

Valuing our communities and cities

This World Cities Day is a moment to reflect on our cities and consider their future. In the last 12 months, city life has changed dramatically. The health impact of COVID-19 alongside the social, political and financial upheavals, is reshaping urban life around the world in an unprecedented manner.

Urbanization has the potential to create opportunities for a better life, provide pathways out of poverty and act as an engine of economic growth, but the contribution of diverse communities within cities is often only recognized to a limited extent if at all. Yet it is increasingly clear that communities are the lifeblood for cities and are part of the essential building blocks providing the economic, environmental and social value that leads to an improved quality of life for all.

As national and local governments adopt various responses to COVID-19, the role and value of communities in urban settings has been brought into sharp focus forcing us to reconsider the importance of local actions for urban resilience and recovery. The pandemic has highlighted the core weaknesses in many urban systems, such as economies that rely too heavily on global and national markets, without sufficient recognition of the contribution and significance of local, social and economic actors and networks.

Communities are innovative, creative, resilient and pro-active in terms of finding solutions particularly during crises. How cities manage to mobilize their various communities, in terms of different identity groups, location and economic status, to address challenges like COVID-19, climate and inequality, will contribute to their success. This World Cities Day reflects on community value ranging from local volunteering and people organizing themselves in their own neighbourhoods to social movements that challenge poverty and racism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated the role of community work in making cities resilient and functional. Communities have organized to respond to the disruption of food and economic supply chains and to support many vital city functions. In informal settlements and slums, communities are grappling with the additional hardships created by COVID-19 but still make a significant contribution to local responses. At the same time, individual households also contribute by providing an enabling environment for work and study in the home. The challenge is to ensure communities' value is maintained beyond the virus outbreak, so they are at the heart of building sustainable cities.

On this unusual World Cities Day and as we launch the 2020 World Cities Report, it is more important than ever, to consider how diverse urban communities can be better recognized, supported and their qualities maximized in new ways that move beyond token engagement or minimal resource support. It is important to look at how the value of communities can be strategically utilized through policy engagement with a central place both in decision-making and in implementation. Doing so will better address the current COVID-19 responses, and make a significant long term contribution to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 11.

Below is a brief outline of the economic, social, environmental and innovative value communities contribute and how they can co-create cities of the future.

Economic Value

Urban areas are engines of economic growth through economies of scale, proximity, density and the formation of agglomeration economies. They attract Foreign Direct Investment due to the diverse labour force and infrastructure. According to the World's Cities Report 2020, urban areas which are home to 55 per cent of the world's population, generate 80 per cent of the world's economic output. Cities have the potential to create sustained economic prosperity and improve the quality of life for all.

How urban areas are spatially configured is directly connected to their generation of economic value, namely their capacity to improve productivity and expand wealth for the communities. Well-planned and managed urban growth improves the economy across a range of scales, from the local to the national level.

Numerous communities in cities contribute to a diversified culture which is a key contributor to urban economic growth. Culture is a driver for sustainable urban development and properly harnessed can make important contributions to poverty reduction, resilience and economic development driving urban regeneration and diversifying and enhancing economic vitality. Cultural initiatives and creative industries generate financial income for cities and make them more attractive to investors.

COVID-19 has transformed global and local economies to the point of collapse while informal and invisible economies such as those of local communities and households and poor families have, to a large extent, sustained local lives. The COVID-19 global crisis has made it clear that the world's formal economies are fragile, and are built on invisible and unpaid labour of certain communities.

The UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women found that even before the pandemic, women were already doing three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. The Secretary-General stated that "this unseen economy has real impacts on the formal economy" and called for future economic structures to be more inclusive and resilient and to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work once and for all.

As public health and support services become overwhelmed, informal community networks including community organizations and faith-based groups, are filling the gap, and to a large extent, contributing to the functioning of cities in all areas including the economy.

The vast majority of workers in developing countries - 90 per cent - earn their livelihoods through the informal economy. According to the World Bank, informal employment makes up 61 per cent of the world's total employment. In urban areas worldwide informal employment accounts for 44 per cent of employment and 79 per cent in the developing world's cities and towns.

In the developed world, formal workers are also undertaking risky work activities that expose them to the contagion of COVID-19. Home based workers, casual labourers, street vendors and women carrying out domestic labour are often taking huge risks while helping urban economies function. There needs to be a recognition of both informal workers and those undertaking high risk work which puts them in the front line of exposure to the virus while contributing to the urban economy.

The 2020 World Cities Report reminds us of the urgency to radically rethink urban governance and planning paradigms to ones that facilitate the transition of workers and economic units from the informal to the formal economy.

All economic efforts need to be factored more strategically into discussions around the economic value of cities to chart a more sustainable economic future of cities. In particular, there needs to be a greater focus on how communities and households are contributing to sustainable development and play a key social and economic role.

Social Value

In addition to the economic value of communities, the 2020 World Cities Report looks at how communities and cultural diversity contributes to the social value of urbanization through increased understanding. Knowledge of other people and communities encourages inclusivity and participation, which is a social asset to foster social cohesion, build community social values, fight racism and improve safety.

Community responses in cities are always in action at different levels. At this time of crisis, neighbourhood volunteer groups, local associations of youth, women, faith-based groups, slum dwellers, local innovation labs, teachers and students are reaching out to vulnerable communities with the information and support they need.

Local communities are best placed to collect neighbourhood level data as they have the networks and understand the changing socio-economic conditions. Governments need to systematically engage communities when deploying new technology or forms of response to ensure the maximum benefit and participation and the sustainability of initiatives. When urban communities are integrated in planning processes and the development, design and implementation of new ideas, the outcomes are more sustainable and representative. Communities are often best placed to also create a vision that reflects the local culture including values and social capital.

Community engagement must become integral part of the process as a continuous and re-iterative cycle and should become mandatory through policy and legislation. This approach results in the integration of new thinking that ushers in co-creation, co-production and co-generation of ideas and solutions.

COVID-19 has shown the value of local communities in terms of harnessing longstanding networks or developing new ones to volunteer, share information and support isolated individuals and groups. Post COVID cities will require even stronger integration of communities, their needs, aspirations, ideas and capacities. Local level action and diverse groups will be fundamental in delivering sustainable urbanization and the recovery from COVID-19 but must be enabled and empowered through policy change, financial resources and political will.

Environmental value

Communities continue to play a key role in preserving and restoring the environment in cities and developing innovative responses to climate challenges and building urban resilience. The new World Cities Report reinforces the role that local communities play in co-producing knowledge and taking concrete actions that support the climate and environmental agendas, often developing innovative and context specific responses that are saving and transforming local communities.

Numerous local initiatives aim at ensuring local sustainability and providing solutions for global action including community gardening, river cleaning and public space reclamation initiatives, sustainable building cooperatives and youth-led climate marches that transform international and national policy.

Significant numbers of people living in slums and informal settlements continue to be disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, including air, water and soil pollution, natural disasters and inequitable access to green and recreational spaces. COVID-19 has highlighted the absence of public space as well as basic water and sanitation services to manage the impacts of the pandemic, provide cleaner, greener urban settings and enable social distancing.

At the same time many people living in poverty are at the mercy of an unpredictable informal economy, limited transport options and an inability to engage in more “green” economic activities. The underlying socioeconomic challenges that render communities vulnerable to disasters, pandemics and economic shocks require a comprehensive resilience approach involving community awareness, knowledge and capacities.

As the World Cities Report notes, it is only through proactive community engagement and bringing local communities to the forefront of participatory processes, that cities will be in a position to transform and become environmentally sustainable.

Innovation Value

COVID-19 has underscored the importance of urban innovations and the capacity of cities, through local initiatives and capacity, to respond, to adapt quickly and develop new systems and approaches. Those cities which have managed to set up quick quarantine buildings, find accommodation for the homeless, scale up mobile banking services, repurpose street space for non-motorized transport and community spaces, and engage communities through social media and other networks, have been more likely to manage the potential threats of COVID-19. Cities where social capital networks are supported in innovative ways, have been able to harness dynamic community driven solutions to address the pandemic effectively.

A great part of a city's success depends upon anticipating global trends and leveraging local ideas and context-specific community innovations while urban-focused innovations and sustainability solutions increasingly shape global trends and policies. Cities that can attract creative and innovative individuals and foster creative, engaged communities via education, culture and the space for interactions and discussions, are more likely to generate appropriate responses.

Some cities have successfully transformed low-cost, under-utilised urban areas into creative places, offering a mix of functions including collaborative workspaces, labs, technological facilities and high-quality amenities, which have emerged as vibrant centres for innovation.

Policies and financial incentives, spaces and places for innovation should be offered not only to innovative ventures, but also to traditional businesses and the creative arts for example, that are often generated and operated by local people. Evidence shows that leadership, incentives and the proactive fostering of an innovative culture enable local communities to provide innovative, context-specific solutions to positively influence urban life for all, not the least to creatively cope with crises such as the current pandemic.

Policy implications and call for action

COVID-19 brings a costly but timely lesson on valuing communities in a more systematic manner and including them in urban planning, implementation and monitoring. They cannot continue to be an afterthought, bypassed in decision making or asked to do a lot of work with minimal support.

We need to reimagine what makes cities resilient and sustainable and how communities contribute with their powers of imagination to increase resilience and build sustainable recovery processes. They do that by deploying important economic, social and environmental value and capital to city development.

On this World Cities Day, we need to re-conceive the transformative potential of urbanization to include local, informal and often invisible social and economic processes. Economists, donors and finance ministers need to recognize the overall economic contributions made by communities every day and every year to our city life.

In the transition to a new sustainable urban normality, local communities must play an expanded role supporting government stimulus packages for employment creation, delivery of essential services, a green-economic transformation, provision of adequate shelter and public space and reestablishment of local value chains. Communities will become critical partners during a time of decline in local and subnational government budgets and financial capacities, redefining the allocation of scarce resources.

Going forward managers, decision makers and stakeholders, should include communities to co-create a different type of city, one where communities can contribute with their skills, knowledge and local assets which can increase cities' capacities to address climate change, potential pandemics and the ongoing long-standing urban challenges.

The Secretary-General in his ***Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World*** also called for engaging communities as response partners and in his video message he stated: “cities are home to extraordinary solidarity and resilience. Strangers helping each other, streets cheering in support of essential workers, local businesses donating life-saving supplies. We have seen the best of the human spirit on display.”

The latest edition of UN-Habitat’s World Cities Report provides insights and deeper appreciation of the value of sustainable urbanization. It gives the evidence and analysis required to re-value sustainable urbanization from an economic, social, and environmental perspectives. The Report also explores the role of innovation and technology as well as local governments and other stakeholders in fostering the value of sustainable urbanization.

The World Cities Report reinforces the benefits of cities that engage all stakeholders. Collectively, we are more likely to truly foster sustainable cities for all. There is no other choice than to work together, all of us. Our future depends on it.