

UN-Habitat Guidance on COVID-19 and Public Space



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The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed our relationship with our streets, public spaces and public facilities. Restrictions, while necessary, are impacting on people's quality of life and disproportionately hurting the urban poor, many of whom have lost their livelihoods, pushing them to the edge and threatening the economy, safety, security, peace and stability.

Physical distancing is reducing intimate personal connections and exacerbating social isolation and exclusion in our cities. Research shows there is a direct correlation between social isolation, loneliness and poor health such as heart disease, dementia and immune dysfunction. Physical distancing and limiting access to public space does not reduce demand. People still need to go outside, for essential grocery shopping, to work and study, for play and leisure as well as to socialize and mental health. We need to support cities and local governments in making public spaces part of the response whether they help limit the spread of the virus, or improve mental and physical health ensuring we do not "leave anyone behind".

It is important to conduct a comprehensive, rapid city-wide profiling and assessment to prepare and to craft a response plan. This can include spatial analyses, asset mappings, risk and vulnerability assessments, supply chain mappings and identification of weak spots to provide evidence-based guidance and inform short, medium and long-term strategies to support response and recovery from pandemics. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted several gaps in public space which need to be addressed in the short, medium and long-term including accessibility, flexibility, design, management and maintenance, connectivity and equitable distribution. As cities start to open up from lock-down, we need to re-build confidence about being out in public spaces.

Key areas of focus for an effective urban response for COVID-19

There are several key areas that local and national governments should focus on to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to develop resilience to and preparedness for events of a similar nature. Some of the **short-term interventions include:**

- 01 | Public spaces are an important asset in a time of crisis** - public spaces are essential in providing space for the swift and rapid establishment of temporary and secondary facilities (e.g. for health care and for food and resource distribution) which may be used longer than originally expected so therefore need to be flexible, multi-functional and adaptable. Public spaces are a crucial asset in a time of crisis supporting alternative mobility, providing such important opportunities for recreation and sport and for many poor people, a livelihood.
- 02 | Well-connected and integrated system of public spaces including streets** – during lockdown, vehicle traffic reduced dramatically on our streets and public transit ridership dropped by as much as 80% in some cities. Cities are temporarily and some even permanently reallocating road space from cars to provide more space for people to move around safely, creating a network throughout the city, easing movement and respecting physical distancing rules. Creating more walkable streets and investing in greening the city results in reduced CO2 emissions and better air quality, which also impacts on people's health and well-being.
- 03 | Expand the amount of land allocated to public space including streets** - physical distancing requires adequate space between people when out in public space. The amount of land in cities allocated to public space will have to be extended to create more resilient cities. The expansion of streets for active mobility is an impactful measure to make physical distancing possible on pavements, particularly in countries which already have high shares of pedestrians walking on inadequate footpaths.
- 04 | Embrace flexibility of functions** – to be resilient in times of crisis, public spaces need to be multi-functional, flexible and continually adapt to the situation. We need to build resilience through agile adaptation, for example, incorporating (temporary) food markets into neighbourhood/community spaces such as car parks or streets to decongest existing markets, transforming small neighbourhood spaces into pop-up community health centres, spaces for food distribution or providing space for food gardens in marginalized communities and slums where food is essential. Other examples are programming streets and spaces to allow for organized street vending on select days or times of day, ensuring multi-use and shared use of the spaces, repurposing street space by expanding sidewalks to facilitate safe walking, skating and jogging, and introducing (temporary) bike lanes to enable safe mobility.

- 05 | Public space and public facilities can **provide essential services** required for marginalized communities during a pandemic providing clean bathroom facilities, water points and/or appropriate cleaning products that can help unhoused or poor people to protect themselves. Many open spaces in informal settlements can offer handwashing facilities to ensure that families without running water stay safe.
- 06 | For many, especially the poor, public space is **important for their livelihoods** - some of the most affected in the pandemic are poor families, many of whom depend on public space for earning a living. Over 60% of urban employment in Africa is in the informal sector and each group of informal workers produces goods or services that are essential to the functioning of the economy. During a lock-down, it is therefore important to allow street vendors to continue to operate and provide space for that. Streets can be adapted to provide space for vendors at sufficient distance from each other to sell their wares and street vendors will require with protective gear to continue to earn a living.
- 07 | Public space can be a **platform for sharing** (connecting places and people) - public spaces that remain open for use provide opportunities to share information about prevention measures such as the importance of physical distancing and hand-washing hygiene. Government can provide clear and accessible information in these public spaces to combat disinformation. These spaces can also provide a platform for dialogue and negotiation to enable government, the poor and informal workers to discuss and jointly come up with the relevant frameworks to prevent the spread of the Corona virus.

Medium and long-term interventions:

- 01 | **Equitably distribute public spaces across all scales** - the pandemic has demonstrated how unevenly public space is distributed throughout many of our cities, especially in poor neighbourhoods, where there are few shared spaces such as parks, gardens and playgrounds within a 10-minute walk from home. Whilst parks, green areas and playgrounds are important in contributing to reducing stress levels, improving mental health and wellbeing and contributing to children's development, they are still considered a privilege. Local governments need to ensure that open spaces are evenly distributed across the city, connected through a web of streets promoting walking and cycling whilst embracing physical distancing and guaranteeing the multi-functional, flexible use of public space and streets to reduce the spread of the virus while leaving no one place behind.
- 02 | **Plan for the self-sufficient neighbourhood or "15-minute compact city neighbourhood"** – with the pandemic and restrictions on movement, the self-sufficient and 15-minute compact city is a model that could contain the spread of the virus as all residents can have all their needs met, work, school, shopping, health, leisure or culture, within 15 minutes from their own doorstep by foot, bike and/or public transport. This can only function if there is an equitable distribution of essential services, streets and public space.
- 03 | The **design, materials used and management and maintenance of public space** is key in fighting the spread of the Corona virus. Public space should be designed to allow for physical distancing and public space managers need to ensure that these spaces can be cleaned frequently and thoroughly, particularly high-touch surfaces like doors, handles, and furniture.
- 04 | **Build "social resilience"** -. The pandemic and nature of the virus affects the way we socialise, challenging existing cultural and familiar practices, which can create tensions in public spaces. The social and connection elements of public spaces remain important and can serve to strengthen resilience in communities, i.e. balconies above streets, where community members gather to socialise with one another and neighbourhood streets being transformed into cinemas, theatres or gym-classes.

Finally, the experience from the COVID pandemic, may lead to richer partnerships across sectors, from health care to public housing authorities, to community development finance and community-based organizations, to philanthropy and research which can influence policy. Systemic change does not happen without supportive policy. We need to create a shared policy agenda where urban planning, community development, architecture, green building, public health have incentives to work toward better policies to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 and future pandemics.

For more information contact: Cecilia Andersson
UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme
Planning Finance and Economy Section, Urban Practices Branch
cecilia.andersson@un.org

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**COVID-19
RESPONSE**

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME
P.O. Box 30030, Nairobi 00100, Kenya
www.unhabitat.org