



Three Ways Cities are Pushing the Accelerator of Change in the Coronavirus Times

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The coronavirus pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge to the resilience of societies and highlights fundamental flaws in social, economic, and governance systems. Cities have realized this from day one. As engines of the modern economy, driving growth and concentrating inequality, with high levels of population density and international interconnectedness, they are the focal point of the current crisis. Empty streets, overwhelmed hospitals, and bread lines are some of the starkest manifestations of the pandemic.

Many cities have been exercising bold leadership and collective action in ways that go beyond mitigating the effects of the pandemic within their jurisdictions. Mayors from around the world have exercised solidarity and cooperated across borders to respond in a way that reflects the interconnected nature of public health as well as the structural flaws that are exacerbating the pandemic's impact.

There are three ways that many cities are using the present moment as an opportunity to make societies more resilient and patch up governance gaps. First, by taking exceptional and often creative measures to mitigate the human consequences of the pandemic and using the opportunity to reimagine themselves, thus setting a better trajectory for when the health crisis subsides. Second, cities have been connecting and cooperating with each other internationally to share data, good practices, and creative ways they have been responding to the multiple challenges related to the pandemic. Third, in some instances cities are coming together to call for changes in governance systems to better equip themselves to deal with current and future challenges of this magnitude.

The leadership coming from the local level is not novel or especially surprising; it was already emerging around longer-term challenges such as climate change and migration. However, the rapid evolution of the pandemic and the global interconnectedness that defines them today make it almost inevitable for cities—the level of government closest to the citizens—to perceptively discern the breadth and depth of the challenge, and to take the lead in making and advocating for the critical changes needed.

Emergency Response and Reimagining Cities

Cities have put forward an array of actions to navigate and thrive through the coronavirus crisis. They have provided major support to hospitals and healthcare professionals, established communication channels to

guide and support citizens, and tried to alleviate the strain and stress caused by the lockdown. While these measures were all born as an immediate response to a crisis, many have proven cost-effective ways of catering to important societal needs, which might decrease in volume and urgency, but will not disappear altogether. The city of Bilbao set up a single service line to effectively channel and answer all questions from its residents, regardless of municipal competences or responsibilities, and reassigning from different departments all necessary workers to do the job. The city of Torino, recognizing the massive psychological impact of the crisis, set up free virtual services to provide support and counseling to families and individuals, as well as to facilitate contact with isolated elderly people in residences through the installation of technological devices.

Cities have also directed their efforts to strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem and to offering free resources, actions, and skills to citizens and businesses during the pandemic. For instance, Portland Prosper, the economic and urban development agency of the city of Portland, is working in real time to help residents and has formed a “COVID-19 Economic Relief and Stabilization Framework” to mitigate economic hardship on impacted individuals, help local business stay solvent and retain employees, and evaluate city business practices and redirect available resources. The framework prioritizes support to the most vulnerable, also applying a racial-equity lens. Meanwhile, the city of Amsterdam is identifying how to organize as “1.5 meter society.” It has asked entrepreneurs to share their ideas for making it a success in a way that makes Amsterdam smart, green, and healthy while having a positive social and economic impact. By May 2020, residents, entrepreneurs, and cultural and educational institutions had already submitted 1,132 plans for temporary space for neighborhood initiatives and other activities. At the time of writing, the city had approved 645 of these. The first initiatives have already been deployed.

Another strategic area where cities are ratcheting up efforts is critical infrastructure, notably in the United States where guidance and support from the federal level is lacking. Across the country, 90 cities and states have suspended water shutoffs to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. The city of Detroit went even further and restored water access to homes that had been disconnected prior to the crisis. Pressure is also mounting on U.S. cities to avoid higher electricity bills and to ensure people that have suffered a loss of income during the crisis do not see the power supply shut off. The city of Austin approved emergency actions to provide relief to the customers of Austin Energy and Austin Water. A day after the city raised the concern about electricity access, the city-owned power utility announced a moratorium on shutoffs.

Cities have also been fast to pursue equitable and human-centered approaches to public health, considering the inequalities in the pandemic’s impact from a health perspective as well as a social and economic one. Existing inequalities are not only highlighted, they are being worsened. Vulnerable groups are not just more likely to suffer adverse health effects, they are more likely to suffer economic and social costs, and in some cases, especially for migrants and refugees, additional marginalization and exclusion. To ensure these inequities are considered in emergency and recovery responses, the mayor of Los Angeles was among the first to appoint a “Covid-19 Equity Director” to highlight the racial inequality in impact and mortality due to the pandemic. New York City’s municipal health facilities are providing free coronavirus testing and care regardless of immigration or insurance status, knowing the reality that public-health concerns cannot effectively be addressed by excluding people, much less vulnerable groups. In the same vein, the mayor of Chicago signed an executive order to protect immigrant and refugee communities during the pandemic, “explicitly ensuring that all benefits, opportunities, and services provided or administered by the city of Chicago are accessible

to all residents, regardless of birth country or current citizenship status.” While mayors are acting to protect immigrant communities, they are also asking for the state and federal governments to do more to protect these.

It is similar with eviction freezes and addressing homelessness. Several cities have secured hotel space for people living in the streets, particularly vulnerable to this public-health crisis. Berlin has opened up a 400-bed hostel for the homeless, and New Orleans is moving the homeless to temporary hotel housing in the central business district.

The coronavirus crisis has also highlighted inequality in the access to digital technologies and how it has become a stress test for many underprepared communities, schools, hospitals, employers and governments. Cities like Barcelona had already recognized digitalization as a universal basic right before the pandemic, and it continues its efforts to reduce the digital divide by designing and implementing public policies aimed at improving citizens’ access, use, and quality of use of information and communication technologies, and overall at offering citizens the tools they need to participate, collaborate, and thrive in the digital change.

Lastly, at a time when the coronavirus is reshaping urban life, cities are looking at the urban environment, adapting it for a better management of the current context and reflecting on what it will look like in the aftermath of the crisis. Milan was the first, but many others are following suit in announcing ambitious plans to reduce the use of private vehicles in urban centers after the lockdown. The city, one of the most polluted in Europe, will introduce one of the continent’s most ambitious schemes, with a citywide expansion of cycling and walking space. Others are looking at Milan for inspiration on how to reset cities after the pandemic and make a switch from cars to active modes of travel possible. Paris is taking steps to create more pedestrian, green, and community space at the expense of car lanes as part of its “15-minute city plan,” according to which all residents should be able to access essential needs within a short walk or bike ride. Similarly, Barcelona’s urban development model and “superblocks” plan involve guaranteeing that residents of any age can access any type of urban service (food, health, education, culture, sports, administrative, civic/recreational) within a 10-minute walk.

Many of cities’ efforts at reimagining themselves are based on values, ideas, and approaches that have existed for a while. The present moment is an opportunity to turn the corner and accelerate these trends, as daily routines have come to a grind and everyone is thinking critically about the functioning of society. Restricted mobility has made many people not just discover their neighborhoods, but question the need to drive so often in the first place. For those who have been forced or had the option to work from home (once schools resume, for many), the need to be in the office as much is being reassessed. In this context, beyond pushing the accelerator of the change they hoped for (less car traffic, for example), cities will need to reimagine the use and centrality of office-based real estate developments and business districts.

International Connection and Cooperation

Cities recognize that being able to respond rapidly and effectively to crises like the coronavirus pandemic necessarily involves cooperating. In engaging with each other, they are free from the traditional pressures of diplomacy and international relations. They might often compete on their “branding” or in seeking to attract specific investments, but on critical issues such as climate change or public health there is no doubt that

sharing lessons and resources internationally is a win-win endeavor. Mayors cannot as easily separate themselves from the predicament of residents, and therefore there is less of a barrier to being bold, outspoken, and frank in facing a crisis.

As first-responders to the many aspects of the crisis, cities have clear tangible gains in cooperating with their international peers, as it is more efficient to hear directly from other city officials than to wait for information to circulate via the traditional channels of international or multilateral exchange. Another example is the informal chat group started by staff of the city of Los Angeles, which has grown into an open forum that includes city officials around the world, most of which are at different phases of similar trajectories, and which they have been using to directly share valuable information of all kinds, from how to ensure safe public transport to ways of addressing the increases in domestic-violence cases.

While many governments were still deciding how to respond to the pandemic, mayors from around the world were on joint calls, notably one led by the mayor of Los Angeles, hearing warnings from Seoul, Milan, and other cities that they ought to act faster and more aggressively than they thought was necessary. Existing cooperation platforms and networks were adjusted to cater to the urgent need to share information. C40, a network of the world's megacities committed to address climate change and representing one-quarter of the global economy, developed a specialized knowledge hub; the Mayors Migration Council set up a live action tracker to collect and share city response and recovery efforts that are migrant- and refugee-sensitive; EURO CITIES's "Live updates COVID-19" website was sharing examples already in March of how cities were enacting rent moratoriums, housing homeless people, assigning tourist apartments to vulnerable families, developing social media apps for the elderly, or creating virtual labor rights offices.

It is only natural that at a time of heightened global interdependence and interconnectedness, mainly tethered through cities, that city governments fulfill a role that extends beyond their 'city walls.' In many ways, it is harder to distinguish between local and global issues. Similar to the previous points about cities accelerating trends and turning the corner on long-term intentions and plans to reimagine themselves, there is also an acceleration of the international activity and engagement of cities. The history of international engagement of cities has old roots, but it has acquired a new momentum over the 20 years. Arguably this has accelerated even further in the current global pandemic in which cities around the world are the focal points, but also more generally at times when multilateralism and international cooperation of national governments is strained.

Cities Urging for Change in Governance

Cities have not just stepped up their international cooperation with one another, they have advocated for a larger role for themselves in governance systems more broadly. Within countries and internationally, many cities are calling for their voice to be heard where policies that affect them are designed and decided. The premise of these aspirations is that for cities to be most effective as first-responders to local manifestations of global challenges, they need more than just essential resources, they need to be included where multilateral and national policies are made to make sure these are designed in ways that correspond to the reality on the ground. If policies are drawn up and corrected, or worse fail, only after they are taking effect in cities, this is wasteful and at times even means a step backwards.

The pandemic and confinement measures have highlighted a critical fiscal-governance failure in the United States and some European countries. Cities act as first responders in times of emergency, but fiscally they are often dependent on revenues that can immediately vanish or hugely decrease when emergencies arise. Because many cities cannot run budget deficits and thus soften sharp fiscal drops, local governments are forced to temporarily lay off employees. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics monthly employment report in May showed that, as a result of the pandemic, over 800,000 local-government jobs were lost, compounded by an additional 180,000 at the state level. State and local-government employment in April 2020 had declined by 4.5 percent compared to a year earlier; during the worst phases of the Great Recession, this “declined at an annual rate of around 1.5%.” In Texas, around 100 mayors from both parties called on Congress to adopt “direct and flexible fiscal assistance.” Spanish cities face a similar situation. As part of the battery of austerity measures implemented during the global financial crisis, city governments were forbidden not just from going into deficit, but from using any surplus generated in previous years. Mayors of the seven largest cities in Spain, from across a highly polarized political spectrum, united to ask the national government for budget flexibility and fiscal measures to be able to face this crisis and protect the most vulnerable, as well as for a greater involvement in the regional and national efforts against the coronavirus. It is ludicrous that at a time of heightened need for public services, these are being put under massive strain.

In late 2019, the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw formed the “Pact of Free Cities” seeking to cooperate among themselves and also to work with other cities to protect and promote “common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, equality, rule of law, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity” against growing illiberalism in their region and around the world. The most tangible part of their platform was a call for direct access to EU funds. This call by the four mayors was reformulated recently in a letter to Chancellor Merkel in the context of Germany’s current presidency of the Council of the EU, asking for the acknowledgement of the role of cities in Europe’s green transition, and direct access to green urban funds as part of the EU’s next Multiannual Financial Framework. Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s manipulation of the public-health emergency, allowing himself to rule by decree, has given him new ways of weaken local governments fiscally and politically, depriving municipalities of revenue streams and stopping funding for political parties. This makes the call for access to funds by the Pact of Free Cities even more critical for supporting champions of liberal democracy.

On the climate front, too, cities are exercising responsible leadership and calling for others to do the same. The confinement measures put in place to limit the spread of the coronavirus, and which have reduced emissions and improved air quality, will not continue forever. Even this temporary reduction in emissions is having negligible impact on the bigger picture of emissions reductions. Carlo Buontempo, the director of the EU’s Copernicus Climate Change Service, pointed out in a recent interview that, “because of the inertia in the climate system, even if we were to significantly reduce or stop our emissions today, you would still see the increase in temperatures expected for the next 20 years almost unaffected.” Further, lockdown measures are not sustainable nor desirable solutions in the long run. Prior to the pandemic, as home to more than half of the world’s population and major emitters of carbon dioxide, and responsible for 70 percent of the world’s energy-related carbon emissions, cities were already on the frontlines of climate-change action.

Now cities are worried that, as restrictions ease, some of the measures designed to contain the virus can set back climate action. Cities are also concerned that the health and socioeconomic impacts of the coronavirus

can be exacerbated by climate hazards such as hurricanes, heat stress, severe droughts, or wildfires. Further, in the context of the pandemic, climate preparedness and adaptation plans take on a new meaning with the physical distance measures in place. Several questions arise: How can cities move the population to shelters in the case of a hurricane? How are they going to protect the most vulnerable in the event of heatwaves if places to cool down are not operative? How are they going to reassign staff and resources to respond and rebuild after the impact the pandemic has had on their budgets?

Cities need the appropriate policy incentives and fiscal support from national and supranational authorities to bring about the structural change necessary to comply with the Paris Agreement. In the EU, the legislative proposal for a new Climate Law adopted in March 2020 as part of the European Green Deal sets the objective for the EU to become climate-neutral by 2050. This would make the target legally binding and could safeguard local climate action. Member states and the European Parliament must now approve it. In the United States, cities confront the danger of an economic stimulus that deepens reliance on fossil fuels as the federal government and Congress move to bail out the fossil-fuel sector, and from general stimulus policies that do not take climate into account and create climate-policy disincentives.

Conclusion

Cities are taking exceptional measures to deal with the coronavirus crisis. They are creatively using the opportunity to reimagine themselves. They are improving their ability to do this and empowering themselves by coordinating and connecting with their peers regardless of borders. They are also pushing for changes in the governance systems in which they are embedded. More generally, we all need to think of what societies we want in the aftermath of the crisis. If there are ways to drive societies to be more equitable, sustainable, and democratic, these need to be staunchly supported. Cities are leading the way. Their actions and vision can catalyze long-term change that does not just turn the clock back to 2019, but to set societies on a better path. National governments should pay attention to what cities are saying and doing, and give them a voice in how they plan to relieve the terrible impacts of the health and economic crises, as well as how they can use these plans to ensure a better, more resilient future.

Cities and mayors have shown exemplary leadership in many cases. But cities also have shown the worst and most tragic elements of the crises. Homelessness, precarious workers, discrimination, segregation, and many other of society's injustices have persisted and worsened in cities. Acknowledging these realities, past mistakes, and privileges are important for cities to be effective in exercising their leadership. Otherwise they risk alienating not just other levels of government as well as sub-urban and rural populations, but their own vulnerable residents who live and see the worst injustices daily.

Cities today are much more than areas of higher density that need to manage planning, transport, and other functionalities of their geographies. They play a key role in our economic, political, societal, and environmental systems. As such, they remain critical to put us a towards a more equitable, inclusive, sustainable and prosperity path. In times of a global pandemic, they are also, importantly, managers of interaction and interconnectivity. As such it is fitting for them to have crucial roles in this time of interrelated crises and for their roles to grow in the national and international arenas.

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