

Hab Post

Updates from
UN-Habitat

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Life in the Time
of COVID-19

Editor's note

While efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 are starting to bear fruit in some parts of the world — [some not hesitating to state that one battle against COVID-19 has been won](#) —, in other places the pandemic is gaining in intensity. Initially strongly present in China and then Europe, the virus later started to affect the Americas and Africa and is now raising worries about transmission in informal settlements and the capacity of healthcare systems to cope with a sudden spike in cases.

With an increased impact of the pandemic comes an increased need for information about the situation where we serve and operate. We have therefore decided to re-focus this issue of HabPost on the situation on the ground. Our feature story this week looks at how UN-Habitat has been responding to the pandemic in Brazil's informal settlements. We also zoom in on two countries — one in the Middle East and one in the Pacific — to hear the voices of colleagues introducing us to their local contexts, their local realities, their local challenges, and their response to it all.

Our next issue will look at African cities in the midst of COVID-19, but will also reveal the results of our survey on HabPost and internal communications, and our plans for the months ahead. So stay tuned, and see you next week.

Happy reading,

The HabPost Team



In the oven




Here is a list of themes for some of our issues in the making—keep an eye out for your HabPost email!

▶ **African cities in the midst of COVID-19, and the future of HabPost**

In the world



As of 5 May, there were **more than 3,444,234 confirmed cases of COVID-19** infections around the world (an increase of 23 per cent since last week), **with 239,740 confirmed deaths** (up 24 per cent) according to WHO. Monitor the situation at <https://covid19.who.int/>. 



Highlights:

→ **Our Executive Director** shares her insights on the impact of COVID-19 on urban environments and what we can do to protect the most vulnerable populations, especially those living in informal settlements:

- [Even During a Lockdown, Public Transport Can Be a Lifeline](#), for NextCity.
- [Interview with the Thomson Reuters Foundation](#) about efforts to slow the spread of the virus in Africa's cities.
- [Slums are the next front line in the fight against the coronavirus](#), for Devex.
- [How Life in Our Cities Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic](#), for Foreign Policy.
- [Interview with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation](#) on UN-Habitat's response plan in Kenya and the wider region.

→ As part of World Immunization Week (24-30 April), WHO has published [new guidance](#) to help countries keep up critical immunization services for preventable diseases in the wake of COVID-19.

→ **Several Asian countries** are cautiously lifting coronavirus restrictions. These include **South Korea, Hong Kong, and China**. In China, tourist sites are once again accepting visitors, with strict limits on crowd sizes.

→ On 4 May, a global fundraising drive was launched by the **UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, Saudi Arabia, and the European Commission**. The drive seeks to raise USD 8.3 billion for efforts to develop a vaccine and treatments against COVID-19.



**COVID-19
RESPONSE**

Get the latest updates on Covid19

[Here](#)



Making the Invisible Visible: Accounting for the Urban Poor in Brazil's Informal Settlements

HAB POST | May 07 2020

The current global pandemic has made several existing inequalities in Brazil more evident. Chief among these are disparities in income as well as inequalities between gender, race, and age groups. And it has become increasingly clear that the difficulties in dealing with this crisis do not fall equally on everyone.

The impact of COVID-19 could mean exacerbated inequalities once the crisis is over. In Brazil, where the population living in slums was reported at 22.3% in 2014, most of the challenges are related to existing inequalities, and the way cities are built and managed.

For months, the Brazil team has been working in three different cities to reduce the vulnerability of people living in informal settlements and leave no one behind. Their efforts continue during COVID-19.

Protecting slum dwellers in Rio de Janeiro

Since 2019, the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, in partnership with UN-Habitat, has been implementing the Social Territories Programme which aims to reduce the social risk of poor families living in large complexes of favelas. The project seeks to identify the vulnerability of families and improve their right to the city.

Since the beginning of the pandemic and with the interruption of field visits, the team in Brazil has continued its efforts to locate people in extreme condition of social vulnerability in order to protect them from the economic consequences of the virus and from the related disruptions to food availability. Hired locally at Rio's 10 largest slum complexes¹, the UN-Habitat 66 field agents – mostly women – have already made around 2,000 phone calls to families in extreme poverty monitored by the programme, paying close attention to those at acute risk. One thousand basic food and hygiene baskets were delivered to families with bedridden members, the elderly, or those with severe respiratory problems.

The population living in slums was reported at

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Most of the challenges are related to existing inequalities, and the way cities are built and managed.

¹ Complexo do Alemão, Cidade de Deus, Rocinha, Penha, Jacarezinho, Lins, Villa Kennedy, Chapadão, Pedreira, and Maré.

Yet poverty generates fragility. Many Brazilian households live in extreme poverty and are deprived of the services and opportunities needed to raise their standard of living. In Rio de Janeiro in particular, the share of the population living in extreme poverty is higher than the national average. The city is also one of the most unequal in Latin America. The Social Territories Programme seeks to understand this reality to overcome the range of inequalities that constitute barriers to sustainable development and poverty eradication. Between August 2019 and February 2020, the Programme visited about 102,000 households, interviewed around 98,000 people, and identified approximately 28,000 families as socially vulnerable. To help manage the spread of COVID-19, those families identified as vulnerable are being monitored, and support protocols are being implemented. About 8,000 families have undergone a health visit, and approximately 4,000 have been cared for by social assistance services.



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Informing decision-making in Maricá

In the municipality of Maricá, State of Rio, the team has since the wake of the pandemic been providing reliable and fast information to support the decision-making process of the city in responding to COVID-19. Through its project *Chegou a Sua Vez* ("It's Your Turn") implemented with the municipality of Maricá through the Darcy Ribeiro Institute, the team in Brazil has located elderly populations with chronic diseases, micro-entrepreneurs, informal workers, and people with no access to basic income to carry out several actions aimed at reducing the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19. A minimum wage has for instance been paid out to informal workers, and 31,000 basic food and hygiene baskets were distributed to each family of students enrolled in the municipal public school system. A note of technical advice to the crisis office of the municipality

containing data from the project was sent out by the team and warned that all children of families from the Inoã district of Maricá with a high Multidimensional Poverty Index² should be enrolled in school for those families to be included in the municipal registers and benefit from the distribution of basic food and hygiene baskets. Thanks to this initiative, quality information and georeferenced data was made available to local authorities. This has been crucial in identifying and informing the latter of those "invisible" people who would otherwise be easily left out of distribution channels.

Mapping out priorities for the Government of Alagoas

The team in Brazil is further supporting the Government of Alagoas, the second poorest state in Brazil, to help define territorial priorities and inform the formulation of quick responses to the

pandemic in the precarious human settlements of Maceió, the state capital. Several datasets were analysed and submitted to the local government, including maps indicating which informal settlements lacked adequate water supply and which hosted the highest percentage of dwellers over 60 years of age. As with most other cities in the region, Maceió's informal settlements are among the densest, making them vulnerable to an increase in COVID-19 cases.

Our team on the ground knows that this is a difficult time for Brazil, in particular for the urban communities and traditional partners that UN-Habitat has been involved with for years. All are looking for guidance, support, and cooperation. As the situation evolves rapidly, the aim is to adapt and make the best of this new reality.

² The Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was developed in 2010 by the Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and the United Nations Development Programme and uses health, education and standard of living indicators to determine the degree of poverty experienced by a population.



This week, our photographer **Julius Mwelu** shares with us what he believes the situation to be in some of Nairobi’s slums. We’re also lucky to have **Thanuja Dharmasena**, Gender and Environment Adviser at our Sri Lanka office, explain us the range of emotions and lessons learnt from the pandemic.



“Critical preparedness, readiness, and quick response actions have now become our daily mantras. The Government of Sri Lanka has performed phenomenally well in containing the spread of the disease, and it is nearly two months since we willingly traded our right to freedom of movement for the greater good of all. I have been testing my own adaptability since work, home activities, and our lives were shoved under the same roof. I have realized that it entails a concoction of highs and lows when trying to strike a balance. Every day to me is a lesson in self-sustainability and discovery.

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Apart from being the Gender and Environment Adviser, and a Peer Support Volunteer, I am currently the acting Communications Officer for the Sri Lanka Country Office. During these particularly challenging times I am happy to be part of a small, competent, and able team of individuals who have inherited an extraordinary wealth of knowledge and experience in working in both humanitarian and development fields. My tenure alone as a development practitioner is

a few months shy of sixteen years. None were grouchy over discussions that continued until the wee hours of the night, with light-hearted conversations during interludes and putting in the additional hours to deliver concept notes on time. I have understood that effective communication and coordination have enabled us to function as a unitary whole facilitating a coherent and efficient teamwork environment. We have reached a common understanding that desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Thanuja Dharmasena,
Gender and Environment Adviser, Sri Lanka Office



“My name is Julius Mwelu, an award-winning photographer working with the UN-Habitat Media and Outreach Section in the External Relations, Strategy, Knowledge and Innovation Division. I was born and raised in the Mathare slum and have been working with UN-Habitat as a photographer for 11 years. Being a photographer, my work entails going to the field, and I am using this opportunity to highlight the positive and timely response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I use my camera to demonstrate ongoing efforts and offer my support to bring more partners to work together with UN-Habitat. Through my photos, UN-Habitat is able to share with partners what we are doing to support communities especially those in informal settlements here in Nairobi. As a photographer, I have been able to work in both Kibera and Mathare slums, and I have seen the impact and the support that UN-Habitat has been providing to both communities. I have also noted that UN-Habitat is the only UN entity on the ground.”

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Julius Mwelu,
UN-Habitat Photographer, ERSKI

Iraq's Multi-faceted Battle



Misfortunes never come singly. While some focus on fighting the pandemic and worry about their economy, others like Iraq face additional hurdles on the way. Despite lockdowns and new work modalities in place, how to respond to the urgent needs of affected communities and make a difference? **Wael Al-Ashhab**, Head of the Iraq Country Programme, shares with us his experience from the field.

At the end of February 2020, just one month from the date I arrived in my new duty station in Baghdad as the Head of Country Programme, I had the chance to visit the city of Mosul in Northern Iraq. Mosul had been devastated and destroyed by the occupation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) — also known as Daesh — and subsequent armed conflicts to remove the group. While in the city, I visited the informal settlement of Hai Al-Tanak and participated in the inauguration of an upgrading project for a poor neighborhood located along the Tigris river.



Just a short time later, while Mosul was locked down by a government decree and most people were staying at home, the city was severely impacted by heavy rain and flash floods that lasted for days.

Wael Al-Ashhab, Head of the Iraq Country Programme

Just a short time later, while Mosul was locked down by a government decree and most people were staying at home, the city was severely impacted by heavy rain and flash floods that lasted for days. This added to the suffering of Iraqis who were already overwhelmed by the effects of COVID-19, the economic

crises, and the political instability. Our UN-Habitat field team, which remotely manages an EU-funded area-based urban recovery programme, received a call for help from the residents of the neighborhood of Maghreb, one of the three neighborhoods targeted under our programme in West Mosul. The UN-Habitat team quickly managed to obtain a special permission from the local authorities to reach the site and assess the situation with the concerned municipality staff. Ten workers from the area were recruited for two days to dig and remove the accumulated dirt that had blocked one of the main manholes. The team also handed over boxes of hand sanitizing gel, gloves, and 500 face masks to municipal staff and workers. Due to the unavailability of medical masks in Mosul, the team had them locally made by a tailor in 24 hours, showing that communities will come together and lend each other a hand even when they need to be apart.



UN-HABITAT/Bernhard Barth

Remote but not Disconnected: Supporting the Urban Poor in Fiji

With less than 20 cases and no reported deaths to date, Fiji may appear to be on the sidelines of the COVID-19 pandemic. But in an interconnected world, the Small Island Developing State faces first-hand the negative consequences of the global measures to slow the spread of the virus at home and abroad. **Inga Korte**, Team Leader, Urban Climate Resilience in Fiji, reflects on her team's activity and achievements during COVID-19.

The [Fiji Resilient Informal Settlements \(FRIS\)](#) project is a four-year Adaptation Fund programme. UN-Habitat, together with the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, the Ministry of Local Government, 4 municipal councils, and 16 communities, is working to strengthen the resilience of some of the most vulnerable and marginalized people across the main island of Fiji. We are working directly with the municipalities and communities, identifying vulnerabilities and risks related to climate change.

When the COVID-19 outbreak changed the working environment of countries across the globe, the FRIS team had just started implementing a series of community validation workshops. During these workshops, the initial results of a vulnerability analysis are presented, explained, and discussed with representatives from the communities. Together with their feedback, action plans are developed and priority projects identified.



With restrictions slowly being eased, it now seems that we may soon be able to go back to the field.

Inga Korte, Team Leader, Urban Climate Resilience in Fiji,

Just like everywhere else, COVID-19 completely changed the way we work: the two major cities in Fiji were put under lockdown after cases of COVID-19 were detected, and the Government of Fiji introduced physical distancing measures and curfews. Our staff was no longer able to visit the communities, and our resilience officers were no longer able to work in the municipal councils.

But the team adapted very quickly. All staff were provided with phone and internet bundles to enable working from home, two new laptops were purchased to make up for the lack of desktop computers in the municipalities, and regular team meetings were held via Zoom. Adjustments were also made to the work plan to postpone

validation workshops. And during the initial lockdown, our resilience officers assisted the councils in producing GIS maps identifying every street and house inside the lockdown area, allowing municipal health inspectors to screen nearly 300,000 households for COVID-19 symptoms. With restrictions slowly being eased, it now seems that we may soon be able to go back to the field.

Making sure that all our staff are healthy and safe has been a priority for our office: we regularly check in on each other, stay connected via a WhatsApp group, and ensure that we also share personal stories and photos during our team meetings. One of our international consultants decided to continue her work remotely from Europe to be closer to her family, so we have adapted and now hold our meetings at a time convenient for everyone.

While fieldwork is on hold, we are working with our main counterpart, the Ministry of Housing and Community Development, **to raise awareness of COVID-19 in over 70 informal settlements in Fiji** – handing out practical tips to community leaders and families, but also distributing soap. We are leveraging the relationships built through the project's community engagement and mobilization to build local networks and identify community champions who can help tackle the "infodemic".

Despite the challenges that come with such a restrictive working environment, we also feel a few positive developments: the team which was used to be slightly divided between Suva and elsewhere has grown much closer, and we have decided to maintain regular online team meetings moving forward. Cooperation with our counterparts has also improved, and a joint medium-term strategy is underway to address COVID-19 challenges. We can also contribute to assessments of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 by providing data gathered through the FRIS project, giving a voice to the urban poor in the Pacific.

Resources



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Links

Travel: <https://hr.un.org/page/travel-health-information>

UN FAQ: <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/covid-19-faqs>

UN information page: <https://hr.un.org/page/coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

UN-Habitat COVID-19 website: <https://unhabitat.org/covid-19-pandemic>

UNICEF information page: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/covid-19>

WHO MythBusters: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

WHO Situation reports: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>

WHO Q&A list: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>



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UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE



IMPLEMENTING
THE NEW
URBAN AGENDA



**COVID-19
RESPONSE**



**COVID-19
RESPONSE**

**UN-Habitat COVID-19
Response Plan**

COVID-19

Take action with us in
cities and communities