



A woman walks down an empty Temple Street in Bangalore, India. 18 April 2020. Kandukuru Nagarjun (CC BY 2.0)

Harnessing Urbanization to Accelerate SDG Implementation in a Post-COVID-19 World

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This article is one of two published by the UN Chronicle providing commentary by a distinguished scholar on the Secretary-General's Policy Brief: "COVID-19 in an Urban World". Click [here](#) to read the other article.

In less than a year, COVID-19 has unleashed a near perfect Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) storm across the world. It now threatens to disrupt many of the sustainable development gains of the last two decades, and possibly delay the implementation of the SDGs beyond 2030.¹

This urban pandemic started, and was later contained, in an East Asian metropolis. Transmitted via global transport networks during this hiatus, it proceeded to disrupt good health and well-being (addressed in SDG 3) in many countries. This contagion has now spread to most economies, often catalysed by draconian lockdowns. This has driven national economies into deep recession, plunged hundreds of millions of people into uncertain livelihood conditions (SDG 8), and consequently worsened poverty (SDG 1) and food insecurity (SDG 2). It has also closed down education systems (SDG 4), disrupted access to public transport (SDG 11) and as demand and real incomes fell, to affordable clean energy (SDG 7) as well as clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), in some places. Tectonic fault lines of economic (SDG 10), gender (SDG 5) and other forms of social inequality have opened, potentially undoing decades of peacemaking as well as institution- and partnership-building (SDGs 16 and 17).

The United Nations Secretary General's policy brief on "[COVID-19 in an Urban World](#)" is an important confirmation of the centrality of urban areas and urbanization to a holistic, local-to-global response to the pandemic. It appropriately emphasizes the need to address inequality and multidimensional development challenges; strengthening local capacities and responses, especially those of local governments; and accelerating inclusive, green economic recovery.

The Policy Brief stops short of addressing the elephant in the room—the need to maintain a fine systemic balance between the “light” and the “dark” sides of urbanization in the pursuit of sustainable development. Without this, the remarkable global political compacts of 2015–2016—the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 and the New Urban Agenda on urbanization—may be at existential risk, or face implementation slippages of many years.

Emerging responses to COVID-19, the climate crisis and successful SDG implementation provide some perspective on what reimagined twenty-first century social and political relationships may look like.

Urbanization and urban areas concentrate economic, livelihood and educational opportunity, public institutions and culture, and the potential for social transformation and gender justice via economies of scale and scope. They also bring together poverty, economic, social and spatial inequality and epidemics, risking the potential for these to exacerbate conflict—the “dark side” of urban history, which has persisted for millennia.²

COVID-19 has brought both of these processes to the fore. On one hand, there are deep economic, social and humanitarian crises across many countries, irrespective of income level. On the other hand, there is a strong counter-response of sustainable development-aligned and compassionate action by local and national governments in partnership with citizens, enterprises and institutions.³

A key question is: what processes and measures can be used to turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity to deepen and localize SDG implementation and accelerate climate action?⁴

One of the most powerful means of doing this is to organize and prioritize implementation around the SDGs in urban areas.⁵ The rationale for such an approach is well established: urban areas host 55 per cent of the world’s population, and produce about 80 per cent of global economic output, incremental employment and greenhouse gas emissions.⁶

In addition, in many places, cities will lead post-COVID-19 economic and livelihood recovery via the informal sector and micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). Focusing on a green investment stimulus in affordable housing, upgrading and climate- and disaster-resilient infrastructure within cities and between regions will have multiplier impacts that will restart broken supply chains and help bring economic activity out of post-lockdown shock.⁷

This is also the opportunity to rethink universal access to food security, the basic urban services of water, sanitation and clean energy, and social protection that address many of the vulnerabilities of informal livelihoods and tenure arrangements in cities—all key tenets of the urban-oriented SDGs.⁸ Some cities and regions are going even further to explore livelihood security and basic income entitlements. Urban health and education systems will need to be rethought to enable universal access despite multiple barriers of structural inequality, vulnerability and a deep digital divide.

The primary constraints to making this real are twentieth century conceptions of the relationships between citizens, firms and local governments, and that of “sub-sovereign” local and regional governments and the “sovereign” nation-state.⁹ Emerging responses to COVID-19, the climate crisis and successful SDG implementation provide some perspective on what reimagined twenty-first century social and political relationships may look like.



A street scene in Bangalore, India, during the COVID-19 pandemic. 28 May 2020. Shyamal/Wikimedia Commons

First, rapid and deep systemic change is necessary as all countries, regions and cities have sustainable development deficits, are exposed to climate risks and are deeply vulnerable to future epidemics. Second, these systemic changes need to be simultaneous, with limited space for trade-offs and choices between them. Third, cross-scalar partnerships between local, regional and national governments, and local actors are effective means of enabling these changes. Fourth, adequately empowered local governments can enable horizontal cross-sectoral integration that builds on the synergies of networked local action led by local actors that is often more investment-effective than top-down approaches. Fifth, the capacity of local and regional governments to act territorially, e.g., by deepening urban-rural linkages or strengthening regional food and water security, also strengthens national resilience to external shocks and uncertainty. Sixth, read together, this would imply deepening the mandate, institutional capacity and financial resource base of local and regional governments by altering older forms of governance and fiscal arrangements. Seventh, the consequence of this vertical and horizontal rebalancing is that national Governments and the United Nations system would have the space and resources to focus on multiple unfinished SDG-related priorities. Foremost among these is establishing appropriate governance of the global commons and the global financial system.

There is a strong case for national Governments and the United Nations system to consider a time-bound transition to a greater institutional voice and agency for local and regional governments. This is just, rational and in the mutual interest of citizens and all levels of government.¹⁰ Otherwise, the prospect of more intense and frequent future crises of global scope, like the COVID-19 pandemic or the onset of dangerous climate change, could lead many contemporary institutions that are not fit-for-purpose to become irrelevant or be swept away by the storm-tides of history.

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Notes

¹“Time to revise the Sustainable Development Goals”, Editorial, *Nature*, vol. 583 (14 July 2020), p.p. 331-332. Available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02002-3>.

²Aromar Revi, “[Cities can save us](#)”, recorded talk given at TEDxPlaceDesNations local event, 2 January 2015. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkJyg0lc88A>.

³Sameh Wahba and others, “Cities are on the front lines of COVID-19”, World Bank Blogs, 12 May 2020. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/sustainablecities/cities-are-front-lines-covid-19>.

⁴Jeffrey Sachs and others, Sustainable Development Report 2020: The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020). Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2020/2020_sustainable_development_report.pdf.

⁵Chaitanya Kanuri and others, “Getting started with the SDGs in cities”, A Guide for Stakeholders (New York, Sustainable Development Solutions Network and German Corporation, July 2016). Available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/6f2c9f57/files/uploaded/Cities-SDG-Guide.pdf>.

⁶Amir Bazaz and others, et al. (2018). “[Summary for urban policymakers: What the IPCC Special Report on global warming of 1.5°C means for cities](#)” (Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, 2018), p. 24. Available at <https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/SPM-for-cities.pdf>.

⁷Aromar Revi and others, “[The potential of urbanisation to accelerate Post-COVID economic recovery](#)”, [Report to the XV Finance Commission](#) (Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), Bengaluru, 2020). Available at https://iihs.co.in/knowledge-gateway/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/IIHS_XV_FC_Urbanisation_Report_Aug2020.pdf.

⁸For more information, see the website of the Live Learning Experience Knowledge Hub available at <https://www.beyondtheoutbreak.uclg.org/>.

⁹Aromar Revi, “Afterwards: Habitat III and the Sustainable Development Goals”, *Urbanisation*, vol. 1, No. 2 (November 2016), p. p. x-xiv.

¹⁰Aromar Revi, “Re-imagining the United Nations’ response to a twenty-first-century urban world”, *Urbanisation*, vol. 2, No. 2 (November 2017). p.p. x-xiv.