



# Building back better from COVID-19 through inclusive territorial approaches

Discussion Paper – November 2020

**Published by:**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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Bonn, 2020

## Introduction

From diverse experiences of countries and that of local and regional governments<sup>1</sup>, it is evident that the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has a number of territorial dimensions that need to be better understood for more effective responses. First it is clear that COVID-19 has asymmetric impacts between and within territories in different countries. Despite such differences of health, social and economic impact, COVID-19 itself ignores territorial boundaries. Therefore, it is important to understand the territorial implications of the pandemic in a larger context acknowledging inter-territorial interdependencies and the flows of people, goods, information, capital, services, etc., across urban and rural areas<sup>2</sup>.

The impacts of COVID-19 have revealed weaknesses of economic policies and the importance of some degree of re-territorializing for improved resilience. COVID-19 continues to impact urban and rural areas, even resurging in cities and countries thought to be recovering. Health, economic, and social systems are disrupted and emergency policy, investment and protection measures are implemented to contain the damage and to prepare for the post COVID-19 phase. There is also evidence that the capitalization on some of the most important lessons of the pandemic can benefit from territorial planning and development. It is therefore important to elicit key messages relating territorial approaches to COVID-19 in order to show the possible contribution of a territorial development perspective to recovery efforts that seek to address combined health, social and economic challenges. Six key points are made in this policy brief:

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<sup>1</sup> There is an increasing body of information on local and territorial lessons from COVID-19. For example (cite UN-Habitat, UCLG and FAO webinars and synthesis of lessons learned)

<sup>2</sup> Urban-Rural Linkages or URLs are defined as systems of spatial flows that are the basis for functional

## Implications of COVID-19 for human development and wellbeing

Like a wildfire, COVID-19 spread from east to west and from north to south in the first half of 2020 and generated worldwide transformations. Many of the systemic and structural challenges to people living in developing countries and especially in rural and informal peri-urban and urban slum areas have been starkly and even tragically exacerbated.

The most vulnerable in social and economic terms before COVID-19 are the most susceptible to contagion and to mortality, but also to losing their livelihoods. Socio-economic differences have widened dramatically during the pandemic and from measures taken to contain the virus such as lockdowns that in dense informal settlements have worsened the outbreak. The pandemic could drive 100 million more people into extreme poverty by the end of this year (Global Commission on Adaptation 2020)<sup>3</sup>.

The lack of capacity to protect and maintain the health of the poor in urban and rural areas, the lack of food, jobs, infrastructure, water and sanitation – all severe prior to COVID-19 – is now at crisis proportions with some countries facing civil disturbance and unrest that could topple governments and engender even greater chaos. The livelihoods of poor people reliant upon informal sector have collapsed in many countries and severe food shortages and rising poverty and inequalities are anticipated.

### **The groundwork exists for territorial approaches to respond to crises such as COVID-19.**

There has been growing recognition by stakeholders from local to national governments, civil society, planners, program managers, the United Nations, research and development communities,

territories by [UN-Habitat](#), [FAO](#), [OECD](#), [IIED](#), [Rimisp](#) and others.

<sup>3</sup> <https://unfccc.int/news/call-to-action-for-a-climate-resilient-recovery-from-covid-19>

that territorial perspectives for development<sup>4</sup> are a viable option to address increasingly complex challenges of our world.

The local and subnational level can play a crucial role in overcoming inequality, power asymmetry, environmental, social and economic vulnerability and other intersecting challenges<sup>5</sup>. In some cases, territorial strategies and actions have been approached comprehensively, fostering collaboration across agencies and sectors and connecting jurisdictions of local, subnational and national governments. Significantly, they can include those who have been left behind for too long in planning and policy decisions.

Multi-sector, multi-level and multi-stakeholder territorial planning and development prior to the pandemic has had demonstrable impact in the capacity to respond to COVID-19. It is acknowledged as the basis for local resilience planning, urban-rural food systems, or disaster preparedness and recovery mechanisms to address COVID-19<sup>6</sup>, etc.

### **National support for integrated territorial development enshrined in global agendas is more relevant than ever for the world after COVID-19.**

Integrated territorial development is embedded in goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>7</sup> to achieve “the future we want” including the future of cities and towns<sup>8</sup>, the future of rural areas and family farmers<sup>9</sup>, the future of nature<sup>10</sup>, the future of food systems<sup>11</sup> and nutrition and the future of the planet<sup>12</sup> and human well-being, peace and prosperity. In the context of

the current crises, planning for resilience is the tie that binds all these agendas.

Communities of practice (including countries, governments and actors at different levels) have taken steps to operationalize global agendas at local levels through territorial and landscape approaches, systems of cities and bioregions, and urban rural linkages. These communities have developed guiding principles, frameworks for action, case studies, tools and guidance advancing new development models to localize sustainable development<sup>13</sup>. In various forms and narratives that share much in common, territorial approaches are being promoted by civil society, by UN agencies, by countries, by cities and by movements in many regions.

### **Cities and local governments are in the frontlines and many mobilized rapid responses to the crisis.**

The toll of human suffering and economic cost to societies in many parts of the world may simply not be enough to bring about the momentum to change national development strategies – yet. In spite of slow or in some cases misguided interventions by central governments, it is at the local level, cities and local authorities and civil society that have led in many countries on the emergency and operational response.

Preventing the spread of COVID-19 has been based worldwide on ensuring physical distancing and has resulted in major reductions of human mobility, with dire livelihood consequences for those who have lost urban or rural jobs. Yet, the constraints on mobility have in turn reinforced movements for re-localization, local sovereignty

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.donorplatform.org/publication-agenda-2030/fostering-territorial-perspective-for-development-white-paper-jointly-released-by-platform-members-and-partners.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/a-territorial-approach-to-the-sustainable-development-goals-e86fa715-en.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/covid-19-outbreak-readiness-and-response>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/ca4672en/ca4672en.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://ipbes.net/assessment-reports/ldr>  
<http://www.fao.org/3/ca4672en/ca4672en.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.ipes-food.org/\\_img/upload/files/COVID-19\\_CommuniqueEN%283%29.pdf](http://www.ipes-food.org/_img/upload/files/COVID-19_CommuniqueEN%283%29.pdf)  
<http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb0407en>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/srcl/>

<sup>13</sup> Examples include: <https://urbanrurallink-ages.files.wordpress.com/2019/09/url-gp-1.pdf> - <https://unhabitat.org/international-guidelines-on-urban-and-territorial-planning> - <http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/text/>

and economies of proximity. These are not only civil society or pocket-sized affairs. Awareness of the advantages of territorial approaches has spread as lessons are shared across regions and globally on COVID-19 response and recovery. This is the case when territorial integration of local and district governments had been carried out prior to the pandemic, in some cases with enabling support of central government ministries<sup>14</sup>.

Other examples are where pre-COVID governance mechanisms were addressing multiple social, economic and environmental challenges. In these places there are operational frameworks that can adapt quickly to address the collapse of certain economic sectors through rapid interventions that have the benefit of prior capacity building and political support<sup>15</sup>. In relation to food systems during and after COVID-19, a widespread lesson from food supply vulnerability has shifted priorities to provide food for cities from rural and peri-urban areas in proximity to urban markets.

### **The global pandemic has underscored the importance of digital connectivity.**

Whether for family communication, data collection, marketing and e-commerce, teleworking, or remote schooling, there is urgent need for inclusive and transparent platforms for connectivity for all households and neighborhoods across digital and economic divides. Equally important is the need for reliable data collection that in turn requires cross-agency, cross-sector and cross-jurisdiction coordination. The urgency is not only to contain the spread of a highly infectious virus, but also to address the enormous non-health social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

At territorial levels, the people- and place-specific characteristics of COVID-19 impacts and responses are diverse, both within and between

countries, including travel restrictions and the closing of borders. Thanks to the internet, people are able to stay both very local and connected across territories, regions and globally. Through these new levels of connectivity, COVID-19 is bringing new emphasis to how integrated and coherent approaches to urban-rural linkages are vital. People are either isolated from their families and communities or have had to move away from friends and families.

Inclusive and participatory methods to bring people together virtually have been tested in multiple territorial approaches prior to COVID-19. During the pandemic, the reversal of rural to urban migration in many countries has had both negative and positive consequences for livelihood and wellbeing that require communication and coordinated action.

### **Transformations in governance systems brought about by COVID-19 will require further transformation of policy and practice.**

These transformations are already occurring at the intersection of multiple sectors of health, food, economic development, social and ecosystems protection and access to services. There is evidence that territorial approaches can provide a long-term framework for sectorial efforts and enhance their efficiency and effectiveness, especially with support by national policy and investment<sup>16</sup>.

Financial support for capacity-building of local and subnational governments to address challenges worsened by COVID-19 is a critical need. The issues of inequality and power imbalance will require strong coalitions, political will, and the support of donors and development partners.

Strengthening of institutional environments with well- designed investment and planning had

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<sup>14</sup> Widespread global exchanges among cities and territories have led to two published syntheses of these experiences in recent months one from UN-Habitat ([https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/07/issue\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_through\\_the\\_lens\\_of\\_urban\\_rural\\_linkages\\_web\\_revised.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/07/issue_brief_covid-19_through_the_lens_of_urban_rural_linkages_web_revised.pdf)) and one from FAO (<http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb1020en>)

<sup>15</sup> <http://urbanpolicyplatform.org/policy-legislation-and-governance-webinar-series/>

<sup>16</sup> GIZ. 2020. Territorial Approaches to Sustainable Development: Stocktaking and Synthesis Report (to be published in late 2020)

emerged as a priority prior to COVID-19. Now such attention to ensure that partners at all levels (local, subnational, national, regional, international) are collaborating to their best ability is even more critical.

Above all, COVID-19 requires the evolution of solely sectoral approaches towards more whole-of-government, whole-of-society approaches made concrete at territorial levels. This is what in fact the implementation of the SDGs also requires. These lessons of territorial approaches for COVID-19 will contribute to the review of global agendas scheduled for 2020/21.

In conclusion, with the likelihood of intensifying humanitarian need worldwide in the struggle to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, the opportunity and the need has never been greater to apply territorial approaches for recovery and post-pandemic policy, planning and development.

From lessons being learned now, interventions at the local and subnational could focus on:

- balancing global value chains with local and regional value chains;
- capacity-building for governments to address territorial planning integrating urban and rural dimensions beyond emergency response to the pandemic and to future crises
- addressing disadvantaged groups of the society disproportionately affected by COVID-19
- reducing risks of increased poverty and hunger with policy responses targeting groups most at-risk in ways that take advantage of the COVID-inspired territorial solidarity and mutual aid efforts
- Harness the benefits of urban-rural linkages and territorial responses to COVID for long term efforts to address rural development



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