



“The infrastructure in the most successful projects are people. Social capital generates community resilience and well-being more than financial capital but it also produces value and financial outputs.”
– Michael COHEN, New School, New York

Image Source: Rice ATMs have been created in Vietnam by private entrepreneurs to provide free, safe distribution of rice to the poor and lower income households and individuals, during the pandemic. The system was endorsed by local governments and it and rapidly and successfully expanded from Ho Chi Minh City to other cities in the country and in the Asean region throughout 2020.
<https://vnanet.vn/en/anh/vna-photos-1027/covid-19-hanoi-unveils-rice-atm-machine-for-underprivileged-people-4598743.html> Note: We apologize for the low image quality.



Nicolas J.A. BUCHOUD (ed.)
Global Solutions Initiative
Paris, France

UNLOCKING THE COVID-19 FROM CITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated into multiple socio-economic challenges in a world interconnected by cities. It has circulated within cities along local and regional infrastructure systems supporting the economy. In the absence of preventative and curative strategies, the World Health Organization, supported by national governments, has urged people to adopt social distancing measures but this approach has had many drawbacks.

Social distancing does not apply for communities depending on street-life. Social distancing does not apply for people and households depending on informal economy, whereas it is a predominant feature of the global urban economy. Social distancing does not apply for workers who have to commute within metro-areas, meaning for hundreds of millions who have been more severely exposed to health risks not because of the place they live but because of jobs and housing distribution.¹

International organizations and national governments have often considered that cities were to implement centralized sets of solutions of social distancing and other sanitary protocols, bypassing local decision-making and overlooking communities' resilience. Now that vaccines distribution has started, the role of subnational governments in contributing to recovery plans is critical, as over 60% of the global gross domestic product comes from less than 1,000 cities and metropolitan areas of +500,000 inhabitants.

It is urgent to unlock the COVID-19 from cities, recognizing the risks of enlarged social divides that could lead to possible new forms of sanitary apartheid. Anticipating the foreseeable post pandemic crises with increased poverty and social inequality, there is need to acknowledge pre-crisis discrepancies. As the semantics and pragmatism of green sustainability are highly developed, the standards for social sustainability, have eroded. In light of the extent of informality, solutions and policies that reduce the waste of social capital and human resources are to be privileged. It's about coevolution of the human social interaction and the environment, but not about a kind of simplistic destructive or even constructive win-win relationship.

As patterns of agglomeration inequalities are repeated locally across the globe, the urban socio-economic consequences of the pandemic have to be addressed globally by national and local governments together with international institutions, otherwise the post COVID-19 crisis financial

deficits will be redoubled by deeper social losses and chronicle institutional instability. Because poverty, which in many cities is particularly related to informality, is only one side of polarization, it is worth not losing sight of the other end: wealth. Cities are places where wealth and poverty sit starkly side by side. In many countries, wealth is concentrated primarily in large cities. They serve the purpose of businesses, social commoditization, the availability of infrastructures, security as well as outward representation. The analysis of both poverty and wealth makes the overall view of social reality possible. This is required, in turn, as basis for understanding the impact and interlinking different policy areas in order to reduce poverty with support of the contributions of both poor and rich households.

It is not all about inequities and injustice. It is also a lot about human capital and people's plans for the future. Well-managed, large scale urban development and urban regeneration projects could become catalysts of integration and participation. Some cities have smartly built upon existing resilience strategies to draw participatory plans for the future and maximise the benefits of digital tools for food and welfare distribution. There are also signs of post-pandemic urban culture emerging from within the crisis, which could be streamlined by the acknowledgement of a new sustainable development goal incorporating culture and creative economy. This would be a clever way to both revive the 2030 Agenda and to strengthen local voices.

Inclusive urbanization depends on many factors, some of them beyond the immediate reach of cities alone. Labour markets will play a critical post COVID-19 'constitutional' role, entailing wealth and welfare distribution at national and regional levels. The introduction of new rights for basic services to all, such as in India, is a promising policy-response reaching out to families and people, including migrant workers. Regional integration and cooperation in key regions for the world economy such as the ASEAN, could bring more long-term benefits than individual national strategies by upscaling new social and welfare standards through structural reforms. We can no longer rely on urban production systems that have been self-reliant on endless growth through global connectivity.

1. For example, in mid-September 2020, São Paulo, which accounts for 12% of the population of Brazil, had 25% of the deaths; Buenos Aires, 33% of the population of Argentina, 60% of the deaths, and Mumbai, 8% of the population of India, 10% of deaths. Source: Financing Cities' Recovery from Covid-19 and Preparing for Future Shocks, U20 Special Working Group on Covid-19 and Future Shocks, Sept. 2020