



Habitat International Coalition  
Coalición Internacional del Hábitat  
Coalition Internationale de l'Habitat  
Coalizão Internacional do Habitat  
التحالف الدولي للموئل  
अंतरराष्ट्रीय पर्यावास गठबंधन

## MANIFESTO

### **HABITAT VOICES: THROUGH THIS PANDEMIC, THE FUTURE IS TODAY**

**May 2020**

The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) has been fighting for social justice, gender equality and the sustainability of our planet since 1976. HIC is a global network of more than 400 affiliate organizations and allies in 120 countries on five continents, which works, along with many social movements, for the defense of human rights to habitat and to dignified housing. We hereby call upon all human rights defenders working at the neighborhood, local, national, regional and international levels to join voices and efforts to help build a socially and environmentally just present and future.

#### **1. The pandemic has made pre-existing inequalities visible**

Cities—large, mid-sized and small—are today home to more than half the world's population and often islands of modernity and capitalist opulence. But much of the world's urban population continues to live in inadequate, unsafe conditions and places, in poverty and without opportunities. Throughout the world, the conditions of habitat reflect deep economic, social, political and environmental inequalities. These are the consequence of accelerated processes of privatization of urban and rural spaces, speculation and dispossession, which in turn produce unequal access to common goods and services that are essential to everyone's daily life. Structural inequalities are particularly evident throughout much of the Global South, after more than three decades of neoliberal policies that have prioritized accumulation over human life.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a global health crisis; it has exposed pre-existing inequalities and the exhaustion of the political-economic system that produces and reproduces these inequalities, as well as historical exclusions and the destruction of ecosystems, vital to human life. Faced with this global sanitary alert, cities have gone into quarantine under “universal immunological measures of social protection” like “stay-at-home” programs which have been quickly spread without distinction to gender, class, age, ethnicity, physical or mental capacity. Such measures assume that everyone has a home, access to basic water, sanitation and food, the ability to work from home and to draw on their savings in periods of crisis. Thus, we are witnessing an unqualified perception of the State as protector of the lives of all citizens; and a romanticized view of COVID-19 quarantines, as scenarios where ‘home’ is presumed as a safe place, and ‘people’ as owners of their bodies and times, of their decisions on production and reproduction, on collective action and political participation; in short, as citizens in full capacity to exercise their rights.

These assumptions, which are deeply rooted in our societies and system of government, continue to have a disproportionate impact on typically invisible social sectors: the poor,

the informal workers, the migrants, the indigenous peoples, and, to a large extent, the women who live at the intersection of multiple social identities.

## 2. Self-care is not the same for everyone

The pandemic makes visible the precariousness and fragility of housing conditions for lower-income people, in inadequate homes or shared living arrangements, without the ability to isolate, or under poor hygienic conditions<sup>1</sup>. Millions of poor and low-income inhabitants are forced by inadequate housing policies into overcrowded spaces and denied access to basic services. Starting now, we must devise and develop strategies to protect those who do not have a safe place for self-care: people who live in precarious settlements that are also victimized by a strange multiplication of aggressions and fires; those that pay abusive rent; people living on the street, immigrants. In short, those who are forced to tell themselves every day: "If I don't go out and work, I don't eat; nor can I pay my rent or utilities, I could be evicted, or have my water or light turned off." Similarly, rural communities also face multiple challenges, as, for instance health and social services are often scarce, both in infrastructure and staffing. To date, although there have been fewer cases of contagion in rural areas, if they begin to multiply, the consequences could be serious. To protect themselves, many rural communities have blocked roads to avoid incoming contagion, affecting their production economies, as they can no longer go out and sell their produce.

Violence against women increases in situations of confinement and crisis; rising reports of gender violence are testimony of this situation. This includes not just violence against women who are shut in with their abusers, but also against children and the elderly. We must also remember that women are the caretakers of humanity, in their homes, their neighborhoods and wider society. They represent the majority of sanitary personnel and informal workers; in the more precarious neighborhoods, they are key caregivers, they are the ones who operate soup kitchens and manage community activities. At home, they support the education of their children, feed their families, procure water and more, while preserving emotional balance.

Many of the preventive measures—as necessary as they may be to contain the virus' propagation—widen the gap between those who can and those who cannot adopt them. For example, in many countries schools are closed and teaching is taking place online; but in lower-income countries only 20% of people have access to the Internet. A similar reality applies to other indicators, like the number of hospital beds, or social security system. Only 22% of the world's jobless receive assistance, and this excludes people who are underemployed or precariously employed. Furthermore, many countries rely on the use of big data as a security measure, compiling and analyzing personal data through electronic media, or have sent their armed forces out into the street to enforce social isolation and curfews.

This is a contradictory moment in history: we are presented with both threats and opportunities. Let's assume the possibility of rethinking habitat rights and conditions of life, recognize the value of the human scale of our territories, of diversified means of

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<sup>1</sup> See attached HIC-AL Declaration on Precarious Settlements [here](#).

production and dignified livelihoods and their relationship with the habitat and public health and education systems.

### **3. No more lost decades**

In an interview published in early April 2020, the Director of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) declared that COVID-19 threatens to impose two decades of lost progress on many countries. Latin America and the Caribbean already know what it means to go through a “lost decade”—it’s not just turning the clock back ten years, but mortgaging the lives and opportunities of entire generations, risking further erosion of public and universal health, education, housing, services, employment and social protection systems. Also in early April—at a time in which the impact of the pandemic was only beginning to be felt in many regions—The Secretary-General of the United Nations estimated the need to mobilize an international assistance plan equivalent to 10% or more of global GDP (more than 2 trillion dollars). To date, however, international and regional efforts on this front are still marginal, and they must be broadened and thought of as the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for reconstruction.

The combination of public health crisis and economic paralysis has fallen hard upon the working and excluded majorities. We know that it will worsen poverty and joblessness. Progress toward the sustainable development goals, SDG 2030, will fall far afield of those targets. Now more than ever, we must oppose the traditional recipes of capital; overcoming the crisis must not depend on financial flows in support of and under the control of private interests or speculators. Hunger is unacceptable.

### **4. Learning from the past to build a different present and future**

The pandemic may be seized by some as a pretext for reinforcing authoritarianism and accumulation by dispossession, relying on old racist, patriarchal, colonialist and neoliberal tropes that fan the flames of individualism, indifference, hate and fear. But the crisis has also proven the collective capacity of critical thought and action of the people. This is particularly evident in self-built settlements, cooperative processes, and the everyday application of the principles of social production and management of habitat. These are the historical practices of survival and solidarity embedded in struggles for land, housing, basic services, public transport, education and health, which must be recognized and supported. The current challenge is to recognize and support these collective capacities and hold decision-making entities responsible for the process.

The reinforcement of deepening inequalities calls for the urgent need to strengthen the State's role as guarantor of rights. The basic function of fiscal policy becomes crucial in ensuring there are sufficient resources to respond to the crisis; this is especially true in regions characterized by regressive tax systems that benefit the rich, to the detriment of the poor and most vulnerable. The effects of this crisis must be mitigated through the adoption of redistributive tax policies that guarantee sufficient, deep-rooted and structural social protection, financed through progressive reforms to tax systems.

We propose and demand immediate life-centered political decisions that empower the collective management of common goods, and the role and responsibility of the State to guarantee everyone's rights to habitat and the common good; which recognize women's contribution to caregiving tasks, the preservation of the planet and the full exercise of all human rights for everyone. Let us recall the lessons learned from other crises of the past century and the start of this one. Let us recognize the wealth of community practices and advocate for policies that stop the commodification of land, housing, water, health and education—in short, the commodification of life. To do so, we propose three key lines of action to advance toward a socially and environmentally just future:

### **Toward a profound redistribution**

This is above all an effort to redirect the economy to protect the life and habitat of everyone. This is not a task to be addressed by short-term, emergency responses, but structural measures, which requires:

- Mobilizing international support in the form of aid—not loans—to programs that benefit habitat and dwelling, to directly benefit the neediest communities and sectors. This requires a level of funding commensurate with the real needs that arise from the direct and indirect impacts of the crisis.
- Enforce the social function of property and land, both in rural and urban areas, and protect the environment as common heritage of all generations.
- Incorporate constitutional amendments that guarantee the right to adequate housing for all, particularly the most vulnerable, avoid evictions and redefine interest rates, debt repayment terms, mortgage loans and rents.
- Have government agencies promote effective policies and programs to access land, dignified housing conditions and adequate basic services, supporting neighborhood improvement programs in a sustained and substantial manner.
- Clarify and strengthen the relationship between the right to adequate housing and health, supporting immediate improvements in habitability conditions and other budget measures to combat COVID.
- Cease the privatization of public lands and goods, as well as public-private partnership initiatives that privatize profits and rob the people of their resources and rights.
- Promote fiscal reforms that correct the deficits caused by insufficient tax revenues and strengthen a more progressive tax system, particularly in relation to capital and property taxes. This includes taxing unoccupied buildings or using them to ease overcrowding among other measures to redeployed underused infrastructure and to build land and housing banks.
- Raise taxes on the profits of major corporations and booming industries, like the digital economy, insurance companies and pharmaceuticals, who are reaping extraordinary gains, and from the financial sector in general. Eliminate tax privileges and unnecessary tax benefits for the better off and promote effective policies against tax evasion and avoidance in order to strengthen redistributive policies.

- Evaluate the reallocation of budget spending in lower-priority sectors – such as military spending – and reinforce public spending on housing and other urgent areas that are fundamental for social protection and to reactivate the economy.

### **Recognition: different but equal**

Redistribution depends on the recognition of differences and invisibilities: if you are invisible, you are not eligible for any redistributive exercise, whether contingent or structural. For this reason, we believe the following measures are urgently needed, many of which should be adopted by government agencies:

- Protect our rights and opportunities to dignified habitat and dwelling regardless of gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity, religion, physical or mental ability, while recognizing the role of multiple social identities that are often taken as grounds for discrimination, stigmatism and marginalization.
- Value and actively support the multiple experiences that exist in the social production and management of habitat, cooperativism and self-built efforts, explicitly including indigenous people, while also valuing the tasks of caretaking and social reproduction that women perform primarily at every scale.
- Recognize the value of solidary economies and support them in legal, regulatory and financial terms.
- Recognize and value of bio-cultural diversity and the wisdom and knowledge of various regions, as the basis for the design of appropriate, relevant and non-hegemonic actions.
- Promote reciprocal relationships of development between rural, suburban and urban areas, locating and shortening the chains of food production and distribution, energy and water supply, as well as the management and recovery of solid waste as a resource.

### **Parity in political participation**

This means extending, on various scales, mechanisms for direct democratic participation without regard to gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity, religion, physical or mental ability.

- Actively combat authoritarian, clientelism, patriarchal and discriminatory relations among citizens and between the citizens and the State.
- Guarantee the equality of all immigrants as subjects with rights.
- Extend processes of decentralization and municipal autonomy as well as mechanisms of direct participation of citizens in the allocation and execution of government spending.
- Guarantee access to social, economic, technical and legal assistance required to transform habitat together with the inhabitants.
- Actively combat patriarchal and authoritarian practices that promote and sustain gender inequity, to broaden spaces for the participation and voices of women in decision-making.

We need new forms of (re)distribution, recognition and parity in political participation in order to protect the collective construction of life, habitat and dwelling. A safe place where we can all live in peace and dignity is possible!

**To support this manifesto, please add your name, organization and country here:**

<https://bit.ly/habitatvoices>

Thanks for adding your voice to make this Manifesto loud!