

UNECE Aarhus Convention

Tenth meeting of the Task Force on Public Participation in Decision-Making

Monday, 10 October, 11.30 a.m.–12.00 p.m. and 2.30–3 p.m. CET

Agenda item 3: COVID-19 pandemic and public participation: challenges and opportunities

Statement by Graham Alabaster

**Chief Geneva Office, Office of the Executive Director,
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)**

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good urban and territorial planning is a key intervention to help manage both communicable and noncommunicable disease responses. Many challenges relating to health inequity still persist, and the fragmented decision-making amongst different urban actors (national, regional and local governments, private sector, civil society and the community) results in weak governance structures.

The recent pandemic, with 90% of Covid-19 cases in urban settlements, meant that local authorities and their partners are in the front line for first response, management and recovery. The pandemic has not only demonstrated the urgent need for cities to have effective emergency preparedness plans and health crisis policies. But also, the importance of establishing mechanisms, platforms and institutional settings for coordination across government institutions and multi-stakeholder collaboration to successfully introduce and implement emergency and recovery measures.

Through UN-Habitat research, we have found that **multi-level and multi-sectoral governance** has helped to achieve best results in the pandemic response. We have developed a **Guide on Leveraging Multi-Level Governance for Health Equity** to expand on this.

The publication has two objectives:

1. How to achieve transformative impact through multi-level governance by placing peoples' needs at the centre, especially vulnerable groups

and

2. To showcase ways in which institutional frameworks can leverage multi-level governance for future health crisis preparedness and health equity.

The pandemic has shown how health in cities has a great deal to do with how municipal governments work with communities, private industry and especially minority groups and the working poor, who are so often left out of decision-making processes.

Alongside the governance measures adopted by cities with the involvement and support of non-state actors, community groups and civil society have themselves played a central role in strengthening health response strategies and driving citizen-led solutions. Community engagement allows cities to build greater trust in policy measures and maximize trust in institutions and the health authorities.

Community engagement and belief in public health information is a crucial element in any successful health crisis response. This was also evident during the outbreak of Ebola in 2014, when a widespread mistrust of authorities led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories and a disregard for many basic protocols to prevent transmission, thus significantly contributing to the spread of the disease.

I would like to share two examples of **Local Strategic Partnership's** where communities were well placed to influence decision-making:

1. **Estonia's community engagement app**. This app allowed local governments to directly interact with their constituents through sharing COVID-19 information, posting photos and videos etc.
2. In **Uganda**, local councils were mobilized to **distribute promotional posters** in local dialects with health precautions and information, in addition to monitoring community members and enforcing social distancing measures.

Digital technologies have transformed urban governance and proved indispensable in supporting responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as the **2021 UN-Habitat Report on Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future** shows. To this end, through tracking apps, remote meetings, online surveys and other e-government practices, many cities have reorganised their approach to public participation, data collection and policy design. A word of caution however, if not properly regulated, this increased surveillance could undermine democratic governance and human rights. It is therefore essential that access to digital technologies is extended to everyone and appropriate protections around privacy and freedom are put in place.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught and continues to teach us new approaches to managing disease. In particular, how technological advances have helped reinforce traditional public health methods, especially before effective treatments and vaccines are available. Public participation is the key to ensuring these approaches are effective and institutionalised.

Thank you for your attention.

For further details:

2021 UN-Habitat Report on Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future

<https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-pandemics-towards-a-more-just-green-and-healthy-future-0>

2021 Guide on Leveraging Multi-Level Governance for Health Equity

<https://unhabitat.org/a-guide-leveraging-multi-level-governance-approaches-to-promote-health-equity>
