COVID-19: A MIRROR FOR THE URBAN WORLD'S CONTRADICTIONS

Octavi
de la Varga Mas
Secretary General
of Metropolis

The 21st century was meant to be the urban century. In the various forums that consider and discuss the impact of cities it has become habitual to call the 19th the century of empires, the 20th the century of nation-states and the 21st the century of cities. Certainly, over the past few decades we have witnessed a process of urbanisation unlike any before in human history in its intensity, speed and global scale (no region of the world has been left out). Urban agglomerations have established themselves as centres of innovation, employment and economic development whose influence stretches beyond their administrative boundaries and territories.

But the coronavirus pandemic forces us to look in the mirror and face the challenges, contradictions, fragility and vulnerabilities of our global urban society. The dramatic consequences of COVID-19 in the health, economic and social fields do not pose new problems. Rather, they have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and tensions. Many of the wounds left by the 2008 economic, social and financial crisis have been ripped open again amid public service dismantlement, recentralisation and lack of funding for local governments.

This emergency has made the poor even more vulnerable. Consider, for example, the agglomerations of shantytowns and slums on the outskirts of cities in Africa and certain parts of Asia where it is impossible to respect even minimal hygiene or social distancing measures. It is also driving the exclusion of new sectors of the population in the cities of the Global North (an entire segment of society has become visible that relied on informal structures). And it should not be forgotten that lockdown is aggravating the gender gap and gender violence.

In the words of Claudia López, the mayor of Bogotá, we seem suddenly to have discovered that great cities are more than just sites of production and consumption. Caught up in processes of globalisation, of achieving competitiveness, of climbing all sorts of rankings and in the design of the major infrastructure and cities of the future, we have forgotten that what gives a city meaning are its citizens, the people who live in it. Cities are spaces in which millions of men and women seek opportunities and a better life.

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC FORCES US TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND FACE THE CHALLENGES, CONTRADICTIONS, FRAGILITY AND VULNERABILITIES OF OUR GLOBAL URBAN SOCIETY.

Faced with this reality, cities are making great efforts to adapt quickly to the new situation and equip themselves to respond to new needs. No one can deny that local governments are at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and its negative effects in all areas. Beyond health responses and the adaptation of medical services, a whole range of changes are being made at various levels:

- Rethinking both political and technical governance structures (e.g. producing integrated cross-cutting systems) and the interaction between political leadership and technical personnel. The introduction of remote working among public sector employees has been accelerated.
- Changes to the model of providing public services and the need for new data and indicators that not all cities possess.
- Determining what basic and essential services consist of.
- Consolidating citizen and community self-management models to help groups that local government struggles to reach.
- Questioning how to relate to citizens and, in turn, forms of citizen oversight.
- Relationships and joint work between the different levels of government.

Local governments are also under pressure due to the major investments in human and financial resources they are having to make and the gaps left by a chronic funding shortfall.

Beyond this, lockdown has presented us with images of our cities that force us to think seriously about basic issues such as the future of public space, mobility, density, local businesses, adequate and affordable housing, key infrastructure, the limits of so-called smart cities and digital divides.

While services and investments are being adjusted to tackle the pandemic, local governments are now having to think about how to design plans for recovery and adaptation to what has been called the new normal. Although, as networks of local governments like Metropolis (the global association of large cities and metropolitan areas with 138 members from all world regions) advocate, it is not a question of adapting to the new normal but of generating the necessary transformations. This is a unique time to propose solutions that transform urban spaces for future generations.

In concert with local government networks, local leaders and their technical teams have a responsibility to rethink our cities, identify new mobility models, facilitate the transition to more social, inclusive and sustainable economic models, place care at the heart of our public policies, redesign public space, imple-

IN CONCERT WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORKS, LOCAL LEADERS AND THEIR TECHNICAL TEAMS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO RETHINK OUR CITIES.

ment nature-based solutions, rediscover biodiversity, ensure cross-cutting approaches to gender and respect citizens' rights. In short, they must commit to a new, creative urban planning that includes specialists from all fields and all actors in the territories.

The fallout from the pandemic has shown that it is more important than ever to strengthen the ties between cities and to promote peer-to-peer exchanges, learning and cooperation. In fact, from the first minute, the mobilisation of local governments in their own territory has been accompanied by mobilisation and cooperation between cities and their networks at international level. This would certainly not have been possible without the prior experience in international action and decentralised cooperation.

It is fascinating to see how networks have been able to react and produce tools to help their members to find solutions. There is no major network that has not launched an initiative to support its members. Standout initiatives include the Cities for Global Health platform launched by Metropolis in conjunction with AL-LAs (Alianza Euro Latinomericana de Cooperación entre Ciudades) and support from UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments). This platform seeks to facilitate decision-makers' access to ideas about how urban spaces around the world can cope with similar situations.

It invites local and regional governments, regardless of their size, to share measures (strategies, specific policies, protocols and action plans, etc.) that have been specifically designed to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as measures to address other health emergencies. We might also mention Live Learning Experience, led by UCLG with the support of Metropolis and UN-Habitat, a series of thematic online exchanges (on housing, the informal economy, funding services, etc.) seeking local-level answers and solutions for the reconstruction and recovery stage. Other important initiatives are C40's Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, the Global Resilient Cities Network's (GNC) collaboration on COVID-19 recovery, and ICLEI's COVID-19 resources.

Intriguingly, while all networks initially embarked on a race to see who could launch a particular initiative or lead a process first, a new awareness of cross-network cooperation and support has been generated around their various instruments. If it continues, this process will strengthen the municipalist movement and ultimately result in better support for cities around the world. Today more than ever what matters for cities is that no one is left behind and that we are able to build urban spaces that are resilient (socially, economically and environmentally), safe and sustainable.