

**UN-Habitat & Global Parliament of Mayors  
Position Paper for the Global Network on Safer Cities  
Partners Consultative Meeting**

# **The Emerging Lessons on Urban Vulnerability and Safety from Covid-19 in Low- and Middle-Income Countries**

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**Jaideep Gupte**

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## Summary

This discussion paper sets forth the lessons on urban vulnerability and safety, relevant to the security sector, emerging from coronavirus (Covid-19) and its related socioeconomic impacts on urban societies in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The paper is structured as four sections: section one describes in brief the direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19. Section two describes the impacts of Covid-19 on the incidence of crime, violence, and insecurity. Section three summarises **the emerging lessons for the security sector, highlighting in the utmost, the need for humane interventions that are tuned to gendered, localised and rapidly evolving risks and vulnerabilities; the enforcement of lockdown and social distancing measures without undue persecution, particularly of informal and other potentially stigmatised livelihoods; and for safety to be implemented at city-scale and through integrated responses.** Section four concludes with reflections on how safer cities programming, including the UN's *System-Wide Guidelines on Safer Cities*, as well as the Global Network on Safer Cities, might lead the required transformations.

*This paper recognises that Covid-19 is not a crisis of policing or security provision. It is a public health crisis with serious safety, security, and law enforcement implications.* Protracted crises and the most damaging impacts will likely occur in contexts with weak public health and welfare provision – and where these weaknesses are compounded by deficient economic, social, and security sector intervention. Security sector response must therefore be integrated with and be supportive of a range of public health measures, including social protection and economic responses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the long-standing consensus that cities must be on the path to inclusion, providing residents access to rights in order to enable longer-term preparedness and resilience. This calls out to groups such as the UN-Habitat's Global Network on Safer Cities to use their experience and knowledge of vulnerability, resource allocations across urban services, land tenure and homelessness, the importance of multipurpose public space, the intersection between public and private space, public–private partnerships, integration of technology, mobile communication and the importance of relationships, trust, and integrity.

# 1. Direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19 in low- and middle-income countries

*Over 95 per cent of all Covid-19 cases globally occur in urban areas (UN-Habitat 2020). Human interactions are intensified in the built environment, making epidemic control a key consideration in city making.<sup>1</sup>*

Nearly one billion people live and work in informal, under-serviced and precarious urban conditions in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme n.d.). Billions more living in the cities of LMICs can just about afford homes with formal services such as piped water, electricity, and access to health care, but these services are patchy and reliant on deteriorating infrastructure.

As a result of the pandemic, 1.6 billion of the world's 2 billion informal workers, or nearly half the global workforce, have already lost their jobs (International Labour Organization 2020). The vast majority are in developing countries, where most employment is informal and families live hand-to-mouth, relying on a daily wage if they are to eat. The loss of income for people already living perilously close to the margins of survival will propel up to 50 million people into abject poverty (Mahler *et al.* 2020), while 580 million could become impoverished, meaning they lack the basic means to survive (Sumner, Hoy and Ortiz-Juarez 2020).

Covid-19 has exacerbated vulnerabilities and exposed structural fragilities and inequalities. The effects of the pandemic are being experienced by all groups exposed to marginalisation and discrimination, including, but not limited to, older persons, children, persons with disabilities, women, LGBTI persons, persons living with HIV and AIDS, indigenous communities, migrants, refugees and stateless persons. The containment measures taken to curb the impacts of Covid-19 have directly and indirectly been socially and economically devastating and if no deliberate interventions and programming is planned, will significantly set back efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda, including SDGs 1, 2, 5 and 10 on poverty, food security, gender equality and reduced inequality respectively. As such, this strengthens the mandate of the Human Rights and Social Inclusion team at UN-Habitat to mitigate the risk for marginalised communities through ensuring that there is equitable and fair access to opportunities and services in cities.

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<sup>1</sup> While 'location' remains a key element, it is also inaccurate to limit the assessment of the ecology of risk, the direct and indirect impacts of the disease, or the implications on long-term responses, to city limits alone. Urban systems share a deeply symbiotic relationship with peri-urban and rural contexts, and it remains important to take account of them. These wider linkages and relationships, however, fall outside the scope of this brief position paper.

## 2. Crime, violence, and insecurity are amongst multiple urban risks

*Urban risks are multiple, cascading, and interconnected* (Gupte and Commins 2016). These risks are experienced differently by women, men, children and vary across different parts of the city. Emerging lessons on urban vulnerability and safety need to be viewed in the context of key trends which pre-date the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Criminal violence, homicide in particular, is increasingly concentrated in urban areas (Small Arms Survey n.d.).
- The number of urban residents in LMICs exposed to multiple risks and hazards (large- and small-scale) is set to double from 2 billion to 4 billion by 2050 (Güneralp, Güneralp and Liu 2015).
- Urban centres also receive people affected by violence, fragility and disaster elsewhere: more than 75 per cent of all displaced people are now living in urban settings, with 60 per cent of refugees and 80 per cent of internally displaced people today located in urban centres (Cosgrave, Crawford and Mosel 2016).
- During Covid-19, many vulnerable and at-risk populations, particularly migrant labourers, have been forced out of cities due to lockdown policies (Nagpal and Srivastava 2020).
- With an increasing reliance on digital interactions during and post-Covid-19, the risks for children interacting in digital environments are also significant, including gender-based harassment.

*Direct and in-direct impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic* on the incidence of crime, violence, and insecurity should be understood in light of the fear, trauma, anxiety, and heightened conflict experienced by service providers, officials, and community members alike during the pandemic:

- As noted by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, there has been an alarming rise in police brutality and civil rights violations under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures (OHCHR 2020).
- Riots and public demonstrations are temporarily down, but these are likely to return to normal, and potentially higher than normal levels once lockdown policies are eased (ACLED n.d.).

- The pandemic has caused a decrease in some organised-criminal activities, while providing new opportunities in other areas (Global Initiative 2020).
- There is a notable increase in domestic violence, violence against children, gender-based violence (GBV) and anti-social behaviour occurring against the backdrop of the Covid-19 outbreak (Batha 2020; Gender-Based Violence 2020; Graham-Harrison *et al.* 2020; Roy 2020)

It is important to note that in the examples offered, *police and other security services were already over-burdened*, trust was low between communities and enforcement officials, who have been continuously exposed to high levels of violence, service delivery protests, and other crimes of a protracted nature (Common Cause and Lokniti 2018).

- Policing often requires close physical contact and frequenting of unsanitary environments. Anecdotal evidence suggests an alarmingly higher rate of contracting Covid-19 amongst police personnel (*Gestión* 2020; *Hindustantimes* 2020).
- Peacebuilders face similar challenges, compounded with funding shortfalls and more logistical hurdles accessing communities, both in-person and online.
- In most LMIC contexts, police personnel, particularly those holding lower ranks, have very limited routine opportunities to access mental health and other wellbeing support. It is under these circumstances that city police forces have become central to national Covid-19 response strategies. They are required to enforce regulations, often seen as unpopular, in public, private, and commercial spaces, in lived environments as diverse as in informal settlements and inside gated communities, as well as online in response to new and increased digital activities.
- Maintaining law and order in these diverse circumstances has proved doubly complex given legal and procedural practices have also needed to adapt extensively and repeatedly to situations of social distancing and lockdown (South African Government 2020).



## 3. Emerging lessons for the security sector

### 3.1 Conducting policing in a humane manner

*All police Covid-19 interventions dealing with the public and with commercial enterprises small and large, as well as their internal practices within police stations and incarceration facilities, must be conducted in an utmost humane manner, with the principle of doing no additional harm. The level of behavioural change and modification of everyday practices required has profound implications for all relations including the most intimate, and cannot be imposed by force. The use of force must only be applied as part of official roles and responsibilities, and only to the extent that it is necessary, proportionate and reasonable in all the circumstances (Jones 2020).*

In particular, the police must not unduly persecute those who depend on public spaces for their livelihood. These livelihoods are likely to be informal and already hyper vulnerable to the economic and social impacts of lockdown policies (Wilkinson 2020). Equally, these professions provide key services for other vulnerable and at-risk groups. For example, street vendors as the source of food for the poorest and most vulnerable urban residents. The police must enable safety guidelines that can be reasonably followed, and find negotiated ways with informal vendors so they can trade as safely as formal supermarkets (Carr 2020). Other informal workers, such as waste pickers and sanitation workers, must be allowed back to their places of work when the crisis is over, with more protections than before (WIEGO n.d.).

City governments, supported by the police force, must take additional steps to ensure that eviction drives targeted at informal settlements and the homeless or pavement dwellers, cease. Eviction increase vulnerabilities to a range of risks, including violence, and are very likely to spur the spread of infection (Breakfast 2020). As focus of city interventions shifts from citywide lockdowns to a fluid system of sub-municipal control zones, the requirement for real-time situation analysis should be integrated with an ongoing assessment of vulnerabilities, including those of groups at risk of evictions, as well as individuals at higher risk of severe disease or death requiring 'shielding' (Butler and Tulloch 2020: 1). In carrying out nuanced and time-sensitive public health interventions, police personnel and the wider set of security provision stakeholders must not be expected to have the sophistication, training, or support that we can reasonably expect from health-care workers. It must be recognised that the best course of action for police officers during this evolving crisis is to maintain vigilant hand hygiene and to use personal protective equipment (PPE) such as nitrile gloves.

This requires additional resourcing. Furthermore, police leadership must recognise and offer support to lower ranked police personnel, like other emergency responders, are having to cope with the disease at home and with their families. Mayors, senior city-officials and civil society organisations bear a responsibility to raise awareness of police brutality and infringements, alongside promoting citizens to conduct their interactions with the police in a respectful manner. As such, police-public and other community policing initiatives to strengthen trust-based relationships will be key.

### **3.2 Lockdown and heightened vulnerabilities to GBV**

*Lockdown measures increase GBV-related risks and violence against women and girls, and limit survivors' ability to distance themselves from their abusers as well as reducing their ability to access external support. In the post-pandemic context, there will be a need to go beyond gender equality and women's empowerment programming that focuses on the individual, and to target gender relations and the structures or social systems in which men and women live (IDRC 2017). If lockdown measures are to persist, additional resources and innovation will be required to enable access to helplines to report domestic violence, GBV, and violence against children. Counselling and mentoring too will require renewed investment, and providers will need to innovate to continue these services while maintaining social distancing norms. Investments in domestic violence prevention and shelters for victims too become critical, as do legal support and advocacy to help women exercise their housing and other rights.*

### **3.3 Tailoring national intervention to meet local realities and remaining prepared to adapt to evolving risks and vulnerabilities**

Social cohesion will manifest differently for different people (by gender, by age, by profession, etc.), in different parts of the city (formal, informal, inner-city, periphery, etc.) and in different political jurisdictions (e.g. urban refugee camps) (te Lintelo *et al.* 2018). Covid-19 response and longer-term safer cities interventions will need to reflect local history, norms, and values, taking advantage of the ways in which local communities self-organise and regulate collective behaviour.

Police and the wider security sector community can engage communities at the early stages of interventions, and create opportunities for them to set their own priorities and participate throughout planning and implementation. The police can also help strengthen the role of informal institutions (neighbourhood and church

groups, etc.) that play a role in maintaining security and social order, and encourage urban design and housing features that foster social interaction among neighbours and enable natural 'surveillance' (IDRC 2017). Peace-building can play a key role in nurturing new visions for a post-Covid-19 world and help shape the critical reimagining and reprioritising of our societies with a focus on holistic human security. Peace-building should focus on ways to mobilise grass-roots organisations and networks to prevent and resolve tensions. The wider security sector must engage peace-builders, but the networks themselves must also act to identify and counter xenophobic narratives in order to counter societal fracturing and build cohesion (Geneva Peacebuilding Platform 2020).

Responding to Covid-19 is arguably an extension of services provided by non-state, para-legal and illegal/illicit actors. Gangs often constitute the primary form of order in *favelas* and other such poor urban areas. They often provide local communities with services such as protection, financial loans or distributing forms of (rough) justice. Key security sector learnings will come from detailed assessment of the extent to which gang and non-state interventions in the context of Covid-19 been truly altruistic (Rogers and Jensen 2020).

*National and city stakeholders must not lose sight of police reform*, as this remains a key intervention in the long-term post-pandemic context. Recent evidence has shown militarising urban space through place-based (hotspot) policing only has marginal impact on violent crime, while displacing other crime (Blattman *et al.* 2019). These findings are likely to be more pronounced in situations of easing lockdown, where the success of territorial and placed-based interventions will be entirely dependent on voluntary responses by the public. There is overwhelming evidence to show successful strategies have re-established confidence in the state police by creating relationships of trust between police officers and citizens (see, for example, Diphorn and van Stapele 2020).

### **3.4 Digital and technology-based interventions**

Digital and technology-based interventions are now seen as essential not only for improving tracking, testing and disaster responder capacity, but also to aid early warning and surveillance systems, as well as for quarantine and social control (McDonald 2020). Interesting examples include the use of WhatsApp chatbots to handle public queries related to Covid-19 and achieve a response rate five times quicker than traditional telephone emergency response (Andrews 2020). However, there remains a fundamental gap between the types of technological solutions being proposed and whether these solutions, and the manner in which they are being implemented, are necessarily promoting

inclusivity, resilience and sustainability from the perspective of economically and socially disadvantaged urban residents (Bisht 2020; Hawkins 2020).

Instead, there is potential to invest in transformational digital infrastructures and practices that promote inclusivity and aid preparedness for future crises. Key examples are emerging from cities, such as Buenos Aires, where recent transformational shifts to move the justice system online have helped the city maintain its legal and ethical responsibilities towards individuals involved with the justice system through the situation of Covid-19 lockdown (Chaneton and Casas 2020).

However, the increased reliance on digital interactions, including on social media, has not been coupled with appropriate measures to address young people's safety. There is a strong emergent need to define and respond to the outliers of online violence and harassment for young girls. Investing in young people through capacity building, mentoring to strengthen social capital that is cognisant of differential requirements of age and gender will lead to better accountability mechanisms. This must be accompanied by responsive safeguarding measures in the online space to make digital spaces safe for *all* children.

## 4. Concluding reflections for safer cities programming

The Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically underscored the long-standing consensus that cities must be on the path to inclusion, providing residents access to rights in order to enable longer-term preparedness and resilience (Gupte 2016). This calls out to groups such as the UN-Habitat's Global Network on Safer Cities (UN-Habitat n.d.) to use their experience and knowledge of vulnerability, resource allocations across urban services, land tenure and homelessness, the importance of multipurpose public space, the intersection between public and private space, public-private partnerships, integration of technology, mobile communication and the importance of relationships, trust, and integrity.

Covid-19 has significantly disrupted the social ecology of cities and this must be reflected in how safer cities outcomes are understood and measured. Resilience and safety during Covid-19 have been fundamentally linked. Vulnerability profiles in urban settings have changed (to include those who were just about surviving, and in some instances also those who were thriving before the onset of the pandemic, as well as groups who have historically been protected from the worst impacts of disasters), and intensified (as a result of an amplification of poverty, isolation, poor nutrition, poor health, low access to opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and punitive enforcement). The significance of expanded vulnerability profiles influences development strategies and interventions moving forward and brings a renewed focus on the use of safety indicators to enable adaptive learning during and after Covid-19. In particular, there is a significant opportunity for tools developed within the Global Network of Safer Cities to continually be updated to be relevant to the various local contexts of its diverse members and partners. At the same time, UN safer cities guidelines and programmes must double down on considerations for simple and precise messaging to raise awareness of the trade-offs and complementarities between short-term actions, and resilience or preparedness in the long run.

Covid-19 has not been an 'equaliser', but a shock on existing city-systems and infrastructures that has therefore amplified pre-existing inequalities. Responding to the pandemic must therefore incorporate complex system-wide thinking and involve shared learning across the global South. UN-Habitat and the system-wide adoption of the *United Nations System-Wide Guidelines on Safer Cities and Human Settlements* (UN-Habitat 2012) provide a key platform for South-South and South-North shared learning. Safer cities programming worldwide has amassed knowledge, skills, tools, and practices over many years and continues to learn lessons during Covid-19. This presents important opportunities to join up

approaches across sectors and areas of expertise, in order to shift the global narrative from one of scarcity and competition for survival, to an understanding that success can only be shared and that we are only as safe as our neighbours.

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