

Special Session  
Right to the City

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Right to  
the City  
Post-Pandemic Perspectives  
to Build Back Better and Fairer Cities  
and Human Settlements

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This paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the failures of the current economic and urban models in many fields. A number of unresolved problems suddenly emerged in a simultaneous manner: gross inequalities, poor access to adequate housing, homelessness, urban economies incapable of ensuring livelihoods for all, poor public healthcare systems, lack of digital skills or tools, insufficient basic urban infrastructures, and so on. The evidence of these structural failures opens up a window of opportunity to change the hegemonic patterns of city-making. A paradigm shift is needed to build back our cities and human settlements better in post-pandemic times. The Right to the City sheds light on how to move towards this paradigm shift by encouraging us to rethink cities and human settlements, building on the principles of solidarity, inclusivity, social justice, equity, democracy and sustainability.

Bottom-up conceptualizations of the Right to City invite us to understand cities as commons<sup>1</sup> that belong to all inhabitants (present and future, permanent and temporary). In particular, this understanding of the Right to the City entails ensuring that all dwellers — with no discrimination based on any condition or feature of identity — have the right to access, produce, use, occupy, govern and enjoy safe cities and human settlements, and all their resources, services, facilities and opportunities.

Against this framework, this thematic paper aims to be useful to a variety of stakeholders (civil society, governmental institutions, the private sector, academia, etc.) in their efforts to build back better cities and human settlements in post-pandemic times by using the Right to the City as a guide for change. To this end, the paper first provides the international legal and political ground on which such change can be underpinned, as well as offering a succinct diagnosis of how the pandemic has impacted cities and human settlements. On the basis of such a diagnosis, several fields of action are offered to guide the policies of national and local governments. Finally, the paper points out the main elements that make up an enabling framework for the realization of the Right to the City.