

COVID-19 Guidance Note¹

Protecting residents of informal settlements

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Housing has become the frontline defense against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation.

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, States across the world are asking and, in some cases, legislating that people “stay home”. This is based on the assumption that one’s home provides protection against contracting and spreading the virus. This is not always the case.

At least 1 billion people live in informal settlements/encampments, including one-quarter of the world’s urban population. Conditions in informal settlements are often grossly inadequate at the best of times. Many residents live without access to on-site water or sanitation, are over-crowded, and face the constant threat of forced eviction. Handwashing, disinfecting surfaces, physical distancing and quarantine for those infected – essential elements in COVID-19 prevention – are often impossible.

Unless governments step-up with immediate measures to assist communities in addressing these conditions, COVID-19 could spread like wildfire, putting many lives at risk both within and outside of these settlements. It is imperative that States recognize that those living in informal settlements/encampments are particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus and this increases the risk of community transmission.

In this context, States must address the housing needs of encampments and informal settlements on an urgent and priority basis to ensure their equal protection against the virus and the protection of the broader population. This will require cooperation between national and subnational governments, so that the necessary resources and capacities are available to ensure all efforts carried out to fight the pandemic are effective. States must take the following urgent measures, in keeping with their human rights obligations:

1. Declare an end to all forced evictions of informal settlements and encampments. Ensure the necessary resources are available to implement this order effectively, including resources to monitor and prevent extrajudicial evictions.

¹ This guidance note was developed through consultations with advocates from Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and Latin America. The guidance note may be updated incorporating further expert advice, good practices or lessons learned.

2. Impose a prohibition of any emergency processes, such as ‘de-densification’, that involves the removal of large numbers of people from informal settlements/encampments. Instead, priority must be given to ensuring informal settlements/encampments are equipped to manage the pandemic including establishing safe quarantine locations for residents who test positive or show symptoms of the virus.
3. Ensure all residents of informal settlements/encampments have access to an adequate, affordable and proximate supply of water, toilets, showers, sanitation services, soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectants, and masks. In communities with limited access to local water supply, water tankers and equipment to create boreholes must be urgently provided. Governments must ensure that water and sanitation services are provided in a manner that allows residents to comply with strict hygiene measures and physical distancing.
4. Provide residents with assistance in establishing or strengthening local community structures so that they can effectively work alongside governments in addressing the pandemic.
5. Develop emergency plans to assist residents of informal settlements/encampments during the pandemic in conjunction with community leaders and residents and ensure these plans are well communicated. Community leaders must be provided with education and training on COVID-19 safety measures and should be invited to assist essential service personnel in providing required services.
6. Ensure residents of informal settlement/encampments have non-discriminatory access to public and private health services proximate to their communities and ensure that testing for COVID-19 is free of charge. Health services must be made available to anyone who contracts the virus, including through informal or traditional health providers who should be included in national and local pandemic response plans.
7. Ensure housing providers in informal settlements provide rent abatements to those affected by COVID-19 and prohibit the cutting off of water and electricity services to households unable to pay their bills. Debt forgiveness schemes should be implemented to ease financial hardship post-pandemic.
8. Lock-down provisions should not affect essential services in informal settlements/encampments that are commonly provided by the local informal economy, such as distribution and reselling of food, water, wood and energy, hygienic articles, provision of emergency transportation, care for children, persons with disabilities, older persons, and those with illnesses.
9. Undertake public education campaigns and ensure residents of informal settlements/encampments have access to information on a regular basis regarding COVID-19, best health practices, government health policies and available supports. This information must be available in local languages, and through diverse mechanisms, not just through social media.

10. Recognize that residents of informal settlements/encampments often depend on the informal economy for their livelihood and ensure any emergency financial aid offered to those in the formal economy affected by the pandemic is also made available to those in the informal economy so that they do not disproportionately suffer from the economic downturn triggered by the pandemic.

11. Recognize that international cooperation during the pandemic will be key to ensuring a global response that is effective in protecting the entirety of the human family. Affluent States and international financing institutions must suspend or cancel the debts of less affluent States. They must also direct financial support to those less affluent States that are working to protect residents of informal settlements through the securing of adequate housing during and after the pandemic, in a manner that is compliant with human rights.