Healing Cities: Toward Urban Climate Justice & Slum Health

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The overlapping crises of climate change, COVID-19, and persistent social inequities are acutely felt in cities, particularly among the poor and already vulnerable. Urban climate justice demands a focused strategy to support the healing of these vulnerable communities while also creating new opportunities for them to co-lead more equitable climate resiliency strategies. COP-26 must address 'healing cities for climate justice;' or the need for urgent investments with (not on or for) already vulnerable people and places in order to eliminate existing suffering and urban traumas, while also planning for future prosperity.

What might a healing city for climate justice strategy look like in practice? We suggest this approach is critical for planetary well-being and the survival of the approximately one billion people living in self-built, informal settlements, often called slums (UN 2019). A healing cities for urban climate justice strategy can also move us closer to Sustainable Development Goals 1, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 13, among others (Corburn & Sverdlik 2017).

Consider: Nairobi, Kenya, a city of just under 5 million where about 65% live in self-built, informal settlements that lack access to basic, life-supporting infrastructure and services (**Figure 1**). In one slum called Mukuru, community-driven research was conducted by residents in partnership with local and international NGOs and universities (Corburn *et al.* 2019) which led to the community being designated a Special Planning Area (SPA) (Muungano Alliance 2021). This designation ensured a new redevelopment plan would be drafted with resident input and expertise, and that the improvement plan must address the multiple traumas afflicting Nairobi's slum dwellers, including: climate change risks from flooding and disease, social and physical exclusion, lack of water, sanitation and energy infrastructure, secure tenure and environmental injustices from toxic dumping and localized air pollution (Horn 2021). The county government was also involved, as were national governmental institutions. Findings were shared with tens of Mukuru SPA 'consortium' partners and, with resident input, turned into an integrated upgrading plan. The improvement strategies included prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable, such as reducing flooding risks for the poorest of the poor living along river riparian areas, delivering water and safe sanitation to women, and creating new public spaces for youth to play, create and learn (Anderson 2014).

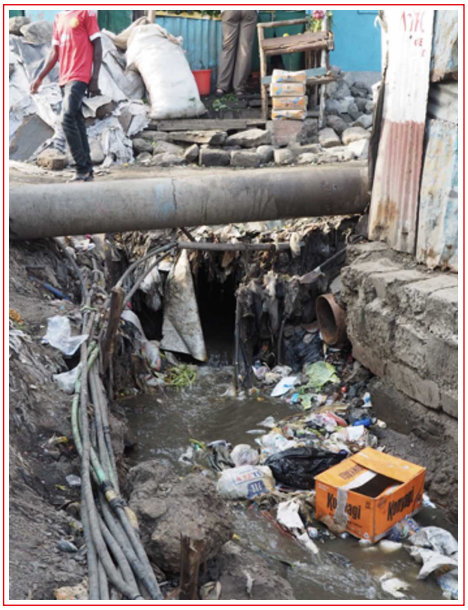

Figure 1. An open sewer and informal water pipes in Mukuru, Nairobi, Kenya.

When COVID-19 emerged in 2020, the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) was empowered by the Kenyan government to lead the response in many informal settlements. Mukuru was one of the first places selected for investments, in part because residents were already mobilized, had already developed a plan and many built environment projects were 'shovel ready' (Weru & Cobbett 2021). Instead of just getting temporary services and treatment, which would have been typical during an emergency response, Mukuru received permanent, healing-focused, life-supporting built environment investments. Kilometers of roads, sidewalks and bicycle paths were tarmacked, connecting previously disconnected villages within the community and linking the entire settlement to services, jobs, schools, and the benefits of the entire city (**Figure 2**).

Boreholes for clean water were drilled and water-access kiosks installed (ABC News 2021). A sanitary sewer main was completed and pipes serviced private toilets serving thousands of households. New hospitals were constructed in less than a year (All Africa 2021). Street lighting was installed for the entire settlement and new green and community spaces were identified. New social programs and school feeding programs were launched. Local people, especially youth, were employed to make these repairs. This was crucial, since the people who dreamed-up the transformation received both immediate employment and cash, while also gaining new skills that could provide them more permanent jobs (Kinyanjui 2021).

Figure 2. An upgraded road in Mukuru, Nairobi, Kenya.

The Mukuru projects are promoting healing and urban climate justice by reducing vulnerability today while building the physical, social and governance infrastructure for resident prosperity moving forward (Sverdlik et al. 2019). While incomplete and an on-going project, Mukuru's transformation reflects the values of how a city can invest in its least-well-off places and populations first, while delivering benefits to everyone (Ng'ang'a 2021).

As COP-26 considers strategies to reduce planetary suffering, the lessons from Mukuru must inform urban design and planning practice. First, practitioners must work with the poor and vulnerable communities to identify the *toxic stressors* (**Figure 3**) – or those inequalities contributing to suffering, trauma and disease – not rely on professional 'experts' alone (Corburn 2017). Next, residents, civil society groups, universities, and local governments must co-create actionable plans to support healing, which means focusing design and investments on reducing trauma and stress through a combination of physical infrastructure, social programs and democratic decision-making (Ellis & Dietz 2017). Third, professionals must practice humility and learn-by-doing with local people, not acting for or 'on' them. Finally, cities that heal and promote climate justice must adapt as they learn what is and is not supporting the well-being of the poor and marginalized communities. A one size fits all approach will not heal those suffering today, and will not contribute to prosperity for all moving forward.

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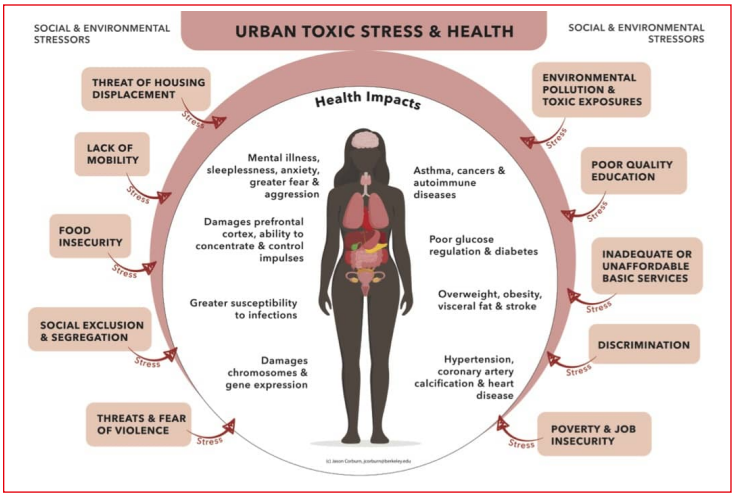

Figure 3. Urban toxic stressors that must be addressed for healing cities and climate justice.

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