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**Report of the Executive Director on the
implementation of the United Nations Human
Settlements Programme coronavirus disease
(COVID-19) response plan**

**Implementation of the United Nations Human Settlements
Programme coronavirus disease (COVID-19) response plan**

Report of the Executive Director

Introduction

1. Across the globe, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is threatening cities and communities, endangering not only public health but also the economy and fabric of society. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) has been helping national and local governments prepare for, respond to and recover from the pandemic. The Programme is especially concerned about the effects of the global health crisis on people living in poverty as well as on those communities particularly vulnerable to the rapid changes and disruptions witnessed in the past year. From March 2020 to March 2021, a total of \$32 million was mobilized for the UN-Habitat COVID-19 response plan, launched in April 2020. This represents 44 per cent of the \$72 million needed for the planned interventions. The portfolio includes 75 projects in 37 countries and 300 cities, benefiting more than 10 million people. The profiling of urban contexts by UN-Habitat, including the mapping of and data collection from 1,700 cities, has informed decision-making and improved coherence in responses to the pandemic.

I. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) programmatic response

2. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fragility of our urban systems and the severity of spatial inequalities, showing the consequences of weak health systems and other social and public services. Across the globe, it has taken root in cities and has proven to be a potent, disruptive force affecting economic growth and sustainable development. Clearly, while national and state governments play a crucial role in conquering the crisis, it is, above all, in cities that the battle is being waged.

A. Policy and programme framework for the COVID-19 response

3. In the past year, UN-Habitat has responded to COVID-19 at the global, national and city levels. It has provided knowledge, placed technical expertise and normative tools at the service of different governments and advocated for a recovery that focuses on more resilient, sustainable and

* HSP/OECPR.2021/1.

inclusive cities. The response focused on urban areas, as these have been the most heavily affected by the pandemic owing to the density, mobility and connectivity of their populations.

4. UN-Habitat developed its COVID-19 policy and programme framework to provide guidance for action at the global, regional and country levels. It is the key instrument that is being used to focus and scale UN-Habitat's contribution to the overall response led by national and local governments, other United Nations agencies and local partners. The framework comprises four areas:

- (a) To support local governments and community-driven solutions in informal settlements;
- (b) To profile urban contexts using urban data, mapping and knowledge for informed decision-making;
- (c) To mitigate the economic impact and initiate recovery;
- (d) To promote active learning on policy measures and practices.

5. UN-Habitat has used the framework with its global partners and at the local level, bringing together mayors, governors, transport and utility providers, women's and youth groups, community organizations and non-governmental organizations to urgently address the needs of cities and adapt the response accordingly. Regional and country offices have implemented the framework in local contexts.

B. Response plan and appeal for funding

6. On 22 April 2020, UN-Habitat launched an urgent COVID-19 response plan for 64 countries, focusing on immediate action in marginalised and densely populated areas. The plan included more than 100 proposals from all regions and sought to secure \$72 million for 12 months. The plan aimed at leveraging the catalytic role of UN-Habitat and increasing the impact of actions by central and local governments, local communities and other United Nations agencies.

C. Internal emergency fund for rapid response

7. To respond quickly to the escalating needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, UN-Habitat created an emergency fund of \$1.5 million to support quick-impact projects that would quickly demonstrate measurable results and align with the priorities of the policy and programme framework.

8. Fifty-six proposals were submitted and assessed against a set of predefined criteria. Thirteen projects, totalling \$1,360,750, were recommended for funding in Bolivia, Brazil, Fiji, Ghana, Guinea, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Philippines and Syria. It was also recommended that \$100,000 be allocated to support the implementation of the Kenya COVID-19 action plan, in line with commitments to programming in the host country of UN-Habitat. Projects were implemented between May and October 2020. The results are presented in the following section.

II. Results after one year

9. From March 2020 to March 2021, a total of \$32 million was mobilized for the UN-Habitat COVID-19 response, representing 44 per cent of the \$72 million needed for the planned interventions. From rapid response to longer-term recovery, UN-Habitat has supported national and local governments in 75 projects in 37 countries and 300 cities, benefiting more than 10 million people. The profiling of urban contexts by UN-Habitat, including the mapping of and data collection from 1700 cities, has informed decision-making and improved coherence in responses to the pandemic.

10. Most of the direct beneficiaries of the projects are residents of slums and informal settlements, which have been identified by UN-Habitat as priority areas in its response plan.

A. Mainstreaming urban issues in the global response

11. The active engagement by UN-Habitat at the highest level of coordination of the United Nations system has contributed to a greater visibility of the specific challenges of COVID-19 in urban areas. UN-Habitat has offered technical expertise for policymaking and produced a specialized database generating knowledge on the urban dimension of the pandemic. This has enabled other major United Nations response strategies, policy briefs and plans – such as the framework for the immediate socioeconomic response to COVID-19 and the Global Humanitarian Response Plan – to have a strong understanding of urban issues and the role of local governments. It has also contributed to the realization that cities are key actors in managing the impact of the crisis.

12. The United Nations Secretary-General's policy brief "COVID-19 in an Urban World"¹ (July 2020), whose preparation was led by UN-Habitat in collaboration with UNDP, UNDESA, UNEP, UNICEF, UNODC, ILO, WHO, OHCHR and all regional commissions, encourages integrated policy support across the global, regional and country levels. The brief also sets the scope and priorities that will guide UN-Habitat in the following areas:

- (a) Advancing the health and development nexus by reviewing standards, manuals and tools in relation to the urban determinants of health conditions, including poverty, inequality and urban morphology as well as the impact on the Sustainable Development Goals;
- (b) Considering the health, governance and urban finance nexus by documenting best practices, reviewing lessons learned and creating capacity-building tools that can inform innovative and resilient recovery strategies;
- (c) Understand the central role of urban planning and infrastructure in the post-COVID-19 recovery era and the unique opportunity afforded by the pandemic to rethink city planning;
- (d) Understanding the long-term implications of pandemics and public health emergencies and to find environmentally sustainable solutions to feed into the work of UN-Habitat;
- (e) Considering the socioeconomic impacts of pandemics, the links with urban finance and the need to address spatial inequalities in cities;
- (f) Investing in basic services, housing and slum upgrading.

B. Supporting governments and community-driven solutions

13. The response by UN-Habitat to COVID-19 in 37 countries has ensured that the most vulnerable and high-risk urban communities have access to water, sanitation, food, housing and health services. It has also assisted with data collection and mapping of existing and emerging virus hotspots to help evidence-based decision-making by local governments and key stakeholders.

14. Slums are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because of overcrowding, food insecurity and the lack of access to water, sanitation and health services. UN-Habitat has worked with partners at several levels, including community organizations, to support the response to the pandemic. Several guidance notes and technical support tools were designed to increase awareness and build the capacity to respond to and minimize the transmission of the virus and to rebuild livelihoods in these vulnerable communities.

15. It is estimated that approximately 2 billion people globally lack access to clean water. Adhering to the most basic public health and hygiene guidelines on COVID-19 can be nearly impossible without access to water and soap. UN-Habitat has worked with community groups and small businesses in key locations to install a network of public handwashing stations and improve hygiene conditions to prevent the spread of the disease.

16. UN-Habitat has supported efforts to mitigate the local economic impact of the pandemic by designing policies for and with formal and informal sectors in support of early recovery. It has worked to safeguard alternative income sources for those most affected by the crisis and has provided direct assistance in severe food insecurity situations, working closely with traditional and religious community leaders as well as with women, youth and other groups. These measures have helped prevent the potential increase in domestic and street violence.

17. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the stark and long-standing inequalities in the housing market. UN-Habitat has focused on critical measures at the national and local levels, such as stopping all evictions, postponing eviction court proceedings, prohibiting utility shut-offs and ensuring that renters and mortgage payers do not accrue insurmountable debt during lockdowns. As a result of advocacy efforts, numerous national and local governments have banned evictions and instituted moratoriums on rent and mortgage payments. UN-Habitat has also investigated and devised alternative solutions and mitigating measures for informal and low-income communities: it has developed tools to manage relocation as a last resort and created guidelines for local governments to lead inclusive and integrated citywide response planning for COVID-19 mitigation in these neighbourhoods.

¹ <https://unhabitat.org/un-secretary-general%E2%80%99s-policy-brief-on-covid-19-in-an-urban-world>.

C. Providing urban data, mapping and knowledge

18. The provision of data and information, along with the coordination among different spheres of governments, has been critical in guaranteeing a coherent and sound response to the pandemic. At the global level, through the United Nations Committee for Coordination of Statistical Activities, UN-Habitat has contributed to the development of the United Nations system-wide indicator framework, to accompany the United Nations socioeconomic framework. It has also engaged with chief statisticians across the United Nations system to establish a federative network of datasets on COVID-19 and a one-stop data centre for countries.

19. UN-Habitat has developed online platforms to assess the needs of cities and individuals, map responses and share knowledge. The city-based COVID-19 Readiness and Responsiveness tracker², powered by the CitiIQ platform, had benefited 1,700 cities by March 2021. The tracker uses global metrics to provide critical and otherwise unavailable information from cities around the world which is used to protect populations and inform resilience and recovery strategies and future responses to global pandemics.

20. In June 2020 UN-Habitat launched an online survey to collect data from residents of cities worldwide to learn about the impact of COVID-19 on daily life. The survey included questions on various topics related to infections and testing as well as prevention and control measures. The crowdsourcing application, which provides geospatial information and was developed in partnership with Esri, continuously collects data on city-specific COVID-19 situations while monitoring measures are put in place to control the pandemic and accelerate local recovery.

D. Promoting active learning

21. UN-Habitat has turned the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic into an opportunity to bring together thousands of experts and partners to discuss the challenges of and solutions to the current crisis and build resilience going forward. A series of webinars saw the participation of a wide range of old and new partners, including national and local governments, non-governmental organizations, community groups, the private sector, academics and the media, among others.

22. One of the key roles of UN-Habitat has been to fast-track learning on how cities and communities, particularly in informal settlements and slums, are dealing with the COVID-19 crisis in terms of preparedness, response and recovery. By facilitating structured learning through webinars and online discussions, UN-Habitat supports the exchange and identification of innovative approaches and solutions.

23. Some of the main virtual live learning series, such as #BeyondTheOutbreak and the COVID-19 Urban Thinkers Campus, have brought together thousands of local community leaders across cities, countries and regions, providing opportunities for active learning about local adaptation, preparedness, lessons learned and future responses.

III. Longer-term work focusing on the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

24. As the global pandemic continues, the approach to confronting it has shifted to city- and country-specific responses, preparing for future spikes in infections and advancing plans for sustainable recovery and resilience. UN-Habitat has increased its focus on policies and actions to mitigate the local social and economic impacts of COVID-19 by working with a coalition of global thought leaders and stakeholders in the public and private spheres.

25. UN-Habitat has increased its efforts to engage with United Nations country teams to review the socioeconomic analysis of the impact of COVID-19 and related response plans. The Programme is also supporting the preparation of common country analyses and cooperation frameworks, guided by the recommendations contained in the Secretary-General's policy brief. These are strategic entry points to mainstreaming urban issues, which UN-Habitat has contributed to at the global level and which are trickling down to national and local responses and recovery efforts.

² <https://unhabitat.citiiq.com/>.

26. The UN-Habitat report *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future*,³ launched in March 2021, provides strong normative and urban policy guidance on the impacts of COVID-19 and the future responses by cities across four interconnected areas: (a) poverty and inequality; (b) the form and the function of the city; (c) normative and governance mechanisms; and (d) urban economy systems. Based on the data and policy information provided in this report, UN-Habitat will lead a global debate around city resilience, socioeconomic recovery and the need for more cohesive and integrated societies living with pandemics. UN-Habitat will also lead global discussions on the United Nations research roadmap for the COVID-19 recovery, which focuses on leveraging science to support a more inclusive socioeconomic recovery and a more equitable, resilient and sustainable future.

27. On 1 March 2021, UN-Habitat suspended the Level 3 emergency protocols of its COVID-19 response, consistent with the deactivation of the system-wide, pandemic-tailored Inter-Agency Standing Committee scale-up protocols on 23 January 2021. With the deactivation, UN-Habitat reverted to its standard procedures for programming and crisis response as defined in its established structure. The experience of the past year will inform its collective learning and knowledge base for supporting responses to future urban crises.

³ https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/03/cities_and_pandemics-towards_a_more_just_green_and_healthy_future_un-habitat_2021.pdf.