

“Cities cannot fix the magnitude of pre-crisis and new challenges on their own. They need to work with national and global stakeholders to contribute to well-being, transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient economy, and drive inclusive growth.”

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Image Source: A mural in the old city of Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia. Image by Nicolas J.A. Buchoud; all rights reserved ©.



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The COVID-19 and the Global Solutions Dialogue: catalyst towards inclusive, green and smart cities for global well-being?

Pandemics have always triggered rethinking of urban paradigms, and COVID-19 is no exception. Our latest OECD Report on COVID & Cities argues that this crisis has not revealed anything new about our structural vulnerabilities, but acted as a magnifying glass, trend accelerator and catalyst for change at local, national and global levels. Cities have always been places of creativity, experimentation, agility and innovation, and to ensure this will be the case again, we should draw lessons at least three domains to go smart, green and inclusive.

First, the digital revolution, notably the large-scale teleworking experience, can minimise pressure on local services, land, housing prices and natural resources. Going forward, we should revisit our relationship to time and chrono-urbanism to stop doing the same thing, at the same

time in the same place such as piling up in crowded transportation and traffic jam to start work at 9am. We should upscale multi-purpose infrastructure and make better use of empty offices where people will no longer work every day. And we should we revive our downtowns to remain attractive in this new context of remote working.

Second, the increased environmental awareness induced by the combined “Greta Effect” and the “Zoom Effect”, and the rediscovery of local loops and proximity, provide a unique opportunity to accelerate the ecological transition, which seems socially and politically more acceptable today than just a year ago. Recovery packages should build on this momentum to enhance green and circular cities, create jobs, reduce CO2 emissions (renewable energy, cycling, walking), prepare communities for climate risks (floods, heats), improve urban environmental quality (air pollution, biodiversity) and promote energy efficiency.

Third, the growing citizen discontent requires renewing the social contract to strengthen local governance. The crisis disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations such as women, youth, migrants, the homeless and the elderly. Going forward, fixing the inequality issue will be the hot potato for city leaders. They should adapt urban design, reclaim public space, and ensure immediate access to amenities while securing safety and health for all their residents for a more quality urbanisation and greater territorial cohesion.

In light of the above considerations, only place-based and people-centered solutions can help build back better cities and fight inequality. For example, for the digital transformation to deliver benefits for all, we must address the 'digital divide' through upscaling our investments. Rethinking clean forms of urban mobility (e.g. cycling, walking, etc.) also requires managing the distributional effects across specific places (i.e. suburban and low-density urban areas) and people (i.e. elderly, families with children, disabled etc.).

Cities cannot fix the magnitude of the challenge on their own and need to work with national and global stakeholders to contribute to well-being, transition to a low-carbon and climate resilient economy, and drive inclusive growth.

Throughout 2020, the Global Solutions Dialogues provided a unique platform for exchange, based on an innovative and open format, to share best practices and common solutions to common problems. In that sense, it was a major catalyst for change towards urban paradigms that can help achieve better quality of life while preserving productivity, social inclusion and the environment.