

UN-Habitat's key messages on COVID-19 and housing

As COVID-19 spreads around the world, billions of people have been told to stay at home. However, this simple preventative public health measure is impossible for people who live in homelessness, or in unsafe or overcrowded housing.

It is estimated that around 1.8 billion people, or more than 20 percent of the world's population, lack adequate housing. These figures include around 1 billion people living in informal settlements or slums.

Housing is a fundamental human right. Now it is also **central** in our battle against COVID-19. Without adequate housing, it is impossible to carry out social distancing and good hygiene practices and the world is at risk of contracting a deadly disease. As Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, says, "Housing has become the front line defence against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation."

The COVID-19 control measures in cities and urban areas and lack of access to outside spaces can have a detrimental effect on **residents' mental and physical health**. The stressful home stay environment especially in small and crowded housing in informal settlements, the disruption of social and protective networks, and decreased access to services exacerbate the risk of violence for women and children.

Absence of basic services, stress and unhealthy living conditions also contribute to poor health. Homeless people often already experience severe respiratory problems that can be aggravated by COVID-19.

The spread of COVID-19 is **exacerbating a pre-existing global housing crisis**, which is already affecting millions of people. Immediate, short-term actions should be focused on containing the spread of infection, while longer term interventions should include a review of the current approaches to housing and land governance. Decisions and measures taken now **could significantly shape the success or failure of future, post-disaster recovery**.

In the short term, UN-Habitat urges national, regional and local governments to, at a minimum, adopt the following **emergency measures**:

- **Provide temporary emergency accommodation with basic hygiene facilities to all** people without secure housing to allow them to practice social distancing and other necessary public health measures such as quarantine and self-isolation. This can be accomplished by leveraging places such as hotels that are currently empty and repurposing community assets like schools and community centres that are closed.
- The economic impact of COVID-19 is creating income instability particularly for small businesses, low-income and informal workers, and self-employed contractors who are facing indefinite closures, job loss and economic hardship. This could result in rental and mortgage arrears, and the threat of forced eviction. National, regional and local government should **take immediate measures to secure the right to housing for all**, including through moratoriums on evictions due to rental and mortgage arrears; deferrals of mortgage payments; extension of winter moratoriums on forced evictions of informal settlements and slums; introduction of rental stabilization or reduction measures; suspension of utility costs and surcharges for the duration of the pandemic; and creation of emergency funds to reduce exposure for categories at risk. At the same time contingency plans to avoid economic challenges for landlords should be taken into consideration.
- Explore options for the **provision of other basic needs** to vulnerable communities or neighbourhoods, particularly food and hygiene essentials. Nationally appropriate social protection systems for all can address multiple, often interrelated causes of homelessness by preventing poverty, easing the burden of certain expenditure during periods of unemployment and contributing to improved health.

The COVID-19 crisis is terrible, but also offers **a unique global opportunity** to demonstrate that it is possible to provide housing and land tenure security to all. It also shows the importance of sustainable housing sectors to strengthen the preparedness of urban areas to respond to extreme events.

Cities and local governments around the world **can move towards** reducing inequalities and poverty levels and providing access to adequate housing for all, as a catalyst for the achievement of other fundamental rights.

Resources:

[WHO Guidelines on Health and Housing](#)

[UN Special Rapporteur on the right to Housing – COVID-19 Guidance Notes](#)