienna, Barcelona, Montevideo, Iztapalapa or Grigny.

3. Civic solidarity and multi-stakeholder partnerships are key to address the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on housing

Both LRGs and civil society representatives stressed the central role that cooperation between local stakeholders is playing in providing housing solutions to overcome the crisis and protect the most vulnerable. As shown through the contributions of participants, collaboration with civil society and community groups has been key in conditioning housing to contain the pandemic’s spread and in gathering information of vulnerable groups’ most pressing needs, while other LRGs have put in place cooperation schemes with private actors to make emergency housing available.

4. The different territories have unequal capacities to enforce quarantine measures and the COVID-19 risks exacerbating the territorial divide

COVID-19 is also exacerbating inequalities between cities and territories across the world. LRGs like Bukavu or Cocody noted how they have to face the spread of the virus while lacking medical equipment and the capacity to enforce quarantine measures due to the reality of local housing systems. According to UN Habitat’s Maimunah Mohd Sharif, *“regular hand washing or social distancing are key to prevent the spread of the pandemic, yet these measures are in short supply for*





residents of informal settlements". As illustrated in the previous section, participants made reference to the need to focus on providing safe drinking water, food or an emergency livelihood in these contexts. As noted by Grigny's Mayor Philippe Rio, socio-spatial inequalities were also a defining feature of the way the COVID-19 emergency was experienced in metropolitan contexts.

5. Evictions, for whatever reason, need to stop immediately and everywhere

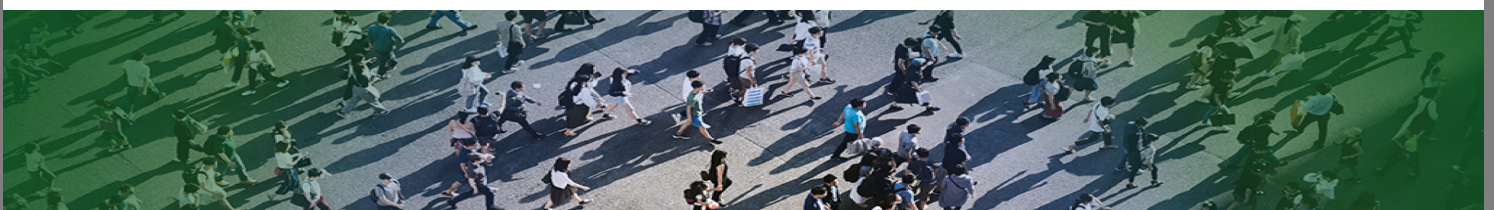
LRGs, civil society and multilateral representatives emphasized that the emergency should not trigger new evictions, and that long term measures to prevent them in accordance to the right to housing framework should be put in place. According to Leilani Farha, *"stopping evictions immediately, anywhere and for any reason, must be seen as a local extension of the #StayAtHome policy"*, while Maimunah Mohd Sharif urged governments to *"take extraordinary measures to secure the right to housing for all in this context, including moratorium of evictions"*. As seen in the previous section, LRGs are already putting in place measures in this regard, such as rent deferrals and moratoriums. Regarding these programmes, Leilani Farha noted how *"they could not be based on debt contracting"*.

6. Housing solutions must be provided to people who are homeless - this solutions must be conceived as an stepping stone towards a long-term strategy to end homelessness

LRG stressed their deep concern with the impact that the emergency has on people who are homeless. As shown by the initiatives shared by LRGs, social care programmes have been extended and new emergency shelters have been mobilized. LRGs have many times benefited from citizen's solidarity and civil society mobilization in this context, as well as cooperation with the business sector to mobilize emergency accommodation. The situation is also allowing to confirm that *"ending homelessness is possible"*, promoting the adoption of a long-term vision to addressing homelessness. In the words of Barcelona's Deputy Mayor Laia Bonet, *"even though many of the measures being taken are only temporary solutions directly responding to the epidemic, we must work to ensure people who are homeless do not go back to the street by implementing long-term social care strategies"*.

7. The current crisis is a point of no return: thinking #BeyondTheOutbreak requires rethinking the ways cities are built and inter-urban systems are developed

The COVID-19 has exposed pre-existing flaws in housing and inter-urban systems





that can no longer be ignored. The crisis has shown the deadly consequences of failing to implement populations' right to housing and how the fulfilment of other fundamental human rights is intrinsically dependent on it. Several UCLG partner organizations, such as the Global Platform for the Right to the City or Habitat International Coalition, are already developing a long-term vision for the recovery phase that will follow the outbreak, calling to "*advance towards human rights-based habitat*" and move towards a "*care society that puts life and community public services at the centre*".

Rethinking our cities along such lines implies rethinking "*the way we build houses, we provide basic services, ensure energy efficiency and promote access to the internet to plan ahead for the digitalisation of work*", as was put by Barcelona's Laia Bonet. Similarly, several participants emphasized that rethinking real estate market will be critical in the aftermath of COVID-19, especially in those areas facing large risks of increased gentrification following the pandemic. These ideas were much in line with Vienna's Human Rights Director Shams Asadi remarks, who also stressed the necessity of enshrining the human rights-based approach in urban development.

The crisis has equally exposed that territories are dependent on each other, and that sustainable development necessarily requires to build on territorial equality, an area in which policy development needs to be advanced. In the words of Catalonia's Urban Agenda Secretary Agustí Serra, "*the current crisis represents an inflection point in terms of the importance that urban development agendas need to play in development management*". Food security and spatial justice issues raised also made the point for more consolidate schemes of inter-urban solidarity and governance; in the words of Lorena Zárate, "*interdependence applies to human rights as much as it does to territories*".

This Live Learning Experience has been an important exercise that has allowed to identify entry points to address the impact of COVID on housing systems, in the immediate situation but also in the long term. It has also helped to identify central challenges - old, COVID-reinforced and new - to ensuring populations' right to adequate housing and on which the Community has expressed the firm commitment to collectively work on.





Resources

The presentations made by the cities during this Live Learning Experience are available [here](#). The [Cities for Global Health platform](#), facilitated by Metropolis, is a living repository of other LRGs' initiatives to confront the COVID-19 crisis. For further information, please refer to the related resources that have been developed by UCLG and our partners, as well as to those shared by LRGs during the LLE.

Resources developed within UCLG and partner organizations

- UCLG's "*Cities for Adequate Housing: Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City*" (<https://citiesforhousing.org>)
- UCLG's "*Rethinking Housing Policies: Harnessing Local Innovation to Address the Global Housing Crisis*" report (<https://www.gold.uclg.org/reports/other/rethinking-housing-policies>)
- UCLG Manifesto "The Future of Housing" (https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/en_manifesto_housing.pdf)
- Metropolis' and ALLA's "Cities for Global Health" initiative: <https://www.citiesforglobalhealth.org/es>
- UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing's "*Housing, the front line defence against the COVID-19 outbreak*" communiqué (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25727&LangID=E>)
- Global Platform for the Right to the City's COVID-19 Communique and Resources (<https://www.right2city.org/the-right-to-the-city-facing-covid-19/>)
- Habitat International Coalition's Declaration: "We need a Human Rights Habitat" (<https://www.hic-net.org/covid-19-we-need-a-human-rights-habitat/>)
- Habitat International Coalition initiatives developed in Latin America (<https://hic-al.org/covid19-vivienda/>)

Resources shared by LRG participants

- Barcelona (<https://www.barcelona.cat/covid19>)
- Bogotá (<https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/bogota-solidaria>)
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities (<https://fcm.ca/en/resources/covid-19-resources-municipalities>)
- Montevideo (<https://montevideo.gub.uy/noticias/sociedad/medidas-de-atencion-para-personas-en-situacion-de-calle>)
- Montreal (<https://montreal.ca/en/articles/coronavirus-covid-19>)
- Valencia (<https://valenciacovid19-valenciacovid19.hub.arcgis.com>)

