

COVID-19

A guide for responding in urban, informal settlements

Purpose:



This is a guidance document for people working in informal settlements and urban contexts as they explore a meaningful response to Covid-19 at the individual, household and community level.

Contexts and country-level scenarios vary so please make sure your analysis and thinking is in line with your government's directives.

What is an urban, informal settlement?

One billion people live in informal settlements where water for basic needs is in short supply, and where space is constrained and rooms are often shared. There are many terms used to describe informal settlements, such as unplanned settlements, unconventional dwellings, slums and non-permanent structures.



The definition of an informal settlement will vary by context. What they all have in common is **a lack of access to basic services and city infrastructure**. Often housing does not comply with safe building regulations and inhabitants have no legal claim to the land. Informal settlements are often situated in geographically and environmentally hazardous areas with **a lack of public space and green areas**. Slum areas in particular are the most deprived and excluded form of informal settlements, and the people who live there are **constantly exposed to eviction, disease and violence**¹.

Why are people living in urban informal settlements particularly vulnerable to Covid-19?

Those who live in densely populated areas, such as urban informal dwellings, are often much more vulnerable to significant **health risks**.

- Poor sanitation, limited food storage facilities and a lack of access to good quality drinking water increase the risk of a **spread of disease**.
- Access to health and other services is often informal and reliant on social networks.

¹ Taken from UNHabitat

- There may be **significant pockets of highly vulnerable people**, such as the old and those with underlying health conditions, living in informal settlements, without support and unable to access care.

What measures can be taken in informal settlements to reduce the spread of Covid-19?

Many people live in informal, urban settlements with hundreds of people living in very close proximity to one another. There is often very limited access to soap and water. Informal settlements and their residents are an intrinsic part of the city system, often subsidising and contributing to life elsewhere in the city. This makes it difficult to implement control efforts built on containment and reduction in movement. There can be underlying mistrust of government or top-down messaging so **it is important communities are approached sensitively** and with an **understanding of local community power dynamics** in order to establish trust and co-stewardship of any messaging or response.



Measures for individuals²

The general advice is to do the simple things that you would do if you had a cough or cold.

- Wash your hands as often as you can with soap or 60% alcohol-based hand sanitiser if available.
- Avoid touching surfaces where possible, particularly communal surfaces such as door handles and light switches.
- Avoid shaking hands or kissing one another in greeting.
- If you do have tissues, use them when you cough or sneeze, and then throw the tissue away safely so that others do not come into contact with it.
- If you don't have access to tissues, cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm to avoid the spread of droplets to other people, and wash your elbow or clothing.
- Try and maintain a safe distance of two metres (6 feet) from other people when walking through the settlement.
- Be mindful of the most vulnerable people in your community and support them in thinking through appropriate physical distancing to reduce their risk of infection.

Measures for households

- Try and keep household surfaces as clean as possible.
- If you have access to 60% alcohol based cleaners, use them, as they work well in killing viruses. Keep the rooms well ventilated. Open curtains and windows and let sunlight in - UV rays and heat in some cases can destroy viruses.



² ARISE - Interview with Tom Wingfield of Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine in the UK 21st March 2020
<http://www.ariseconsortium.org/>

- If someone in your household has symptoms, try and help them sleep and eat in a different part of the dwelling if possible. If that is not possible, try not to share any communal bowls, cutlery or cups during this period of illness.
- Be mindful that individuals can be carriers of the virus for some time before showing any symptoms, so practice safe hygiene and try to maintain physical space between household members.

Measures for communities

Community engagement will be key to effective epidemic control, whether through delivering trusted messages, carrying out monitoring, or attempting to limit movement.

One of the main recommendations for reducing the spread of Covid-19 is to use social distancing. This is where people are encouraged to keep a safe physical distance between themselves and others. To do this:

- Avoid all gatherings - large or small. Most contact takes place in the workplace, while shopping or in places of worship. Think about where your main points of contact with others are, adapt your routine and behaviours, and consider if you should stay away from those places temporarily.
- Avoid public transport wherever possible - consider walking or cycling if that is possible. If you can, adjust your travelling hours to less busy times of the day so that you are not on crammed trains or buses.
- Avoid gatherings with friends and family. The same risks apply to gatherings of friends and family as they would to gatherings in the wider community. Try some other creative ways of keeping in touch during this time.
- Try and vary when individuals go to collect water, to limit the numbers of people in one place at a time.

Contact information

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