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Local government strategies to provide emergency lockdown solutions in the COVID-19 crisis

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Although the legal frameworks underpinning housing policies and allocating resources are typically set at a national level, it is often local and regional governments which are responsible for the implementation of local housing development and manage public and social housing stocks and related services.[2] As the global trends in urbanization widening inequality and mass displacements accelerate due to war, migration and the climate crisis, the role of local governments in housing policies is more important than ever. Yet, their resources, powers and institutional capacities are often inadequate to effectively curb real estate speculation and to uphold the right to housing in their territories.

The convergence between the global housing and global pandemic crises has meant that local governments are facing major challenges in accommodating people so that they can properly isolate. They have therefore sought emergency measures and have set up new services to enable proper lockdowns and contain the spread of the virus in their communities. Emergency measures taken by cities include:

▌ Setting up temporary shelters in public buildings (army barracks, sport infrastructures, neighbourhood social centres, empty public buildings, universities, city halls, etc.).

▌ Requisitioning or renting private hotel rooms at preferential rates to enable people to self-isolate.

▌ Creating multidisciplinary mobile public service teams composed of health, social and security workers to carry out testing, deliver treatment and take care of vulnerable people directly on the spot.

▌ Strengthening the availability of shelters and support to victims of domestic violence that spiked following lockdown orders.[3]

▌ Providing "sanitation points" with running water and soap in different urban locations to facilitate access to proper handwashing, especially where such essential services are hardly accessible or unsafe.

Cities have also sought to mitigate the effects of the crisis on the income of precarious tenants by:

▌ Lowering, deferring or renouncing payments on public and social housing rentals for tenants who suffered a loss of income, including on the private rentals of non-essential services in public buildings and infrastructure.

▌ Passing moratoriums on evictions and repossessions.

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1 This box is an extract of a paper published by PSI in August 2020, see https://bit.ly/3hiInbc.

2 UN General Assembly, A/HRC/28/62, "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, Leilani Farha: Responsibilities of Local and Other Sub-National Governments, 22 December 2014, http://www.unhousingrapp.org/user/pages/04.resources/Thematic-Report-7-Responsibilities-of-Local-and-SubNational-Governments.pdf

3 A. Taub, "A New COVID-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide" New York Times, 14 April 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html

▮ Encouraging and negotiating with real estate agencies, landlords and banks that they defer rents and payments for vulnerable residential and commercial tenants.

▮ Postponing municipal and other local taxes.

▮ Providing essential service continuation (electricity, water, gas, etc.) or – requiring it from private providers – even in case of non-payment by households under economic hardship.[4]

4 UCLG, LLE Housing: ensuring everyone can safely #StayAtHome Briefing & Learning Note April 1st, 2020 https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/eng_briefing_housing_lle1.pdf and "Cities for Global Health" https://www.citiesforglobalhealth.org/

While these measures go in the right direction to face the pandemic contingency, it will be essential that permanent housing solutions are found and that local governments' financial efforts to provide sustainable access to housing for vulnerable people are duly supported and accounted for by national governments and international institutions rescue packages.