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Habitat Voices Manifesto: A Socially and Environmentally Just Response to COVID-19

Habitat International Coalition, July 2021

The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) has been fighting for social justice, gender equality and environmental justice since 1976. HIC is a global coalition of over 300 affiliate organizations and allies in 120 countries that works for the defense, promotion and realization of human rights related to habitat, including housing and land in rural and urban areas.

This manifesto outlines essential principles and state obligations for transformative and redistributive recovery from COVID-19 and its consequences. It emphasises the need to uphold habitat-related human rights and build a present and future based on social and environmental justice. In so doing, actions and commitments need to go beyond “resilience” and tackle existing and emerging inequalities through equitable and sustainable development.

HIC hereby calls upon all human rights defenders at the neighborhood, local, national, regional and international levels to join voices and efforts in this cause.

The pandemic exposes and deepens existing inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore global habitat conditions that reflect deep economic, social, political and environmental inequalities and injustices. Cities and towns are today home to more than half the world’s population and are often seen as islands of modernity and capitalist opulence. But, like in rural areas, the majority of the world’s urban population continues to live in poverty and inadequate, unsafe conditions. These are the consequence of accelerated privatization, speculation and dispossession that produce unequal access to common goods and services essential to daily life while creating meagre conditions for livelihoods. 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.

COVID-19 is therefore not just a global health crisis; it has exposed existing inequalities and the exhaustion of the political-economic system that produces and reproduces these, historical exclusions and the destruction of ecosystems, vital to human life.

In this context, cities have gone into quarantine under “universal immunological measures of social protection” like hastily imposed “stay-at-home” programs without distinction to gender, class, age, ethnicity, physical or mental capacity. Such measures assume that everyone has a secure home, means of livelihood, adequate access to safe water, sanitation and food, the ability to work from home, to decide on production and reproduction, to draw on their savings in periods of crisis or to

participate in collective and political action; in short, to act as citizens in full capacity of exercising their rights.

These distorted assumptions – of the State as protector of the lives of all citizens; and a romanticized view of COVID-19 quarantines – are deeply rooted in our societies and governance systems and continue to have a disproportionate impact on typically invisible social sectors: the poor, informal workers, migrants, indigenous peoples, and, to a large extent, women who live at the intersection of multiple social identities and forms of discrimination.

The pandemic is also producing emerging inequalities

Many preventive measures – as necessary as they may be to contain the virus – widen the gap between those who can and those who cannot adopt them. Self-care capacities differ, forcing ever-increasing millions of impoverished inhabitants into overcrowded spaces under poor hygienic conditions with lacking access to basic services, unable to isolate while facing multiple eviction practices. We must protect those who do not have a safe place for self-care: people living in precarious settlements or on the street; those paying abusive rent; immigrants. Those who are forced to tell themselves every day: “If I don’t go out and work, I can’t eat or pay my rent or utilities, I could be evicted, or have my water or light turned off.” Large numbers of women and men live and work under precarious conditions with no other choice than to work at the risk of contracting COVID-19. Many face possible eviction from their homes *and* their working premises, without alternative secured housing options and livelihood opportunities.

Similarly, rural communities face multiple challenges such as scarce health and social services (in both infrastructure and staffing). Although fewer cases of contagion have been recorded in rural areas, their consequences should not be underestimated.¹ To protect themselves, many rural communities have blocked roads to avoid incoming contagion, affecting their production economies, no longer able to go out and sell their produce.

In current situations of confinement and crisis, violence and abuse of women, children and older persons, often shut in with their abusers, has increased. We must remember that women are the overwhelming majority of humanity’s caregivers in the home, neighborhood and wider society, representing the majority of sanitary personnel, health-care practitioners and informal workers. In more-precarious neighborhoods, they are key caregivers operating soup kitchens and managing community activities. At home women educate children, feed families, procure water and more, while preserving emotional balance.

Access to education, internet, medical treatment, and social protection facilities vastly differ across social segments: in many countries, schools are closed, and teaching occurs online; but, in lower-income countries, only 20% of people access the Internet. A similar reality applies to the number of available hospital beds, or social security protection. When falling ill or engaging in caregiving activities, only 22% of the world’s jobless population receives unemployment assistance which excludes underemployed or precariously employed people. Furthermore, many countries rely on

¹ See for instance: <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/1/2019378118>

the use of 'big data' and digital surveillance methods that transgress people's right to privacy; or have sent armed forces out into the street to enforce social isolation and curfews.

In this contradictory moment in history we face both threats and opportunities: let us rethink human rights related to habitat across different scales and territories, while recognizing the value of diversified means of production, dignified livelihoods and their relationship to habitat, public health and education systems.

An alternative global pact and action plan

In April 2020, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) declared that COVID-19 threatens to impose two decades of lost progress on many countries, a reality that many across the global South have already experienced. It's not just turning back the clock by twenty years, but undermining the lives and opportunities of entire generations by risking further erosion of public and universal health, education, housing, services, employment and social-protection systems. The combined public health and economic crisis has most severely affected the working population and excluded majorities treated as minorities. It will worsen poverty and joblessness and undermine progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Hunger, homelessness and increased morbidity and mortality from preventable diseases are unacceptable.

In early April 2020 - when the impact of the pandemic was only beginning to be felt in many regions - the United Nations Secretary-General 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. International assistance for reconstruction must be broadened and deepened. Recovery must not depend on models of capitalist speculation and extractivism, subsidizing private interests, or "economic growth". Recovery needs to pursue grounded alternatives that challenge these foregone theories.

Collective management, common goods, and development States

Some might seize the pandemic as a pretext for reinforcing authoritarianism and accumulation by dispossession, relying on old racist, patriarchal, colonial and neoliberal tropes that fan the flames of individualism, indifference, hate and fear.

But the crisis has also proved and validated the collective capacity of critical thought and action of the people evident in self-built settlements, cooperative processes, popular and civil defense measures, and the everyday practices of social production and management of habitat. Such survival and solidarity practices have always characterized social struggles for land, housing, basic services, public transport, education and health.

States must now recognize and support these processes as stronger duty holders and guarantors of rights, bearing in mind that these processes also help to combat the pandemic. Fiscal policy adaptations are crucial for ensuring sufficient resources to respond to the crisis, especially in regions characterized by weak and regressive tax systems that benefit the rich, to the detriment of

the poor and most vulnerable. This includes redistributive tax policies that guarantee sufficient, deep-rooted and structural social protection, financed through progressive reforms to tax systems.

Let us recognize the wealth of community practices and advocate for enforcing policies that end the commodification of life and empower the collective management of common goods. The State plays a critical role and responsibility to guarantee everyone's right to a safe and secure habitat; to combat racism and gender inequality, and the preservation of the planet and the full exercise of all human rights.

We call States and the international community to actively support five key lines of action to advance toward a socially and environmentally just future and the protection of all habitat related human rights:

1. Profound economic redistribution

In an effort to protect the life and habitat of everyone, structural economic transformation, beyond short-term and emergency responses, requires:

- Mobilizing international support in the form of aid—not loans—to programs that benefit human habitat, directly prioritizing 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.
- Enforcing the social function of property and land, both in rural and urban areas, and protecting the environment as common heritage of all generations.
- Incorporating constitutional amendments that guarantee the human right to adequate housing for all, particularly the most vulnerable, prohibit forced evictions and redefine interest rates, debt repayment terms, mortgage loans and rents.
- Government agencies promoting effective policies and programs to ensure land, dignified housing conditions and adequate basic services to those in need, supporting neighborhood improvement programs in a sustained and substantial manner.
- Strengthening the relationship between the human right to adequate housing and health, stopping evictions, and supporting immediate improvements in habitability conditions and other budget measures to combat COVID-19.
- Putting an end to the privatization of public lands, goods and services, as well as public-private-partnership initiatives that transfer public resources to private interests and rob the people of their resources and rights.
- Promoting fiscal reforms that correct the deficits caused by profligate borrowing and indebtedness at the public expense, and adopting a more-progressive tax system, particularly in relation to capital, land and property taxes. This includes taxing unoccupied buildings or converting them to ease overcrowding and high housing demand and pricing, among other measures, to redeploy underused facilities and infrastructure, and to develop land and housing banks.

- Supporting the development of productive and solidarity economies, instead of rentier schemes that favour the commodification of life and protect property rights over human rights.
- Raising 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.
- Evaluating the reallocation of budget spending in lower-priority sectors such as military spending, and reinforcing public spending on housing, healthcare and other urgent areas that are fundamental for social protection and reactivating the economy.

2. Recognition of differences and invisibilities

Redistribution, whether contingent or structural, depends on the recognition of differences, invisibilities and entrenched inequalities: Government agencies should adopt the following urgent measures:

- Protect human rights and opportunities to habitat in dignity regardless of gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity, religion, residential status, physical or mental ability, while recognizing the role of multiple social identities that are often discriminated, stigmatized and marginalized.
- Value and actively support multiple experiences existing in the social production and management of habitat, cooperativism and self-build efforts, explicitly including indigenous and other land-based people, while actively promoting gender equality by valuing the tasks of care-giving and social reproduction that primarily women perform at every scale, but also their practical and strategic needs across their roles in production, community organization and political mobilisation.
- Recognize and support the value of social and solidarity economies through legal, regulatory and financial means, while advancing food, energy and water sovereignty, as well as climate justice.
- Recognize and value bio-cultural diversity and the corresponding wisdom and knowledge of various regions as the basis for designing appropriate, relevant and non-hegemonic actions and development.
- Promote reciprocal relationships of development among 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.
- Take all appropriate measures to eliminate and prohibit all forms of racial discrimination, as states and their constituent organs are already treaty-bound to do.

3. Parity in political participation

Extend, on various scales, mechanisms for direct democratic participation irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity, religion, physical or mental ability, or any other status, including:

- Actively combatting authoritarian, clientelistic, patriarchal, exploitative and discriminatory relations among and between citizens and the State.
- Guaranteeing the equality of all immigrants as natural and legal persons with corresponding rights.
- Extending decentralization and municipal autonomy processes, including mechanisms of direct citizen participation in the allocation and execution of government spending.
- Guaranteeing provision of social, economic, technical and legal assistance required to transform habitat together with inhabitants.
- Actively combatting patriarchal, nepotistic and authoritarian practices that promote and sustain gender inequity and marginalization by broadening spaces for the participation and voices of women and marginalized groups in decision making.

4. Human rights habitat, not war

In March 2020, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued an urgent appeal for a global ceasefire in all corners of the world to focus together on the common fight to defeat COVID-19. He repeated that same call at the start of the 75th UN General Assembly session in September 2020. However, no party has heeded that call. Some long-standing cease-fires have been broken in the same period while new and long-standing hostilities continue, subjecting conflict-affected populations to new famines and humanitarian crises. Internal to certain States, authoritarian, military, monarchist and other illiberal and extremist regimes have opportunistically oppressed their own people and other inhabitants at increasing levels during the pandemic. Long-standing occupations and denial of peoples' self-determination have persisted and become more entrenched, even practicing COVID-treatment and vaccine apartheid. We join the Secretary-General to demand:

- Immediate cease-fires in all fields of battle around the globe.
- Prompt and meaningful reallocation of resources away from offensive military activities and materiel in favor of public spending to alleviate all the negative consequences of the pandemic.
- Withdrawal and definitive end to all foreign and military occupations, in particular the economic, trade, military and diplomatic aid and cooperation with those illegitimate administrations beyond occupying States' jurisdiction.
- All States and international organizations compliance with international and extraterritorial obligations to support the self-determination of peoples and nations, including to refrain from recognition of, cooperation and/or transaction with parties to these illegal situations and to bring them to an end.

5. Mutual care and solidarity

As indeed we are in this together, each of us bears both a personal and a social responsibility to take all measures possible to avoid and prevent the spread of all strains of the COVID-19 virus. While governments and international organisations bear special obligations to set in motion a truly transformative process, every person is called to maintain a spirit of mutual and reciprocal care for community and others, including:

- Taking all reasonable precautions to protect each other by wearing masks, maintaining strict personal hygiene and social distancing wherever possible.
- Giving priority to afflicted persons of advanced age and underlying health challenges by taking all personal health, life-style and medical precautions to avoid injury to yourself and others.
- Sharing reliable and verified information with others about precautions to take and therapies to seek.
- Providing material and moral support to the extent possible for those affected by the pandemic and the accompanying economic hardships.
- Taking all measures to ensure a safe and healthy environment for our communities and the wider world, including the avoidance of polluting activities and gratuitously producing waste and releasing toxins of any kind, not least by reducing consumption of fossil fuels and animal products.

We need new and deeper forms of redistribution, recognition, parity in political participation, protection of human rights and promotion of mutual care and solidarity, in order to collectively advance habitat-related rights and the right to the city in a world where all can live in peace and dignity.

To support this manifesto, add your name, organization and country here:
<https://bit.ly/habitatvoices>

For further reference:

- 1 [See attached HIC-AL Declaration on Precarious Settlements here](#) (available in Spanish).
- 2 [The coronavirus pandemic / Covid-19 by HLRN India](#)
- 3 See the publication A Pandemic of violations by HIC-HLRN
http://www.hlrn.org/img/publications/Pandemic_Violations.pdf
- 4 [See HIC HLRN Statement: We need a Human rights habitat](#)
- 5 See HLRN [Housing and Land Rights violation database](#)