



REPORT FROM A WEBINAR ON

Pandemics and Future Cities

WORLD HABITAT DAY
OSLO, OCTOBER 5, 2020



HABITAT
NORWAY

Edited by: Vendula Hurnikova, Habitat Norway, November 2020

Cover photo by: [billow926](#) on [Unsplash](#)

HABITAT NORWAY 2020

The webinar and the report are funded by the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation.



HABITAT
NORWAY

Preface

It is undeniable that we are living through a process of profound epidemiological, social, economic, and political significance. The multiple crises we see emerging take place against a global background of increased isolationism, populist, nationalist and authoritarian style governments across the globe. We face greater fractures in the multilateral system than we have seen since the Cold war.

The UN and the multilateral system are weakening because of constant underfunding, increased tensions, and work challenges. In the processes that is unfolding it will be particularly important to identify the right tools to address the issues raised by the interaction of global pandemics, securitization, climate, conflict, natural disasters, and urban development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that long-term complex challenges and short term crises demand new responses and ways of working. The Habitat Day talks 2020 in Oslo - titled "Pandemics and Future cities" - were meant to identify what is necessary to make us more ready through new ways of working and living to tackle present and future crises. You will find some of the responses in this report which contains contributions presented at the webinar.

The webinar was organized by Habitat Norway, supported by the UN Human Settlement Program (UN HABITAT), and made technically possible by the Polytechnical Association of Norway. It took place on Monday October 5, 2020 from 3 to 6 pm.

The webinar proceedings are available online on Habitat Norway's YouTube channel and following link: <https://youtu.be/IDHh9qQHaeQ>

The Board of Habitat Norway

October 24, 2020

Contents

Preface	3
Opening	7
Erik Berg Introduction to the Webinar	8
Anna Skibevaag Words of Welcome from Habitat Norway	10
Victor Kisob Welcome	14
Nikolai Astrup The International Habitat Day 2020	18
Keynote Speech	21
Eduardo Moreno The State of World Cities in Global Pandemics - Status, Challenges and Responses for More Resilient and Inclusive Cities	22
Thematic Interventions	24
Annie Wilkinson Addressing Systemic Poverty and Inequalities in Cities – the Health Challenge	25
Fionnuala Ni Aolain Not just a health emergency? But a Parallel Pandemic of Human Rights, Accountability, and Governance	27
Miloon Kothari Dense Cities and Community Emergency Mobilisation	31
Interview with Jan Egeland How to Respond to Long-term Complex Challenges and Short-term Crises? The Global Humanitarian System under Scrutiny	36
Conclusion	37
Helge Onsrud Final Comments and the Way Forward	38
Appendix	41

Opening

Erik Berg

Introduction to the Webinar

Erik Berg, is a former Norwegian development diplomat and the present Chair of Habitat Norway

Good day and welcome everyone, I am the present chairman of Habitat Norway and will be the moderator of today's webinar on World Habitat Day brought to you from Oslo. We look forward to having you with us in an interactive exercise where we hope that everyone will contribute either on chat or on e-mail. All

contributions are meant to be collated in the written report from this webinar. It is a technological challenge, I can assure you, and please bear with us regarding the problems we certainly will be facing. There also are some changes in the program and its time schedule that we will revert to as we go.



I. Erik Berg introducing the webinar with the band Pöbel on his side, photo by VH

Before I pass on the floor to Johannes Fjose Berg, in charge of technical arrangements, to explain its intricacies and how you optimally could benefit from this event, let me just say a few words about the context of this webinar.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate UN Habitat for having initiated and produced the report that forms the basis for today's deliberations. The report titled "The Future State of Cities in a World with Pandemics" represents a unique opportunity to pose questions on the new realities for cities and their populations after COVID 19. This webinar with 740 registered participants and speakers from all continents also gives you a chance to listen and learn and initiate small dialogues on the way forward. On how each of us, individually or together,

“The report titled “The Future State of Cities in a World with Pandemics” represents a unique opportunity to pose questions on the new realities for cities and their populations after COVID 19.”

could impact respective authorities, be they local, national or international. Please use the chat or e-mail system for comments and questions.

Thus again, on behalf of Habitat Norway – the smallest of all-important urban

associations – I welcome you. You could make us bigger by becoming a member at our homepage www.habitat-norge.org.

It has become a tradition for Habitat Norway to start our webinars with music – a true universal language. The majority

of our members are students. They have formed a band and named themselves “Pöbel” which in English translates into MOB. The leader of the band is not Sergeant Pepper but Eilert Ellefsen who also is a member of Habitat Norway's Executive board. The floor is yours Eilert and Pöbel.

Anna Skibevaag

Words of Welcome from Habitat Norway

Anna Skibevaag, is an urban planner and member of Habitat Norway's Board

Excellencies, Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor and pleasure to welcome participants and speakers from all corners of the world to the first Habitat Day during the “SDG Action Decade towards 2030”.

Habitat Norway is particularly pleased to welcome Deputy Executive Director Victor Kisob, who is with us from Nairobi. We also appreciate very much the participation of Norwegian Minister of Local Government and Modernisation Mr. Nicolai Astrup, who has left today's busy parliamentary deliberations to join us here in the studio.

We would like to thank both of you for a consistent and unwavering support to the implementation of the SDGs and Agenda 2030. Also, a vote of thanks to the Polytechnical Association of Norway who is providing technical support for this

webinar with speakers on three continents and participants on five.

The first World Habitat Day was celebrated in Nairobi in 1986. “Shelter is my right” was the theme. 35 years later a broader rights-based approach is

promoted. “The right to the city – the city for all” is today’s main urban mantra.



II. Anna Skibeveag at the webinar, photo by VH

In a situation with populist, nationalist and authoritarian regimes on the offensive all over the world, a broad, holistic rights-based approach is more important than ever.

The World Habitat Day which is celebrated on the first Monday of October each year is intended to

“The pandemic has exposed and increased stark social and economic inequalities and system weaknesses.”

remind the world that everyone has the power and the responsibility to shape the future of towns and cities. I hope this event would contribute to that end.

The background of the event is as follows: In experiencing the social and economic shock of COVID 19 comes the realization that we must adapt new and better ways to deal with global crises. The pandemic has exposed and increased stark social and economic inequalities and system weaknesses. It has highlighted that long-term complex challenges and short-term crisis demand new responses and ways of working. We hope to identify some of them during the course of this event. Suddenly we are all developing countries. In the same boat which (wiki) - leaks.

As we look ahead the question arises: what can we learn from the pandemic? What do we need to do differently? What kind of collaboration and action are needed to achieve transformative change and prepare for a radically different world? Cities containing 90% of all COVID cases will because of demographic and economic development be at the center.

Social urban development has however during the six decades of the so-called development era been utterly neglected by national and international governments all over the world. From 1970 to 2015 only 4% of total Official Development Assistance was received for social purposes. In a situation with 1.8 billion people living in inadequate housing and 1 billion in slums very few development agencies are promoting social housing programmes. National Governments focusing on the continuum between the most rural and the most urban need to utilize the opportunities and challenges that urban and regional development represents.

The global context of today is one of evolving multiple crises of which the pandemic is one and the climate the most serious. Drawing on lessons learnt from capacity building, advocacy and grassroots action, the challenge becomes

how we can catalyse, plan and implement a different and better future. We are now just experiencing the first wave of what might come. It should be a memento for all.

Habitat Norway would like to commend UN Habitat for at an early stage of the pandemic having initiated a new and thought-provoking flagship report titled “The State of World Cities in Global Pandemics”. We all look forward to today’s presentation of its main findings and recommendations. As well as the expert interventions that follows on issues of health, housing, human rights, and the future of the global humanitarian system. Reflecting the need for a broad systematic approach to the multiple crises we are facing all over the world. They all tend to convene in cities and towns.

Thank you for your attention!



III. A woman selling vegetables wearing a face mask at Haat Bazaar Line, Butwal, Nepal, photo by Kabita Darlami via Unsplash

Victor Kisob

Welcome

Victor Kisob, is UN Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat

Excellencies, Colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

A week ago, we reached an ‘agonising’ milestone of 1 Million COVID-19 deaths, as stated by the UN Secretary-General.

The world will not be the same after this pandemic. It is predicted that the way we will interact, work, play and rest will drastically change. The instruments to overcome the crisis will also change. The status quo we knew is gone, and a new reality is in place. This reality has compelled us to adopt new habits and unfamiliar choices for our communities and cities around the world.



IV. Victor Kisob, photo by [UN Habitat](#)

We have witnessed the fragility of our communities and cities; we have observed even more glaringly the inequalities and unevenness of resource allocation for sustainable development.

Although the possible outcome scenarios, and the scope of these impacts are yet to be assessed, it is clear that job markets, the economy at large, the use of the social and physical space have been negatively affected, creating a world of uncertainty that calls for a rapid assessment and adaptation.

The pandemic is a local and global crisis. Urban areas have become the epicentre of the pandemic, as our Secretary-General has indicated in his Policy Brief on COVID-19 in an Urban World, for which UN-Habitat was the penholder.

Cities, particularly large agglomerations, played a role in the initial spread of the infection. However, they are also part of the solution, facilitating a response to the pandemic. They can be extremely important providing solutions in rural settings.

Cities are at the frontline of this crisis, and they would continue to be, in the future when medium- and long-term responses will be implemented.

The pandemic is teaching us important lessons. Firstly, health and epidemiological studies reveal to us a sort of hidden truth. No country is fully prepared for epidemics or pandemics, and every country has important gaps to address in this regard.

Secondly, Governments were unprepared to respond to this crisis. Particularly those with reduced funding for education and health, public facilities and institutions, basic services and essential subsidies. These governments will be compelled to come back to the

drawing board of central and local government dialogues, and state and society relations.

Thirdly, private sector and markets alone, cannot respond to the crisis and global

“Cities, particularly large agglomerations, played a role in the initial spread of the infection. However, they are also part of the solution, facilitating a response to the pandemic.”

supply chains are far from resilient. COVID-19 has disrupted the global economy. Demand, supply and finance have been deeply affected. Trade and value-chains have been disrupted; the propensity to consume will decrease and global Financial Development Investments (FDI) will collapse, including a reversal in international investments in emerging markets.

Therefore, the numbers of unemployed people are growing in an unprecedented manner. Poverty and inequality are increasing. Mortality of women and

children will increase. GDP growth will be drastically reduced. Education is being interrupted. In short, the realisation of SDGs is seriously affected.

We need to do everything possible to reverse this situation. At the end of this month, during the celebration of World Cities Day, UN-Habitat will launch the World Cities Report 2020 on the value of urbanization. This report makes the case for cities, to remain central in the pursuit of sustainability, especially in these difficult times.

The Report also highlights that, the New Urban Agenda and SDGs are both timely and relevant, to fundamentally reform planning, policies, strategies, and budgets for cities to create value. This value touches in the economic, social, environmental and intangible conditions.

It touches on:

- a) Governance,
- b) Political, cultural and civic perception; and,
- c) Outcomes that are needed to improve quality of life of residents in tangible ways.

Understanding the value of urbanization,

advocating for new healthy habits, and managing appropriate responses is part of our strategy for the new normal.

When putting in place medium- to long-term responses, it is important to reflect on the nature and effectiveness of the systems of governance; not just to address health conditions, but more broadly the governance of a more complex society.

We have spent some time reflecting on what kind of 'social contract' the 21st century state would need, and how would local authorities be factored in.

Effective recovery systems and possible new pandemic responses require a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, with resources and clear collaborative mechanisms and capacities.

At the outset of this pandemic UN-Habitat had been supporting several communities, cities and countries. We have been working with local authorities and citizens to deliver essential services;

we have been assisting with the development disaster risk management plans; and the strengthening

“The COVID-19 pandemic gives us the unique opportunity to re-imagine the city.”

crisis management and response.

These are particularly important when it comes to informal settlements and slums where communities are most at risk of high infection rates, due to overcrowding, lack of basic services and medical

facilities. Beyond immediate actions and containment policies, we are gearing up for medium-to-long term interventions.

Our State of the World's Cities Report: Living with Pandemics will be most timely. The proposed report serves as



V. Streets of Beijing, photo by Zhang Kaiyv via Unsplash

both an important study of the COVID-19 response from an urban perspective and enables the international community to formulate concrete solutions.

Mr. Eduardo Moreno, our Chief of the Knowledge and Innovation Branch, will deliver a keynote address on the initial findings of the Report.

If I may, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to highlight the significant role that the Government of Norway is playing, in support of multilateral systems. I would like to thank Habitat Norway, and the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, for their timely and generous support to the organization of this event and the active role that the

Ministry is playing in the policy dialogue on human settlements.

The COVID-19 pandemic gives us the unique opportunity to re-imagine the city. I look forward to an engaging dialogue on COVID-19 and cities, in particular in the promotion of sustainable solutions and transformative ideas. It is our hope that

we can continue forging a creative alliance towards sustainable, less polluting and less resource-consuming activities, with a strong emphasis on human security and well-being.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.

Nikolai Astrup

The International Habitat Day 2020

Nikolai Astrup, is Minister of Local Government and Modernisation (the Conservative Party).

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues,

It is a great honor to welcome you - more than 740 participants from all corners of the world – to this webinar. I am particularly pleased to greet United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UN Habitat Mr. Victor Kisob. I appreciate your consistent and unwavering support for the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

A vote of thanks to Habitat Norway for having initiated this Habitat Day webinar

on “Cities and Global Pandemics”. We hope to continue the partnership through future Habitat Days, Urban October campaigns and other events and processes related particularly to SDG 11 – “the City goal” – and the New Urban Agenda.

I would also like to commend UN Habitat for having initiated a new and thought-provoking flagship report titled “The State

“Housing is explicitly articulated in SDG 11, and it is a key component of sustainable development across all the goals.”



VI. Nikolai Astrup delivering his speech at the webinar, photo by VH

of World Cities in Global Pandemics” already early in the pandemic.

I look forward to today’s presentation of the report’s main findings and recommendations - as well as the subsequent expert interventions on issues of health, housing, human rights, and the future of the global humanitarian system.

This year’s Habitat day theme - “housing for all, a better urban future” – reflects a main priority in my portfolio as Minister of housing. It is also a central part of achieving the SDGs.

Housing is explicitly articulated in SDG 11, and it is a key component of sustainable development across all the goals. Good housing drives access to basic services, contributes towards inclusive growth, and supports the development of a sustainable future, with a direct impact on the factors that contribute or mediate the effects of climate change. Investment in affordable housing will therefore have a profound and direct impact on many of the SDGs. However, we have now only ten years left to achieve the SDGs.

Therefore, the 2020s must be the decade of action. The Government is now working on a national action plan for the SDGs. Our main goal is to make Norway more sustainable by translating the SDGs into relevant actions for Norway.

I hold goal number 17 as my favorite because the SDGs are so inevitably tied together: The goals cannot be solved one by one.

Achieving the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda requires innovative partnerships that bring together the

public sector, civil society, the private sector, and academia. The action plan will therefore be developed in a broad process, and I hope many will provide input and share their experiences.

The International Habitat Day is intended to remind the world that everyone has the power and the responsibility to shape the future of towns and cities. We need to work together to promote inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities – and I hope this event will contribute to that!

Thank you for your attention!

Keynote Speech

Eduardo Moreno

The State of World Cities in Global Pandemics - Status, Challenges and Responses for More Resilient and Inclusive Cities

Eduardo Moreno, is Director of Research and Capacity Building of UN-Habitat

Mr. Moreno's speech has been video-recorded and can found in the following link:

 <https://youtu.be/ZrV66qNZfZA>



VII. Eduardo Moreno, photo from the linked video

Thematic Interventions

Annie Wilkinson

Addressing Systemic Poverty and Inequalities in Cities – the Health Challenge

Annie Wilkinson is an anthropologist and health systems researcher at Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

The following is the presentation slides delivered by Annie Wilkinson at the “Pandemics and Future Cities” webinar.

institute of development studies

Addressing systemic poverty and inequality in cities – the health challenge

October 2020
Annie Wilkinson, Research Fellow
Institute of Development Studies
a.wilkinson@ids.ac.uk
@ALSWilkinson
ids.ac.uk

What is the urban health challenge?

- The world is increasingly urban; urban populations in low and middle income countries are growing the fastest
- We know that inequality and poverty have a range of negative impacts on health but we do not clearly understand the social determinants of health in many of these rapidly growing urban settings
- Urban-health interactions are overlooked and misunderstood; we know least about the most vulnerable settings and people e.g. 1 billion people living in informal settlements

ids.ac.uk

2

Epidemics are a window into society

What do they reveal?

Will COVID-19 be a turning point?



ids.ac.uk

Images: 1) Alan Derney 2) Mark Vauthall 3) Toga Wanderrings 4) Tim Dennell

3

Approaches to controlling infectious disease in cities



From sanitary reforms to...

... 'silver bullets' ...

Image: 1) John Snow 2) FRC 3) Felipe Filippaki 4) Zokwanele

4

Ebola in West Africa

- Legacies of urban neglect facilitated spread
- Public health teams were ill-equipped to respond e.g. quarantines and riots in West Point
- Histories of structural violence and inequality led to distrust, violence and resistance
- But locally led control efforts bent the curve of the epidemic
- Highlighted the social and political dimensions of health and the need for inclusive responses



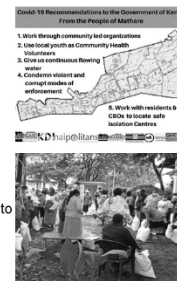
ids.ac.uk

Image: 1) Trenchard 2) Wilkinson

5

COVID-19 in informal settlements

- Fears about spread, but limited understanding of vulnerabilities and heterogeneity due to lack of data
- Issuance of unfeasible guidance, imposition of impossible restrictions (again)
- Failure to see the city as a system beyond risk of infection
- State support did not reach the most vulnerable
- Social movements have mobilised support networks to plan locally appropriate and inclusive responses
- Successful local responses have built on long term collaboration and dialogue between residents and authorities



ids.ac.uk

Images: Muungano wa Wanawaji

6

Why are cities, their inhabitants, and urban-health interactions overlooked and misunderstood?

- Spending on and attention to urban development is very limited
- Limited data and knowledge, especially about the most vulnerable people and places
- An absence of policy frameworks: no national urban policy, and urban omitted from sectoral policies e.g. in health or pandemic preparedness
- Siloed expertise
- Politics of neglect: strategic ignorance, exclusionary policy and practice + historic blaming of the poor e.g. as vectors of disease

ids.ac.uk

7

We cannot generalise



Image: 1) Toehk; 2) Wilkinson 3) Sunil KV 4) Vijayawada-Shrutika Murthy 5) Wilkinson and 6) Alexander Macfarlane

8

Understanding inequality and systemic poverty in cities – a complex picture

- Heterogeneous social, political and economic relations shape urban spaces
- Drivers of health and well-being comprise intersections between environmental deprivations and hazards as well as social marginalisation, stigma, violence
- Cities have complex governance across sectoral, administrative and spatial scales, much of which is invisible and informal; as a result, accountability is unclear
- It is a challenge to identify drivers of multiple, intersecting inequities in health and well-being and routes for redress
- People have diverse forms of power and agency

ids.ac.uk

9

How do we address the urban health challenge?

"The pandemic is a portal" to where?

- Increased investment, data and attention
- Perspective is vital:
 - 'Seeing like a city'
 - 'Seeing like a citizen'
 - What and who is not visible?
- Interdisciplinary, intersectoral and intersectional approaches are required, paying attention to power dynamics, and inclusive of the most marginalised
- Focus on social context and infrastructures: learning, dialogue, collaboration



ids.ac.uk

Image: Zen

10

institute of
development
studies

ARISE

SSHAP
Social Science
in Humanitarian
Action Platform

Thank you!

UKRI

Economic
and Social
Research Council

a.wilkinson@ids.ac.uk

ids.ac.uk

11

Fionnuala Ni Aolain

Not just a health emergency? But a Parallel Pandemic of Human Rights, Accountability, and Governance

Fionnuala Ni Aolain, is UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism

Let me start with some global contextualization on the state of human rights across the globe. Human rights protection and promotion is under severe and undulating strain. It is estimated that civic space is restricted or impaired in its operations in 111 countries. In 2019, 300 human rights defenders were killed, including a rising number of women human rights defenders who lost their lives. Torture, inhuman and degrading treatment remains widespread and institutionally tolerated. Human rights are in uphill struggle, but the demands for justice by ordinary men, women, boys, and girls remain visible and continue to break through even in this time of pandemic. These short snapshots are not generic, they are intimately connected with and sustained by national security practices, and the use of

counter-terrorism, security and securitized approaches as a normalized 'exception' in multiple states across the globe.



VIII. Fionnuala Ni Aolain, photo from her private archive

The weakening of the multilateral system, UN and other multilateral fora, their chronic underfunding, the increased tensions and challenges in common work and the increased role of security interests and the increased hierarchies in

practice (particularly the role of the security council). The role of the security council as super-legislator, and the securitization of complex issues which include governance, accountability, transparency (for example the Sahel region).

The backlash to human rights and the undermining of rule of law and human rights-based approaches to large complex problems both within and without multilateral fora. This is related to the rise of populist, nationalist and authoritarian style government across the globe. Here I highlight in particular the tightening of civil society space and attacks on human rights defenders across the globe.

The rise of securitization as the primary motif of response to complex issues, evidenced by the use of counter-terrorism, security discourses and security led approaches. My view is that this is particularly dangerous conflation in the area of climate change, notwithstanding the seductiveness of 'security and climate' interfaces.

The increased relationship between climate harms, resources fragile and violence in many countries, and the ways in which we might think of complex and nuanced interventions to address these issues.

Covid-19 and its capacity to embolden the authoritarians, and the securocrats among States. I note that my mandate issued an early warning with a number of my Special Procedures colleagues on the misuse of counter-terrorism, security and emergency measures in the context of Covid-19. In addition, the SRCT & HR mandate with two leading NGOs ICNL and ECNL has created a global tracker on the use of emergency legislation in the context of

“I caution unreservedly about the flirtation with security frameworks and counter-terrorism law and practice as a basis of response to the global pandemic.”

Covid-19, which demonstrates a number of profoundly concerning trends in the appropriation of counter-terrorism tools to the regulation of a health emergency. These include widespread use of data-tracking including the most sensitive data (e.g. biometric health data) without in some contexts any or sufficient protections on collection, storage, use or transfer of such data. I caution

unreservedly about the flirtation with security frameworks and counter-terrorism law and practice as a basis of response to the global pandemic. Moreover, as other Special Procedures mandate-holders have



IX. One of many murals in Mathare slum in Nairobi with a police violence theme, painted by Mathare Roots and Mutua Ndereva, photo by UN Habitat

documented the policing of Covid-19 has exacerbated discriminatory patterns of abuse in the use of force. Epidemiological evidence across a number of States reveals that Covid-19 is causing disproportionate deaths among racialized minorities or other historically vulnerable groups. Consider then the proposition that the tools of the surveillance state and the use of force capacity of the state would be further mobilized against those communities who experience ongoing trust and harm deficits with the security sector.

“The positive human rights outcomes from the Covid-19 pandemic might include an emerging consensus on the right to health and the right to adequate housing as fundamental rights.”

In conclusion let me turn to some potentially positive aspects. The positive human rights outcomes from the Covid-19 pandemic might include an emerging consensus on the right to health and the right to adequate housing as fundamental rights. It might also include a recognition that the right to information is a safeguard to prevent the spread of disease across the planet. We are not well-served in safeguarding global health by giving security sector actors with limited oversight and even

less transparency a central role in managing the complex health needs and challenges of diverse populations. Given the demonstrated human rights and civil society deficits of the global counter-terrorism and global security architectures, there are a range of other actors better placed to safeguard the right to health, the right to a home, and right to water, and the right to challenge government information about health risks than counter-terrorism and security actors, whom as this input suggests, have significant human rights deficits to be righted, arcs to be corrected and trust to be built in the work they already do.

Final opportunities to note, we see extraordinary global organizing even in the context of a global lock-down. We see enormous debate around certain rights (e.g. health, housing) as fundamental to the rights of persons and this represents a significant shift in the global consensus on what “rights count” and what “rights are rights”. Yet, we have much work to do, and we hope that the

pandemic spurs us in new and innovative directions rather than entrench further limitations on the rights of persons.

Housing

Miloon Kothari Dense Cities and Community Emergency Mobilisation

Miloon Kothari, is former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, UN Human Rights Council

Miloon Kothari's contribution at the "Pandemics and Future Cities" webinar was based on the article "*The call of home: It is time the Centre legislates on the right to homestead*" written by himself and Ramesh Sharma. It was published on June 15, 2020 in "The Indian Express". The article is printed here with the permission of the authors.

The call of home: It is time the Centre legislates on the right to homestead

Mayapur is a remote village of Sahariya tribes in Sheopurkalan district of Madhya Pradesh. The villagers are homeless/landless and forced to migrate to Jaisalmer for work for one to two months every year. Variations of this tragic story play out in thousands of India's villages annually. The precarious nature of lives and livelihoods is now becoming more glaring as the rural poor are unable to access cities for work.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed, in tragic and graphic manner, the hard truth that millions of citizens in India exist with no recourse to a range of rights. We are now witnessing unemployment, hunger and a yearning for home unprecedented in the country's history. Women, men, and children have been left with little or no food security, livelihood options and a secure home.

The pandemic has, in a stark manner, made it clear that the rights of people to food, housing, livelihood and land have to be addressed if we are to survive the current crisis. It has become clear that more stress needs to be placed on the rural economy, including the creation of livelihood opportunities. The need for greater self-reliance for individuals and families has never been more urgent as migrant workers, among others, look for the security of home, land and livelihood. Data collected by the Ekta Parishad shows that migrant workers comprise 55 per cent of India's landless and homeless population.



X. Miloon Kothari, photo from his private archive

The colossal scale of forced seasonal and casual migration, exposed by COVID-19, points to the lack of land reform in India. For the migrants returning to villages, an optimum solution would be to make land available to them so that their livelihood and housing needs

“The COVID-19 crisis has exposed, in tragic and graphic manner, the hard truth that millions of citizens in India exist with no recourse to a range of rights.”

are met. If this can be achieved, then many who are currently migrants would not need to return to the insecure and unpredictable life in urban areas. Urgent policy and legislative measures that would provide migrants with security and a sense of “self-sufficiency” regarding livelihood and housing need to be undertaken.

That the rights of people can be realised through policy and legislative avenues is not a theoretical and idealistic argument but a lived experience, achieved through mobilisation in the past three decades. Take the example of the Right to Homestead Acts. Bihar and Madhya Pradesh have laws for the allotment of homestead to the homeless and landless poor. In states such as Kerala, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana and Odisha, separate schemes exist for homestead rights, but these have not been extensively implemented.

In 2013, following a national campaign by the Ekta Parishad, a draft national Right to Homestead Bill was formulated. After 2014, this draft was under consideration with the Ministry of Rural Development, which played a leading role in the Act's formulation. At a mass gathering of land rights activists in Gwalior in October 2018, the Minister of Rural Development gave a written assurance that GoI would move quickly to bring the Bill to Parliament.

Now is an opportune time to bring this draft bill for discussion in Parliament. There are several compelling reasons to bring forward this legislation. First, such an Act would operationalise people's right to food, land and housing and fulfil our constitutional and international commitments. India has ratified a range of instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has supported the formulation and adoption of international "soft-law" such as the voluntary

“For the large majority of poor in rural India, the critical need today is upgradation of their houses and security of tenure of housing and land.”

guidelines on the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests in the context of national food security, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other Rural Workers.

The codification of a national law on homestead rights would also allow us to comply with these international obligations and, in fact, also respond to recommendations that have emerged from the UN's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. India's record of the implementation of its commitments to CEDAW (as elaborated in the CEDAW Committee's general recommendation 34 on the rights of rural women) would

also improve as a significant proportion of the landless in India are women agricultural workers.

Second, the Right to Homestead Act can begin the process of reversing the damage

done by the failure of land reforms in India, especially for those whose land rights are not covered by the Forest Rights Act. For the large majority of poor in rural India, including those who have a small piece of land where they have built

insecure and inadequate homes, the critical need today is upgradation of their houses and security of tenure of housing and land. This is possible with the implementation of state land laws bolstered by the Right to Homestead Act.

Third, the Homestead Act will align itself well with one of the government's "flagship" national missions — for instance, housing for all by 2022. The Homestead Act will move this housing programme more in the human rights direction taking it away from a piecemeal "housing units" approach. This is critical considering that a significant number of rural poor do not have a secure place to live. The draft National Homestead Rights Bill (2013) provided for each and every landless family, not less than 1/10th of an acre of land.

Fourth, the Homestead Act can become a benchmark for the success of other laws, on food security, MGNREGA etc., especially if the Act includes, or leads to, a legal framework similar to the Forest Rights Act.

“The powerful yearning for a home, to belong is evident in the voices of the migrants, who are willing to risk all to be able to return ‘home’.”

Take the case of Kanser in Gwalior district, also a village of the Sahariya tribes. After a long struggle, they were fortunate to get their land rights as well as rights over homestead land. Today, amid the pandemic, they are content in their homes and village, and self-sufficient in terms of food grains, unlike their brethren in Mayapur. The change that land rights have brought to their lives is palpable.

The powerful yearning for a home, to belong is evident in the voices of the migrants, who are willing to risk all to be able to return "home". If this longing for security of home can be combined with the security offered by a piece of land and an opportunity to build livelihoods, then the nation would have demonstrated the sensitivity the migrants sorely missed

during the Covid crisis. The Right to Homestead Act would be a key step in that direction.

Atmanirbharta (self-sufficiency) is not only an economic concept.

This grand idea has to be based on personal self-sufficiency. The Right to Homestead Act can be the missing piece that will not only assist in alleviating the

suffering of the abandoned migrants but more importantly, provide them a semblance of pride and identity they now

lack since the only choice before them now is to make a living in an uncertain, insecure and alien urban environment.

Original text can be found here: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/coronavirus-migrant-workers-the-call-of-home-6460561/>

Interview with Jan Egeland

How to Respond to Long-term Complex Challenges and Short-term Crises? The Global Humanitarian System under Scrutiny

Jan Egeland, is the Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council

The interview with Mr. Egeland has been produced by the Norwegian Refugee Council. It can found in the following link:

 <https://youtu.be/y--llvtiXnY>



XI. Jan Egeland in interview, photo from the linked video

Conclusion

Helge Onsrud

Final Comments and the Way Forward

Helge Onsrud, is member of Habitat Norway's Executive Board

This webinar has underlined the close relationship between health and the way buildings and cities are constructed. Poor people living in badly constructed houses in densely built-up areas are much more harmed by the Covid-19 pandemic than those who live with more space, with clean air and clean water and with green fields in the vicinity. Harmed by the virus, millions of poor people are losing jobs. Their kids are meeting closed schools, perhaps lasting for a year or more. Richer countries spend trillions of dollars to keep business going as usual. I doubt we have reasons to believe that these countries will share much of their wealth to combat the virus-related problems in poorer countries. It remains to be seen if a vaccine will be distributed fairly between richer and poorer countries and made available to the poorest at a price they can afford.

To people living in slums, the Corona virus adds to a lot of other challenges related to their health and well-being. Those are challenges which have been

there for as long as the slums have existed. Being exposed to the Corona pandemic where I live, is exactly what poorer people in the South are permanently during a full lifetime struggling with malaria, dengue fever, diarrhea – to mention a



XII. Helge Onsrud presenting his remarks at Polytechnical Association of Norway, photo by VH

few challenges making lives hard and short. A continuous state of affairs which gives you good reason to reflect.

At best we can hope that the global Corona pandemic has *shown* that we are all onboard the same ship, that things will not be better unless it gets better for all.

I do not know if we still are at the beginning of the global virus outbreak.

Hopefully, at best we are at the end of the beginning. Domestic and international interventions can help. UN Habitat should be congratulated for

preparing the flagship report on *The State of World Cities in Global Pandemics*, so timely and rapidly. We are talking about short term and long-term interventions. In the short term: Some cities will do better than others in fighting the pandemic. Local dwellers are often the best experts. That is very clearly demonstrated in my hometown, Oslo.

Early at the virus outbreak, infections spread rapidly among immigrants from Somalia. Engaging immigrants to disseminate information to their fellow

immigrants - using their own language - very rapidly stopped the extraordinary outbreak and brought it down to the average level in Oslo. Frequent, transparent, available and understandable information was certainly key factors. I encourage UN Habitat and others to continue to collect and share best practices.

With a longer perspective: as the pandemic reminds us about the close connection between housing, urban planning and health, we need to address these issues with

“Some cities will do better than others in fighting the pandemic. Local dwellers are often the best experts.”

much more intensity, domestically in countries, in international organisations and among professionals. Habitat Norway will certainly come back to the topic of safe, healthy and resilient cities in future events. We intend to influence UN Habitat and our own government. We want to inspire professional development workers all over the world.

I have watched this webinar from my own computer. It worked remarkably well bringing together lecturers from literary all over the world to a virtual seminar, reaching out to many, many more participants than we would have done

with a traditional “physical” conference in Oslo. Flying less is also a contribution to the SDGs. Webinars are certainly a model we will continue to use when things are back to normal. In themselves they are a good learning from the pandemic situation.

A note of thanks to the Polytechnical Association of Norway for handling the technicalities in an excellent manner.

Habitat Norway as a small organization focusing on housing and urban development in a global, sustainability perspective. To conclude: it was no better way to celebrate the Habitat Day 2020 than arranging a webinar on pandemics and future cities.

Appendix

HABITAT DAY TALKS ON “URBAN PANDEMICS”

FINAL DRAFT PROGRAMME

In experiencing the social and economic shock of COVID 19 comes the realization that we must adapt new and better ways to deal with global crises. The pandemic has triggered unparalleled global action and exposed stark social and economic inequalities and system weaknesses. It has shown that we have to abandon the old, normal way of dealing with global emergencies. It has highlighted that long-term complex challenges and short-term crisis demand new responses and ways of working.

As we look ahead: what do we need to do differently? And what can we learn from the pandemic? What kind of collaboration and action are needed to achieve transformative change and prepare us for a radically different world? Cities will because of demographic and economic development be central.

Through a conversation with representatives from civil society organisations to those of universities and governments, the Habitat Day talks in Norway will look at what is necessary to make us more ready for the new ways of working and living to be developed to tackle present and future crises. The global context of today is one of evolving multiple crises of which the pandemic is one and the climate is the most serious. Drawing on lessons learnt from capacity building, advocacy and grassroot action, how can we catalyse, plan and implement a different and better future? We are now just experiencing the first wave of what might come.

OPENING

15.00 – 15.05 Music by “Pöbel”

15.05 – 15.15 Erik Berg, Chairman, Habitat Norway (Moderator’s introduction)

15.15 – 15.25 Maimunah M. Sharif, Executive Director, UN Habitat

15.25 – 15. 35 Nicolai Astrup, Minister of Local Government and Modernisation

KEYNOTE SPEECH

15.35 – 16.00 The State of World Cities in Global Pandemics. Status, Challenges and Responses for more resilient and inclusive Cities. *Eduardo Moreno, Director of Research, UN Habitat*

16.00 – 16.10 Questions & Answers

THEMATIC INTERVENTIONS

16.10 – 16.25 Health Addressing systemic poverty and inequalities in cities – the Health Challenge. *Annie Wilkinson, Institute for Development Studies Sussex*

16.25 – 16.35 Questions & Answers

16.35 – 16.50 Human Rights Not just a health emergency? But a parallel pandemic of human rights, accountability, and governance? *UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism Fionnuala Ni Aolain*

16.50 – 17.00 Questions & Answers

17.00 – 17.15 Housing Dense cities and community emergency mobilisation. Supporting economic recovery through community empowerment by linking resilient and affordable housing with livelihood and employment strategies. *Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing Miloon Kothari.*

17.15 – 17.25 Questions & Answers

17.25 – 17.40 Humanitarian challenges How to respond to long term complex challenges and short-term crises. The global humanitarian system under scrutiny. *Jan Egeland, Secretary General, Norwegian Refugee Council*

17.40 – 18.00 Conclusion: The Way Ahead

Become a member of Habitat Norway at

www.habitat-norge.org

