

FROM CRISIS TO CRISIS? MELBOURNE IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19



Michele
Acuto

Director, Connected
Cities Lab, University of
Melbourne

CIDOB REPORT
05- 2020

After living through a catastrophic bushfire in January 2020, Melbourne was hit by COVID-19. The pandemic has underlined the challenges of governing a large metropolitan area like Melbourne and the dependency of global cities of its stature on international networks. Halfway through the year, a potentially protracted economic crisis almost certainly looms. Managing a global city in the midst of overlapping crises might just be the new state of affairs.

In the middle of the global lockdown the events of late 2019 can seem like a distant reality, but for many Melbournians they remain burned into memory. Reports of the outbreak of what was then known as SARS-CoV-2 started spreading as the city had just finished witnessing one of the, if not *the*, most devastating bushfire seasons in recorded history. With 20% of Australia's forests burnt in bushfire, accounting for more than two-thirds of Australia's annual emissions budget (approx. 350m tonnes of CO₂) and billions of property, agricultural, insurance and tourism damage, at the beginning of February Melbournians were still surveying their charred regional and suburban fringe as the pandemic hit home.

Melbournians were given just a few weeks' respite between a climate-induced disaster and a health catastrophe. But, nearing the end of the southern hemisphere's summer, the situation seems brighter than in other major international cities. From a comparative perspective one could argue Melbourne has been relatively untouched by the global turmoil caused by the coronavirus: as I type this, there have been 1,182 confirmed cases in Greater Melbourne (only 89 are currently sick, an increase of 17 from yesterday) and 18 confirmed deaths total. Lockdown restrictions are still in place, but are slowly easing and are set

to loosen further in the months to come as long as no further spikes in cases occur. Such figures seem very different from those in key theatres of the crisis like Milan, New York and London.

Yet the global lockdown, the inevitably deep economic downturn it will provoke, and social distancing measures are hitting hard even in the wake of relatively comfortable contagion figures. As many have already noted, for a predominantly urban (86%) country accounting for 25 million people, whose economy is highly dependent on global connectivity, COVID-19 might mark a dramatic turn for the worse even if the outbreak itself remains contained. The federal government's A\$130bn JobKeeper

THE CITY HAS ALSO BEEN LOOKING AT THE POSSIBILITY OF LEVERAGING THE RECOVERY AS A TRANSFORMATIVE CHANCE TO BUILD A BETTER MELBOURNE.

wage subsidy programme will to some extent ease the impact of the crisis on employment, but estimates foresee the nation's unemployment rate possibly rising to between 10% and 15%.

Local government in Melbourne has been relatively quick to take action. The city rapidly stepped in to offer A\$5 million in grants to small and medium-sized businesses and non-profit organisations to invest in online and e-commerce capabilities and a A\$2 million fund providing financial assistance to artists and small organisations to develop new work, or for the digital presentation of artistic works and performances. Importantly, along with artists and indeed the poorest (with for instance a A\$6m programme for homeless quarantine support), the city has also sought to support essential workers even with mundane gestures such as issuing free parking stickers for up to 8000 frontline workers in the healthcare and other vital services sectors. In a country built on migration, many of those working in these jobs hail from abroad.

Local government in Melbourne has been relatively quick to take action. The city rapidly stepped in to offer A\$5 million in grants to small and medium-sized businesses and non-profit organisations to invest in online and e-commerce capabilities and a A\$2 million fund providing financial assistance to artists and small organisations to develop new work, or for the digital presentation of artistic works and performances. Importantly, along with artists and indeed the poorest (with for instance a A\$6m programme for homeless quarantine support), the city has also sought to support essential workers even with mundane gestures such as issuing free parking stickers for up to 8000 frontline workers in the healthcare and other vital services sectors. In a country built on migration, many of those working in these jobs hail from abroad.

Here Melbourne's "global" character has been very clearly shown. The city also stepped in to show leadership in the protection of its large international student body, which numbers over 200,000, at least 52,000 of whom live in the city centre, well before its major universities acted. Early in April the mayor and the council launched a dedicated support hub, including advice, an ombudsman function and a hardship fund, and called for increased support for students from overseas, many of whom found themselves in precarious living and services situations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state government of Victoria matched this with a A\$45 million International Student Emergency Relief Fund, as well as a broader COVID-19 health costs waiver for overseas visitors

The city has also been looking at the possibility of leveraging the recovery as a transformative chance to build a better Melbourne, starting with experiments taking place in the midst of the crisis. This is certainly a perfect moment for this kind of experimentation: cycling rates in the city have been reaching record levels during lockdown, and road traffic has reportedly fallen by 88%. The city council has been proactive about seizing this opportunity. Plans are afoot to do away with several car parks to allow for more footpaths and to roll out 12 kilometres of pop-up cycling lanes across the CBD in the name of social distancing as COVID-19 restrictions start to ease. In this Melbourne has been following the temporary mobility retrofit trend set by Milan and Berlin and has done so as the likes of London and Paris are also moving in a similar direction. Many of these innovations are neither novelties nor unprecedented efforts. Much like London, Sydney had been rolling out a “cycling highway” since 2014. In fact, several of the proposed changes to the way we will at least temporarily move in the city as we enter a new phase of the crisis were already present in the council’s *2030 Transport Strategy* and are in all effect simply being fast-tracked.

**THE BUSHFIRE,
CLIMATE AND HEALTH
CRISES ALL BRING
TO THE SURFACE THE
DEEPER UNDERLYING
CRISIS OF INEQUALITY
ACROSS THE GREATER
METROPOLITAN AREA.**

Yet Melbourne is not just the City of Melbourne (Gleeson & Spiller, 2012). The latter accounts for approximately 37 square kilometres and a population of 169,961 and while it is certainly home to some of its major economic, educational and cultural players and many of the renowned landmarks, it is far from the whole of Melbourne. The wider area covers five million people and 10,000 square kilometres, and is in turn surrounded by not-so-small regional realities like Geelong (253,269 people) on the south-west coast and Ballarat (107,325 people) in the north-west inlands. Similar to Sydney, 31 municipal councils make up what we call Greater Melbourne. This is a key local issue (Rossiter & Gibson, 2011). For instance, the largest share of the city’s population (46.6%) lives in areas covered by the outer local governments. In the absence of a metropolitan or regional authority like the Greater London Authority (GLA) in London or even just the state government coordination body of the Greater Sydney Commission in New South Wales, it has fallen to the state government of Victoria to manage much of the response to the crisis. In fact, many would argue that the COVID-19 response across Australia has reminded us of the power of premiers and states and the limits of both local councils and the federal executive in Canberra.

As flagged above, Melbourne as a city has responded proactively to several of the chronic issues heightened by the crisis. Yet it perhaps remains less in

the global spotlight than its international peers in organisations like the C40 Cities, 100 Resilient Cities or ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability. It has not been in the limelight of international leadership as a promoter of global – or indeed regional – discussions and exchanges between cities. Milan has for instance become chair of the Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force sponsored by C40, and Freetown has been a regular presence in non-governmental and multilateral (virtual) fora, sharing its dramatic experience with containing the 2014–15 Ebola epidemic. New York City, Helsinki and Montreal are leading conversations about leveraging the SDGs or acknowledging the possibilities of tackling inequality in a time of deepening economic divisions (Acuto, 2020).

Here, Melbourne has an opportunity to do more. The bushfire, climate and health crises all bring to the surface the deeper underlying crisis of inequality across the greater metropolitan area, with major issues in terms of poverty (12.6% in Greater Melbourne), homelessness (up by nearly 50% in the last decade) and vulnerability for the lower-income households across the region.

The bushfire crisis had already begun underscoring this with an emphasis on suburbs and peri-urban livelihoods in the global city (Connolly et al., 2020). COVID-19 has also hopefully brought into play a more explicit focus on these more cross-cutting dangers from hundreds of thousands at risk (Lee et al., 2020). Action on this front has been a little slow coming, but both state and city executives are relatively well attuned to the issue. Once again, the opportunity for Melbourne is clear: it can act as a true bridge between continued local leadership, its rightful place as a global city amongst its peers and as an important regional voice for Southeast Asia and the Pacific, but it could also step up internationally as much as a promoter of discussions about widening urban inequality gaps in the midst of yet another major disruption. Indeed, we should not discount that this crisis may be far from over and that the next crisis may be just around the corner. In January the catastrophic bushfire season seemed to have set the tone for the Victorian capital for 2020. Then COVID-19 came to Melbourne. Halfway through the year, a potentially protracted economic crisis almost certainly looms. Managing a global city in the midst of overlapping crises might just be the new state of affairs, and not just down here in the antipodes.

Reference

Acuto, M. "COVID-19: Lessons for an Urban(izing) World". *One Earth* 2(4), 2020, pp. 317-319.

Connolly, C., Keil, R. & Ali, S. H. "Extended urbanisation and the spatialities of infectious disease: Demographic change, infrastructure and governance". *Urban Studies*, 2020 (online first). [Accessed on 19.05.2020] <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0042098020910873>

Gleeson, B. & Spiller, M. "Metropolitan governance in the urban age: trends and questions". *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 4(4), 2012, pp. 393-397.

Lee, V. J., Ho, M., Kai, C. W., Aguilera, X., Heymann, D. & Wilder-Smith, A. "Epidemic preparedness in urban settings: new challenges and opportunities". *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, 20(5), 2020, pp. 527-529.

Rossiter, B. & Gibson, K. "Walking and performing 'the city': A Melbourne chronicle". In Bridge, Gary, and Sophie Watson (Eds.), *The New Blackwell Companion to the City* (pp.488-498). John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

