COVID-19's impact on housing and efforts to upgrade slums worldwide

July 28, 2020, 9 a.m. ET

[0:46] Patrick Canagasingham: A warm welcome, and thank you for joining the +You series, hosted by Habitat for Humanity International.

You may be aware, for the past couple of months, we've been focused on important topics such as housing and health, housing and racial discrimination in the U.S. And I am pleased to let you know that we are taking these public conversations global. And in fact, starting today, our very first session focusing on cities, housing and informal settlements is going just not public, but we're taking it to an international audience as well.

I just want to make a plug up front to really engage the audience, so if you could please make use of the chat box and start typing in questions whilst I engage the panel, that would be most welcome.

It goes without saying that, you know, this conversation is fairly timely. Just earlier this month, world leaders met remotely for the annual U.N. High-Level Political Forum to discuss progress on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs as they are commonly referred to.

And it's fairly important. Think about the ambitious goals that we've set ourselves in terms of looking for improvements in a wide range of areas, ranging from poverty alleviation to human rights to gender inequality to environmental sustainability. And at the same time, I want to say that the focus of our discussion today, of course, would be on SDG 11. And the SDG 11, primarily, is about to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

From a Habitat for Humanity standpoint, I just wanted to say that it was back in February — and it was quite timely at that point — that we launched our own advocacy campaign to increase the number of national governments working and reporting on progress on SDG 11.

SDG 11.1 is a specific area of interest as far as Habitat for Humanity is concerned. It's on slums and other forms of inadequate housing. And also, we want to ensure there is access to safe affordable housing, as well as basic services such as water and sanitation. A little later on, even as I engage the panel, one of the things that I hope to really do is to come back specifically to

SDG 11, but in principle, also start talking about just not progress but what would accountability really look like, both civil society organizations but also national governments, for example.

It goes without saying, again, that, you know, COVID-19 has both underscored the need to advance towards this goal more than ever, but also posed a whole new set of challenges for families. You know, it's been further amplified, living in slums and other forms of informal settlements.

So this would be a really good segue for me to introduce our first panelist, Professor Genie Birch. She's the Nussdorf Professor of Urban Research at the University of Pennsylvania. And if I may just start off, Genie, by posing this question to you. Some have called the pandemic an urban humanitarian crisis because it has had a disproportionate impact on cities. Why are cities particularly vulnerable to COVID-19?

[4:33] Eugénie Birch: Well, the answer is fairly simple. Cities are really impacted greatly by COVID-19 because a lot of people live in cities, and a lot of jobs are in cities. Now, I don't want to confuse a lot of people with density, and that has been a big problem in this discussion around the world about cities and COVID-19. Let's take a minute and look at dense cities that have been very successful and dense cities that have not been very successful.

The dense cities that have been very successful have national, subnational governments, that are prepared to deal with pandemics and have good public services. Those cities that have not fared so well are at the opposite end of the spectrum. They don't have national programs that have been coordinating things, they don't have good subnational governments, and they lack good public services. So I just want to make it clear that cities are experiencing this because there are a lot of people and a lot of jobs, but they're experiencing it differently.

[5:40] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you, Genie. And if I may just open up with another question, to stimulate a discussion around a related point. How do we meet short-term needs for basic services like shelter and livelihoods and plan for more sustainable cities at the same time? So it's really a parallel kind of a process where we want to do both: ensure that the short-term needs aren't neglected and, at the same time, we want to ensure sustainability by being more focused in terms of how we look at shelter and livelihoods in the more long-term.

[6:18] Eugénie Birch: Well, I think you have to look at the shock … as responses to it having three stages.

The first stage, of course, is the absolute emergency response. What do you do to control it, what do you do to help people, and so forth?

The second stage are the sort of … the beginning pre-recovery activities, in which you stabilize the economy and stabilize the public health systems.

And then, the last stage is the recovery stage, and that's when you think about the long-term changes that have to happen in places.

These things should happen almost simultaneously, but, of course, when a city or a national government is dealing with an emergency, it tends to forget about the long-term needs. And planning for and laying the framework right in the beginning, for the changes that have to occur.

And this is the role, I think, that civil society can play in terms of encouraging the people in charge to begin to think about recovery, along with the second-stage. Really, the response emergency, I think that just all hands are on deck for that. But when you get to the second stage — when you're giving payments for unemployment, when you're providing other kinds of services like food and providing food security — you also have to think about, long-term, how are you going to deal with job [inaudible]? How are you going to [inaudible] deal with the various systems that make [inaudible] your public health system, your transport system, your housing system and so forth.

So [inaudible] a little bit idealistic, but I think it's very important for this message to be brought forth in all corners of the world.

[7:56] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you. Before I take a question from the audience, Anacláudia Rossbach, she's the program manager for the Cities Alliance, the regional program manager for Latin America and Caribbean. Would you like to weigh in on my second question to Genie, around the short- to medium-term to long-term, looking at both the basic services in the short-term but also the medium- to long-term response?

[8:23] Anacláudia Rossbach: Well, Patrick, sure. Yeah, being based in Latin America, it makes me reflect if we will ever leave the emergency phase because it seems we are in an endless circle of the pandemic here in many cities of the region. The pandemic has affected — a lot — people in informality, the most vulnerable population that are occupying the urban territories, and the governments are struggling to deal with that. The impacts of COVID are still unforeseen. Economic impact, for sure, they are clear and there.

And I fully agree with Genie. There is an immediate reaction of the civil society community-based organizations. They have been on the front line. And we need to create spaces to use this opportunity right now, where the state and the cities are depending on the actions from the civil society, to establish robust urban governance schemes that can be the basis for the long-term thinking. The actions we take now, they will have impact in the long-term, and this is the strategic thinking that we might be able to place at this exact moment.

[9:44] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you. Thanks, Anacláudia.

And that's quite consistent and maybe somewhat aligned to a question from the audience, and I'm just going to open it up. And it's really the same topic, but looking at it more from a policy front to say, you know, during these unprecedented times, if a housing advocate has just one or

two minutes with a key decision-maker, what is the best way for them to make a case for supporting policies that ensure housing stability for low-income families?

Please feel free to go ahead, Anacláudia, and then I'll defer to Genie, as well.

[10:24] Anacláudia Rossbach: Sure. Well, I might be a little bit of polemic in my response, but I do think our legal frameworks, they are just not adjusted to allow people to live in cities. They don't protect people living in informal settlements, they don't allow them to stay, and they're not able to regulate markets in a way that we are able to provide vacant land or expand the supply of land for affordable housing and low-income housing.

So living in cities is very expensive, the land — well-located land — is very expensive, and quite often, people living in informal settlements … families are evicted because they are considered illegal and not formal. I think right [now] is the moment to change that. Emergency situations in many countries might create a great opportunity for us to review, quickly, our legal frameworks.

And I know of countries that are doing that because they are realizing if they don't review it right now, they will not be able to provide the minimum services — water, the minimum — to people to be able to tackle the COVID situation, to attend to the minimum health requirements to deal with the pandemic. So "change the law" would be my first advice.

[11:50] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you, Anacláudia. Genie, would you like to respond, as well?

[11:55] Eugénie Birch: Absolutely. I think that it's very imperative for groups such as yours and for the Cities Alliance to have an idea as to which of the informal … all informal settlements are not the same. And so some are [inaudible] places, some are old, some are new. And you know this. You've done inventories. So I think you need to bring this knowledge to the decision-makers.

It's not just every informal settlement needs to be saved, but certain informal settlements need to be saved. Other ones you need to have other kinds of policies for. So I think this is slower, it's more nuanced, but I think, in the end, this is the direction you need to take.

You need to say to the national leaders, "Our fate is your fate, number one, so you need to realize that the fate of the nation is dependent upon the health of your cities."

Particularly in places where urbanization is dominant, and that's most of the places of the world, particularly in places where the economy of the cities drives the national economy. You have to make those national leaders understand that their fate is your fate.

What's good for cities is good for the nation. And then, you need [inaudible] approach with regard to informal settlements.

Obviously, in the emergency situation, you need to help them all, but for these permanent changes that Anacláudia is suggesting, she knows, her group knows, they've done the work, they've done the research. Particularly in [Africa], they surveyed 265 informal settlements. They could tell you, in the flip of a finger, which ones would be useful to take care of and which ones wouldn't. And you, too, at Habitat for Humanity, you have this data, so I think now is the time to really intensify the messages that you have.

[13:42] Patrick Canagasingham: That's a great point, and that's one of the things that we are being very intentional about, based on what we know, the data that we have, what research is telling us, but what we are learning, as well, in the process. And maybe if you could stay on this topic for another couple of minutes because it's such an important topic, and again, it gets further amplified due to COVID-19.

You know, we are told that there are about a billion people who live in slums and other forms of informal settlements you kind of alluded to it right now, Genie. Some experts are also telling us that another 500 million people are going to be driven into poverty in the post-COVID-19 phase as well. So again, you know, the issues get further compounded, and you're right, agencies like Habitat for Humanity or Cities Alliance, we've got to be both responsive in the short- and near-term. But we've got to think beyond in terms of, you know, what does this really mean for us in terms of our own interventions, as well?

And I'm just thinking … and maybe, Anacláudia, if I could start with you. Even a specific kind of a case study in the region, in Latin America and Caribbean that's quite frankly being devastated at this point due to COVID-19, are you able to maybe share, you know, either interventions or possible interventions that could actually lead to some of the sustainable solutions that we ought to look at in the post-COVID-19 world?

[15:12] Anacláudia Rossbach: For sure. I think Latin America, in terms of dealing with slums, has built, for the last 40 years, a strong set of practices, has gained expertise and has changed a little bit of the culture. So informality is mostly accepted.

We do have evictions, we do have perception of informality as illegality, but we have learned. Many cities in the region and many countries have developed tools, policies and laws that are able to respond to informality. So you can mention a country like Brazil, the country where I am located, where, back in 2007, there was a major investment program called the Growth Acceleration Program. They reached out to more than 2 million families, providing infrastructure, et cetera.

But as I said before, this was only possible because we do have a constitution, and we do have a national law from 2001 that recognized the social function of the land, the social function of the property and the social function of the city. Meaning that, the properties, the land and the city, they have to work for the collective interest, right? Not overwhelming the property rights, but saying that there is a collective interest, a social interest that is … it's bigger, it's at a higher stake. So if it's there on the legal system, and cities can incorporate that in their planning mode,

they will be able to plan citywide, you know, respecting the settlements that are located there, plan for integration, plan for infrastructure. And the public investments will be able to flow because we are no longer talking about illegality; we are talking about a situation that has to be addressed in our city.

So Brazil is an example. Colombia is an example. Right now Argentina is doing slum upgrading at scale. Mexico is prioritizing slum upgrading within their national urban and housing policies. So we are on our way, but 40 years too late. The agenda is overdue, so we have to change something, something we are not doing well.

[17:42] Patrick Canagasingham: Thanks, Anacláudia. And, Genie, before I ask you to maybe weigh in on the same question, I want to combine it with a question that we've received from the audience. And that really kind of tells the story about, you know, how it's so, you know, front-and-center in terms of looking at the immediate whilst you're planning ahead.

And it's that tension that resides, in terms of how we prioritize, right? Even for Habitat for Humanity, if you want to do both — as interested and keen in terms of pursuing the policy discourse, looking at the systemic issues — we also need to make sure that we are addressing the immediate, as well. So the question here, Genie, is what opportunities do you see for providing relief and relief in some of the worst scenarios, so looking at some of the worst-case scenarios?

So Anacláudia kind of brought in a regional perspective, but what can we do from a relief standpoint in the short-term whilst we are focusing, maybe, on the systemic issues as well?

[18:48] Eugénie Birch: Well, Anacláudia represents a region where informal settlements have been around for 40 years, and so they're much more stable than, say, in some of the countries of Africa.

And so, I think the issues may be a little different when you look region by region. I suspect, in many of the informal settlements that Anacláudia is talking about, there is water, there is a way to get water. I may be wrong here, but you can correct me. But in some of the African places, there's simply … there's just no water.

And so bringing in those basic services, working with the groups that are doing that, the handwashing stations and the sanitizers. And using local leaders, for example, in the community, in the slum communities, to help with the messages of what needs to be done. In places where there are lockdowns, perhaps schools … if the schools are not open, you might be able to decentralize some of the population and have them move temporarily into areas that are … so you can get a little more social distancing. I know that might be really complicated logistically, but thinking about how you could decongest some of these areas and then provide those services. Food is another one that, in many places, food has been delivered to the informal settlements.

So it is, at this point, finding ways to reduce the crowding, finding ways to make sure that there's water, there's food and ways for people to survive. I mean, it's a survival mode that you're talking about until things stabilize. And then work with the local community to institute the public health activities that we need to do, the masking, the … and all those sorts of things, it's … So I think providing new housing, permanent new housing, probably is later down the list, particularly what Anacláudia is talking about in releasing more land so that you can do this kind of planning. But right now, we're, in many places, trying to flatten that curve and keep a handle on the disease through very, very stringent emergency activities. And that takes a lot of coordination.

And I should bring up, obviously, the work that a number of scholars have been doing. My own Ph.D. student just finished a dissertation about this, and this is the role of clientelism in informal settlements. And how to energize the … understand and energize the existing political systems within places such as these. Tricky, but I think really understanding the dynamics of how these places work in order to energize the kinds of responses we needed to have or they need to have.

[21:35] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you. And, you know, knowing that 1 in 8 people live in slum or informal settlements, I thought if we could get to maybe more the solutions in terms of what we could do. And we've started talking about it, whether it's programmatically or in terms of our discourse. I thought we'll spend maybe a few minutes talking about entry points and linkages.

So on the programmatic side, one of the things that we would love to do — be it Habitat for Humanity and I'm sure other agencies as well, working in this space — is to look for those entry points. And water, sanitation and hygiene is a really good example, from a programmatic standpoint, in terms of how we can really build the community infrastructure. So it really gives us an access point, but also gives us some credibility when you're taking care of the immediate.

And the point here is to say how can we use that entry point, then, to look at the more comprehensive and integrated informal settlement upgrading. Anacláudia, again, maybe one or two concrete examples would be helpful.

[22:48] Anacláudia Rossbach: Sure. Yeah, you're right, Genie. In Latin America, we have slums for a longer time, and we have started to work out solutions for a longer time as well, right?

But the countries in Central America and in the Caribbean, they have a different reality. So I see now, for instance, a country like Costa Rica that might be a good example for what you are asking for. They are still struggling to provide … to extend the access of water to slums, including they are working with UNOPS, which is the host institution of the Cities Alliance, and with other … even the private sector to support and immediately provide, you know, water connection in some slums. But at the same time, they're working at the deeper issues.

So they are collecting data, using the basis provided by the community. Information generated by community-based organizations, information generated by cities, but the national government working on data, understanding the reality of slums and also working on a long-term plan. And a multilevel governance structure that includes the city in planning for the slums, planning for this immediate reaction, but also the long-term. And also in combination with investments from the national government.

So I believe Costa Rica is a very good entry point. So they are providing the needed infrastructure right now, but they realize they have to change, you know, to reveal the legal frameworks, to improve the information systems and to reveal the programmatic actions to be more aligned with expected multilevel governance of the issue.

[24:42] Patrick Canagasingham: Thanks, Anacláudia. And if I may, very quickly, even speak from a Habitat for Humanity standpoint as well. We're doing something similar, as well, looking at entry points, looking at programmatic integration as well. And similar examples for us in Brazil, in Paraguay, in Zambia and Ethiopia to India, you know, anything from handwashing to really looking at, you know, how we provide sanitation kits as well.

And these entry points are really, you know, as we've just talked … it's so significant in really helping us, you know, just not shape the conversation but to find those concrete solutions, working with communities, of course.

Genie, are you privy to any other examples, based on, you know, your network and some of the work that you do as well?

[25:30] Eugénie Birch: Well, I'd like to talk a little bit less about examples, but more about other advocacy approaches. And … we know that what's needed is money, right?

You're not going to do any of this without having that kind of funds to support the major systemic issues that are needed. And if one talks to the World Bank, which I actually have been on many conversations with Sameh Wahba about this — and I'm sure you have, as well. And one day I said, "Well, you know, are we seeing a difference, in national approaches, to understanding the problems of informal settlements and maybe reorganizing some of their priorities in terms of their investment asks of the World Bank?"

And I asked this a couple of months ago, so maybe things have changed, but he said, "No, not really. Not really."

So I think one of the things in terms of the advocacy piece that we need to be working on is just what Anacláudia was saying with the data and the multilevel governance. But really finding ways to have national governments who have the power to borrow, to bring funds into creating the systems for their cities. And that means recognizing, yes, in Brazil, they've recognized informal settlements, but in many other places, informal settlements simply are not recognized and not part of the planning process.

So that … it's changing the conversation at the national level to understand what makes a strong nation. Strong cities, strong inclusive cities, particularly inclusive informal settlements and the money to make them work.

[27:10] Patrick Canagasingham: And that's a great point, Genie, I mean, looking at sustainable solutions, advocacy, in many ways, is a gamechanger, as we know. And it's something that we are also quite intentional about as Habitat for Humanity. Very similar to what the Cities Alliance is doing as well to make it the forefront in terms of how we engage decision-makers and national governments.

Do you, Genie, have one or two examples, in terms not so much who's listening — obviously someone is listening — but in terms of who's responding?

[27:45] Eugénie Birch: Well, actually, I'd like to talk about some pathways.

Right now, the G20 is preparing to meet in November, and the G20 finance ministers have put together a plan for action to deal with the post-COVID. It would be well worth reading that.

There are six engagement groups for the G20, one of which is the U20. There's a Civil Society 20. There's an Education 20. There's a Youth 20 and so forth. It seems to me that one of the pathways for this better understanding that I'm talking about would be through these kinds of international meetings where you have the people who have money are getting together and worrying about the stability of the international economy. But as I said from the beginning, what's good for the nation is good for the cities. Or good for cities, good for the nation. What's good for nation is good for the international system.

So I think we need to start making that argument and really start pushing that argument through some of these pathways that exist. And, yes, the HLPF is great because it exposes what's happening at the local levels, but it doesn't unlock money. And so … I'm being a little crass here in saying that this is what we need to do, but I think that we need to really focus on not only all of the things that Anacláudia is talking about and what you at Habitat for Humanity's talking about, but also changing the international conversation about fiscal stability.

[29:20] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you, Genie. You know, when we talk about maybe more specifically around progress and accountability around the SDGs, I think it's a good topic to pick up on because you're absolutely right, in terms of, you know, the HLPF. It's not so much the money, but it's really ensuring that accountability actually translates into progress, and maybe we could have a conversation very shortly.

If I may just quickly also talk about — because this is something that our audience is also very interested in learning and hearing from us — let's talk about shelter in place, things like social distancing, access to water, sanitation and hygiene that we just talked about and other restrictions in the slum context.

I'm just trying to think … Anacláudia, I think of the region that you represent, and I'm thinking of the challenges that this probably poses. Maybe if you could give us a social perspective as well, in terms of, you know, the real issues confronting, you know, the various populations in the region.

[30:25] Anacláudia Rossbach: Yeah, for sure. And, yeah, I was just thinking … I was so keen to interact with the earlier topic.

[30:39] Patrick Canagasingham: You know what, Anacláudia, maybe you want to start from there, and then get to the next point, and that's perfectly …

[30:45] Anacláudia Rossbach: Wonderful. Because Genie really, yeah, provoked some reactions in my brain and my heart.

I fully agree with Genie that these international advocacy spaces are really important to leverage the agenda, the urban agenda, the slum upgrading agenda, which is forgotten.

And the World Bank is one of the key stakeholders. They have been keeping this agenda somehow alive, for a while, right now. So they are a key stakeholder on that front. But I would advocate for the local advocacy, for the in-country advocacy, for the advocacy in cities. There are so many stakeholders that we should engage, and I believe Habitat for Humanity is already engaging and Cities Alliance also through its country programs.

So you have so many local organizations that, you know, can also push towards unlocking domestic money. Because the international money from the World Bank and so on, it's critical. But even if we unlock, you know, all the international money that we can do, it's the domestic force that will change, actually, the system. So changing the internal systems to make them work, you know, in supporting the urban poor, unlock the internal budgets. Because countries, as poor as they might be, there is some capacity for investment. And right now, this investment is not going to the poorer areas of the city, and this money we are able to unlock if we invest in in-country advocacy as well, complementing all the global effort.

So this is what we need to do to build coalitions, to collectively, you know, advocate. Because not taking the weight out of our organizations — Cities Alliance, Habitat for Humanity, World Bank, we all have a job, and we know that — but they're more out there, and we alone will not be able to unlock, you know, the magical key. There's a process of awareness creation in the society as well.

But, yes, the social distance is a big issue, and there are some interesting examples where cities are working even, you know, in sanitizing spaces in slums. The city of Niteroi, for instance, here in Brazil is working on that.

Some cities even creating, you know, managing to create some public spaces and some, you know, ways where people can be together out there. Because the houses are overcrowded, the settlements are overcrowded, right? To create access, you know, to some sort of public spaces in the city. So these are critical areas that can be addressed, you know, soft areas that can be addressed together with the hard infrastructure.

And not to forget the digital connection as well. So, right now, we realize that the digital connection is key for us to be connected, to receive information about what's going on, what should we do, what shouldn't we do, to find jobs, to find economic opportunities and social protection, access to health. So digital connection has been very, very key. There are some governments working hard on that, and this is something that we really have to pay attention in the near future.

But sorry for disrupting the whole conversation.

[34:04] Patrick Canagasingham: No, that's no disruption. In fact, it was a really good segue, I thought.

And the reason we look for the specific examples, Anacláudia, is, as you know, Habitat for Humanity, we are so very engaged with local communities, and we work in very diverse contexts, right? And culture plays such a big role when it comes to some of the issues that we are talking about, and even from a learning standpoint, it's so useful for us to learn in different parts of the world how are the various communities and populations dealing with this reality. And, you know, we hear some good stories, but we also hear some not-so-good stories that can translate into the solutions that we talked about as well. So thank you for that.

I just want to shift gears because, you know, we kind of started this conversation by talking about the high-level political forum, that meeting in early July, and really talking about progress around the SDGs. And I thought it would be good for us to maybe spend a few minutes, really, talking about the localization of SDGs.

Obviously, the focus for us is SDG 11, but I just want to say something before we get to that point. You know, the precursor to the SDGs, the millennium development goals, you know, it was interesting, right, how rich donor countries were … the agenda was to tell the developing countries — or the countries that were considered not developed — telling them how to pursue their development agenda. So accountability was to some extent seen as "us and them." I mean, that was really the divide, and it wasn't very subtle with the MDGs.

The SDGs, it's very different. It's about accountability for all of us. So when we talk about localization, when we talk about progress, when we talk about accountability, we are talking about "us inclusive" versus us, really, say, for example, telling, you know, another group of countries or communities how they got to get their act together.

Now that doesn't, of course, preclude the fact that we need to really advocate in order to ensure that the SDG agenda is advanced. So, for example, Habitat for Humanity has been quite intentional. We know the value attached to localization, so we work with key stakeholders — be it national governments or, you know, other influencers — to ensure that there is progress, and the agenda itself around 11 and 11.1, for us, is really advanced.

But I really would want to get, maybe before we even get to 11, I would love to get your thoughts, both Genie and Anacláudia, about the not-so-subtle difference in terms of, you know, how we talk about accountability and progress around the SDGs when it comes to localization. And how it's very different from the MDGs.

Genie, can I start with you?

[37:04] Eugénie Birch: Well, I think you've put your finger on the difference between the MDGs and the SDGs, which is, right from the beginning, the conception was that this would apply to all nations. And since it applied to all nations, it meant, then, that each nation had to figure out within the framework that eventually evolved — and as you remember, it was a very, very big fight even to get the cities … 11 into the framework, and many other goals that were beyond the original aid of the MDGs.

So nations then needed to figure out exactly what it was that they felt was in their purview to change and to work on, to meet the new framework that developed. I think one of the issues you have with the SDGs … it is national governments that are putting together the framework, and indeed, national governments have the power to affect many of the elements in that national framework through national policies that they may engage with, whether it's in education, health, cities, urban development or whatever.

But in the end, as studies right from the beginning showed, something like 60 percent of the targets had to be accomplished at the local level. And there's probably some disconnect between the national leaders who decide on the framework and their understanding of how to really implement that framework and the necessity of having the local organization. And we see that in the fact that the reporting systems don't necessarily include disaggregated data, attention to what's happening at the local level. I think that's changing a little bit, but I think that's one of the issues that you just have a disconnect in the very organization of the SDGs.

So that leaves lots of room for what Anacláudia and you have been talking about, which is the role of advocates, of civil society, of academia, of local government, et cetera, to hold national governments' feet to the fire and say, "You signed this thing. Now you've got to make it work."

[39:23] Patrick Canagasingham: Thanks. And I might come to this because I think at a very practical level, again, just coming back to accountability ... I mean, the HLPF is such an important forum, but you kind of nailed it when you said it's also incumbent upon many of us, in terms of, you know, our interventions, our discourse, as to how we are really advancing this as well. So I think it'll be really good for us to maybe talk about it.

But Anacláudia, you know, as a practitioner, I would love to get your perspective, same question that I posed to Genie, you know, the not-so-subtle difference. What do you see as the difference, and what it means in practical terms.

[40:00] Anacláudia Rossbach: Well, I love this question because, as a practitioner, I have a different perception of the MDGs, I had, and now I'm doing advocacy internationally.

So when I received the information about the MDGs, I was a practitioner, I was a public servant, let's say so, in the city, and I was in doubt how it related to the work I was doing. Which was actually, you know, working … designing policies, you know, for slum upgrading and low-income housing. And then I moved from the city to advise the Ministry of Cities in Brazil, and in a meeting, someone came with the MDGs and with the question, "How can we then organize ourselves to monitor it correctly?" And there was one — I forgot the numbers now, it's so long ago, maybe Genie knows — on the water, I believe, that was more related to informal settlements, so ...

And I asked, "But how did these people design these things?" Because our information system cannot respond to that. The way our statistics work does not respond to that. We cannot monitor this information at all.

And we have a strong information system in Brazil where we collect information from informal settlements, informal economy, et cetera. And we were in the meeting, like, a bunch of people saying, "Who designed those? Who thought of those? We cannot do that. No." At the end of the day, we didn't monitor.

But the SDG was different. SDG was different because there was a statistic working group on the 11 that I'm aware of, where the Brazilian statistic agency was … took some sort of leadership role. At some moment, there was a conversation who would take the lead, and the Brazilians said, "No, we're taking the lead." This is the story that I heard. And they took somehow the technical lead, and then, I believe the indicator itself came more connected to the reality.

Because what they did was to talk to other statistic agencies and see how this information about slums was being collected or not, right? This is what happened before the SDGs, and right after, while this working group was working.

I lost track of this working group, and I believe most of the institutions working around the SDGs … around SDG 11, sorry, also lost track of that. Amazingly, right? Because we should be very connected to the work the statistics bureau are doing if they are doing some work. But we are able to follow through the economic commission, to the regionals, through Sao Paulo and so on. And what I found out, by the reports from Latin America, is that we are far behind. We're not able to collect information on SDG 11. Surprisingly. So we will rely on what Genie said: the civil society.

For me, we'll not be able to have enough information about SDG 11 through official statistics, by 2030, unless we change the systems too much. And we will need information provided by communities and by cities. Not just because probably there will not be a methodological alignment that comes on time, but I'm talking about the dynamics as well and the impact of COVID-19.

We might have an expansion of poverty and an expansion of slums — which I really hope it doesn't happen, but it might happen — and the statistics agencies, every 10 years collecting information through census, they would not be able to collect that. They would not be able to be fast enough to align the methodologies and to collect this information.

So I basically at this point in time — me, Anacláudia — gave a little bit up, you know, the formal systems. And I believe we need to invest a lot in informal ways and practical ways to collect information about slums if we want to know how far we got in achieving SDG 11.1.

[44:20] Patrick Canagasingham: That's a great point, Anacláudia, and you really brought us back to the core of some of the challenges that we have and whether we can actually attain these goals by 2030. And also, you know, some of the practical examples that Genie talked about as well, in terms of, you know, how can we be more steadfast and maybe to some extent more robust, I guess, in our approach.

So if I may, again, let's take that policy advocacy discourse for a moment in advancing, really, the accountability around localization. What can we do differently?

I mean, I've given examples from a Habitat for Humanity standpoint. You've given a couple of examples from Cities Alliance. And, Genie, I'm just wondering, are there any other examples whereby we can say, you know, maybe there's an opportunity here to try and do things a little different or differently?

[45:15] Eugénie Birch: Sure. Well, I think, first of all, remember, 2030 is aspirational. We're all working towards that. But the reality, as you both pointed out, is that it'll be very difficult to meet these. But there are a lot of hopeful things that are happening, that are setting a structure for the future.

One of the hopeful things is the rise of the voluntary local reviews within the HLPF that numerous cities now — based on the work that New York did, originally, and now I don't know, there are quite a few that are now doing their own voluntary local reviews. And they're doing them together in coalition and collecting comparable data, so I think that's really hopeful in terms of setting up a framework for the future.

A second piece that's very interesting is, as you well know, there is no single definition of "urban." In the United States, if you have 2,500 people together, you're urban. If you're in Kenya, I think it's something like 20,000. And so, when we look at the data, it's not comparable.

The work that the EU and the Joint Research Centre just publicized about a month ago with this common definition of urban is, again, extremely hopeful in terms of creating the framework and the understanding of what urban means worldwide. This isn't dealing with the local issues you're talking about, but I'm talking about how we set up, you know, a situation that, for the future, we'll be able to understand a little bit better, systematically and comparably in terms of what's happening in urban areas.

A third thing is the U.N. Statistical Commission, which has done a lot of work on the indicators. And Anacláudia is absolutely correct when she pointed out that, from the beginning, when the SDGs were formed, the … I think it was civil society and the nation said, "Hey, don't wait till we have these goals. We want to work with you, and we want you to show us how you're going to collect the information around the things that we're talking about."

And so they created a process by which the data and the indicators collaborated along with the SDG goals. Not perfect, but if you look at Goal 11, there are some very easy — quote "easy" — data to collect. Which would be the [inaudible] data, I think, you know, that's relatively easy worldwide.

And there's some very difficult data to collect, which is the availability of public space or the amount of sprawl. We didn't call it "sprawl" at the time because one of the countries didn't want it to be called sprawl, but that's one of the target three measures in part.

So we have developed …. with each one of these big development frameworks, we have developed a better way of thinking about how we're measuring things.

And I'll go back again to the MDGs. As you know, there was no definition for what a slum was. We may not agree with it today, but that stimulated at least a consensus about what would be counted in a slum. And now as we have the SDGs and those indicators, we have multiple indicators, so now they're being redefined, and methodologies are agreed upon, and more information is being carried forward about the kinds of things that will make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

And I think this is progress. It's not the progress that meets those goals like that — not going to happen — but it is forward progress. And I think we have to appreciate that.

And I think, getting back to what Anacláudia and you were saying, the contributions that you make to your research, your local knowledge, to the development of the kinds of data that we need is just essential. And on one hand, you'll have advocacy at the local level based on your data sets. On the other hand, I'm hopeful that we will move towards a more universal understanding of these things, so that we can have the kinds of policies that we need.

[49:30] Patrick Canagasingham: Thanks, Genie, and you make a really good point about, you know, what's aspirational as well in the process, right? And we really want to pursue that aspiration as well.

Reality also tells us — and, you know, this is the ground-level reality for many of us, as practitioners on the ground — is that we have our own limitations. We have our own constraints, be it resource constraints … Really engaging governments at various levels from local to national can be very complex.

Oftentimes, you know, particularly when it comes to the advocacy discourse, you know, the way we engage is as important as what we're engaging on. So, you know, we have those challenges as well. So maybe, you know, considering those, like, what inhibits us maybe and yet, for us to be focused, you know, what would be the one or two things that we also could potentially do differently, that we are not …

[50:25] Eugénie Birch: Number one, I think you shouldn't be discouraged. I think you should be very proud of what you're doing. You are making progress. You are learning as you go along. You are understanding how to manage the situation, and I think that these are enormous problems, and they're not going to be solved overnight.

And the fact that you are making progress, that you are learning, just what you said, we're learning different ways of engaging people and making changes and so forth. That in itself is progress and important. So keep working at this, I think, is really, really essential.

You'll never have enough resources to do … to fulfill all your aspirations. Don't look back. Go forward. Keep doing what you're doing.

[51:08] Patrick Canagasingham: Thank you, Genie, and that's really great advice. And it is encouraging, even as we continue to just not pursue the goals or the targets we have given ourselves, but to be aspirational in our pursuit as well. I think that's equally important.

I did promise, at the beginning, that, you know, we would entertain questions from the audience, and questions have come in. So I just want to, you know, maybe reflect a particular question … again, it just tells us, you know, how the pandemic itself, the COVID-19 pandemic, is so front and center in terms of how it preoccupies us. But also it really is a reminder that, even as we are considering the various interventions and our pursuit to move forward, we can't ignore this reality.

So one question is this, and I thought it was a really good one. You know, even as we think about the pandemic — the impact that it really has on cities, on housing and informal settlements — what should keep us awake at night, even as we are considering our interventions?

[52:15] Eugénie Birch: Future shocks. Are we prepared for future shocks? And how … what can we learn from what worked and what didn't work right now, what's working or not working, and what can we do better for the future?

We really have to appreciate that there will be more shocks in our urban worlds, and so we need to be thinking about that. Not staying up at night, but thinking about that.

[52:45] Patrick Canagasingham: Oh, thank you, it's a good reminder. Anacláudia?

[52:50] Anacláudia Rossbach: Yes, I was thinking. I believe we really have to change a lot the way we work, all organizations.

For me, there were two ways we used to work and that we have to change.

First of all, we used to work individually as organizations — so the Habitat for Humanity, the Cities Alliance, even being a membership-based organization, right, the World Bank, Asian Bank, et cetera.

Secondly, we have been very projectized, so we lost the track of, you know, the big picture. So if you work through projects, you expect outputs, which are 200 families, 1,000 families, 3,000 families are benefited. Fine, wonderful, they have to be benefited. But we don't need that.

We need 1 million people to be benefited, right? And living in informal settlements, it takes more that we need … we need to build, I believe, World Bank estimates. 20,000 houses a day or something like that, right? So this is the big-picture that we have to address.

But if you work only through projects, you only have outputs. No. Change the big picture. So this is the second issue.

And the third thing I think we did wrong was we separated political and technical spaces. And for me, changes … we need technical knowledge for changes, for sure, for innovation, but the changes are politically. And the major global arena might be a force, but internally, in the cities, there is a political struggle for land, which is real. There are conflicts that need to be addressed. These conflicts escalate to the country, and they have to be addressed. I might have a good example, technical example, of a law from Colombia, but if I don't address the conflicts that are political, this law will not be approved. Although with my best technical knowledge, right?

So I believe, for the future, what we have … And I will add one more now. We have to less … people like Genie, which can be qualified. A friend of mine, Hector, said that, in a webinar last week as a practitioner researcher, right … so practice and research has been very much segregated. So we need to unify.

So for me, what we need to change for the future, we need to work more in coalitions. We have to set more communities of practice. We have to be low-profile and understand that our

organizations alone will not save the world. And we really have to know how to work in collaboration, which we don't. Working in partnerships means giving up our logos, means give up our, you know, our egos. Giving up our spaces to say something, but opening up space for people who have to say things that are meaningful. Opening spaces to share practical knowledge.

I believe — I have faith — on the good practices out there, but I am 100 percent convinced that we cannot translate and replicate this good practice because they are contextual. But we can share practical knowledge through communities of practice. And this is where we have to go.

We have to go beyond our borders. The scientific knowledge on health has been changing a lot, so everybody's collaborating and promoting cross-border knowledge sharing towards a vaccine, right? We are finding new ways. We are disrupting protocols. We are cutting steps. So in the urban arena, we have to do that as well. We have to quickly share knowledge from practitioners because the traditional research will not be able to do that, and we can only do that through communities of practice that go transnational.

And especially considering the countries in the Global South where the informality has a strong and a high prevalence. So I believe in a world where we can work globally as a coalition, but where the local governance is strong, the urban governance.

The New Urban Agenda shows us many ways on how to accomplish SDG 11. Because we can accomplish SDG 11 shortly, destroying our slums, but this is not the world we want. We don't want to leave anybody behind, right? And we want everybody to participate in the decision-making of our cities and policies, so this is where we have to invest in the future, in the governance, in sharing decision and sharing knowledge.

[57:50] Patrick Canagasingham: And so well said. I'm just going to pick up on something you said, what it means to give up our egos and our logos to pursue a shared vision.

Be it the SDGs, but looking at some of the overarching challenges we have when it comes to be it cities and housing and informal settlements. I mean, we talked about, you know, our respective organizations, what our peers are doing. But you're spot on, you know, when you said that.

And in conclusion, I also want to say something that Genie said so well: not to be discouraged. We have work to do. And I think we need to just keep reminding ourselves, as Genie said, that we are making a difference, even as we are pursuing something that's aspirational. In terms of our interventions, we are making a difference

And there's an opportunity — like you rightly pointed out, Anacláudia — to say that, you know what? If we come together and if we are more intentional — whether it's sharing knowledge or in terms of how we work together — it's that much easier to get to that shared vision that we are collectively pursuing.

So we've covered a lot today. We started with, you know, some of the complexity around cities, housing and informal settlements, how it's further compounded by COVID-19, the pandemic itself.

And, you know, as we heard from our audience, you know, they are concerned, but there are possibilities as well and opportunities for us to advance, you know, our pursuit, and that includes the SDGs. Particularly with the localization piece, we spent some time talking about it, you know, the reality of localization and how it could be a game changer, of sorts, for us.

So I just want to take this opportunity to thank our panelists. Thank you for coming prepared to really have this discussion. You know, it's not the last conversation we are going to have, but absolutely, it's something that I'm sure resonates with all of us.

So can I just take this opportunity to thank you, Anacláudia, as well as you, Genie, for coming and participating in this discourse

I also want to thank our audience. Thank you for your questions. It's a pity we couldn't take more questions, but we just want to encourage you, to say, you know, stay tuned, stay engaged and look forward to staying in touch.

Thank you.