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Impacts of a pandemic: Covid 19 and informal settlements

Description

When the Covid 19 pandemic hit most of the world in the early months of 2020, it quickly became clear that – similar to other disasters – some societal groups were more likely to be affected than others. While frequent flyers and those traveling for professional reasons as well as international tourists were mainly spreading the virus in the onset, the mutual interconnectedness of urban agglomerations around the globe in general became drastically apparent by swift dispersal of the virus along lines of international travel.

Once it reached cities, however, those most at risk generally turned out to be groups known to be vulnerable to disasters more in general, such as low-income households living in overcrowded informal quarters in want of basic infrastructure. Where water is scarce even for handwashing and physical distancing virtually impossible, containing a highly contagious infection becomes a nearly insurmountable challenge. Furthermore, lockdowns impeding any kind of economic activity immediately brought daily wage earners and laborers to the brink of existential threat. Adding to this, insufficient public health care systems were swiftly overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of constantly increasing patients.

The Covid pandemic thus with anew and acute urgency highlighted the considerable risks and challenges at which substandard housing conditions in informal settlements put more than a billion people forced to reside in such kind of housing worldwide. It became clear more than ever that not just immediate action was needed to waive the worst of impacts: A much more systemic approach is required to meet the basic housing demands of marginalized groups of society if cities in the 21st century ought to become truly inclusive.

No previous outbreak of an infectious disease has ever been felt to a similar global and simultaneous extent as Covid 19 did. In consequence, this outbreak was also characterized by a daily changing influx of media coverage with reports of related stories and occurrences coming in constantly. Our knowledge of the disease, its ways of transmission and the effects it causes on all parts of life is still evolving by the day. What is regarded as standard knowledge today might seem outdated in a few weeks' time. And it's far from being over. Thus, while this course deals with the implications of the global pandemic on

informal settlements in cities around the world, it therein establishes what is current knowledge in this respect as of now (May 2020). Future developments in this regard are unpredictable, however, harsh living conditions and daily challenges in informal settlements, on the other hand, are hardly news as these have been well documented up to now.

Introducing students to knowledge about the pandemic's impacts on residents of informal settlements thus requires interweaving two strands of knowledge: that of socio-economic framework conditions of informal and precarious housing on one hand and the public health threat posed by an highly contagious epidemic like Covid 19 on the other hand.

Course objectives & structure

The course is loosely structured in sessions around different aspects of the epidemic, which are particularly relevant/ linked to people residing and living in substandard informal housing. Form most of these aspects pre-readings are given to introduce students to these areas: given the highly recent occurrence of the phenomena under scrutiny, these are mostly non-academic texts from different news sources, which provide easy access to the topic at stake. Furthermore, follow up, in depth readings are provided for some topics: these give more paramount background knowledge. Most sessions additionally provide suggestions for tasks/ exercises to further engage students with the specific topics either during the session or before/ after.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students should be capable to understand:

- the specific risks residents of informal settlements incur with regards to infectious disease like Covid 19 (amongst others)
- the role of built environment and basic infrastructure (or the lack thereof) in residents' heightened vulnerability
- socio-economic implications of measure such as lockdown on people working in the informal economy
- socio-economic and health implications of evictions, especially when taking place in times of pandemics
- dynamics of land grabbing in an urban context (evictions) in times of crisis and state of emergency
- health implications of/ particular vulnerability to infectious disease of homeless persons
- particular challenges posed by infectious disease for refugee camps

Student Workload

Session 1

Pre-reading	1 hr
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	2 hrs
Total	4,5 hrs

Session 2

Pre-reading	1 hr
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Preparatory assignment	2 hrs
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	4 hrs
Total	8,5 hrs

Session 3

Pre-reading	1 hr
Preparatory assignment	2 hrs
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	2 hrs
Total	6,5 hrs

Session 4

Pre-reading	1 hr
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	1 hrs
Total	3,5 hrs

Session 5

Pre-reading	1 hr
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	2 hrs
Follow up assignment	1 hr
Total	5,5 hrs

Session 6

Pre-reading	1 hr
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	3 hrs
Total	5,5 hrs

Session 7

Pre-reading	1 hr
Preparatory assignment	2 hrs
Session	1,5 hr
In depth reading	3 hrs
Total	7,5 hrs
Overall	41,5 hrs

Course Structure

Semester course with weekly session and preparatory/ in depth assignments

Prerequisites *[requirements for participation]*

Undergraduate students of planning and architecture related disciplines; participants should have a general understanding of informal settlements, housing policy and urbanization in the Global South.

Assignments

[See sessions]

Grading

Stages & details	Evaluation weights (%)
Immediate challenges	11
Migrant workers, informal housing and the impacts of lockdown	20
Forced evictions during lockdown	16
Homelessness in times of crisis	9
Crisis within crisis: Refugee camps in times of pandemic	13
Lockdown's impact on environment	13
Building back better	18
Total	100%

Session 1: Immediate challenges

Pre - readings

- UN-Habitat Cities and COVID-19 :
https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/13_may_2020_-_key_messages_un-habitat_and_covid-19.pdf
- Water for handwashing in slums is critical to prevent COVID-19 spreading:
<https://unhabitat.org/water-for-handwashing-in-slums-is-critical-to-prevent-covid-19-spreading>
- Youth in Nairobi slum use murals to educate the community about COVID-19:
<https://unhabitat.org/youth-in-nairobi-slum-use-murals-to-educate-the-community-about-covid-19>
- Fears over Covid-19 in villas come to fruition with community leader's death:
<https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/fears-over-covid-19-in-villas-come-to-fruition-with-community-leaders-death.phtml>
- Has India's 'airpocalypse' put the poor more at risk from coronavirus?:
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200414122042-ic9jj/>

Session content

While widely popular narratives portray disease such as Covid 19 as big “equalizers” which indiscriminately can harm just about everybody, extensive research has shown time and again that some societal groups are more likely to be affected by infectious disease than others. Those most at risk generally turned out to be groups known to be vulnerable to disasters more in general, such as low-income households living in overcrowded informal quarters in want of basic infrastructure.

Where water is scarce even for handwashing and physical distancing virtually impossible, containing a highly contagious infectious disease becomes a nearly insurmountable challenge. Adding to this, insufficient public health care systems were swiftly overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of constantly increasing patients. Furthermore, lockdowns impeding any kind of economic activity immediately brought daily wage earners and laborers to the brink of existential threat.

The Covid 19 pandemic thus with anew and acute urgency highlights the considerable risks and challenges at which substandard housing conditions in informal settlements put more than a billion people forced to reside in such kind of housing worldwide.

In depth reading

- COVID-19 Guidance Note Protecting Residents of Informal Settlements:
https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/04/guidance_note_-_informal_settlements_29march_2020_final3.pdf
- UN-Habitat COVID-19 Response Plan: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/04/final_un-habitat_covid-19_response_plan.pdf
- UN-Habitat Water, sanitation and hygiene in informal settlements and COVID-19:
https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/13_may_2020_-_wash_and_covid_19.pdf
- Interim technical note on water, sanitation and hygiene for COVID-19 response in slums and informal urban settlements: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/un-habitat-unesf_wash_technical_note-urban_wash_for_covid_in_informal_settlements.pdf

- RIGHT TO WATER IN KENYA: ASSESSMENT OF ACCESS TO WATER IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KE/Assessment_right_water_Kenya2020.pdf
- "Survive COVID" game: <http://covid.xrlabs.cloud/home>

Follow up assignments

- Play "Survive COVID" online game while documenting your choices in the course of the game – explain why you choose these options over others; In hindsight, analyze how these choices contributed to you mastering or losing the game. Assess how much each of these choices / steps in the game is related to aspects of housing such as infrastructure provision, availability of space, location of residence etc.
- Sketch a plan of a fictional informal shack and its inhabitants, including the immediate living environment; Draw a time-distance-diagram for daily activities in/ around the shack (such as usage of toilet, securing daily rations, household chores etc.), identifying activities/ time slots/ places most dangerous in terms of infection.

Session 2: Migrant workers, informal housing and the impacts of lockdown

Pre - readings

- Race for space to house vulnerable in coronavirus crisis: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200326163728-etbum/>
- As cities order people to stay off the streets, homelessness activists say police are targeting those with nowhere else to go: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200423122421-hibd0>
- The migrant workers crisis and what the government should have done March 30, 2020: <https://indianexpress.com/audio/3-things/the-migrant-workers-crisis-and-what-the-government-should-have-done/6337882/>

Preparatory assignment

- Think of someone you know who has migrated (even long time ago, for example your grandparents etc.). Try to talk to this person on phone, via Internet, and ask about his/ her experience with the actual process of changing home: did they already know where to stay when they first arrived? If no, how difficult was it to find a place to stay? Did they bring all their belongings? Etc. Document this interview.

Session content

Over decades, landless, impoverished rural migrants have kept flocking into megacities of developing countries and emerging economies to seek alternative livelihoods in industry, construction and service sector. Engaged as low skill and low wage workers many of them continue to struggle for foothold in the big cities to this day. Lack of affordable housing solutions often forces them to live in overcrowded dormitories, untenable pavements squats, on constructions sites or as highly vulnerable renters in informal settlements.

As measures to stop the spread of the new corona virus were taken up and countless countries around the globe imposed lockdowns, these migrant workers in cities remained unchartered for to a wide extent. Not having a proper home to stay at in the first place and now additionally bereft of their daily wages, which they depend upon for sustenance they found themselves in want of even the most basic provision and consequently figured out upcoming acute danger of starving. As a consequence, millions of workers eg. in India desperately tried to get back to their native village places where they could at least hope for sufficient food provision.

With all trains and other means of transports halted due to lockdown, heading home on foot remained the only option for most of these people. The ensuing mass movement of exhausted, malnourished laborers dramatically collided with restrictions on movement and led to repeated violent clashes with law enforcement personnel, including inhumane treatment, beatings and incarcerations.

In depth reading

- Borders of an Epidemic: http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_Migration_2020/COVID-19.pdf
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Session 3: Forced evictions during lockdown

Pre - readings

- UN-Habitat Policy Statement on the Prevention of Evictions and Relocations during COVID-19: https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/05/un-habitat_policy_statement_on_prevention_of_evictions_and_relocations.pdf
- At least 5,000 people in Nairobi were left homeless and at risk of contracting COVID-19 after slum demolitions: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200506115554-bt2r5/?source=package&id=71dbcfa7-0056-4ad5-8b45-239428b3f3d7>
- COVID-19 crisis: Kenya urged to stop all evictions and protect housing rights defenders: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=25901&LangID=E>
- City demolitions expose Ethiopian families to coronavirus: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200429114219-ucgnb>
- Despite a moratorium on evictions, tenants unable to pay rent are having utilities shut off and being kicked out of their homes: <https://news.trust.org/item/20200424082353-4txpg/?source=package&id=71dbcfa7-0056-4ad5-8b45-239428b3f3d7>
- Ten arrested for land grab during lockdown: <https://www.talkofthetown.co.za/2020/05/05/ten-arrested-for-land-grab-during-lockdown/>
- New land grabs in Durban's Cato Crest informal settlement: <https://www.talkofthetown.co.za/2019/02/19/new-land-grabs-in-durbans-cato-crest-informal-settlement/>

Preparatory assignment

- Study the articles from Ethiopia and South Africa as indicated above (“City demolitions...”, “Ten arrested for land grab”, “New land grabs”); Identify stakeholders involved in the described disputes and list their arguments. Compare and discuss your observations with two comrades. Not all the reported events took place under lockdown – try to elaborate how the advent of the pandemic has influenced the discourse.

Session content

While advocacy groups have pledged to city authorities in many cities to at least postpone imminent large scale evictions, reports have come up lately of informal settlers being made effectively homeless – and thus even more vulnerable to the disease - amidst the lockdown in some places due to ongoing evictions. Local administrations in question have in turn claimed that informal settlers were making use of the current situation to create facts by unlawfully occupying barren land.

In several instances worldwide, NGOs have claimed that large (international) cooperations were exploiting the state of emergency and anxiety as well as insecurity and lack of monitoring following the global Corona outbreak to shift realities on the ground to their end. In some cases where ongoing disputes over alleged land grabbing had previously remained undecided, these actors were said to have taken advantage of the general situation to quietly appropriate areas in question.

In depth reading

- Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context:

<https://www.undocs.org/A/73/310/rev.1>

Session 4: Homelessness in times of crisis

Pre - readings

- Closed bathrooms afflict U.S. homeless in coronavirus lockdown:
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200526101748-rou62/>
- Cancel or strike: Pressure mounts to help U.S. renters amid coronavirus:
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200513111819-09k55>
- Coronavirus could put 1.5 mln U.S. families on cusp of homelessness:
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200408140017-37u8r>

Session content

Homeless people in Western countries are found to be made even more precarious due to the general lockdown. Not having a home proper to retreat to, they are literally left to the streets and thus highly more likely to contract the virus. Additionally, public spaces and parks which they are frequently found to resort to, likewise remain closed for the most part. Those who depend upon begging, rack picking or street vending for a living are confronted with sanctions and even (hefty) fines being imposed upon them by police and security personnel. Lacking social security provision and with limited access to public health services they are more severely affected in case of contracting the illness. At the same time, cramped conditions in many emergency shelters deter many from accessing these.

In depth reading/ listening

- Unsheltered in place (podcast on homelessness during lockdown in the US):
<https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/unsheltered-in-place/>
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Session 5: Crisis within crisis: Refugee camps in times of pandemic

Pre - readings

- COVID-19 threatens refugee camps: <https://www.rescue.org/covid-19-threatens-refugee-camps>
- COVID-19 cases spark concern in Rohingya refugee camps: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/covid-19-cases-spark-concern-in-rohingya-refugee-camps/1852529>
- Refugees and displaced highly vulnerable to COVID-19: https://www.natureasia.com/en/nmiddleeast/article/10.1038/nmiddleeast.2020.39?utm_campaign=NatureMidE_&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_account=NatureMidE&sf231791576=1

Session content

Refugee camps in several conflict zones on different continents were already faced with numerous ailments and challenges with regards to provision of basic services such as housing, drinking water and sewerage removal before the Corona outbreak. Governmental agencies, parastatal and nongovernmental organizations in often poor host countries such as Jordan, Ethiopia or Bangladesh were struggling with logistical as well as financial constraints, dealing with high numbers of refugees and prolonged duration of conflicts in neighboring states.

In frequently unhygienic conditions and water scarcity, which renders hand washing impossible already under “normal” conditions, Covid 19 has come as an additional challenge. Social distancing is found to be near to impossible in overcrowded camps and basic health infrastructure mostly absent. The pandemic thus adds a further severe burden to already fairly hazardous living conditions for both residents and relief workers.

In depth reading/ viewing

- Webinar: Reducing COVID-19 Vulnerability Amongst Displaced Populations and Migrants: https://undrr.zoom.us/rec/play/upB4dLj6r243HN2StASDC6R7W9S1f6us0yVP-6EEmRvkBXEFOIGiZbFHNuQUahwWvPyOYioSeoTg4moJ?startTime=1586415438000&xzm_rtaid=4axv7rXhQYedXacmC4ZpUA.1590593509437.095cb84b8a76cab25f12ee8f170fba73&xzm_rtaid=261
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Follow up assignments

- Watch the webinar. Compile lists of challenges/ difficulties encountered by refugees in the different countries represented. Compare these lists and identify those challenges which are most common to all the situations. Which of these directly or indirectly relate to housing and infrastructure? Why?

Session 6: Lockdown's impact on environment

Pre - readings

- Coronavirus Lockdown: What Is The Impact Of Lockdown On Pollution in India?:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-79cLR_AVUc
- As lockdown clears the air, Cairo looks to keep pollution low:
<https://news.trust.org/item/20200525002313-fgnts/>

Session content

With sharp, extended and unprecedented curbs in environmental pollution especially from traffic and industry (while domestic consumption might generally have increased), many countries and cities, especially in emerging economies, are experiencing extraordinary improvements in outdoor air and water conditions as well as noise under the lockdown, which have long been deemed unachievable in the policy arena. These unexpected side effects are perceived as highly appreciable and have raised discussions on whether such kind of “holidays for the environment” should be envisaged as a regular feature in the years to come. However, they of course come at a significant economic and in consequence: social costs.

At the same time, one should not forget that challenges related to climate change and the increased frequency of extreme weather events (such as heat waves, cyclones etc. remain a threat even during times of Covid 19 and might become even more difficult to tackle.

In-depth reading/ listening:

- The Natural Experiment (podcast on scientific research caused by the pandemic – min 6:30 – 22:30 on air pollution related effects in India): <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-natural-experiment/>
- Coronavirus: lockdown's effect on air pollution provides rare glimpse of low-carbon future: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-lockdowns-effect-on-air-pollution-provides-rare-glimpse-of-low-carbon-future-134685>
- Webinar: Combating the dual challenges of climate-related disasters and COVID-19: <https://www.undrr.org/event/webinar-combating-dual-challenges-climate-related-disasters-and-covid-19>

Session 7: Building back better

Pre - readings

- After the Pandemic, Will We Rethink How We Plan Our Cities?: <https://thewire.in/urban/city-planning-pandemic>
- Coronavirus: we're in a real-time laboratory of a more sustainable urban future: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-were-in-a-real-time-laboratory-of-a-more-sustainable-urban-future-135712>
- Natural Ventilation in Built-Environment during and beyond COVID19: <https://www.zingyhomes.com/latest-trends/natural-ventilation-built-environment-during-covid19/>
- Public spaces - not a "nice to have" but a basic need for cities: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/public-spaces-not-nice-have-basic-need-cities>
- Coronavirus: we're in a real-time laboratory of a more sustainable urban future: <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-were-in-a-real-time-laboratory-of-a-more-sustainable-urban-future-135712>

Preparatory assignment

- Draw up your list of main lessons learnt from pandemic and lockdown in terms of cities and housing, especially for informal settlements. Derive five main goals for the future. Discuss with five class mates and agree upon your joint lists of goals. Discuss which of these goals will directly affect you as future planners and how you will be able to respond to these.

Session content

Coronavirus has engendered discussion about the future of the cities worldwide. This is seen as a wakening call to discuss the kind of cities we want and then demand the changes we need to have them. The current situation will have lasting consequences, but many of them were set in motion long before the Covid 19 pandemic. The crisis has exposed how divided, unbalanced and unsustainable many cities have become. Their future will be determined by issues that have already defined their past and the myriad of daily challenges faced by their most vulnerable citizens will remain ever pressing. So, what is planners' stance in this?

In depth reading

- The Post-Coronavirus Metropolis: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/cities/publications/blogs/The-Post-Coronavirus-Metropolis>
- URBAN PLANNING RESPONSE IN MUMBAI DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN A CITIZEN'S CHARTER: <https://csainquiry.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/urban-planning-response-for-covid-2020.pdf>
- Sustainable Housing Can't Slip Under the Radar Once the COVID-19 Crisis Subsides (P.K.Das): <https://thewire.in/urban/mumbai-housing-social-distancing>