

ANGEL GONZALEZ-SANZ - TALKING POINTS

**SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN
DEVELOPMENT IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD**

30 March 2022

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to present the Report of the Secretary-General under the agenda item on science, technology and innovation (or STI) for sustainable urban development in a post-pandemic world.

I am also grateful for the valuable contributions from eighteen member States and seven international organizations that we received for this report.

Distinguished delegates,

Urban areas continue to expand and will absorb most future population growth. Two-thirds of the global population will live in urban areas by 2050, where Asia and Africa will be urbanizing fastest in the next decade. At the same time, for the last two years urban areas have become pandemic epicenters: up to 90% of the COVID-19 cases worldwide were reported to be in urban areas. The global economic crisis and job losses caused by the pandemic hit urban areas the most, widening existing inequalities and aggravating poverty in urban areas. The pandemic also provided important lessons about inclusiveness and sustainability issues in urban communities which point to the need for more innovation to address development challenges in a post pandemic world.

The Report identifies twelve such challenges. Some concern inclusiveness issues, such as ensuring access to quality education and healthcare systems. Others focus on environmental aspects, for example, inefficient and polluting urban energy systems. A third group of challenges examined in the report concern economic questions such as the limited access to decent urban employment opportunities, poor housing, and growing inequalities.

Several of them may not be unique to urban areas but have significant impact on urban sustainable development if they are not addressed. For example, the water scarcity, disaster, and gender-based inequalities and violence against women and girls.

In all of them, the report shows how, during the pandemic, scientific knowledge production, digital technology adoption, and innovations in organizational and institutional settings have substantially contributed to address those challenges in urban settings and mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The report presents a selection of particularly relevant STI solutions, including many examples from the concrete cases contributed by the member States and international agencies.

Based on the discussion of those examples, the report formulates several policy recommendations from which, in the interest of time, I would like to focus on three.

First, policy-makers should seize the innovation momentum generated by the pandemic and adjust priorities and resource allocations to invest in STI solutions to alleviate unemployment and the financial difficulties experienced by low-income households and smaller firms.

E-commerce provides a prime example of this. During the pandemic people have switched to the use of e-platforms to meet their daily needs. UNCTAD data show that in 2020 the share of e-commerce grew from 16 to 19 per cent of total retail sales. The report illustrates this with a good practice case from Uganda, where the United Nations Capital Development Fund collaborated with the main ride-hailing company in Kampala to launch a digital e-commerce platform for home deliveries during the pandemic. The platform has helped 18,000 people keep their jobs, 800 vendors to maintain revenue during lockdown and thousands of customers to receive deliveries of food and other essential goods.

The second recommendation that I would like to highlight is that policy makers and all stakeholders need to cultivate and empower local ecosystems for urban innovation. To enhance urban sustainability, STI solutions require a people-centered focus, and they must consider local context conditions. In this regard the report quotes examples of how this approach is used in various developing countries such as the Dominican Republic and Kenya and underlines the need to establish an enabling institutional and regulatory environment that promotes the an open innovation culture and facilitates multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Third, the report calls for the introduction of new and more equitable financing mechanisms for STI for urban development. Cities and urban communities need stronger financial capacity to support the development of local STI solutions. They also need to ensure that public investment management in cities and communities is supported by policy coherence across multiple levels of governance.

To support this, several countries have established dedicated zones to nurture the sustainable development of STI that promote job creation and the advancing of industrialization in urban areas. Such dedicated spaces support local urban innovation ecosystems, improving the ease of doing business, providing access to finance and tax support, and creating demand for new job profiles.

Distinguished delegates,

To move ahead with the implementation of these and the rest of the recommendations of the report, developing countries should be able to rely on technical and financial support through international cooperation. The Report calls for international collaborative actions in five areas in particular:

- Support cross-country collaborative research efforts by establishing common strategies for data collection and analysis, that can facilitate benchmarking and knowledge transfer.
- Assist developing countries in structuring long-term collaborative efforts that extend beyond single projects and consider multi-year developments; UNCTAD and other UN agencies stand ready to support in this regard.
- Develop operational tools that consider the local social and technical aspects of STI-based sustainability transitions, in order to stop the spread of one-size-fits-all mentalities;
- Enhance capacity-building support to increase the availability of resources to scale up research development capacity.
- Strengthen scientific cooperation in the field of digitally enhanced teaching and learning to provide better guidance to government leaders and local authorities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion, the report illustrates how new scientific knowledge, digital technology adoption, and innovations in organizational and institutional settings have contributed to mitigating the impact of COVID-19, helping many urban social and technical systems to continue to function during the pandemic. Building on this, the Report also calls for actions at the international, national and local levels to promote the deployment and scaling up of STI solutions that can address some of the most pressing inclusiveness and sustainability challenges that urban communities face in the still ongoing pandemic crisis and its aftermath.

Thank you for your attention.