First Online Meeting of the UCLG Community of Practice on Housing

Protecting the Right to Housing in the Context of COVID-19 and #BeyondTheOutbreak

Friday, May 22 2020

The first online meeting of the UCLG Community of Practice (CoP) on Housing assessed emerging housing challenges and policy initiatives by local governments in the context of COVID-19 for better protecting the right to housing and the right to the city beyond the outbreak. It provided a follow-up to UCLG's Live Learning Experience #BeyondTheOutbreak focused on housing, which was held on April 1. The May 22 meeting also built on documents developed within UCLG, like the "Cities for Adequate Housing" Declaration and the Decalogue for the COVID-19 aftermath.

The meeting gathered housing representatives from **Barcelona** (Housing Councillor Lucía Martín), **Paris** (Deputy Mayor for Housing Ian Brossat), **London** (Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development Tom Copley), **Cape Town** (Councilor Xolani Sotashe), **Montreal** (Counselor for Housing, Real Estate Strategy and Public Parks Robert Beaudry), **Rivas Vaciamadrid** (Housing Councillor José Luis Alfaro), and **Valencia** (Housing Councillor Isabel Lozano); the President of **Plaine Commune** and co-chair of the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights Patrick Braouezec; the global director of the **Make The Shift** and former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right Housing Leilani Farha; as well as **UCLG's** Secretary General Emilia Sáiz.

COVID-19: Main challenges and impacts on housing

Housing-related issues are having a central role in the social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 is having profound impacts across the world, exacerbating already existing vulnerabilities and creating new ones. As recalled by UCLG's Secretary General, **Emilia Sáiz**, housing was soon identified by local and regional governments (LRGs) as a critical issue in connection to the impacts of the

pandemic. According to **Leilani Farha** (The Shift), "*the crisis brought to the forefront challenges predating the outbreak, such as homelessness, inability to pay rents, evictions or housing financialization*".

According to the Deputy Mayors for Housing of **Paris** and **London**, COVID-19 has put housing-based inequalities back in the spotlight: not everybody went through the lockdown measures in the same way according to where or how they lived. In the case of **Barcelona**, those that have been more affected by this crisis (like migrant residents, precarious workers or single-parent families) are also the ones to which it is more challenging to channel public aid. According to **Montreal's** Councillor, the harsh social impact connecting housing inequalities and COVID-19 showed "*how social housing policies developed by local governments were not a whim, but a real need and a condition to guarantee their residents welfare*".

Exacerbated vulnerabilities and systemic failures: COVID-19 impacts over unaffordability, evictions and homelessness

Housing unaffordability, evictions and homelessness were identified as the three main challenges exacerbated by COVID-19. **Paris'** Deputy Mayor on Housing Ian Brossat stressed how the crisis has directly impacted many households' capacity to pay their rents, which increases the risk of eviction. Even though moratoriums have been put in place, sustainable solutions should build upon stronger social security systems, according to **London**'s Deputy Mayor on Housing Tom Copley. **Barcelona's** Councilor Lucía Martín also stressed the importance of protecting vulnerable residents in the long term in case there's a massive increase of unemployment and temporary benefits put in place recently are no longer available.

The crisis shows the interdependence between the right to housing and all human rights

According to **Valencia's** Housing Councillor Isabel Lozano, many improvements have been done to strengthen social assistance systems, yet much more needs to be done to recognize the right to housing and protect it as such. Many participants noted the interconnection between access to housing and many other human rights due to the crisis. As recalled by **UCLG-CSIPDHR**'s coordinator, Amanda Fléty, LRGs have increasingly taken their responsibility, developing innovative policies to advance housing's social function. As recalled by Ms. **Farha**, "*governments do not have new human rights obligations, but must respect and fulfil those they already had. Human rights are not particular to any crisis*".

Diverse city contexts, similar institutional challenges

According to **Rivas Vaciamadrid**'s Housing Councillor José Luis Alfaro, local governments face similar problems when it comes to housing policies: lack of regulatory capacities and adequate funding. In this regard, **London** noted how it doesn't have a system of rent control and doesn't have the powers to put one in place, yet the Mayor has been particularly active in terms of advocacy, calling for more regulation and protections for tenants.

In spite of these challenges, local authorities showed their capacity to rapidly adapt to the new challenges posed by COVID-19 over local housing systems, as noted by **Montreal**'s Housing Councillor Robert Beaudry. **Cape Town**'s Councilor Xolani Sotashe agreed with Montreal's Councillor, yet affirmed how the pandemic is bringing additional responsibilities to municipalities in parallel to lesser financial resources to cope with them.

Other COVID-19 impacts over local housing systems

According to Ian Brossat, City of **Paris,** the crisis is triggering other transformations offering an opportunity for advancing the right to housing. One of these relates to how the crisis affects short-term rental apartments, and how this trend could help increase rental market supply. As noted by **Barcelona**, however, some landlords are taking advantage of existing legal voids to continue offering short-term rental arrangements under fraudulent terms. This allows landlords to avoid more stable standard rental contracts without the city government being able to do anything about it and prevent these behaviors.

Paris also mentioned how, with the rise of teleworking, many office spaces might be left vacant, which offers an opportunity to bring more housing units into the market. In Paris, around 350,000 m2 of office spaces have been transformed into housing units. **London** is also transforming empty offices into affordable homes, even though Mr. Copley recognized how these new units should maintain adequacy conditions. According to **Barcelona**, even though it seemed that the crisis might result in a decrease of housing prices, this might not end up being the case due to property distribution.

Housing and COVID-19: Emerging policy responses put in place by local governments

Emergency solutions: Homelessness

In conjunction with the national government, **Paris** has reached an agreement with the hotels to provide rooms for 1,500 people living in homelessness inside the city and for 3,000 in the Paris region. **London** advanced a similar strategy just before the lockdown began. The designated rough sleeping team booked hotel rooms, providing emergency accommodation to 1,300 people in Greater London and 250 in the city of London. Such efforts also contemplate a long-term strategy for providing housing to rough sleepers. London raised the point that the national funding they had received was key in the provision of emergency housing, noting however that such support needs to be maintained to prevent these residents from returning to the streets. **Barcelona** also made available hotel rooms and housing facilities to ensure housing for approximately 3,000 people, including people who are homeless as well as persons in precarious jobs, who could no longer afford rent due to the crisis and faced eviction.

According to Councillor Robert Beaudry, **Montréal** was already facing a housing crisis before the outbreak, yet the COVID-19 pandemic is turning it into an even larger social crisis. He also stressed how, despite the large number of existing social housing units in the city, the need to ensure physical

distancing entailed that the city had to requisition further accommodation spaces, such as cultural facilities and hotel rooms.

Emergency solutions: Rental market and evictions

Paris, **London** and **Barcelona** implemented measures to protect tenants and residents at risk of eviction, in most cases in coordination with national authorities. **Paris** introduced for instance the possibility to stagger rent payment and introduced a moratorium of evictions until March 2021 in the city's social housing system. In the case of **London** renters are also being protected from evictions until the end of June, while **Barcelona** is enforcing an eviction moratorium in public rental housing. The city is also applying a moratorium on the collection of rents from the city's social housing stock as well as a 5.5M€ budget to lower the fees of those in need. The city will also continue to provide allowances to protect residents living in private rentals.

Box 1: Montreal's Social Housing Strategy: Guaranteeing Affordable Housing and an Inclusive Metropolis by 2021

Montreal shared its local plan on social housing, which was launched in 2018 and intends to deliver 12.000 new social housing units by 2021. According to Montreal's Councillor for Housing, Real Estate Strategy and Public Parks, this measure will be playing a crucial role in ensuring affordability and supporting those that suffered the most in the aftermath of the pandemic. In the long term, it is also part of a more structural vision for the city, focused on achieving an integrated and inclusive model of metropolitan development. The plan is structured around 5 axis:

- Supporting community-led housing, as half of the 12.000 new social housing units are developed under a co-housing scheme;
- Since 2005, each new building is asked to offer a 15% of affordable rental housing;
- Launching a $ 15 million budget dedicated to fostering housing innovation, where civil society groups propose new housing ideas;
- Maintaining a subsidy program on affordability and housing adequacy to keep residents from living in unhealthy conditions;
- Accepting affordable property for young families, something which frees up rental stock and avoids urban sprawl;

Mr. Beaudry also mentioned how Montreal already "s*tarted working on a draft regulation for a mixed metropolis, with the obligation for any housing developer of more than 5 units to offer a 20% of them as affordable housing*". In terms of affordable housing, the City also wants to ensure such measures' sustainability, meaning housing units will still be affordable in 2025, avoiding housing speculation and financialization.

Housing and COVID-19:
Ways forward and proposals for guaranteeing the Right to Housing #BeyondTheOutbreak

What type of systemic changes are needed in housing #BeyondTheOutbreak

According to Mr. Brossat, "*One of the most striking phenomena we are seeing is how many people who provide basic services to our cities and allow them to function*

normally, such as nurses or supermarket cashiers, can't even live in them. We knew it already, but it's even more outrageous in the current context. The principle we must defend is very simple: those who run our cities must have the right to live in them". According to **UCLG-CSIPDHR**'s co-chair Patrick Braouezec, this phenomenon can't be disconnected from debates dealing with metropolization and polycentrism from a Right to the City perspective.

This discussion deals also with promoting inclusiveness and diversity of populations and functions - "*Multifunctionality goes beyond housing: We must ensure that all public services, those of culture, leisure or economic activity, are accessible and within everyone's reach*". These ideas were much in line with those of **Rivas Vaciamadrid**, which argued that "*fulfilling the right to housing through public policies goes beyond building houses, but deals also with designing the type of cities we want our neighbours to live in*".

According to **UCLG's** Secretary General Emilia Sáiz, systemic changes many LRGs are promoting in regards to urban development deal with many economic and social issues, including housing and the real estate market.

Ms. Farha noted how "*a global consensus emerged telling us that the best way to combat the virus was for people to stay at home - housing is therefore at the centre of so much of what we're experiencing right now*". Ms. Farha believes this moment provides an opportunity to foster deeper changes in both narrative and practice: "*We can better assert new global consensus around housing as a social good, around the need to eliminate homelessness or to put our energy to promoting social housing and re-examining the relationship with the private sector or between national governments and LRGs*".

Box 2: Bringing Human Rights-based perspectives and policies at the heart of the conversation

The toolkit presented during the meeting by Ms. Farha offers "*practical tools for governments to champion human rights and the right to housing while ensuring safety and the best possible outcomes in the current context and beyond*". The toolkit draws on already existing practices. These innovations depend on each local context and capacities. Indeed, and according to Ms. Farha, "*international human rights law provides a target showing where we want to go, but it is up to each government to*

decide how to reach these goals". The toolkit is devised to help governments deliver transformations in key areas like homelessness (recognizing it as a rights violation and putting in place measures to eliminate it in the pandemic's aftermath) or affordability (reevaluating the way rents are defined by market rates and fostering in exchange affordable rents according to each housing unit income).

Shifting the relationship with the private real estate market

As highlighted by **Mr. Brossat**, "*The crisis triggers difficulties but also opportunities regarding housing, with the decline in tourism and the rise of teleworking.*" Paris is indeed planning to create "*a real estate company composed of both public and private funds to create affordable housing (20% below the rental market price)*", a lot of which could come from reconverted touristic apartments and offices.

Ms. **Sáiz** called for shifting the conversation with the private sector, "*They cannot just sell us whatever kind of product they have. We need to define what we want and co-define that agenda.*" On that note, **Paris** advocates for the implementation of new regulatory tools, including both touristic apartment platforms and rent regulation systems (*encadrement des loyers*).

In **Barcelona**, the first priority is dealing with the short-term emergency. "*We can't go back to the 2008 eviction wave. We have to extend prevention measures for 6 more months so that in the meantime the laws are tuned, and the parties are required to mediate.*" In the long-term, more affordable housing needs to be built. But even if the City is supporting the construction of more than 4,000 affordable housing units, resources are scarce. "*If we want to scale up production of affordable housing, we have to include the private sector*", said Ms. Martín, also stressing the need to implement anti-speculation measures such as permanent affordability of the units: "*public-private partnerships, yes, but not at the expense of selling public land*". Ms. Lozano, **City of Valencia**, also called for rent regulation to curb speculation: "*Now is the time for regulation to prevent unaffordable prices once the crisis is over*".

Both Montreal and Cape Town agreed with the need to engage the private sector, and brought in the role of civil society and local communities. **Cape Town**'s Councilor Xolani Sotashe said about local communities "*we plan together the resources that we have emanated from the communities that we represent.*" To which **Montreal**'s Councillor Robert Beaudry added "*Let's talk about economic recovery, but let's make sure we include civil society (...) social housing development allows more diversity and social inclusion.*"

A renewed emphasis on social housing

Participants emphasized the importance of promoting social housing in coming times, aiming at both ensuring housing affordability as well supporting economic recovery. According to Mr. Copley, "*local authorities in the 60s were building almost half of the total housing output. Then, after the 80s neoliberal approach, housing construction was left to the private market, which is now not delivering housing at the price people can afford*". Mr**.** Copley shared London's plan to expand the affordable housing stock. "*Councils in London are back building council housing. The City Hall now has a significant affordable housing budget, though still inadequate. We need more support from the National*

Government" adding also how *"there's an economic case to support housing: Support the social rental sector to drive our economic recovery."* However, the financing and scalability challenge of social housing should also be addressed: *"The housing we build relies on the houses we sell, which means we need to find the rest of resources elsewhere"*. That's why he called for *"A renewed investing in genuinely affordable housing".*

Multi-level cooperation as a driver of structural transformations

Another key feature is that of multi-level cooperation. As recalled by Ms. **Sáiz**, *"there is no single sphere of government that can push for these types of transformations alone"*. A strong case on this issue was nonetheless made by Mr. Beaudry, who emphasized the need to give more powers and resources to cities: *"National governments have a role in financing, but local governments are those which must put them in place and coordinate."* Mr. Beaudry also added how *"for many years, city governments were perceived as an implementation-oriented administration, and that their potential to lead transformation has only been recognized recently. This is why we have to allow cities to have the necessary funding"*.

A renewed focus for networking on housing

Ms**.** Sáiz emphasized how *"the work made by UCLG and its membership through our shared commitment with The Shift helped to put housing at the heart of international agendas"* and that face to the emergence of new practices and shared aspirations *"we need to go beyond as a network of cities, building on your advocacy initiatives and policy developments"*.

According to Mr. Brossat, a priority for networking in the coming period should be to *"put housing back at the heart of the conversation"*, and that on behalf of Paris, *"we would happily contribute to fostering these debates, as well as sharing those measures that we put in place in our city as well as the challenges we encountered"*. **Barcelona's** Housing Councillor Lucía Martín made similar remarks, arguing how local governments *"have a key role to play in fostering the necessary changes in housing policy we've been addressing throughout this session, by both developing new policies as well as carrying out advocacy efforts at a national and international level"*. According to Ms. Martín, it is imperative *"to keep talking about housing in the context of what changes should be made in our cities in the pandemic's aftermath"*.

Valencia argued how local governments could benefit from the experience of their peers in areas like public-private-partnerships, and that her city was willing to join the "Cities for Adequate Housing" Declaration.

Finally, Ms. **Farha** proposed "The Shift" initiative as a platform to develop the right to housing narrative in the pandemic's aftermath, gathering different actors to build new global consensus around housing.