



Building Urban Economic Resilience  
during and after COVID-19  
#urbaneconomicresilience

# Regional Policy Brief on building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19 in the UNECE region



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## **Acknowledgments**

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a multi-dimensional effect on the UNECE region, causing the worst economic contraction in decades. Cities and urban areas are at the epicentre of the pandemic, with high population density and interconnectivity making them particularly vulnerable. The pandemic has impacted urban economies, equity, employment, public services, infrastructure and transport, affecting virtually all individuals, especially vulnerable households, businesses and workers.

There is no one policy or action to tackle the complexity of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic. Instead, this impact needs a whole-of-society approach. An effective response should:

- Be multi-dimensional, coordinated, swift and decisive
- Reinforce urban economic resilience, create value and provide tangible solutions for the whole community, leaving no one behind
- Use evidence-based approaches, enabling decision-makers and policymakers to implement recovery plans
- Encourage multi-governance and multi-stakeholder engagement to promote urban economic resilience during and after the pandemic.

This regional policy brief is aimed to:

- 1) Provide an overview of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UNECE region and gain a better understanding of urban economic resilience challenges during and after the pandemic.
- 2) Identify broader urban economic resilience needs of cities arising from the multi-dimensional impact of the pandemic in the context of recovery plans.
- 3) Offer policy recommendations, best practice examples, tools and mechanisms for sustainable urban economic recovery.

To achieve these objectives, this regional policy brief analyses the impact of the pandemic on urban economic resilience and formulates policy recommendations in the following four thematic areas:

- Urban governance
- Socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Nature-based solutions and climate neutrality for environmental quality
- Urban planning and transportation policies and programmes.

This policy brief builds on knowledge developed within the global project on “Building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19” which is supported by the United Nations Development Account (UNDA) programme<sup>1</sup>.

The policy brief also includes an analysis and recommendations of a background document “City action for a resilient future: Strengthening local government preparedness and response to emergencies and the impact of hazards and climate change” prepared by the UNECE secretariat in 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19 <https://urbaneconomicresilience.org/>

## **Challenges**

Cities are especially vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic; the socio-economic and financial consequences have severely reduced cities' economic productivity, jobs and revenue. Recovery from socio-economic crises takes years and produces numerous collateral effects, including exacerbation of social, spatial and economic inequalities, especially for vulnerable groups. Meanwhile, local public budgets are severely strained by declining tax revenues and a sharp increase in demand for social services and income support.

Cities have been at the forefront of addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, “lockdown” orders in cities led to unprecedented decreases in mobility, economic and social activities. Policy response should thus reflect these changes in the UNECE region and integrate COVID-19 recovery plans into strategies for building long-term urban economic resilience, thereby helping cities “recover better”.

Building urban resilience while containing the pandemic and mitigating the resulting socio-economic impact represents a considerable challenge for local governments. This is especially so given diminished budgetary resources.

## **Proposed solutions and innovative city responses to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Governments should ensure that COVID-19 recovery measures focus on supporting the urban economy, jobs while ensuring long-term green and sustainable urban development, including measures for economic resilience, to respond to both the pandemic and climate crisis. The measures to support economic urban resilience must include funding for nature-based solutions, upgrading public spaces, providing accessible infrastructure and expanding reliable and resilient public transit.

COVID-19 recovery measures should transform urban systems rather than simply rebuilding outmoded structures. Collaboration across all levels of government and with civil society is vital to success. All cities need to develop urban economic resilience adaptation and recovery plans fully integrated into urban planning strategies with the technical, legislative and financial support of their national and regional governments.

## About the Regional Policy Brief

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, stated that “COVID-19 doesn’t discriminate, our efforts to prevent and contain it do. For that reason, the pandemic has hit the poorest and most vulnerable in our societies hardest. The social and economic impact of the pandemic is enormous and growing”<sup>2</sup>.

COVID-19 has spread throughout the world, infecting almost 111 million people and killing nearly 2.4 million worldwide as of 25 February 2021. According to WHO, by February 2021, COVID-19 led to nearly 60 million confirmed infections with over 1 million deaths in the UNECE region. The UNECE region has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic, accounting for 36 per cent of global infections and 35 per cent of global deaths<sup>3</sup>. An effective vaccination roll-out campaign has proved to be the most promising means for mitigating the pandemic. The UNECE region is the leader in the global vaccination process according to the official WHO data dashboard<sup>4</sup>.

In this challenging context, cities in the UNECE region urgently need to build urban economic resilience into their recovery plans. The approach needs to be holistic, addressing challenges related to governance, socio-economic development, funding and financing.

In response to the public health crisis, UNECE member States have taken measures to prevent the spread of the virus, the most common being varying state-wide lockdowns. The magnitude of these has adversely affected trade, business, consumption and employment throughout the region. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), services, the creative industry and tourism are among the most heavily affected sectors by national lockdown and containment policies.

The pandemic has led to a historic decline in economic activity and living standards globally (see figure 1), further exacerbating inequalities and disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups<sup>5</sup>. The related economic losses are dramatic, with the global economy contracting by 4.4 per cent and the UNECE region economy by 5.9 per cent in 2020. While the global economy has demonstrated modest growth above 2020 levels with projected growth of 5.2 per cent in 2021, the UNECE region has demonstrated only partial recover with 4.8 per cent growth throughout the same period.

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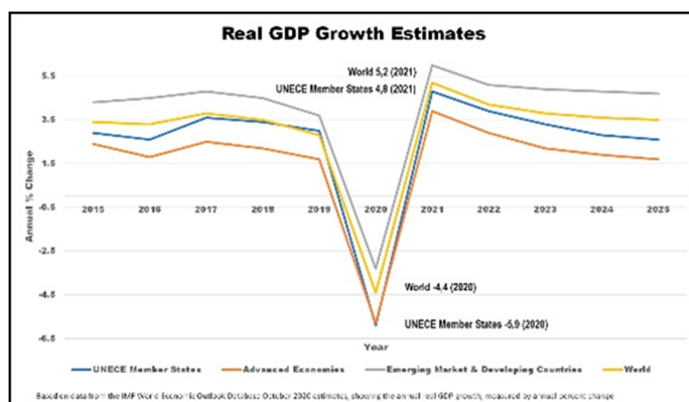
<sup>2</sup> United Nations Secretary-General. General Assembly Special Session in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic on 3 December 2020. UN Web TV. Available at [http://webtv.un.org/watch/ant-per-centC3-per-centB3nio-guterres-un-secretary-general-on-the-31st-special-session-of-the-general-assembly-in-response-to-the-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic-3-4-december-2020/6213891915001/#t=18s\\_](http://webtv.un.org/watch/ant-per-centC3-per-centB3nio-guterres-un-secretary-general-on-the-31st-special-session-of-the-general-assembly-in-response-to-the-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-pandemic-3-4-december-2020/6213891915001/#t=18s_)

<sup>3</sup> Data based on WHO Statistic COVID-19 dashboard collected on 2 February 2021. Note that of the 1.178.667 reported deaths in the UNECE region, 437.964 cases were from the United States. Available at <https://covid19.who.int/>.

<sup>4</sup> WHO Statistic COVID-19 dashboard collected <https://covid19.who.int/>

<sup>5</sup> UN Geneva Charter on Sustainable Housing. “The definition of vulnerable groups and people varies from country to country and may include: young people; senior citizens; large families with children and single parent families; victims of domestic violence; people with disabilities including mental illness, intellectual and/or physical disabilities; immigrants; refugees; Roma communities; and other minor groups”. Available at [https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/charter/Language\\_versions/ENG\\_Geneva\\_UN\\_Charter.pdf](https://unece.org/DAM/hlm/charter/Language_versions/ENG_Geneva_UN_Charter.pdf).

**Figure 1.** Real GDP growth estimate in UNECE member States



**Source:** UNECE, 2021, based on data from the IMF World Economic Outlook Database October 2020 estimates, showing the annual real GDP growth estimate measured by annual per cent change

Urban economic resilience is heavily tied to quality of governance and the capacity to meticulously plan and manage resources to reduce inequality faced by lower-income groups. Governments, both national and local, must engage households and communities, paying particular attention to specific concerns of urban vulnerability, including informal workers, migrants, children, women and ageing population groups.

The challenge to recovering better is shaping policies and regulations such that optimized sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) does not hinder innovative and creative solutions. This regional policy brief addresses the dynamics of risk facing the urban socio-economic sector as well as the crucial role of urban economic resilience in recovering better and leaving no one behind.

This regional policy brief was prepared in the framework of the UNDA project “Building urban economic resilience during and after COVID-19” (See a summary of the description in Box 1). The project is aimed to enhance social protection during the pandemic response, particularly by strengthening urban economic resilience policies during and after COVID-19, focussing especially on vulnerable populations.

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