Live Learning Experience: Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19

Equity and Access in Times of Pandemic.

Briefing & Learning Note

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The joint live learning experience (LLE), developed by UCLG, Metropolis, World Enabled, BMZ, GIZ and UN-Habitat is part of a broader partnership within the Cities4All initiative and the policy recommendations from the Townhall on Inclusive and Accessible Cities, brought together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations promote meaningful exchange on ensuring equity and access during the times of the pandemic.

Local and regional governments, accessibility, and COVID-19

In spite of the opportunities and innovative policies of urbanization, the reality is that the urban era is not accessible for everybody. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a rapid disruption in the daily lives of people around the world for the past months, and has highlighted the growing inequalities that marginalized communities are most affected by today. Local and regional governments, at the frontline of this crisis, play an essential role in protecting human rights through equitable public service provision and awareness raising to the public on life saving information. Taking this into, local and regional governments need to ensure and be responsible for the full participation of all citizens to develop and foster inclusive public policies, legislation, plans, and programs to face the pandemic and ensure a more equitable future.

Many of the responses utilized to communicate information, keep people at work and students in schools, maintain cultural connections and allow people to continue non COVID related medical treatment have been part of accessibility and reasonable accommodation requests prior to this pandemic, particularly for the 25% of the population representing persons with disabilities and older persons. More than half of all persons with disabilities and older persons live in cities and towns today and continue to experience numerous barriers to their effective inclusion and safety, due to inaccessibility in the built, digital and social environment.
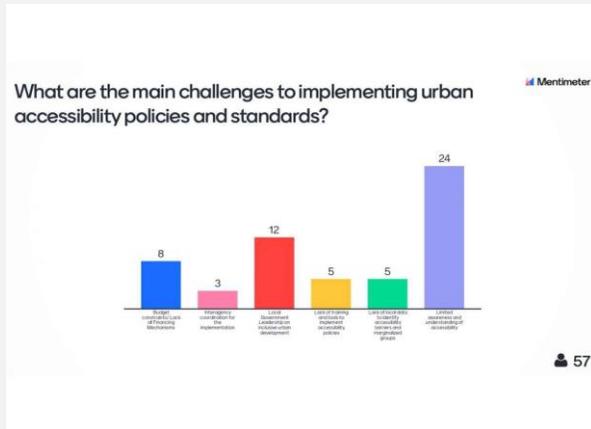
During the COVID-19 recovery phase, we cannot doubt that equity and accessibility will be at the heart of our municipal agenda, and also opening new opportunities for shifts towards social equity, solidarity and resilience in cities. Towards the post COVID-19 era, local and regional governments are committed to making targeted efforts to support the most vulnerable in our cities and towns, and fostering solidarity among territories and putting local measures in place against discrimination and exclusion.

Local and regional governments cannot achieve this transformation alone. Following the co-creation and the political outcomes of the Town Hall process of the 2019 World Congress of Local and Regional Leaders, we should look towards effective and strategic dialogue with civil society and other stakeholders to co-create policies and programs that will foster inclusive processes to ensure current and future pandemic responses are guided by principles of inclusion, namely non-discrimination, accessibility, participation, inclusive urban policies and programs, capacity building and data for development.

Priority for Accessibility and the COVID-19 pandemic

During this pandemic, equity and accessibility are more critical than ever, serving as mechanisms for safety, sustainability and solidarity. Addressing inequalities will be fundamental in our recovery phase, but what mechanisms do local and regional governments need to promote inclusion? What role can accessibility towards ensuring that we leave no one behind in emergency response? What resources and partnerships can help guide and localize the principles of inclusion?

To help answer these questions, an interactive consultation conducted during the session surveyed the participants' thoughts on equity and accessibility in general and during the pandemic; underlying the key challenges and priorities, identified by the participants.

Participants identified 4 priority words in relation to the term accessible which included ***freedom, inclusion, mobility and justice.*** Out of these, *freedom* appeared to resonate with the participants, linked to the idea of choice, associated to accessible design and services. Accessibility is not only a human right but a mechanism to ensure diversity by creating a platform in which people can have the freedom to choose how they live, learn, work and grow in their communities. At the base, freedom is also linked to the concepts of inclusion, justice and mobility which are also indices of equity, prosperity and resilience.

Although associated with freedom and inclusion, the majority of participants still felt that at the local level ***accessibility was moderately being implemented***. With the potential to address inequalities and resilience in cities, this moderate implementation of accessibility is indicative of potential gaps on the realization or local urban policies and standards, that were also prioritized by participants.

What are the main challenges to implementing urban accessibility policies and standards?

Participants were subsequently presented six key challenges and asked to prioritize three out of the following choices: "budget constraints", "interagency coordination", "local government leadership", "lack of training and tools", "lack of local data", and "limited awareness and understanding". Of the six choices, the majority of the participants identified the *limited awareness and understanding of accessibility* as the main challenge which highlights the relevance of city networks and collaborations with partners on specific thematic to foster communities of practices in which local and regional governments can share best practices, share knowledge, access resources and training and pilot knowledge on inclusion and accessibility in their local context.

Equity and Access During and Beyond the Outbreak

Ensuring effective access and limited interruption to essential services during COVID-19 are key pillars to guarantee equitable socio economic resilience, while also facilitating physical distancing and quarantine orders. Along with service provisions, it is crucial that the service providers are protected to reduce the spread of the infection particularly in vulnerable settings such as social care institutions and medical facilities.

The lack of accessibility in the plans for essential service provisions in COVID-19 response measures have left many persons with disabilities and older persons vulnerable at higher risks not only for infection but also, discrimination and isolation. This lack of equitable provisions has also affected social care workers and their ability to safely continue their work, ensure the health and independence of the individuals they care for and minimize the strain on the hospital/emergency medical facilities. There was a consensus during the session in the need of mechanisms to foster an enabling environment, based on the principles of inclusion within the Global Compact on Inclusive and Accessible Cities, to ensure future pandemic responses do not further inequities

Equitable Access in Public Service Delivery and Protection

To foster an enabling environment for inclusion, local government representatives and partners discussed priority aspects of accessibility of public services such as housing, mobility, food distribution, health and education. The city of Banjarmasin brought up the concept of social safety nets, particularly to ensure equitable food distribution to all during the crisis. ***Social safety nets systems*** should be developed using a human rights lens, particularly the right to accessibility. Sao Paulo aimed their social safety nets during the pandemic response through an emergency response center for accessibility provisions for assistive devices, such as wheelchairs and white canes, to ensure that persons with disabilities, particularly those in informal settings, were able to safely shelter in place and manage their daily care. Montevideo social safety nets focused on bringing services for grocery shopping and food delivery directly to homes of at risk groups and those with reduce mobility as a measure to ensure that all people were able to safely stay at home. These initiatives call the attention of the need for accessibility guidelines in emergency shelter, mobility and food distribution responses.

With a view on protection, Abu Dhabi and New York City's social safety nets aimed service delivery on safety and maintenance of people's socio economic activities. Prior

to complete shutdown, Abu Dhabi initially aimed mitigation of infection for employed pregnant women, persons with disabilities and older persons, by issuing a public mandate for them to work from home. Complementary to isolation orders, the city provided online mental health services and onsite medical attention directly to the people's homes. In New York, the city assigned provisions for digital services for those who did not have devices and connections at home. Due to the **_digital accessibility standards_** set in place, students with disabilities were also able to continue their classes online, as schools began delivering classes online to follow stay at home policies.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of **_protection for social care service providers_**. Local provisions for sanitary protective equipment for essential workers, such as masks and gloves, have not adequately considered social care service providers in provisions for these resources.

> *"We are aware that this pandemic affected everyone, in particular most vulnerable. Abu Dhabi had to take actions to improve service provision for all"* Bushra Al Mulla, Executive Director Department of Community Development, Abu Dhabi

> *"We have gone from addressing disability to the perspective of accessibility. It is local and regional government that have to eliminate the barriers that ste from inaccessibility "* Fabiana Larisa Goyenche Giupponi, Director of Social Development, Montevideo

Access to Information

During the live consultation, access to information came up as an important issue in ensuring equity and accessibility during the COVID-19. Updated and correct information is an essential measure to the current pandemic response around the world. As previously highlighted, there was a majority consensus on access to information as priority in ensuring equity and accessibility during the COVID-19. Local and regional governments have been tasked with translating national information into relevant local context to help mitigate the spread of the virus. Although an essential safety measure, information and public briefings on COVID-19 are still not accessible to everyone. Lack of accessibility to life saving information during the pandemic response has exacerbated vulnerabilities of at risk groups, particularly for

persons with disabilities and those with limited access to information and communications technology.

Following the live consultation, the speakers highlighted the measures enacted locally in place to ensure people's right to information by guaranteeing **all messages and updates on COVID-19 were available and accessible**. In Banjarmasin and New York all COVID-19 related information was disseminated with captioning, and national sign language (Indonesian and American). In addition to sign language interpretation, New York and Sao Paulo utilized accessible service channels to relay and communicate information with the option for mobile text message based information and communication with the city and web based information on the city's webpage optimized for accessibility.

By taking into account non-discriminatory and participative communication in urban planning and strategies, particularly in emergency response, local and regional governments can take a direct actions to localize human rights and ensure equity safety measures during and beyond the outbreak.

> *"Recognizing the importance of the reintegration of migrants following the corona virus, we started to think establishing a strategy on the economic reintegration of migrants, how to improve their access to public services, access to information, and the most important is the digitalization that will greatly facilitate this"* Imen Ourdani, Maire adjoint de Sousse

Social Inclusion and Multistakeholder Engagement

The health emergency and social emergency, coupled with physical distancing and isolation measures, have further marginalized those communities that were already vulnerable and invisible in urban development before COVID-19.

The local responses detailed during the session towards localizing inclusive urban policies and programs to address existing and new inequalities, highlighted the importance of participatory community engagement in rapidly and efficiently developing, adapting and delivering inclusive emergency response measures. In Banjarmasin and Sousse, the cities benefited from previous **multi stakeholder engagement and partnerships** with civil society organizations, the private sector,

to assist in the production and dissemination of personal protective equipment. Banjarmasin work directly with community members to develop and maintain a local kitchen, to provide nutritious food to the community. In addition, the city worked together with state and private sector partners to produce and distribute transparent medical masks to address communication barriers of traditional masks. The city of Sousse worked with partners in their multi stakeholder Committee on Social Development to facilitate donation of resources for vulnerable communities. In Sao Paulo, the direct partnership and regular dialogue with local organizations of persons with disabilities have has assisted the city in monitoring the situation for food and sanitary provisions for persons with disabilities.

Local governments also took this opportunity to address the **digital divide**, with examples from both Montevideo and Helsinki having set up digital information and communications centers and service points ensure that those with barriers to accessing internet or information on the internet are able to engage in online communities, discussions and receive updated information. The topic of digital inclusion and the use of frontier technologies for social inclusion has come to the forefront as an essential service to tackle inequities, both during and post COVID.

An important intervention from the city of Sousse, spoke to local government recognition of culture diversity and support services to facilitate cultural celebrations, even in times of crisis. As part of the COVID-19 response Sousse provided health support services to the Sub-Saharan African Muslim community so they could safely follow cultural celebrations during the lockdown. The city wanted to foster solidarity and ensure all communities felt respected and included.

In the post COVID-era, **social inclusion will undoubtedly take a central role in the future development of our cities**. Local and regional governments cannot achieve this inclusive urban transformation alone. Stronger and more meaningful partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders, particularly civil society, will be key and is essential to ensuring that we leave no one behind.

> *"Vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, elderly and urban poor are most affected by outbreak, so Banjarmasin prepared a social safety net through distribution of assistance and basic food, particularly during Ramadan"* H Ibnu Sina, Mayor of Banjarmasin

"Home office and teleworking, is a great opportunity for people with disabilities because this equalizes skills, diminishes barriers of prejudices" Cid Torquato, Commissioner Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities, Sao Paulo

Data based governance and Assessment of Vulnerable Communities during crisis

Towards more effective local responses, the live consultation and discussion highlighted the need more ***disaggregated data*** to identify and plan strategies to assess and address vulnerabilities and barriers in the built, digital and social environments of our cities. In terms of data, New York and Sao Paulo have established local disaggregated data, which includes disability and was the base of their initial emergency response. Sao Paulo's data proved essential in identifying persons with disabilities that were in vulnerable situations, such as those without shelter, and inform their service delivery and provisions of essential accommodations such a food and assistive devices. In Sousse, the city is using data on migration flow during the pandemic, to prepare strategies for re-integration of the migrant population during the recovery phase.

To complement data and inform actions where data is missing, the presentations also highlighted the importance of effective ***assessment mechanisms***, which compliments the need for community engagement and multi stakeholder partnerships. In New York, the city has opened an accessible channel of communication through weekly virtual meetings with the disability community (advocates, service providers, etc). This civic engagement tool has been an essential mechanism to inform, identify gaps and adapt the local response. In Helsinki the city directly reached out to persons over 70 during the lockdown, which was used to assess and deliver assistance with daily activities or items needed. Montevideo also took a proactive approach through their 24/7 phone helpline as an assessment measure and mapping of barriers and vulnerable communities with limited access to services during lockdown.

The utilization of disaggregated data and inclusive assessment mechanisms highlight the leadership of local governments in rapid actions and adaptations measures, which prioritizes human rights as a base to the pandemic response to the benefit of our diverse communities. These open assessment channels have also been an effective

tool for understanding and addressing discrimination and harassment against older persons and persons with disabilities during the pandemic.

> *"During the 1st wave we called everyone over 80 years old in Helsinki, and those over 70, to check how they were doing and if they needed assistance"* Johanna Seppala, Head of Participation and Information Unit in City Executive Office, Helsinki

> *"We really want people to look at the person, not at the disability so they get the care they deserve"* Victor Calise, Commissioner, Mayor's Office on People with Disabilities, NYC

Building Back Better: Equity and Access during and beyond the outbreak

UCLG's and World Enabled's partners including the World Bank, UNICEF, the UN Special Envoy on Accessibility and Metropolis highlighted the need for synergies in in initiatives for the equality and accessibility through a multidimensional approach: synchronizing the data and information of local and regional governments globally (with common surveys); giving special attention to each part of this heterogeneous group (as children, for example); and implementing inclusive public policies and services. Recognizing the opportunities to build back better and effectively address inequalities in pandemic response and our post COVID-19 world the discussion left clear recommendations on the way forward including:

   1) **Ensuring accessibility and equity is engrained in public service delivery and protection.**

Public service delivery is essential to the global COVID-19 response and that we all must work towards guaranteeing that all people are duly protected and informed. To this end, it is vital to ensure that services are accessible and that delivery is non-discriminatory. This entails making sure that services are provided to all citizens including the most vulnerable and those living and working in informal contexts, guaranteeing the protection of all service providers working tirelessly on the frontline, and fostering an enabling environment based on principles of inclusion to ensure

persons with disabilities and older persons at higher risks of infection and also discrimination and isolation are protected and not left behind. Overall, the session made clear that fully accessible, open, and transparent service provision is a key pillar to maintaining and promoting socio economic resilience during and in the aftermath of the crisis.

2) Non-discriminatory Access to Communication and Information

Access to information is essential to guarantee people are have timely and accurate information related to the pandemic and the availability of services a during and beyond the outbreak. Local and regional governments have the competencies and responsibility to ensure that all residents and visitors have access to the lifesaving information in multiple formats that takes account vulnerabilities from limited access to the internet and information and communication technologies. Methods include ensuring all briefings are accessible with captioning, the guaranteeing of open and inclusive communications lines to help fight discrimination and harassment, the provision of digital infrastructure to ensure all citizens can access information and education, and digital centers where people can equitably access technology devices and online information

3) Ensuring capacity building in mainstreaming accessibility and universal design across all government sectors.

To properly design and implement inclusive programmes that prioritize universally accessible, safe, and diverse environments at the core of pandemic response, local and regional governments must prioritize mechanisms that enable authorities to fully address the structural inequalities citizens face on a daily basis. This means fostering enabling environments pre-pandemic through legislative measures to enable human rights, mechanisms for participatory planning and decision making; promoting inter-agency coordination to mainstream universal design and accessibility, and initiatives that address discriminatory attitudes and beliefs on vulnerable populations , particularly persons with disabilities and older persons; local leadership and budgets that champion inclusion, accessible health services and equitable security and independence. These evaluative pillars are essential to enable prepared and resilient communities and empower local and regional governments to ensure equitable and accessible pandemic response and recovery actions

4) Multi-stakeholder collaboration in disaster preparedness, management and recovery and post-recovery planning and actions.

The inclusion of civil society groups in decision making will also prove to be vital to ensuring that no one and no place is left behind. Grassroots organizations ensure proper coordination amongst communities and local institutions concentrating on the needs of people on the ground as the closest organizations to citizens. Local and regional governments recognize the importance of bottom-up collaboration with different internationally organized communities and civil society to ensure that a space of structural dialogue is created as was provided for by the Town Hall process stemming from the 2019 World Congress of Local and Regional Leaders. Within this context, local and regional governments must continue to support dialogue with civil society and multi-stakeholder collaboration to co-create policies and programs that will foster inclusive processes that will ensure our current and future pandemic responses are guided by principles of inclusion.

5) Disaggregated Data based governance and Inclusive Barriers Assessment

Data based governance is essential to ensuring that the diverse needs of all facets of the population are considered during and beyond the pandemic. This is especially the case to recognize and address the rights and needs of the most vulnerable, among them persons with disabilities and older persons living in informal settings with limited support from public services and authorities. Moreover, this can be exacerbated by unequal access to internet and digital services for citizens. During the session it was made clear that data based governance and tools to help citizens grounded on data can aid in protecting the rights and health of our communities. To better serve all facets of the population and respond to growing socio economic inequalities, further exacerbated during times of crisis, local and regional governments need to adequately understand the gaps and needs of their communities through disaggregated data on gender, disability and age. To compliment data disaggregation, local and regional governments need to develop mechanisms to conduct barrier assessments in direct dialogue and coordination with civil society. Participatory assessment mechanisms will support local authorities in rapidly adapt pandemic responses to address local vulnerabilities.

6) Bridging the Digital Divide during and beyond the outbreak

The imperative for digital inclusion is here and will dictate the future of equity in cities. Local and regional governments will be at the heart of this transformation, should be supported by national governments and international organizations in issuing agile regulatory structures, specifying standards, procurement policies, and guidelines that ensure accessibility and usability of digital products and services for all. On the other level, local governments should actively support programs to guarantee that emerging technologies can maximize the benefits they yield and minimize their harm by collaborating with civil society organizations, academia, private sector, policymakers, organizations of persons with disabilities organizations, and organizations of older persons.

The recommended points above recall the policy commitments approved by the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments following the Townhall on Inclusive and Accessible Cities, which addressed the need for more capacity building and awareness and called for the formulation of a **Global Community of Practice on Inclusive and Accessible Cities***; a space where cities can dialogue for local governments and urban actors to exchange knowledge and good practices on inclusive urban development, develop tools to implement the principles in of the* [*Global Compact on Inclusive and Accessible Cities*](#) *and create partnerships to accelerate local implementation, development, evaluation on inclusion and sustainability.*

Resources

- Accessible PDF Policy Paper on Inclusive and Accessible Cities [EN](#), [ES](#), [FR](#)

- Audio version of Policy Paper on Inclusive and Accessible Cities [EN](#), [ES](#), [FR](#)

- [Information from Word Enabled series Equity and Access in Times of Pandemic](#)

- [Transcript of the session](#)

- [Cities for All COVID-19 "Inclusive & Accessible Cities" Pilot Survey](#)

- [Transport Justice: Designing Fair Transport Systems](#)

- NYC COVID-19 Information: [GET FOOD NYC,](#) [NYC COVID Disability Services Facilitators](#), [NYC Human Rights](#), [NYC MOPD](#), [NYC Digital Accessibility Resources](#)