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Urban Inequality and COVID-19: The Crisis at the Heart of the Pandemic

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1. Introduction

The last two years, 2020 and 2021, have presented unprecedented challenges at the local, national and global scale, as COVID-19 spread within and between countries. Dealing with the distress and suffering the pandemic unleashed has stretched individual and collective responses beyond their limits. As of June 6, 2022, WHO estimates that approximately 6.3 million women and men lost their lives due to the pandemic and over 528 million were confirmed as infected globally (WHO, 2022). The majority of these cases have been in urban areas; given either the absence or imperfections of recording systems in different parts of the world, the available figures are likely an underestimation and may distort both intra-urban and urban–rural differences.

The scale of the pandemic and its wide-ranging material and psychological impacts have led many to confront fundamental questions about the role of the state, the private sector and civil society in the provision of health care, basic goods and services, secure livelihoods, accountable political decision-making and governance. More generally, it has caused the meaning of socio-economic justice to be re-evaluated and re-examined in a context where structural relations and everyday practices were so rapidly and profoundly disrupted. The pandemic has exposed existing inequalities at every scale, at the same time deepening and widening socio-economic and political cleavages at the local, national and global scale (Goldin and Muggah, 2020; Sen, 2020).

This Special Issue focuses on what has been learned about the intersections between the manifestation of the COVID-19 pandemic in urban areas and these pre-existing and growing inequalities, and the implications for a post-pandemic future. The Special Issue seeks to respond to four questions:
- How has the urban inequality–pandemic intersection manifested in different urban contexts?
- How have actors from government, civil society and the private sector responded to addressing the unequal impact of the pandemic on urban residents?
- What formal and informal institutional and organisational conditions created in response to the pandemic are critical to post-pandemic responses to address urban inequality?
- What have we learnt about the urban inequality–pandemic intersection that will enable strategies to 'build back fairer' (Marmot et al, 2020) in a post-pandemic future?

The next section introduces the analytical lens that frames this Special Issue. It does so by addressing three aspects of the pandemic: its urban character, its impact on the multi-dimensional experience of urban inequality, and the challenge of weaving pathways to urban equality post-pandemic. The article concludes with an overview of the contributions in this Special Issue.

2. Urban Inequality and COVID-19: The Analytical Lens of this Special Issue

2.1 The Urban Character of the Pandemic

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly threw light on the urban character of the crisis. Given the high concentration of population and economic activities in cities, they rapidly became hotspots of COVID-19 infections around the world (Sharif and Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). The WHO estimates that 95 per cent of COVID-19 cases occurred in urban areas (United Nations, 2020a). This reflects in part the proportion of the world's population living in cities as well as the high densities of urban living that are fertile ground for disease transmission, whilst also acknowledging the probable under-reporting of rural cases (Bhalla, 2020; Florida, 2020).

In fact, the development and deployment of COVID-19 response measures—including unconventional forms of controlling movements and human activity, such as lockdowns, social distancing, face coverings and other forms of so-called non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) which were at the core of national strategies—were predominantly justified through the urban lens (Acuto *et al*, 2020; Teller, 2021). This implicit or explicit urban framing of the pandemic reconfigured the experience of the urban both spatially and relationally (Martinez

57　and Short, 2021) and directly correlated with the disruptive effects on livelihoods and socio-economic
58　activities.
59
60　However, it would be deeply problematic to interpret urban agglomeration as the cause of the pandemic, as
61　such arguments have fuelled "de-densification" policies. The negative consequences of this fall primarily on
62　the urban poor in informal settlements in the global South who are routinely targeted with threats of evictions
63　and relocation (Gupta and Mitlin, 2021). This has also been used to justify top-down decision-making,
64　increasing surveillance and curtailment of rights (Ibid; Lambert, 2020). The central argument of this Special
65　Issue is that COVID-19 is a global health crisis that has been intensified and worsened in urban locations,
66　where inadequate health services, housing and basic infrastructure, informal economies and resulting socio-
67　economic vulnerabilities are concentrated. The pandemic has also highlighted the cascading nature of risks,
68　where one event can trigger several other impacts, both linear and complex, and create protracted unequal
69　burdens for urban residents (UNDRR & UNU-EHS, 2022). It is now widely recognised that the pandemic both
70　fed off and fed into a wide range of urban inequalities.
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72　　　　2.2 The Multi-dimensional Experience of Urban Inequality in the Pandemic
73
74　In this Special Issue we use the definition of urban equality developed in the Knowledge in Action for Urban
75　Equality (KNOW) research and capacity building programme, encapsulated in Yap, Cociña & Levy (2021). This
76　definition comprises four dimensions, building on the work of Young (1990, 1998), Fraser (1996, 1998a&b) and
77　Lynch (2013), and their application in different contexts (for example, Apsen Frediani and Allen, 2013). There is
78　a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the impact of COVID-19 on each of these dimensions of
79　equality.
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81　　　　　2.2.1　Inequitable Distribution
82
83　The first dimension of urban equality, an equitable distribution, 'focuses on the material outcomes of equality
84　that constitute a dignified quality of life, including equitable access to income, decent work, housing, health,
85　basic and social services, and safety and security for all citizens in a sustainable manner' (Yap, Cociña & Levy,
86　2021, p. 3). On the other hand, *unequal distribution* is reflected in the lack of access to decent housing and
87　basic services like water and sanitation, combined with precarious livelihoods in high density informal
88　settlements, which increased the exposure to and impact of COVID-19 on poor households (see, for example,
89　Allen et al, 2021). The lockdown measures, although applied in various ways in different countries, left low-
90　income urban dwellers with a terrible trade-off between the health of household members and maintaining
91　the material means of everyday life like income, food, water, and freedom from violence.
92
93　In addition to the health impacts on those catching the virus, preventive measures for COVID-19, such as physical
94　distancing, lockdowns, closing international and inter-province borders, and halt to transport, have disrupted
95　the economic and livelihood systems across the globe. There has been loss of work and incomes, as well as
96　disruption in agricultural production, transportation systems and supply chains (Khanna, 2020; Workie et al.
97　2020). This disruption to economic and livelihood systems is compounded by the lack of safety nets. As noted
98　by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report (2019), 55 per cent of the global population, the
99　majority of which　　　lives in the global South, does not have access to social protection.

100　In the weeks following the first lockdown in India, for example, unemployment in urban areas shot up to as
101　high as 30 per cent from 9.35 per cent (Vyas, 2020). In a World Bank study of 39 countries between April and
102　July 2020, a fall in income was reported by three quarters of households with non-farm enterprises compared
103　to around two thirds of households with farm enterprises (Khamis et al, 2021 in WIEGO, 2021, p. 6). Chirisa et
104　al. (2020) demonstrate how lockdown and allied measures have undermined households' survival strategies
105　and heightened risks for the urban poor across anglophone sub-Saharan Africa who primarily work in the
106　informal sector. Indeed, restrictions devastated the livelihoods of 80 per cent of the global informal workforce,
107　which comprises nearly half of the total global workforce (ILO 2020: 1 in WIEGO, 2021, p. 3). Women are
108　particularly at risk, given their greater exposure to informal employment in more vulnerable categories of
109　informal work than men, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America (OECD/ILO, 2019,
110　Chen and Skinner, 2021).

In addition to hunger and food insecurity, the spillover effects of disruption to livelihood systems are also seen in the impact on children and the education sector. For example, UNESCO estimates that 90 per cent of school-age learners were affected at the peak of school closures in April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020 in Meinke et al, p. 1), with the greatest impact on the most vulnerable learners (Kim et al, 2022), worsening pre-existing education inequalities (UNESCO, 2022).

Among the urban labour force, migrant labour plays an essential economic role in destination urban areas, and their remittances play a fundamental role in supporting the households in the rural areas and human settlements from which they come (see, for example, Zhang et al, 2021). The pandemic has had multiple impacts on this group. It has negatively impacted the health of this vulnerable group, particularly those in lower-paying jobs and those in jobs that play a critical role in responding to the pandemic. The disturbing image of the mass exodus on foot of migrant workers from Delhi, the capital city of India, to neighbouring states, is a constant reminder that, in many contexts, the pandemic is not just a health crisis (Ram, 2020). Migrants have also been subject to job loss and deportation, leaving them more vulnerable and dislocating their livelihoods, causing reductions in remittances and increased poverty and marginalisation of their families back home (Khanna, 2020; Lambert, 2020; Jesline et al, 2020).

2.2.2 Lack of reciprocal recognition

The second dimension of urban equality is the *reciprocal recognition* of intersectional social identities, focusing on 'the ways in which citizen claims and urban and territorial governance recognise multiple intersecting social identities, across class, gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, migration status and sexuality, which have been unevenly recognised throughout history' (Yap et al, 2021, p. 3). The *malrecognition* of social identities in society, including in government policy and planning, and in the way data is collected and knowledge produced, leads to the reproduction of inequalities, for example, the growing gender and class inequalities in most societies, as well as the growing racial inequality and religious intolerance in many places. The pandemic exacerbated these intersectional inequalities.

Focusing on the gender impact of the pandemic on inequalities in the distribution of material goods and services, there was a greater impact on women and girls economically, in terms of access to health services, increased unpaid care work, and increase in domestic violence (UN, 2020b). In terms of employment, 'gendered outcomes depended on whether women or men were over-represented in different groups of workers in different countries' (WIEGO, 2021, p. 8), and women were over-represented in the worst impacted sectors. This study emphasises that 'race, ethnicity, caste and class intersect with gender to determine labour market outcomes for both women and men' (Ibid, p. 8). However, the collection of disaggregated data showing the differential impact of the pandemic by gender and other social relations is still not systematic in most countries or cities. For example, in India, Agarwal (2021, p. 251) notes that 'few surveys have focused on intra-household effects or identified intersectional differences between women by class or caste.'

2.2.3 Diminished parity political participation

The third dimension of urban equality, *parity political participation*, relates to 'the equitable, inclusive and active engagement of citizens and their representatives in processes of urban and territorial governance, and the deliberations and decisions about current and future urban and territorial trajectories' (Yap et al, 2021, p. 3). However, situations of crisis, like the pandemic, often undermine democratic governance, taking on top-down features and potentially diminishing the possibilities for political debate and protest (Otto, 2011 in Branicki, 2020). The pandemic also saw 'an alarming rise in police brutality and civil rights violations under the guise of exceptional or emergency measures' (Lambert et al., 2020, p. 312; Okukpon and Eruaga, 2021). Where governments did put in place a range of top-down pandemic restrictions, they did so invoking 'science,' raising fundamental questions about the role of science in democratic governance (Mercuri, 2020; Lührman et al, 2020). As argued above, in most cases, the top-down restrictions imposed demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the real lives of the majority of citizens, causing greater hardship in particular on the urban poor. Such restrictions also created increased tensions between communities and those entrusted with enforcement, with implications for both groups (Bhan et al, 2020).

Through the pandemic, the argument for a multi-level governance approach has grown, with clear roles and relationships between central and local governments, including devolved decision-making, community-led

168 action and the use of decentralised health systems where they existed (see, for example, Gupta and Mitlin,
169 2020; Bahn et al, 2020; ACHR, 2020). In the absence of such enabling government action, collective
170 mobilisation and action during the pandemic largely took place outside of formal political structures, building
171 on the final dimension of urban equality.
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174   *2.2.4*   The expansion of solidarity and mutual care
175
176 The fourth and final dimension of urban equality, *solidarity and mutual care*, focuses on 'how cities and
177 territories guarantee the provision of care, prioritising mutual support and relational responsibilities between
178 citizens, and between citizens and nature, and actively nurturing the civic life of cities and territories' (Yap et
179 al, p. 4). The pandemic made visible the urban-centric nature of the grass-roots fight against COVID-19, based
180 on a refocusing and expansion of solidarity and mutual care operating in many communities.
181
182 All over the world, urban residents, communities, and other collective actors played an active and critical role
183 in crisis response, often coordinating the involvement of private sector and development partners across scale
184 (Wilkinson, 2020; ACHR, 2020). This included practical logistical inputs such as mobilising and distributing
185 sanitation materials, food parcels and water, as well as the performance of broader operational and tactical
186 coordination of pandemic responses such as information management and contact tracing in informal
187 settlements. Community-based initiatives became central to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable,
188 particularly in developing countries where the state and other forms of formalised welfare initiatives were
189 lacking, or unevenly distributed (Wilkinson, 2020; Osuteye et al, 2020; Duque Fanco et al, 2020).
190
191
192   2.3 Pathways and the Pandemic: Weaving the Intersecting Dimensions of Urban Equality
193
194 It is clear from the previous discussion that the pandemic has exacerbated urban inequalities in different ways,
195 despite the valiant efforts of many communities to respond to the crisis. It is also clear from these responses,
196 that the four dimensions of urban equality are woven together. In the context of the pandemic, addressing
197 the material distribution of essential goods and services inclusively, with attention to the needs of different
198 community members, has been driven by collective action based on solidarity and care, and directed as claims
199 for fuller political engagement where necessary and possible (see, for example, HIC, 2021; UCLG, 2021).
200
201 The dominant and urgent question across public policy and academia is, what can be learnt from this
202 experience that will enable strategies to 'build back fairer' (Marmot et al, 2020) in a post pandemic future? In
203 particular, in this Special Issue, the focus is not just on exposing the negative reinforcement of the urban
204 inequality–pandemic interaction. It is also on what formal and informal institutional and organisational
205 conditions created in response to the pandemic are critical to post-pandemic responses to address urban
206 inequality. It is these institutions, imbued with relations of power (class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion,
207 sexuality and physical/mental ability), that constitute pathways that either (re)produce inequalities or can be
208 the basis of alternatives aspirations like urban equality (Leach et al., 2016; Levy et al, 2020).
209
210 The pandemic has reminded us that pathways are held together by notions of 'collective life' or the 'broad
211 fabric of relations, initiatives, efforts, ways of paying attention, of joining forces, investing time and resources
212 that take place both as matters of intentional organization, but more importantly as a series of practices that
213 people engage in so as to manage their everyday existence within cities' (Bhan et al, 2020). This notion
214 intersects with the conception of social infrastructure, 'a range of connections between people and things that
215 helps to reproduce everyday life, shaped in relations to both material and knowledge fragments' (McFarlane,
216 2021, p. 51). This 'connective tissue' embodies 'a form of care, support or coordination that brings a social
217 glue' (2021, p. 51) to respond to fragmented urbanism, which could be extended to everyday and punctual
218 crises.
219
220 How resilient are such collective social relations in a multi-level governance approach? Is this a basis for
221 'building back fairer'? Where such social infrastructure is mobilised in civil society struggles for better living
222 conditions, this could generate important experience and capacities to cope not only with everyday needs,
223 hazards and risks, but also unexpected events like a pandemic (Wisner and Walker, 2005; Ortiz, 2020).
224 However, framing this as parity political participation and not instrumental to top-down government-led

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225 initiatives is critical to promoting urban equality. This implies an approach to governance that recognises the
226 right to political participation and active citizenship. It also implies a shift from traditional approaches in crisis
227 management to one that foregrounds mutual care and solidarity (Branicki, 2020), grounded in the ongoing and
228 everyday relationships and responsibilities of collective life, based on a feminist ethics of care (Ibid.)
229 Taking these principles into a post-pandemic future, it highlights the process of social learning and under what
230 conditions it is possible to learn from unexpected events. Building on a growing literature that positions
231 disasters as an opportunity for transformative learning, Castán Broto et al. (2014) examine to what extent it is
232 possible to engage with 'higher order' learning from infrastructure shocks, a dominant pandemic response
233 theme. They argue that whether learning occurs is context specific and 'will vary greatly within cultures and
234 depend on how the impacts are perceived to affect the wider economy and society' (Ibid, p. 194). Such
235 learning across collective urban actors also needs to address epistemic injustices, where the experiences and
236 claims of particular groups are ignored and/or not valued (see, for example, Allen et al., 2020).   The articles in
237 this Special Issue pick up these themes in their examination of the impact of the pandemic, whilst exploring
238 the possibilities for a more equal post-pandemic urban future.
239
240   3.   In this Special Issue
241
242 This Special Issues draws on the research and capacity building done across 12 cities in Africa, Asia and Latin
243 America, working together within the Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW) programme[1]. It brings
244 together a collaborative, interdisciplinary and international team of 13 partners in the United Kingdom, Africa,
245 Asia, Latin America and Australia to develop innovative long-term programmes of knowledge co-production
246 for urban equality among governments, communities, and academia. The impact of the pandemic, though
247 different in each of the KNOW work streams and partner locations, profoundly changed the methods of doing
248 research and capacity building. In many cases, it also changed the focus of knowledge production itself, as
249 new needs arose and were identified by community partners in facing the crisis. The experiences documented
250 and analysed in this Special Issue speak to the knowledge and information generated across the KNOW
251 programmes and the local and regional networks of KNOW research partners over this period in dialogue with
252 others.
253
254 In the General Articles section of this Special Issue, Allan Lavell, Angel Chávez, Cinthya Barros, Gustavo
255 Jimenez, Marina Martinez, and Celene B. Milanes, a network of researchers in Costa Rica, Perú and Colombia,
256 frame the pandemic and its impact as a socially constructed multi-hazard risk. It demonstrates how the
257 pandemic has increased inequalities in a region which, as they acknowledge, has some of the highest levels of
258 interpersonal and intra-urban inequalities in the world. On this basis, they argue that disasters like the
259 pandemic, in addition to their shocking impact, are also reflective of failed development approaches and
260 strategies.
261
262 Wilbard Kombe, A Kyessi, Tatu Limbumba and Emmanuel Osuteye also demonstrate the impact of the
263 pandemic on urban poor women and men in Dar es Salaam, exacerbating inequalities for residents living in
264 informal settlements. This article emphasises the value of urban grass-roots responses, illustrating how such
265 responses are contextually relevant to meeting the needs of the urban poor in a time of crisis, and how they
266 draw heavily on existing resources and organisations, demonstrating the resourcefulness of local actors in
267 initiating and sustaining initiatives.
268
269 The other two articles in this section powerfully demonstrate the way in which organisational structures
270 previously created for different purposes were galvanised into action to address the pandemic. This reveals
271 not only the value and utility of community knowledge and agency in times of crises, but also the critical and
272 often overlooked relational dimensions of building trust, information management, and navigating local
273 politics required for sustained and effective response.
274
275 Braima Koroma, Joseph Mustapha Macarthy, Abu Conteh and Emmanuel Osuteye document how the learning
276 platforms, operationalised at the community and city levels under the KNOW programme to represent the
277 needs and interests of informal settlements at the city level, focused on supporting communities to cope with

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[1] KNOW is a 4-year research and capacity building programme, funded by ESRC under the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) (https://www.urban-know.com/).

278 the pandemic. Recognising differences within communities, they worked to promote participation of informal
279 settlement residents in local decision-making, while promoting principles of solidarity and care to meet
280 material needs through the delivery of food, water and masks.
281
282 The theme of building on past community experience and multi-level governance is continued in the article by
283 Belén Desmaison, Kelly Jaime, Paola Córdova, Lia Alarcón and Luciana Gallardo, which focuses on the response
284 of a partnership, between the university, NGOs, communities, and local and central government, to food
285 insecurity in Lima as a result of the pandemic. The article contextualises and documents the way in which the
286 historical experience of community kitchens and the feminist activism underpinning it, took on a new form and
287 function in the current crisis. It makes a case for spatial improvement as an entry point for sustainable change,
288 both as an emergency response and in a post-pandemic era.
289
290 In the second section, Writing from Practice, the theme of the previous two articles is continued in the
291 examination by Supreeya Wungpatcharapon and Brenda Pérez-Castro of the challenges of refocusing the
292 community networks affiliated to the Baan Mankong programme in Thailand to address the impact of the
293 pandemic. This case demonstrates the operation of multi-level governance with financial support for the
294 communities devolved from Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI)—the national government
295 institution with the mission to support people-driven development and the Baan Mankong programme—and
296 dovetailed with community–local government resources. Working with McFarlane's definition of social
297 infrastructure (2021), the article explores how care and solidarity are integral to community competence
298 developed historically and to the range of actions for addressing the urgent needs of communities during the
299 pandemic.
300
301 In the third section, On Method, Joiselen Cazanave-Macías, Jorge Peña-Díaz, Camila Cociña, and Yael Padan
302 reflect on the ethics of research in the context of the pandemic, when access to the equitable distribution of
303 basic material goods and services by researchers, staff and students in the university setting and communities,
304 in the context of Havana, is threatened. They elaborate on the development of a notion of solidarity and care
305 in applied research in the context of universities, and in the participatory planning processes developed with
306 community representatives.
307
308 In the fourth section, Learning and Pedagogy, Julia Wesley, Ruchika Lal, Nandini Dutta, Geetika Anand and
309 Adriana Allen explore how individual and collective learning practices were sustained through the pandemic,
310 rooted in transformative imaginaries, and pedagogies of care and solidarity. They do so in the context of a
311 continuum of organisational forms, from formal to informal, within and between academia and communities.
312 Their article highlights the diverse experiences of critical pedagogies in research and activism, social
313 movements, civil society, and higher education in specific cases in India, Argentina and Brazil.
314
315 In the final sections, Visual Essay and Poetry, we have two special inputs from an artistic lens on the impact of
316 COVID-19. The first is a visual essay by David Heymann, the communication officer of the KNOW programme,
317 illustrating an urban lens on the pandemic. The second is a poem by Martín Espada and, related to this, an
318 interview with the poet conducted by Amlanjyoti Goswami.
319
320 We trust that this Special Issue will contribute to the ongoing and urgent discussion on post pandemic futures
321 that addresses urban equality, and the right to a decent and fulfilling life for all that is central to this aspiration.
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