

# CITIES IN A CRISIS: COVID-19 AND CLIMATE-FRAGILITY RISKS IN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

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In his address on this year's World Cities Day, UN Secretary-General António Guterres recognised that "cities have borne the brunt of the pandemic" and called upon governments to "prepare cities for future disease outbreaks". Authorities cannot waste this opportunity to build back better by simultaneously addressing the increasing economic hardship for the urban poor and climate change impacts. This will help not only prevent future health emergencies but also decrease the risk of urban violence and insecurity.

Around 90% of all reported COVID-19 infections occur in urban areas. This staggering statistic makes it clear that the impacts of the pandemic will most affect the urban poor. In many parts of the world, food supply has become the most urgent need for people in cities. In Nairobi, when the COVID-19 related restrictions were in place, 70% of the urban poor ate less, and more than three quarters incurred higher expenses. One reason why the pandemic has had such a severe impact on food access in cities is that incomes are lower in

the informal sector, where the majority of the urban poor are employed, though increased food prices due to reduced supply and the suspension of school meals have also played a role. Unsurprisingly, health services are under strain in informal settlements where many residents lack access to healthcare, which is particularly alarming as poor health is the predominant reason why city dwellers slip into chronic poverty. Even when medical treatment is available, the costs are too high for many, whereas the quality of the services provided is often doubtful. Given that food insecurity and unequal access to health care were already among the most pressing needs for urban dwellers before the pandemic, the impacts of COVID-19 on urban economies in the Global South could be enormous.

The situation is even worse if one considers that residents of informal settlements are more exposed to the impacts of climate change, such as flooding, storms and sea-level rise, as they often live in high-risk areas. Yet, measures to contain the spread of the pandemic can hamper disaster

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Trinity Care Foundation's project "Fight against COVID-19": mobile medical services provided to vulnerable populations in collaboration with Ashok Leyland and Aster Volunteers. Source: [Trinity Care Foundation/Flickr](#)



responses. For example, when Cyclone Amphan hit South Asia in May 2020, authorities were caught in the dilemma of having to decide whether to prioritise evacuation over distancing, i.e. either risking the spread of the virus in overcrowded shelters or exposing people to the impacts of the cyclone in their homes. Similarly, in South Africa, social distancing in informal settlements – already hard in normal circumstances – was further challenged by extremely heavy floods in spring 2020.

Against this backdrop, government-imposed lockdowns and other measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 not only risk undermining already strained livelihoods but they can also exacerbate prevalent mistrust towards public institutions and frustration with authorities. This may spur violence, as in the case of Nepal, where urban youths expressed their anger over the government's efforts to contain COVID-19 in the country. Similar risks exist with regard to access to essential services and supplies such as food and water. For example, insufficient access to food during the pandemic has fuelled violence in the suburbs of the Chilean capital Santiago, where recent protests built on the civil unrest over living conditions and government's measures that already existed before the outbreak of the pandemic. Past experiences also show that failed disaster response by the government can trigger public unrest in the aftermath of natural disasters. When Taifun Haiyan hit the Philippines in 2013, for example, violent unrest erupted over the government's inefficient reconstruction efforts. These trends could be exacerbated by the effects of climate change on food prices, which has already proven to be a driver for violence in urban settings, e.g. during the Arab Spring or in Sudan.

If unaddressed, the effects of the pandemic may provide further opportunities for illegal groups and activities to flourish. Criminal gangs have already been able to fill the void left by unresponsive governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, organised criminal groups in the *favelas* of Brazil introduced price regulations for in-demand products, such as hand-sanitiser or face-masks, interfering with traditional areas of government policies. In Mexico, several drug trafficking cartels performed government functions as they imposed curfews, distributed aid to poor neighbourhoods – with their respective groups' logos on the aid

packages – and provided financial assistance to businesses in need. In the process, these illicit groups have not only made profits but gained reputation and trust among the population. The consequences of the pandemic and lockdown measures, such as soaring unemployment rates and closed schools in combination with the threats posed by climate change, can provide fertile re-cruiting ground for illicit organisations.

So, what can be done? Although urban areas are most affected by the spread of COVID-19 and the pandemic holds multiple security risks for urban dwellers, the current situation also offers an opportunity to transform cities into healthier and more resilient spaces. To this end, governments, working together with local authorities and other relevant stakeholders, should redesign urban environments to meet both the need for disease containment and the demands of a changing climate: one way to better equip cities and to shore up government-citizen relationships is to improve the provision of public services – such as water and power supply, sanitation and health care – without widening or creating inequalities. In informal urban settlements, in particular, insufficient access to water and sanitation has made physical distancing more difficult during the pandemic. More locally grown food can help to achieve food security in cities. At the same time, these initiatives would make urban spaces more climate-friendly.

Although fast government responses are necessary, having acceptance and (re)building trust between authorities and communities is a key element of an effective pandemic response. Authorities should consider the possible impacts of the measures they implement to contain the spread of the virus on various parts of the society and develop mechanisms to absorb negative effects for the most vulnerable. Moreover, building back better requires integrated approaches that address the impacts of COVID-19 across sectors, including health, environment, climate and urban planning.



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