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# Urban Solutions: Learning from cities' responses to COVID-19

## UNESCO Cities Platform Online Meeting

25 June 2020 | 13:30-17:00 CET

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### CONTEXT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted cities around the world and raised fundamental questions about urban development. With over half of the world population living in formal and informal urban settlements, the ongoing crisis has demonstrated the ability of cities to address such challenges but also unearthed fundamental issues of equality, access, and participation amongst others.

The multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic, for example, resulted in lockdown measures, the closure of schools, public spaces and cultural institutions, and the rise of unemployment, as well as a collapse of tourism and related incomes in cities notably. It exacerbated deep-rooted social and economic inequalities that led to a surge of racism and xenophobia and the proliferation of domestic violence. Repercussions are unevenly impacting vulnerable populations, who often live in densely populated or informal areas, have precarious employment and little financial resilience, combined with difficulties in accessing distance education, healthcare and other essential services. The pandemic has thus left an indelible mark on the outlook of the cities and has led us to rethink cities' development in different dimensions - social, cultural, economic, and environmental.

Cities were amongst the first affected, but also those first to respond. Large numbers of people living together, combined with vibrant economic and cultural life, make cities particularly vulnerable to disasters. This is also why cities are where numerous creative solutions are devised. By providing immediate local responses, as well as rethinking and reinventing urban structures and tissues to be more sustainable, cities have demonstrated their capacity to adapt to the evolving global situation.

In the same way that cities are composed of diverse neighbourhoods, urban development is multifaceted and encompasses different development aspects and dimensions, to cater to cities' various needs and constant transformation. Response to the COVID-19 has shown that this is often a strength, marking the agility with which cities have been able to act and devise locally relevant solutions. Future models of urban development should thus recognize and take into account the strong bonds and interlinkages between the diverse dimensions of city planning and development.

The experiences of cities and the innovative solutions that emerged, but also the key challenges they faced, including ways to develop and promote a more resilient and sustainable tourism, can teach us how to create more sustainable and equitable urban living environments for tomorrow and have better-informed policy-making in the coming months.

# Cities at the forefront of COVID-19 response and recovery: UNESCO Cities Platform

UNESCO is uniquely positioned to assist governments and other stakeholders at national and local levels in the recovery processes and in crafting forward-looking solutions. Through the UNESCO Cities platform (UCP), which brings together 8 UNESCO city Networks and Programmes<sup>1</sup> from all its fields of expertise - education, culture, sciences, and communication, UNESCO harnesses its unique comparative advantage and transversal approach to support city decision-makers in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

Built on three interconnected sessions and a special session, the UNESCO Cities Platform aims to use this meeting to bring together diverse city stakeholders and actors to discuss how to revamp urban policies and plans, as well as develop innovative local actions and practices towards sustainable cities of tomorrow in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase and beyond.

## OBJECTIVES

This online meeting aims to:

- Share best practices and initiatives from cities' responses to COVID-19 to allow cities to better adapt and recover
- Understand the challenges and opportunities in various sectors to devise more resilient solutions and enhance urban risk preparedness and mitigation
- Demonstrate cities' enabling and transformative power in shaping resilient, inclusive and sustainable societies through innovative and well-rounded policies and programmes
- Identify appropriate guidelines for addressing multiple dimensions of the pandemic that resulted in disproportional repercussions on vulnerable populations;
- Strengthen cross-cutting synergies and trigger an international dialogue between various city networks and programmes
- Foster innovative partnerships, exchange and collaboration within and amongst city networks and programmes, and across stakeholders at all levels
- Build a future-oriented and transversal vision for urban sustainable development

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<sup>1</sup> UCP is comprised of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), UNESCO/Netexplo Observatory, Megacities Alliance for Water and Climate, UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), World Heritage Cities Programme, Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience, the International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable cities (ICCAR), and the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Cities.

3 thematic e-debates and a special session (45 min each), an introduction (10 min) and a wrap-up session (20 min)

Total duration: 3.5 hours

1. Each panel may consist of panellists from UNESCO cities networks and programmes, or experts associated with these
2. Panellists may include mayors and local policymakers, experts, city representatives (Focal Points), professionals and practitioners (journalists, philosophers, architects, urban planners, entrepreneurs, etc.), NGOs, other International Institutions (World Bank, UN-Habitat, OECD, UCLG, UNISDR, UNWTO), research institutions (UNESCO institutes and centres, UNESCO Chair programmes), and Foundations (Global Resilient Cities Network)
3. Each panel may include the following components:
  - Individual presentation (experience and observation sharing) (4 min maximum by each)
  - Case studies supported with audio-visual materials (4 min maximum by each)
  - Debate format between panellists with pre-selected questions (using the UCP Networks) or spontaneous questions (from the live chat room)
  - Others depending on the panel





## THEMES FOR THE E-DEBATES AND THE SPECIAL SESSION

The meeting is composed on 4 sessions: 3 e-debates and a special session. The three e-debates are structured to take into account the different timelines of responses – short-, medium-, and long-term, focusing respectively on cities' immediate responses to the pandemic, early recovery in cities, and building resilient cities for a sustainable future. The special session on tourism reflects upon the impact of the pandemic on one of the most affected emblematic sectors. While measures are being or foreseen to be implemented to revive the tourism sector, the cross-cutting nature of tourism can further support others sectors in building a resilient and sustainable city. For each session, all UNESCO cities Networks and Programmes are foreseen to participate, addressing different dimensions of urban issues.



### **E-Debate 1: Cities' Responses to Covid-19**

Cities have been at the forefront of the pandemic, and have provided multi-dimensional responses to allow their inhabitants to better respond and adapt to the outbreak.

During the acute phase of the emergency, cities led the way in implementing national or regional regulations and guidelines at the local level. The session aims to understand the key common challenges faced by cities during the pandemic and their immediate responses, financial assistance and capacity development (civil society initiatives, government responses, etc.). Thereby, it seeks to share good city practices and understand lessons learnt for better preparedness for future emergencies.



### **E-Debate 2: Learning from Early Recovery**

More than 4 months after the global outbreak of the pandemic, many cities around the world have started easing measures and working towards early recovery. Cities are often in the lead for translating deconfinement rules into practical measures adapted to local needs. By doing so, they also start moving towards new adaptive measures to resume their activities, that often admits restrictions. Guiding these actions is usually a need for returning to normal, giving inhabitants' perspective, allowing people to safely meet and come together. This can be particularly challenging for cities. Whereas the acute phase—often in the form of a lockdown—focused on the cities' inhabitants, deconfinement also reignited a cities' central role within a broader region, drawing workers and commuters, but also students, shoppers, visitors and tourists for example.

The panel will seek to illustrate how cities have implemented measures to initiate recovery, including, enabling the restart of the local economy and tourism, devising ways in which cultural and educational institutions can be mobilized, engaging with youth and enhancing mobility. It will consider the challenges of balancing the response for cities' inhabitants with the need to cater to a broader region. In all of this, cities have also started thinking about recovery in a way that would make their cities more resilient, greener and more sustainable.





## E-Debate 3: A More Resilient Future: Imagining the Cities of Tomorrow

As cities manage their immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic and are looking ahead to plan and resource long-term recovery efforts, there is an opportunity to transform cities in meaningful ways that not only protect vulnerable people from immediate threats but also build resilience for the looming climate crisis and other emergencies. This work must be guided by the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Goal 11 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.' Other complementary elements may include, use of new technology such as big data and Artificial Intelligence, socio-economic demographics including gender-disaggregated data, consultancy studies, technical and administrative assistance, global inter-city collaboration.

The panel will discuss how the current crisis can be seen as an opportunity to rethink the way we live in cities, the symbiosis between cities and their inhabitants, the role of physical and virtual urban public spaces, and thus to design the cities of tomorrow. Cities are redefining their identity and priorities. It will consider how cities can rethink their urban policies to strengthen their risk preparedness and response capacity, and become more resilient by making cities smarter, greener, more inclusive and resilient.



### Special Session: Transformative City Tourism



As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, it has had an unprecedented impact on travel with the closing of virtually all destinations worldwide. Tourism was a major source of growth, employment and income for many of the world's developing countries with over 1.5 billion people crossing international borders in 2019. Yet, millions of jobs in the travel and tourism sector are being lost every day and up to 120 million are under immediate threat.



Before the crisis, the popularity of cities as tourist destinations was growing at a significant rate by providing rich and meaningful cultural experiences to visitors. The exponential growth however came at an increasingly high price to both local residents and the cultural infrastructure, which were straining under the pressure of more and more visitors. Now as certain cities begin to reopen, the landscape has shifted dramatically. New measures and approaches are needed to restart tourism which reflect new standards of health, safety and social interactions. This poses enormous challenges for cities that will require new ideas and innovation that encourages residents to rediscover and invest in new approaches encompassing social and environmental dimensions for a more sustainable tourism and to welcome visitors back.

Taking stock of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on city tourism with local actors and city stakeholders as well as civil society, this session will also present an opportunity to discuss the post COVID-19 environment and allow cities to share their assessments of the real value of tourism and the importance of balancing needs and interests of both residents and visitors. The panel will reflect on the emerging lessons learned from the pandemic keeping in mind that tourism is an essential pillar of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and discuss how cities can make their destinations more resilient, particularly for their communities, and encourage a vibrant and robust tourism recovery.

### Wrap up session

To build the sustainable cities of tomorrow, there is a need to identify gaps in cities' existing systems, support the needs of their inhabitants, as well as address future risks and known and unknown challenges. It is, therefore, necessary to partner with local authorities, community-based organizations, educational and cultural institutions, the private sector and professionals, for instance. In the aftermath of COVID-19, leaving no one behind and reaching the most vulnerable will be fundamental for achieving an equitable and more risk-resilient society.

This closing session will aim to instigate and allow all participants to reknit the social, economic and cultural fabric that has been frayed and torn by the COVID-19 pandemic, and rethink their communities in a more resilient manner.

