Right to Housing and COVID-19

Contribution by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights

Housing emergency responses and mid-term strategies during the pandemic: A general overview from local governments perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect over local housing systems across the world, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and putting under stress millions of households. Local and regional governments (LRG) from across the world have quickly reacted to these challenges, putting in place emergency measures: from providing emergency accommodation to people who are homeless to establishing mechanisms to protect women and children who are victims of domestic violence, as well as putting in place and advocating for moratorium of evictions and rent deferral programs in the short and mid-term.

Networking has played a key role in strengthening these responses, fostering knowledge exchange and highlighting LRG responsibility to provide answers to the crisis. Indeed, LRGs raised their voice at a national and international level to defend housing's social function, its interdependency to the enjoyment of human rights and the need to reimagine long term housing strategies - including a renewed relation with the real estate market and prioritization of social housing.

In line with its long standing commitment and listening to its constituency, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and its Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights (UCLG-CSIPDHR) activated specific discussions regarding housing challenges throughout the pandemic.

A **Live Learning Experience on Housing**[1] co-organized by UCLG, UN Habitat and the UCLG-CSIPDHR on the 1st April, gathered more than two hundred of representatives from LRGs, civil society, academia and organizations. If April's event showcased emerging challenges and policies in a first phase of the crisis, a more recent gathering of the **UCLG Community of Practice on Housing**[2] (22 May) brought together leading members of the Cities for Adequate Housing Declaration to discuss structural responses and ways forward for advocacy in the future, based on the concrete experience presented by the cities of London, Montreal, Barcelona and

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[1] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/local-authorities-are-already-addressing-housing-related-challenges-face-covid-19

[2] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/uclg-community-practice-housing-assessing-ways-advance-right-housing-context-covid

Paris [3]. The **Live Learning Experience " Addressing Informalities"**[4] (April 29) stressed specifically the priorities and emergencies of informal settlements focusing on the situation of the most vulnerable and invisibilized groups and the necessary alliance between civil society organizations and LRGs.

This rapid capacity to build up such a momentum for LRG networking on the right to housing springs from UCLG and the UCLG-CSIPDHR members' previous work on this topic. Indeed, LRGs have long been fostering networking spaces where to showcase their challenges, policies and initiatives face to the global housing crisis. UCLG became a central partner of "The Shift": A global campaign launched by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the former holder of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing mandate seeking to denounce the ill-effects of the commodification of the right to housing.

As a specific contribution by LRGs and the UCLG, various leading cities launched in 2018 a joint Declaration, "Cities for Adequate Housing", to propose a roadmap for policy and advocacy to bring about the right to housing across the world. The Declaration was launched on the occasion of the 2018 High Level Political Forum[5] by the Mayors of Barcelona, Montreal, Madrid, Montevideo, Strasbourg and Berlin, and now gathers more than 40 LRGs from across the world.

Key messages on the right to housing and COVID-19 raised in previous UCLG networking initiatives

a. *Housing-related issues are having a central role in the social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic*

LRG representatives participating in the two discussion events on how the COVID-19 has affected housing systems stressed the direct impact of this relation over the social crisis caused by the pandemic. Not everybody experienced the lockdown in the same way according to how or where they lived; something which has put back at the spotlight the issue of housing adequacy. In several contexts this might relate to overcrowded housing or to domestic violence. LRGs also recalled how it was harder to channel social assistance for those that were suffering the most, such as migrants, precarious workers or single-parent families.

Housing unaffordability, evictions and homelessness were identified as the three main challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. As the crisis affected directly the daily income of millions, many households have gone through difficulties to pay their rents or mortgages. For many others, the reliance on day-to-day income in

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[3] https://citiesforhousing.org/

[4] https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/addressing-informalities-midst-covid-19-outbreak-and-beyond

[5] https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/cities-adequate-housing-call-action-ensure-right-housing

public space has hindered their capacity to comply with the #StayAtHome policy. These factors have increased the risk of eviction in many contexts – and, as a consequence, the rise of the number of people who are homeless. In any case, the pandemic (and the #StayAtHome policies) have also affected the conditions of people who are sleeping rough and added additional risks to their condition.

Participating LRGs also recalled that the impact of the pandemic over local housing systems might worsen in the medium term. This might be due to the fact that extraordinary measures put in place to protect vulnerable tenants during these last months are no longer in place while the economy has not yet fully recovered.

For many LRGs, this phenomenon has specific structural implications. It first implies that, as many social and economic rights have been advanced over the last decades in many geographical contexts, the right to housing is still not fully recognized as such, especially due to its commodification. LRGs are also aware that the crisis has stressed and even amplified the clear interdependency between the right to housing and many other human rights (such as health or education).

While local governments in the Global South are mainly concerned with the challenges arising from informality, overcrowdedness and lack of basic services, cities in the Global North are suffering from the financialization of housing. Added to restrictive urban planning and insufficient taxation and financial regulation, it has resulted in widespread unaffordability, indebtedness and insecurity.[6] The pandemic has only intensified these phenomena and put additional pressure on governments to take action.

b. *Administrative and financial limitations pervade LRGs' capacity to advance strategies for the right to housing*

Lack of regulatory capacities and adequate funding have been preventing many local governments to take a more firm action on the right to housing, both before the crisis and during it. Indeed, these items were already among the main claims of the Cities for Adequate Housing Declaration launched in 2018. Several LRGs noted how the pandemic is bringing additional responsibilities to municipalities while counting with lesser financial resources to cope with them.

c. *Taking advantage of the new scenario to advance systemic changes that reclaim housing's social function in connection to the right to the city*

In several contexts, the pandemic is also triggering other type of transformations that actually offer an opportunity to advance the right to housing in the long term.

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[6] https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/01/16/housing-is-at-the-root-of-many-of-the-rich-worlds-problems

One of these relate to how a decreasing demand of short-term rental accommodation (mainly touristic) can actually result into an increase in the rental market supply – something which can end up turning housing more affordable in these cities. The rise of teleworking might also result in a transformation of many office spaces into affordable houses, even though this process should also consider the need for these housing units to comply with housing adequacy standards.

Beyond these short term transformations, the crisis is also triggering a shift in the way housing is perceived both for its social function as well as for its connection to the full enjoyment of the right to the city by all residents. In debating about this kind of transformations, LRG representatives referred to the need to promote policies that ensure the connection between access to adequate housing and access to public services, cultural and leisure offer as well as economic opportunities.

d. A renewed framework for public-private cooperation

Many LRGs are taking advantage of these transformations to promote a shift in their relationship with the real estate market to bring about more affordable and adequate housing in their cities. They also called for the implementation of rent regulation systems, even though many cities face struggle due to the lack of competences. All necessary measures should be taken to curb speculation, so that once the crisis is over the housing market does not become unaffordable.

e. Multi-level cooperation to promote social, non-speculative housing policies and advance the right to housing

LRGs agreed on the need to promote the building of social housing as a concrete means to ensure adequate and affordable housing for their residents, but also to trigger the economic recovery after the COVID-19 crisis. Many cities have been developing sound social housing programs that include permanent affordability mechanisms (means to avoid these units from turning into speculative housing); chiefly, by promoting social rental housing or introducing social housing clauses to private housing development (for instance, making it mandatory for private developers to devote a 30% of all the new houses they build to social rental housing, as in Barcelona[7]). In their social housing plans, local governments are also relying on the initiative of civil society and community-led housing groups (as in Montreal's 2018-2021 social housing plan[8]). LRGs also stressed that in order to scale up these initiatives more implication is needed by national governments.

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[7] https://www.barcelona.cat/infobarcelona/en/tema/housing/organisations-and-political-groups-reach-an-agreement-to-allocate-30-of-all-new-homes-as-protected-housing-2_711671.html

[8] https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=9337,143319549&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

f. Not all urban territories count with the same capacity to protect the right to housing face to the crisis and its aftermath

COVID-19 is also exacerbating inequalities between territories across the world - something which is directly connected to LRGs capacity to protect the right to housing of their residents. Even though emergency sanitary and social assistance measures have been put in place in informal settlements, the pandemic has also exacerbated the vulnerability of its residents due to the lack of adequate housing conditions. Other LRGs also mentioned how socio-spatial inequalities were a defining feature of the way the crisis was experienced in metropolitan contexts.

g. Housing must play a central role in the conversation about reconstruction after COVID-19 and the future of cities

LRGs believe housing should play a central role in post-COVID-19 reconstruction conversations - including the future of the 2030 Agenda and sustainable urban development agendas. LRGs are eager to put housing back at the spotlight from a rights-based perspective on the basis of the policies they carry out locally as well as through coordinated advocacy efforts at the national and international level.

For more information on LRG key messages on housing and COVID-19 consult the reports of the sessions organized by UCLG and the UCLG-CSIPDHR: Live Learning Experience #BeyondTheOutbreak on Housing[9] and online meeting of the UCLG Community of Practice on Housing on "Housing and COVID-19"[10]

Policies put in place by local governments

a. Measures taken to prevent and stop evictions and protect residents of informal settlements

Rental assistance programs are on the rise across the world. **Boston**[11] and **New Orleans**[12] have been at the forefront in the implementation of these kind of measures in the United States. The **Washington D.C** Council[13] passed a relief bill allowing deferred mortgage and rent payments, prohibited to implement rent increases during the emergency and allowed tenants who risked being vacated from their houses to remain in their units until the emergency is over. In Latin America, **Montevideo**[14] and **Bogotá**[15] have launched programs targeting poor income

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9 https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/EN_Briefing_houisng.pdf

10 https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/uclg-community-practice-housing-assessing-ways-advance-right-housing-context-covid

11 https://www.boston.gov/news/3-million-fund-help-bostonians-pay-their-rent-during-covid-19-pandemic

12 https://ready.nola.gov/incident/coronavirus/city-of-new-orleans-covid-19-rental-assistance-pro/

13 https://www.gwhatchet.com/2020/04/08/d-c-council-approves-rent-mortgage-deferrals-in-second-covid-19-relief-bill/

14 https://montevideo.gub.uy/noticias/vivienda/plan-de-subsidio-antidesalojo-para-pensiones

15 https://bogota.gov.co/mi-ciudad/salud/coronavirus/bogota-solidaria-en-casa-ayudas-para-necesitados-en-cuarentena

households, providing cash transfers to support residents paying their rents and maintaining a basic income. In Australia, the government of **Victoria** has announced a six-month suspension of evictions, a ban on rent increases, tax relief for homeowners and 500 million dollar in aid for struggling tenants[16].

Local governments in Europe adopted similar measures, as in the case of **Nantes Métropole** and the **Loire Atlantique Department**[17], which have allocated a 1 million euros budget to help vulnerable tenants pay their rents, including those living in public housing units and the private market. The City of **Barcelona**[18] also announced that it would not be collecting rents for public housing units during the months of April, May and June, and allocated a 2,5 million euros budget to support vulnerable tenants in the private real estate market[19]. **Paris** introduced a similar moratorium for public housing units until March 2021[20]. **Valencia** has also opened a hotline to provide advice, mediation and intermediation to those households experiencing residential risk[21], and provide them with all necessary informations on the measures adopted at different spheres of governments in this matter. On the other hand, cities like **Berlin** have recently introduced new rent regulation in real estate market that freeze rent increases in coming years (5 in the case of Berlin[22]).

Several LRGs have also implemented measures to protect the right to health of informal settlements. The government of **Asunción** has made available 300 public fountains in the city's informal settlement in cooperation with the national government; a measure that benefited a total amount of 10,000 residents[23].

b. *Measures taken to protect groups at risk of marginalization, including persons living in situation of homelessness*

In conjunction with the national government, **Paris** has reached an agreement with the hotels to provide rooms for 1,500 people living in homelessness inside the city and for 3,000 in the Paris region[24]. **London** advanced a similar strategy just before the lockdown began. The designated rough sleeping team booked hotel rooms, providing emergency accommodation to 1,300 people in Greater London and 250 in

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[16] https://www.sbs.com.au/news/victoria-announces-500-million-coronavirus-rent-relief-package

[17] https://metropole.nantes.fr/actualites/2020/egalite-sante-solidarite/aides-loyers-locataires

[18] https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/premsa/2020/03/24/lajuntament-atura-el-cobrament-dels-lloguers-del-parc-public-i-crea-una-partida-de-35-me-per-rebaixar-les-quotes-de-les-persones-que-ho-necessitin/

[19] https://habitatge.barcelona/es/noticia/aportacion-extraordinaria-de-25-millones-de-euros-para-el-pago-de-alquileres_952259

[20] https://www.paris.fr/pages/coronavirus-logement-et-habitat-7763

[21] http://www.valencia.es/ayuntamiento/tablon_anuncios.nsf/vDocumentosTituloAux/43BA2788B23D2201C12585430066C743?OpenDocument&bdOrigen=ayuntamiento%2Ftablon_anuncios.nsf&idapoyo=CCEC3B02C11D3DC9C125852A00388D8A&lang=2

[22] https://www.berlin.de/rbmskzl/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/2019/pressemitteilung.856545.php

[23] https://www.asuncion.gov.py/intendencia/estrategia-de-prevencion-del-covid-19-en-banados-y-asentamientos-fue-analizada-en-reunion-virtual

[24] https://www.cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/covid-19-2000-places-dhotel-supplementaires-mobilisees-pour-heberger-des-sans-abris-les-3-premiers

the city of London[25]. **Vienna** has also expanded its winter shelter programme to provide accommodation to people who are homeless[26].

Amsterdam has also adapted its municipal system of emergency shelters for people who are homeless, opening up new accommodation services due to the restructuring of former shelters due to social distancing measures[27]. Thanks to public-private cooperation, the Netherlands capital has also transformed a city hotel to host COVID-19 patients which required less-intensive care[28].

Local governments have also taken the initiative in this field by carrying out joint advocacy initiatives, as in the case of **Birmingham** and other local authorities in the West Midlands, which have come together to write the United Kingdom's government to "*prevent a post-COVID-19 homeless world*"[29]. Even though Birmingham made an effort so that "*every known rough sleeper was made an offer of accommodation*" the city "*wants to ensure that this opportunity is not lost (...) to prevent rough sleepers from being pushed back on the streets after the crisis ends*".

c. Measures taken to protect residents at risk of vulnerability, older persons, persons with disabilities and women and children from abuse

In other cases, the challenges of #StayAtHome policies derive from ensuring that confinement does not exacerbate existing vulnerabilities for women and children for whom confinement can intensify the domestic violence they may suffer.

Through its campaign "València no et calles", **Valencia** is opening hotlines and calling for physical distancing but social proximity, with the aim of fostering neighbours to be attentive to signs of domestic abuse, report them and support victims by letting them know they are not alone[30]. In order to strengthen support for victims of domestic violence in the province of **Pichincha**, its regional government implemented an emergency protocol known as #CanastaRoja (Red Basket), were women at imminent danger can request help and receive urgent care in conditions of confidentiality[31] (formally asking for a food basket to avoid being monitored by their abusers, although mentioning that this basket should be red so that emergency protocols are activated and the police can ensure women's safety). The government of **Mexico City** also intensified its municipal services for supporting women victims of domestic violence, launching the public campaign "*Mujer, no Estás Sola*" (Women,

[25] https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/housing-and-land/homelessness/end-homelessness

[26] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/challenges-and-responses-covid-19-interview-shams-asadi-human-rights-commissioner

[27] https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/coronavirus/overview/homeless-shelters/

[28] https://www.amsterdam.nl/en/news/corendon-city-hotel-become-care-hotel/

[29] https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/607/local_authorities_urge_the_government_to_prevent_a_post-covid_homeless_world

[30] http://www.valencia.es/ayuntamiento/tablon_anuncios.nsf/vdocumentos/E48F96E68E2C9F88C125854C003FE6B4?openDocument&lang=1

[31] https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/canasta-roja-violencia-genero-pichincha.html

You're Not Alone) to raise residents' awareness and make it easier for women to report their abusers[32].

LRGs are also protecting the elderly and people with medical needs. **Mexico City** is ensuring these populations' access to food and medicines by delivering it to their homes[33]. In a similar vein, **Bologna** (Italy) has launched the programmes "*Piano Mais*" and "*L'unione fa la spesa*" (Union to do the groceries) to monitor the situation of senior residents via phone call and establishing home delivery of food supplies and parapharmacy for senior residents, people with disabilities and those suffering from chronic diseases[34]. These service were activated thanks to a protocol between the Municipality of Bologna and several local civil society organizations. **Buenos Aires** has also fostered the creation of a network, "*Mayores Cuidados*" (Taking care of senior residents), where local residents can help monitor the situation of senior residents and offer them with all kinds of supports during the confinement[35]. More than 38,000 signed up as volunteers by early May.

The government of **Pichincha** did a similar effort on food delivery, focusing on distributing 16,000 food baskets among vulnerable households in the province[36]. The government of **Montevideo** distributed 10,000 solidary baskets for vulnerable households, including food and medical utilities[37], while the city government of **Birmingham** distributed 7,000 food parcels among clinically vulnerable residents[38]. The city government of **Cascais** developed a solidarity system which allowed to distribute 200 solidarity food parcels among vulnerable residents[39].

d. Measures taken to ensure that migrant, domestic workers and other vulnerable workers continue to have access to secure housing

Due to recurring structural conditions of vulnerability and exclusion, migrant residents have also suffered particularly during the confinement period and the aftermath of the health crisis in many contexts. The city government of **Sfax**, in Tunisia, launched a campaign to identify the needs of migrant residents and find ways to distribute solidary food baskets or food vouchers to sustain their basic needs during the quarantine period: Up to 1,200 benefited from these donations coordinated by the municipality, local civil society and the International Organization for Migration[40]. The city Mayor also advocated for the opening of

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[32] https://www.cdmx.gob.mx/portal/articulo/no-estas-sola-acciones-para-atender-la-violencia-durante-aislamiento

[33] https://sibiso.cdmx.gob.mx/atencion-social-personas-adultas-mayores-COVID19

[34] http://www.comune.bologna.it/coronavirus/misure/persone-fragili/#Accoglienza_straordinaria_alle_persone_senza_dimora

[35] https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/laciudad/noticias/coronavirus-la-ciudad-lanza-una-convocatoria-para-colaborar-con-los-adultos

[36] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/challenges-and-responses-covid-19-interview-paola-pab%C3%B3n-president-province

[37] https://montevideo.gub.uy/noticias/sociedad/entrega-de-10000-canastas-alimentarias

[38] https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/news/article/598/more_than_7000_vulnerable_people_receiving_weekly_food_parcels

[39] https://www.cascais.pt/noticia/cascais-distribui-200-caixas-solidarias-pelo-concelho

[40] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/challenges-and-responses-covid-19-local-perspective-cities-sfax-and-douala

hospital services to all city residents irrespective of their administrative status[41]. This and other city experiences on how LRGs were responding to migrants' needs during the COVID-19 emergency were presented in the Live Learning Experience #BeyondTheOutbreak on migration organized by UCLG on April 16[42].

Mexico City also showcased the vulnerability of sexual workers, who suffered sudden evictions from their accommodations (often rented hotel rooms) and loss of income due to confinement measures. The local Secretariat of Social Welfare implemented emergency solutions in this regard, including the provision of emergency shelter and food vouchers[43].

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[41] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/challenges-and-responses-covid-19-local-perspective-cities-sfax-and-douala

[42] https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/leveraging-migrants-contribution-emergency-and-protecting-most-vulnerable-during-covid-19

[43] https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/en/news/latest-news/challenges-and-responses-covid-19-local-perspective-mexico-city