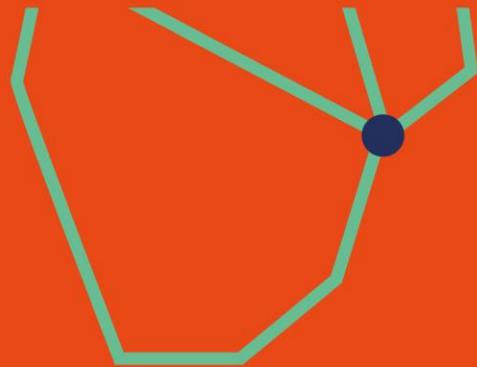




# ASTON

DIGITAL TRANSITION FOR SUSTAINABLE  
AND INCLUSIVE CITIES



COVID-19  
OPEN CALLS  
– A SUMMARY  
**JUNE 2020**

**THE CITIES IN THE ASTON NETWORK HAVE BEEN HIT BY COVID-19 AT DIFFERENT PACES AND IN DIFFERENT WAYS. THAT'S WHY WE DECIDED TO HOST A SERIES OF OPEN CALLS AROUND THE 3 HORIZONS OF RESPONSE TO COVID-19.**

**React:** immediate response and action required to stop the spread of the virus and enforce confinement

**Stabilise:** considering how to deliver vital services to citizens as confinement continues

**Recover:** easing of restrictions and action focused on adjusting to the new environment and effects

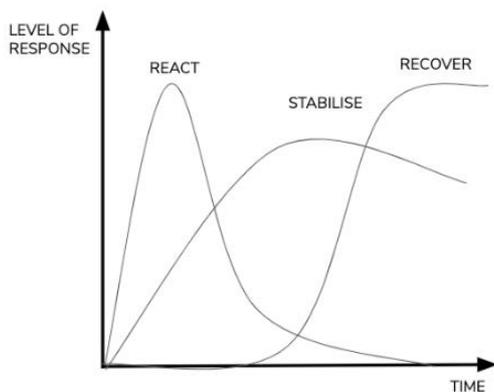


Figure: 3 horizons of response to COVID-19

Across the world, cities and countries were not prepared for the crisis. While borders have been locked down, we've seen cities in the network open up to share ideas and ways ASToN cities are responding.

We were delighted by the turn out to the calls and we hope to continue to connect in this way through the course of the ASToN programme.

This is a summary of what we heard across the three calls.

#### A QUICK REMINDER OF WHAT HAPPENED

These sessions featured an expert presentation relating to responses to COVID in each of the 3 horizons. We were joined by [Lorenzo Kihlgren Grandi](#), lecturer in City Diplomacy at Sciences Po, Paris who provided examples from cities across Europe and South America to prompt and stimulate conversation.

*OVER THE COURSE OF THE CONVERSATIONS WE NOTICED A SHIFT IN TONE AND MINDSET LINING UP WITH THE 3 HORIZONS WE WERE DISCUSSING*

This was followed by an open discussion about how this might apply to ASToN cities' work, what they might do differently because of the conversations, and encouraging them to continue to connect with each other. We also tried out the model of a 'problem solving clinic' - inviting individuals in the network to present something they are working on and asking the network for guidance and support. (Massive thanks to Lagos & Bizerte for sharing their work with us!)

## WHAT WE DISCUSSED AND LEARNT

Over the course of the conversations we noticed a shift in tone and mindset lining up with the 3 horizons we were discussing. In the first call (React), a lot of conversation centred around the African realities making this crisis particularly worrying; that many are not able to build as much locally, lock down is not possible in the same way and there is the ever present issue of corruption.

In the second call (Stabilise), we heard more about how ASToN cities were starting to reflect and look at their strengths and weaknesses. By the final call (Recover), many participants spoke about the need to see the opportunities and possibilities presented by COVID, including the way it's shifted people's attitude and behaviour towards digital & technology.

We covered a lot of different things in these calls so in this note we've drawn out just a few highlights.

### **Communicating with citizens has never been more important**

The primary message for all cities to their citizens has been to emphasise the lack of health infrastructure to support the pandemic in the longer term, to communicate the rules of social distancing and advice for reducing the spread of the virus.

However, communication featured across all three calls and moved beyond those initial messages.

Lorenzo Grandi emphasised the need for reassuring messages, he said; **'Mayors have become psychologists in chief'**, as well as the need to **share progress on projects** and the way money has been spent during the pandemic.

Some important challenges to effective communication were also discussed. We heard a lot about the issue of **fake news and misinformation** being spread which could undermine official communications. Many of you spoke also about the mistrust in government, and how this could affect the effectiveness of government communications. **Community players**, and people more trusted by the citizens, are being enrolled across the network to support in giving information. **Campaigns fighting stigma** from the disease were also currently being developed by several ASToN cities at the time of the call.

### **Creative financing solutions and lack of trust**

The economic implications of the pandemic and the lock down were widely discussed. In many countries the government is borrowing money to ensure that priority services can continue but much of the usual revenue collection is not being collected. As a result, many in the network are expanding their use of things like mobile money tax solutions.

Some felt there could be a **moral issue in trying to collect tax when so many are already struggling**, and

we discussed whether it was possible to target organisations that have been able to continue to operate in lockdown. An alternative model that was discussed was crowdfunding, asking people to donate and contribute directly. The challenge with this approach came back to the **lack of trust in government and how money is spent**, and ultimately

brought the conversation back to **communication and transparency**.

### **Acting in response to the crisis and the opportunities it presents**

We know that we cannot copy and paste policies from other countries but instead need to create policies that are appropriate to the local social and economic circumstances.

Nevertheless throughout the calls some key points were shared which can serve to guide the response to the crisis:

1. Keep assessing and evaluating the spread and impact of the virus within your own city and use this to inform your next steps
2. Consider carefully the spread of activities against all 3 horizons (React, Stabilise, Recover) to ensure a resilient portfolio
3. Always consider the most marginalised in your community to avoid allowing divides in society to deepen
4. Look for opportunities in your work to strengthen the system in the longer term not just solutions to the crisis right now
5. Use the current emphasis on communication to shift from a more bureaucratic system to a more collaborative one:
  - Communicate to the population with clear and engaging data
  - Consider engaging stakeholders & the general public through forums and polls that inform and direct decisions being made
  - Use platforms that are already in place rather than building something new
6. Harness the opportunity to build trust in government spending now and in the future
7. Finally, "do not underestimate the virus".