Responding in informal urban settlements

This is a guidance document for those working with communities in informal urban settlements (sometimes known as slums, shanty towns and favelas) as they respond to Covid-19.

Act now

Prepare people: **once the virus gets into a slum, it will spread really fast.**

Research shows that slums experience faster viral spread and earlier peaks. Therefore, health facilities can become quickly overwhelmed. It is vital to take measures to slow the spread of the virus.

Follow basic prevention principles

These recommended preventative measures are the same worldwide, but they are harder to implement in slums and settlements.

- Reduce social contact with others and practise physical distancing. Stay two metres away from people who are coughing or sneezing.

- Practise good hygiene, especially regular handwashing, preferably with soap.

- Consider isolating or shielding older and more vulnerable people, but ensure that such people still have access to a support system and supplies of food and medicine.

In slums, the acute needs are:

- **Advocacy for external interventions:** These may include installing new handwashing stations, improving access to clean water and soap, obtaining protective equipment including masks and gloves.

- **An informal economy:** There needs to be a balance between restrictions and ensuring that livelihoods and people's well-being are not harmed.

- **Adequate physical space:** There is a significant problem of overcrowding and therefore physical distancing is hard to achieve.

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- **Access to health facilities:** There may be little or no access to health facilities. This is a significant issue for those who become unwell.

- **Resources for long-term development:** If agencies fail to acknowledge and incorporate this need into response planning, it can damage trust between agencies and communities. This can contribute to 'response fatigue', where communities choose not to engage with projects because they do not see long-term change.

People need information *and* an understanding of the risks posed by their context

- **Be clear in your communication** about the significance of this pandemic. Explain why people are being asked to treat this differently from other fatally infectious diseases that already affect slums.

- **Communication channels must be two-way:** People need to know that they are being listened to.

- **Radio and social media** are key platforms to use for communicating important information.

- **Engage and support religious leaders:** Facilitate online or on-air spiritual activities where trusted community and faith leaders can endorse public health messages and counter misinformation.

Acknowledge and mobilise local capacity

Communities should have ownership of their response: they are the experts about their situation. Be aware of who is trusted in the community and what level of influence they have. Always seek to listen and learn, remembering the adage '**nothing about us without us**'.

Consider the following:

- Top-down control can lead to the community becoming disengaged.

- Engage the community to ensure that your response takes into consideration the unique complexities of that specific context.

- Be aware of locally trusted information channels and decision-making structures: these may be informal and you will need to learn to work with them.[1]

- Foster good relationships with the (local) government, who control access to infrastructure.

- Any intervention should be done through, or in collaboration with, local community groups. Local organisations and self-help groups are likely to be good sources of information about local geography, buildings and social, physical and micro-economic resources.

- Local people understand the potential and cultural impact of measures. Solicit local ideas and leadership for:

  - adapting physical distancing practices for the local context, as this may need to be by section of the community rather than individually or by specific household

  - adapting local facilities to use as clinics/quarantine areas

  - organising people to implement measures and support mechanisms

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[1] Social Science in Humanitarian Action: 'Key considerations: COVID-19 in informal urban settlements'

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