Public Space and COVID-19:

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The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on movement have changed the relationship of citizens to their streets, public spaces and public facilities. Clearly public spaces must be part of the response to the virus whether to limit the spread of the virus, or to provide ways for people to relax or carry out their livelihood.

Physical distancing requires people to have adequate space between them in public spaces. The expansion of streets can ensure physical distancing is possible on pavements, particularly in developing countries where the majority of the people walk. In slums and informal settlements the often inadequate and overcrowded footpaths make it difficult to adhere to the physical distancing requirements and solutions such as placing water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in strategic places and educating people to stand as far as possible apart while queuing are important steps.

Vehicle traffic has reduced dramatically on the streets and the volume of passengers on public transport has dropped by up to 80 per cent in some cities. Cities are temporarily or even permanently re-allocating road space from cars to provide more space for bicycles and people to move around safely, easing movement and respecting physical distancing rules. Some cities are expanding pavements to facilitate safe walking, skating and jogging. Such measures result in reduced CO_2 emissions and better air quality improving people's health and well-being.

Public spaces need to be multi-functional and adaptable. For example temporary food markets can be set up in spaces such as parking areas to decongest existing markets. Small neighbourhood spaces can be transformed into pop-up community health centres areas for food distribution or food gardens. The shared use of streets and spaces can allow for organized street vending on select days or times of day or for leisure activities such as showing films or plays or holding exercise classes.

Public spaces and facilities can provide essential services for marginalized communities during a pandemic such as providing clean bathrooms, water points and/or appropriate cleaning products for the urban poor or those without housing. Open spaces in informal settlements can offer handwashing facilities to ensure that families without running water stay safe. They can also be used for safe street vending providing an essential living for poor families.

The pandemic has demonstrated how unevenly public space is distributed throughout many cities, especially in poor neighbourhoods, where there are few shared spaces such as green spaces, parks or playgrounds. These are important in contributing to reducing stress levels, improving mental health and wellbeing and contributing to children's development.

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The design, materials used and management and maintenance of public space is key in fighting the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Public space should be designed to allow for physical distancing and public space managers need to ensure that they can be cleaned frequently and thoroughly including high-touch surfaces like doors, handles, and furniture.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted several gaps in public space including accessibility, flexibility, design, management and maintenance, connectivity and equitable distribution across a city. Going forward we need to create a shared policy agenda bringing together urban planning, community development, architecture, green building and public health.