

## **INTRODUCTION: AN URBAN PERSPECTIVE TO BASIC GOODS AND RIGHTS**

*The war in Ukraine, the persistent disruptions in the global supply chain and the increase in the cost of living as a result of the inflationary economic context have aggravated the difficulties of access to basic goods and rights such as energy, food, drinking water, health, housing or digital connectivity. This has accentuated the inequalities and vulnerability of a large part of the world population, manifesting itself in a particularly evident way in cities. This CIDOB Report analyzes the causes, impact and responses that are emerging to address the current global crisis of access to basic goods and rights from an urban perspective.*



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**W**e live in complex times shaped by the concatenation and confluence of multiple and interrelated crises that interact and reinforce one another. Words like “**polycrisis**” and “**permacrisis**” have become established dictionary entries, part of an emergency glossary for describing this new era of uncertainty in which a series of destabilising events coexist, including the unfinished post-pandemic recovery, the war in Ukraine –and the ensuing food and energy crises, rising inflation or tightening debt–, eroded democratic systems and the climate emergency.

This convergence of crises, alongside tepid global economic prospects, is proving devastating for large swathes of the world’s population, who face sharp declines in well-being, equity and access to basic goods and rights such as food, water, housing and energy, among others. Decades of progress and development appear to have come to a halt, or even gone into reverse. For the first time, the global Human Development Index (HDI), calculated annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to measure life expectancy,

CIDOB REPORT  
# 10- 2023

education levels and per capita income in different countries, **has regressed** for two consecutive years. The prospects thus seem bleak for the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This is the context in which this *CIDOB Report* sets out to analyse the causes of the current global crisis in access to basic goods and rights, as well as its impacts and the responses to it. The approach is eminently urban, as cities are both home to most of the world's population and the places where worsening inequalities and vulnerabilities are manifesting themselves most starkly. While local governments do not always bear ultimate responsibility for ensuring basic goods and rights, they are the most likely to face the

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economic and social consequences of any shortfalls (Satterthwaite, 2013: 13). To address a challenge of this magnitude, many cities are pursuing innovative initiatives to ensure continuity of local public services in order to safeguard people's lives and livelihoods (Saiz and de la Varga, 2022: 2).

Before introducing the structure of this publication, it is worth clarifying some of the terminology used, since the category "basic goods and rights" can, confusingly, include different interpretations and scopes. "Basic goods" are here understood as those goods and services that are essential to satisfying

the most basic human needs and, as such, are central to human progress (Reinert, 2018) <sup>1</sup>. Nutritious food, clean water, sanitation, health and education services, housing, electricity and human security services are usually included in this category.

However, human progress is linked not only to access to certain goods, but also to the realisation of certain basic rights, such as the right to a life free from violence, the right to digital connectivity, the right to information, the right to work or the right to political participation, among others. "Basic rights" are, thus, those that must be guaranteed as a necessary condition for other rights to be enjoyed (Shue, 1996).

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1. As Reinert (2018) notes, the term «basic goods» often includes both basic goods and services, since in most cases it is difficult to separate the two. To give an example: providing health services requires goods such as vaccines; while providing food requires services such as transport.

Finally, it is worth noting the close relationship between the concepts of “basic goods” and “basic rights”. It could even be argued that basic goods *are* essentially basic rights, in the sense that the rights are fulfilled via the provision of the goods (Reinert, 2020). To put it another way, it may be difficult (or even impossible) to exercise basic rights in a situation of severe deprivation of subsistence goods and services.

### **Structure of the publication**

This volume contains nine chapters, ordered by theme, with each addressing a good or right that is fundamental for “sustainable development”<sup>2</sup>. The first four chapters analyse access to traditional basic goods that are also considered to be subsistence rights: food, energy, housing and health. Then follow two contributions focusing on goods that have recently acquired more relevance: access to information and digital connectivity. Finally, the provision of global public goods is addressed, such as peace, local democracy and humanitarian protection.

The publication begins with a chapter on energy, in which Víctor Burguete examines the causes of the global decline in universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services. The author reflects on increasing energy inequality, and presents some of the main policies promoted by both central and local governments to mitigate energy shortages and rising prices.

In the second chapter, Ana García Juanatey highlights the global trend, since 2014, of deteriorating food security. This is attributed to factors that are both structural (the growing impact of climate change on agricultural systems) and cyclical (higher food prices due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine). The author argues that hunger in urban areas has particular characteristics and examines various measures taken by cities to improve their inhabitants’ food security. These measures focus primarily on shortening supply chains and reconnecting food systems with their surroundings.

By the same token, access to adequate housing is an essential component of achieving a decent standard of living and is intrinsically linked to the

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2. According to the first historical definition of the term, formulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) in 1987, «sustainable development» is «development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs».

enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights. However, in her contribution to this *CIDOB Report*, Lorena Zárata argues that the right to housing is currently under threat. We are facing a global housing crisis that can be explained, among other factors, by the processes of privatisation, gentrification and touristification taking place in the world's major cities. In this setting, communities and local and regional governments play a key role in promoting transformative agendas based on "the right to the city", to the commons and to care.

Health is another key element of sustainable development, and with cities expected to house two-thirds of the world's population by 2050,

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the question of how to make urban spaces into healthier environments is now of paramount importance. This is the central concern of Rafael Vilasanjuan's chapter, where he examines the new conditioning factors affecting the health of people living in cities. Among other things, he analyses chronic illnesses induced by environmental, climate and lifestyle factors. In this context, the author argues that urban geography remains the best option for advancing the well-being of the majority of the planet's population.

fundamental aspects of our societies (work, education, etc.) depend on access to the internet, which has become essential to living standards in a similar way to access to water and energy. However, the global digital transition is uneven. The author analyses the various emerging dimensions of the digital divide, as well as some city-led initiatives to reverse them.

Moving on to chapters that deal with new rights, Marta Galceran-Vercher argues that digital connectivity is not a luxury, but a key part of sustainable development. Today, many

For her part, Carme Colomina explains that we are also experiencing a pandemic of disinformation. This is not a minor issue, since information is an essential public good and a right that acts as a multiplier of other rights: the more knowledge is available about societies and how they are governed, the better democratic systems are able to function. In the chapter dedicated to this essential good, the author defends the importance of local journalism and grassroots information as the accountability mechanism that is closest to citizens and essential to reducing government corruption and encouraging political participation.

Democracy is being eroded around the world. **The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance** (International IDEA) quantifies this, stating that half of the world's democratic governments are in decline while authoritarian regimes are increasingly repressive. This global deterioration of democracy is also affecting the local level, reversing some of the decentralisation processes that have taken place in recent decades. This is the diagnosis made by Agustí Fernández de Losada in his contribution, where he states that in recent years the decentralisation agenda has been displaced by the localisation processes that resulted from the 2030 Agenda. Faced with the rise of anti-democratic authoritarianism in many countries, hopes exist that local power can act as a means of resistance, democratic control and coordination of the opposition.

Peace, the central promise of the UN Charter, is one of the most difficult global public goods to preserve. The latest edition of the **Global Peace Index** of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) reveals that the average level of global peace has declined for the 14th consecutive year. And when peace breaks down, urban areas can easily become theatres of war and destruction. Eschewing this pessimism, Pol Bargaés provides a rereading of cities as the architects of "sustainable peace". This is a positive peace based on the promotion of emancipatory municipal projects and the provision of public services that seek to improve coexistence between generations, peoples and cultures.

Finally, one of the consequences of an increasingly peaceless world, with more prolonged, complex and serious crises, is the growing need to provide humanitarian protection to people fleeing conflict and war. In the last chapter of this *CIDOB Report*, Francesco Pasetti argues that the international protection system is undergoing an endemic crisis, and identifies three structural limitations that the system must face in Spain: access to protection, material reception capacity (number of places, budget, personnel), and the issues with the design of the pathway through the reception system. The author argues that it is at the local level where reception and the right to asylum are realised, and presents some municipal initiatives to improve the international protection system.

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