

WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR OF URBAN GLOBAL SOUTH



Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters

System Explorations/ A Tryst With Systems

Introduction

While the Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 seems to have brought the mightiest to their knees, it has also held up- for those who are willing to see- a mirror against the gaping rift between the haves and have-nots. Whole nations have been under lock down and with the global economy capsizing, it felt as if the world was almost coming to a stand-still. This “slow-down”, a welcome pause for some, was nothing short of a terrifying calm for many.

As bleak headlines populated the media and the obituary column ran into tens of pages, it was evident that it wasn't just the virus that took lives, but hunger, abuse, stress, ignorance, all fuelled by crony capitalism and the sheer apathy of authorities. The cry for “inclusiveness” once again resurfaced, as always, after much of the harm was done.

It is in this context that we started off our exercise with a discussion on vulnerable communities and why leaving no one behind is inevitable for a truly resilient urban society.

What?

The *Urban resilience* is conventionally defined as the "measurable ability of any urban community to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming towards sustainability". To address this,

urban communities should not just bounce back, but bounce forward

This is especially important for vulnerable communities, as they have a limited capacity to adapt to new shocks and stresses. Urban resilience as a whole can be obtained by pursuing three concurrent key objectives: (i) community resilience (capability to bounce back to the extreme events), (ii) community grit (passion and perseverance toward long term goals, like green transition, (iii) empathy and social inclusion.

We decided to focus on this with placing empathy and social inclusion as the central starting point. After meandering through different elements such as vulnerable groups, informal economy, post-COVID economic recovery and deliberating on their causes and effects, our system diagnosis question boiled down to:

“How to harness the informal economy to support resilience building for women in the informal sector of the urban global south?”

with the vision of facilitating a

“Women-friendly, resilient informal economy through self- sustaining, green and, above all, just transition.”

in order to overcome the shocks and stresses induced by

“the COVID-19 pandemic in specific and climate change in general.”

Owing to the nature of this summer school exercise, it was essential to narrow down the system focus by defining its scope and limitations which are given below:

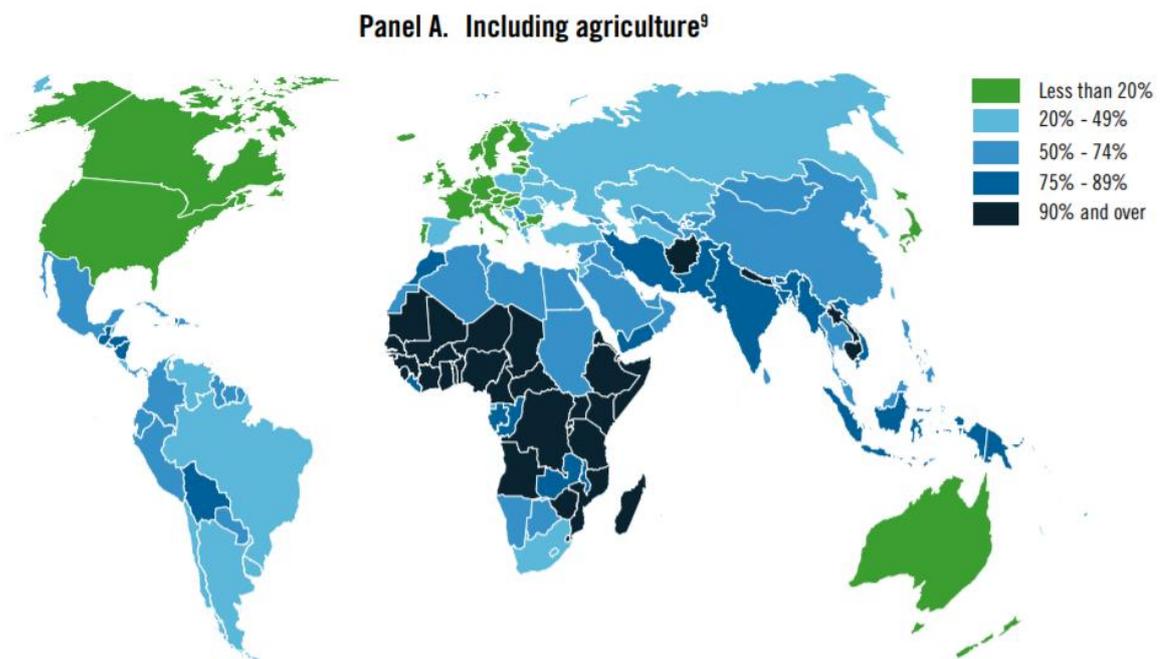
- Coverage: **Economy** (linked to livelihood and society) and **Governance** (linked to participation) were the two broad areas covered and this was anchored on resilience qualities of inclusiveness, integration, robustness and redundancy.
- Exclusions: Infrastructure, Planning and Ecosystems; Health and Basic needs

Why?

Initially what prompted us to explore this system was the need to take an empathetic stance against inequalities. As the discussions progressed we approached the topic as an opportunity to throw light on the most invisible, unrecognized and unprotected sector of economy.

As the picture below shows more than 61 per cent of the world's employed population – make their living in the informal economy.

Figure 5. Share of informal employment in total employment, including and excluding agriculture (percentages, 2016)



Source: Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture- International Labour Office

As the informal sector absorbs into employment some of the most vulnerable groups within the population, it is especially vulnerable to shocks and stressors. They are the first to get hit and the last to bounce back. Furthermore, due to everyday-vulnerability they are not even able to properly follow COVID-19- lockdown-guidelines and social distancing protocols.

Why Women? They are not only affected by everyday vulnerabilities but also by exceptional vulnerability. They are more exposed to informal employment especially in developing countries. Past developments show that women are more impacted by climate change due to their productive

and reproductive roles than men, which can result in deep crisis as the women are often the main income source within many households.

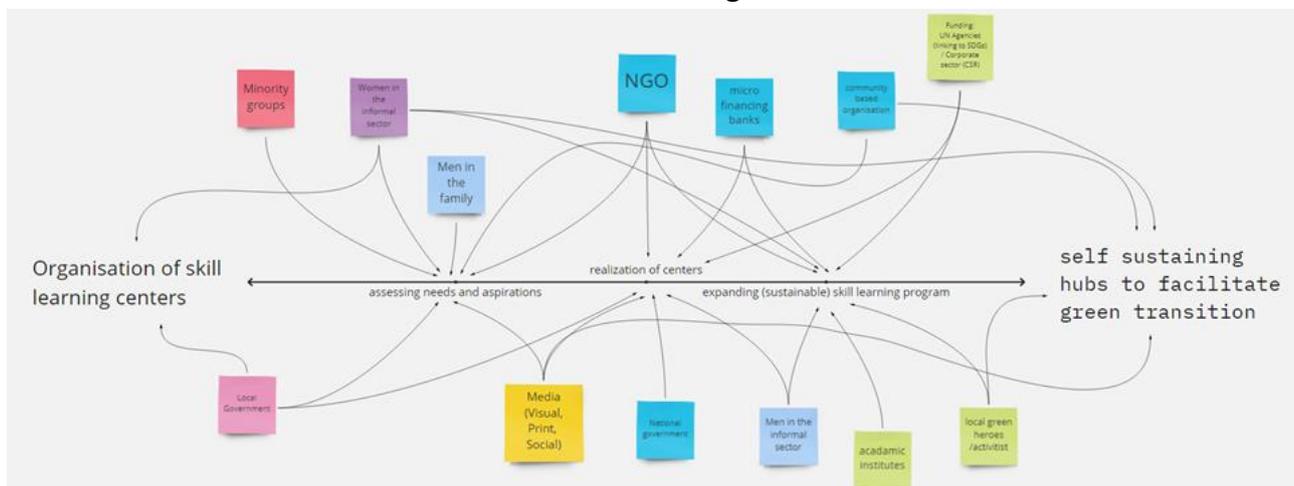
How?

Based on our analysis of the system, and our chosen perspective as a local governmental institution, we identified a solution with both short and long term possibilities. A skill learning centre was proposed with the aim of upgrading the current skills and building capacities of the community. To ensure the appropriateness of the interventions, the community needs to lead the design, implementation and monitoring of the intervention. Using participatory assessment tools like the Participatory Vulnerability Capacity Assessment tool, the community is able to identify their challenges, the causes, solutions and their resources within the community to deal with the challenges identified. Actively involving the community from the start builds trust and a sense of ownership. It ensures acceptance and full engagement of the community as the interventions responses to the very needs of the community. It allows us to build on the already existing resources in terms of skills, knowledge and networks. With a focus on existing skills we allow for upward social mobility, enabling tailors to become designers and construction labourers to become carpenters.

A crucial limiting factor with this solution can be the local men, who could possibly resist new roles of their wives or female family members within the local economy. That is why we decided that in order to make such a solution successful, the men should also be part of the target group for the community learning centre. However instead of only training based on local jobs, they should also learn child care, and the benefits of a more equal family unit. That way they can become part of the solution, instead of a possible limiting factor.

Besides the design of the solution, the implementation should capitalise on the involvement of human resources from within the community as change agents. In this case, the first cohort of trainees are picked as volunteers and or fully employed trainers. This way, the community feels the recognition as capable and able to sustain the intervention in the long-run with minimal or no external support at all. Adding training programs on local jobs in the green transition can not only support a local green transition, but also help future proof the livelihoods of the local people, who would otherwise be vulnerable in changing market systems. Crucial to the success is the involvement of various stakeholders at different specific moments. See the figure below for the timeline, indicating which stakeholders are involved during which periods of the development.

Timeline of stakeholder involvement with skill learning centres.



Key Learning Points

Content

- Every day and exceptional vulnerability of women, even climate change impacts women more than men.
- While vulnerability is interpreted with a negative connotation, the focus should be on the power of vulnerability through networks and social relations/connectedness, resourcefulness and flexibility of the population at hand.
- In order to truly effect change, it is necessary to have all stakeholders on board. In this case, even though our target group was women, it was necessary to orient and train men (who seemed to be a resisting force) for the intervention to become successful. Men in most locations especially in the global south play the role of gate-keepers and are either enablers or inhibitors.
- Community participation is crucial throughout the process to not only understand their needs and aspirations but also to ensure ownership and sustainability.
- Substantial amount of time is required where participatory processes/approaches are employed.

Process

Various methods:

- System thinking: This approach elucidates the complexities of the system, breaks it down to bite-sized components and also helps one in identifying appropriate entry points.
- Tools like miro boards and kumu not only helped us visualise the connections, loops etc. but also made working simultaneously online easier.
- Urban resilience forces us to think outside the existing silos and enables interdisciplinary thinking methods.
- Our different educational/professional backgrounds and personal learning styles helped to work creatively and constructively on the tasks.

Summer school as a whole:

- In order to come up with a simple enough solution, one needs to understand the complexity of the problem at hand.
- The necessity of having interdisciplinary teams to work on complex urban issues to arrive at meaningful and sensitive interventions.
- The value of the various working groups which allowed for weekly critical reflection from peers.

- The summer school also forced us to think outside-the-box in terms of presentation techniques. It was challenging as well as fun to employ an unconventional method of presentation.

Reflections from exploring COVID19 as a global crisis

As the viral poem goes, *“We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat”*. However, more often than not, authorities tend to overlook the most marginalized while coming up with solutions to tackle the urgent issues at hand.

The study of our chosen system through a COVID lens did not fundamentally change the analysis of the system, it merely exposed the challenges and vulnerabilities that were already there. COVID brought these vulnerabilities to the light. If the same system analysis was done without a COVID lens the identified vulnerabilities and possible interventions would have most likely been very similar. However COVID does present a new opportunity as every disaster is an opportunity for change. And because the pandemic has both short term and long term effects, the opportunity for change is spread out over a longer period. This creates the possibility for fundamental changes, and new system functions. By focussing on the vulnerable communities, and their capacity and resilience, future fast onset disasters can have a decreased impact.

