MANAGING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC. TOWARDS MORE SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT URBAN FUTURES

This CIDOB Report examines how 12 cities around the world have managed the COVID-19 crisis and provides lessons to help guide future urban action. These include learning to govern complex, uncertain scenarios by placing decentralisation, cooperation and resilience at the heart of public policies; rethinking cities to encourage social distancing and make them healthier and more liveable without sacrificing density; and tackling the deep economic recession and social emergency without neglecting the commitment to advance on the ecological transition and address the climate crisis.

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CIDOB REPORT
05- 2020

An urban crisis in an urban world

COVID-19 is an eminently urban crisis taking place in an increasingly urbanised world. From its initial focus in Wuhan, China, the epidemic mutated into a pandemic as the virus spread by aeroplane across the vast network of globally interconnected cities. Once landed, it further spread by public transport out from economic and financial centres via rich, cosmopolitan, globalised neighbourhoods to cities' poorest parts and outskirts.

And yet despite its urban dimension, when the crisis broke out, it was national governments that took up the baton and hogged the spotlight. They decreed states of alarm, lockdowns and closures, coordinated health responses, security and border control and implemented the main economic measures aimed at cushioning the impact. In this context, the denialism of leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro and the nationalist and authoritarian rhetoric of others like Orbán have caused much ink to be spilled and raised the infodemic to pandemic levels.

But as the crisis has progressed, it has become clear that cities, despite their lower profiles and smaller

operating budgets, have been at the forefront of meeting citizens' most basic needs. They have done so by providing essential services such as transport and waste management, adapting public space to enable social distancing, caring for the most vulnerable, supporting companies, professionals and workers affected by the crisis, and strengthening healthcare systems.

Decentralisation and cooperation to face complex, uncertain scenarios

As this CIDOB Report points out, more decentralised countries like Germany, Austria and Argentina have had greater capacity to tackle the pandemic's complexity and coordinate context-specific responses. Even in countries whose leadership is clouded by denialism like the United States, Brazil and India, decentralisation has acted as a firewall, allowing cities and states to implement confinement and lockdowns that have mitigated the ravages of the virus. On the contrary, the data seems to suggest that the most centralised countries – and those that have temporarily re-centralised competences and rolled out uniform measures throughout their territory – have been less efficient (see Rode in this report).

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Among other things, decentralisation requires consensual sharing of competences, empowered local governments endowed with enough resources to operate, and multi-level governance mechanisms that aim to ensure cooperation in a framework of non-hierarchical loyalty between the different spheres of government. These three variables — clarity of competences, sufficient resources and multilevel governance — are proving key to tackling the emergency. In many places, city governments have had to go far beyond their allocated powers to respond to social needs; and they have done so with clearly insufficient resources (human, material, technological and financial) – in many cases benefitting from strong doses of commitment, creativity and innovative capacity.

Experiences like those in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Vienna and Zurich (Knoblauch; Lanfranchi; Asadi; Uffer in this report) show that cooperation between different spheres of government is key to providing more efficient responses to the specific needs of citizens. Non-exclusive competences, shared efforts and greater contextualisation and attachment to the reality of the policies promoted at all levels facilitate the establishment of complementarity frameworks. Similarly, articulating metropolitan responses

has become a larger part of managing the crisis and has underlined the need for efficient governance structures that ensure adequate coordination when providing certain basic services (Klaus in this report). Cities with federal status (Berlin, Buenos Aires, Vienna and Zurich) or with metropolitan governments (London and Barcelona, although the latter has limited powers) are better placed to manage emergencies such as COVID-19 and will possess better tools for designing comprehensive recovery strategies that guarantee economic, social and territorial cohesion.

But just as important as multi-level governance and inter-municipal or metropolitan cooperation is the coordination of collaboration mechanisms with citizens and other urban stakeholders. Such mechanisms seek to generate collaboration and mobilise resources, talent, experience and meaningful capacity to respond and innovate. In many cities, alliances with civil society, the private sector and science have enabled public authorities to manage the emergency in ways that they could not have done alone, or at least not with the necessary speed and efficiency. Civic initiatives range from solidarity networks supporting the vulnerable (Parnell & Claassen in this report) and the innovative "makers" community sharing designs to produce healthcare and protective equipment on 3D printers (Abdullah & Reynés in this report) to science seeking solutions in fields as diverse as biomedicine, mobility, urban planning and sociology (Ng in this report).

WHILE TRADITIONAL MULTILATERALISM HAS STRUGGLED TO ARTICULATE A COORDINATED RESPONSE, THE VARIOUS FORMS OF PARA-DIPLOMACY – CITIES, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, CORPORATE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS – HAVE BURST WITH DYNAMISM.

The alliances cities have built to address the crisis have transcended their administrative boundaries and national borders. While traditional multilateralism has struggled to articulate a coordinated response, the various forms of para-diplomacy – cities, science and technology, corporate and social movements – have burst with dynamism, generating digital spaces for dialogue and collaboration, the transfer of knowledge, exchange of experiences and political advocacy processes. As various authors in this report point out (Abdullah & Reynés; Acuto; Klaus; Rode), international municipalism has taken a step forward during this crisis, consolidating frameworks for collaboration with international organisations, philanthropic institutions, transnational civil society and academia. These collaborative structures will be key to managing the socioeconomic repercussions of the health crisis at both the local and global scale.

The ability to forge alliances is giving cities a firm foundation to face the complex, uncertain future that will define the new normality. Making progress on resilience and adaptation strategies, such as those already being drawn up to mitigate the effects of climate change, will require collective efforts and commitment. In this sense, the pandemic leaves us with important lessons that will need to be processed.

Towards the inclusive, sustainable city of multiple centralities

The crisis COVID-19 has provoked provides opportunities to rethink the city. Measures imposed to ensure social distancing – at least temporarily – will require key aspects of city life, including mobility, uses of public space, local trade and tourism, to be re-examined. The decrease in indicators such as pollution, traffic volume, noise and overcrowding during lockdown may provide some clues. So might tracing the impact of the pandemic on different neighbourhoods and social groups. As this CIDOB Report shows, the emergency has hit lower-income neighbourhoods hardest, along with the most vulnerable people (see Kling; Parnell & Claassen).

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New urban mobility models can take several forms. Most importantly, they will need to counter the impulse to use private vehicles as a way to social distance, which would cause a critical increase in road traffic and pollution. To mitigate this trend and move towards a healthy city rationale, policymakers will have to promote broad social consensus (especially with companies) to streamline public transport use and promote alternative and sustainable means of transportation, such as walking, bicycles and electric scooters. This will require traffic and pedestrian flows to be redesigned; roads will need to be adapted, reducing the space for cars and extending bicycle lanes (within the municipality and between municipalities in metropolitan areas); parking facilities for bicycles and electric scooters will need to be increased; and streets and entire areas of the city pedestrianised (as with Barcelona's superblocks). Technology and big data will be central to all of this.

Further, the redesign of public space will need to be complemented by the redefinition of its use. The growth patterns of many cities have been fragmented and divided between centres that concentrate much of the

economic, commercial, social, cultural and scientific activity, more or less affluent residential neighbourhoods, and increasingly dilapidated outskirts. A transition towards the polycentric city – for example, the "15-minute city" currently implemented in Paris and Bogotá – with multiple centres that each host administrative, economic and commercial activity, services, culture, sports and leisure, would greatly reduce internal mobility in the city and improve citizens' quality of life.

But the pandemic teaches us other important lessons that should condition the urban future. The case of tourism is paradigmatic, with the disappearance of tourists leading citizens to recover parts of their city. New tourism models must be designed around quality and sustainability rather than overcrowding, and they must connect to and interact with the city and its inhabitants. Tourism should not drive out cities' inhabitants and its benefits should be evenly distributed across their multiple centres. It should strengthen local businesses and shops rather than the multinationals that erase cities' most emblematic sites while smudging any hint of local identity.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 lockdown has highlighted and further deepened the inequalities present in urban environments around the world. Not all people have had the same opportunities because not all homes are equally large and comfortable, not all workers were able to work remotely, and not all children had the digital means to keep up with their classes (see Asadi in this report). Societies' housing stock deficits and deep digital divides have been evident in cities on all continents. Guaranteeing the right to fair housing and using all means to mitigate the social disruption caused by technology will be major challenges for cities.

Public policies to mitigate the effects of the crisis and design the recovery

The design of the recovery process will be highly complex. Not just because all attempts to remove established structures face intrinsic difficulties and prompt resistance, but also because it will have to be done during an unprecedented economic recession, whose impacts are already being felt by substantial sectors of society. And then there is the global climate crisis, which cannot be ignored.

In the midst of all this, cities will have to promote public policies that guarantee prosperity, mitigate the social emergency and advance the ecological transition towards zero emissions scenarios in line with the commitments made before the pandemic broke out. Some cities, like Milan (Zevi in this report), have already begun work on comprehensive recovery strategies. They

particularly focus on strengthening economic sectors with high added value, such as ICT, biomedicine, transport, culture and the creative industries. Further, they seek to revise patterns of consumption and bolster local trade and production, the social and solidarity economy, the circular economy and digitalisation processes. These initiatives are closely linked to strategies that address the most vulnerable sectors of society and protect the rights of all citizens, as well as managing complex processes such as financialisation and technological disruption.

To implement these strategies and promote the necessary public policies, cities will need more capacities to mobilise financial resources (fiscal, surplus and debt), technical expertise and highly skilled professionals. Collaboration with other levels of government and alliances with urban stakeholders will also be indispensable; as will cooperation at international level with other cities and urban actors. But none of this will be possible without strong political leadership at all scales: local, national and international.