

Valuing Our Communities and Cities

The impact of COVID-19 has re-shaped urban life around the world. Local communities have played a key role in contributing to keeping people safe and maintaining some economic activities.

Community value encompasses local volunteering and people organizing in their own neighbourhoods as well as social movements that challenge poverty, systemic discrimination and racism. In informal settlements and slums in particular, communities are making a significant contribution while individual households in urban areas are providing an enabling environment for work and study in the home.

UN-Habitat's latest World Cities Report reinforces the benefits of cities that engage all stakeholders, including local communities to foster sustainable cities. The Secretary-General has identified cities and communities as being on the frontline of the COVID-19 response. Collectively, we can truly foster sustainable cities for all.

Community activities can no longer be taken for granted or under-resourced. Policy makers and urban managers need to engage communities systematically and strategically in urban planning, implementation and monitoring to co-create the cities of the future.

The recognition of communities' value must be maintained beyond the virus outbreak. 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, ensuring a green-economic transformation, the provision of adequate shelter and public space and reestablishment of local value chains.

Economic Value

COVID-19 has hit global and local economies hard. In many areas it is the informal and invisible economies, such as those of local communities and households which have, to a large extent, sustained local lives. This includes the unpaid care and domestic work carried out by women along with public health and support services provided by community organizations and faith based groups.

Informal employment constitutes 44 per cent of work in all urban areas and 79 per cent in the developing world's cities and towns. Home based workers, casual labourers and street vendors help urban economies function often putting their own health at risk.

Economists, local and national governments and other stakeholders need to recognize, engage and value community work alongside other sectors and recognize the overall economic contributions made by communities.

Social Value

COVID-19 has shown the value of local communities in building urban resilience, including neighbourhood volunteer groups, local associations of youth, women, faith-based groups and slum dwellers, teachers and students who volunteer, share information and support vulnerable individuals and groups.

Cultural diversity contributes to the social value of urbanization through increased tolerance and understanding. This encourages inclusivity and participation which fosters social cohesion, builds community social values, fights racism and improves safety. Culture can also make an important contribution to poverty reduction, resilience and economic development.

Community engagement must become an integral part of urban planning processes and the development, design and implementation of new ideas through policy change. The outcomes of such engagement are more sustainable and representative.

Local communities are also best placed for collecting neighbourhood level data as they have the networks and understand the changing socio-economic conditions and should be engaged when deploying responses and in recovery and resilience planning.

Environmental value

Communities play a key role in preserving and restoring the environment including developing innovative and context specific responses such as greening initiatives, river cleaning and public space reclamation, and sustainable building cooperatives. Community action can also result in policy change to support urban sustainability from the environmental perspective.

Innovation Value

COVID-19 has underscored the importance of urban innovations and the capacity of cities through local initiatives to respond, adapt quickly and develop new systems and approaches. Cities which have engaged communities to set up quarantine sites and community spaces, have been more likely to manage the pandemic than others which fail to do so.

Cities that attract innovative individuals and foster creative engaged communities via education, culture and the space for interactions, are finding solutions to urban challenges. Some cities have worked with communities to successfully transform low-cost, under-utilised urban areas into creative places and vibrant centres for innovation.