

“The changing configuration of human settlements has challenged institutions (and research) in the past decade. Now is the time to respond and implement new welfare solutions.”

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Image Source: In the outskirts of Sao Paulo along the highway 116.  
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## Welfare, social and spatial organization in the post-COVID global urban age

For the first time since the creation of the United-Nations, a unified contribution gathering the efforts and inputs of many UN agencies and programs has showcased a photography of our urban world in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The New Urban Agenda issued at the Habitat III summit in 2016 was completely silent about the risks of pandemics and their consequences and the role that human settlements can play.<sup>2</sup> However in 2020, the United Nations has proven up to the task, calling for 'an urgent need to rethink and transform cities to respond to the reality of Covid-19 and potential future

pandemics.' Yet, designing a much-needed urban response to this disease cannot be just about cities, mayors and advocacy networks; it requires to articulate as well a social, institutional and political response. The urban world of the Covid-19 isn't just one of places or connectivity but that of powerful transformations in various domains, as the recent World Cities Report 2020 highlighted.<sup>3</sup> Rethinking the notion of welfare will depend on physical as much as on social capital investments, supported by new forms of spatial-constitutional organization.

Whereas 'cities' are often used as synonymous for sub-national governments, in reality urban geography and the configuration of human settlements has changed faster than institutions and existing categories of city sizes in the past two or three decades. Somehow, it has also outpaced research. The classification of cities in the urban geography of the turn of the millennium defined cities of small, medium size, large or big size. Since then, typologies and classifications have reflected on a new economic geography through mega-regions, urban corridors and city- or metropolitan regions. This new constellation of large scale urban and territorial arrangements remained too much about space and not enough about system connections. As an illustration, the first framework of the planetary boundaries issued in 2009 completely ignored urbanization, whereas urban research from a decade ago barely noticed the rise of a new generation of science of complex systems and their interactions. Despite confirmed economic benefits

and spillovers also applying to rural livelihoods, we argue that agglomeration economics have exposed a global urban system in the making to very high levels of risks and deep vulnerabilities. This is also a consequence of incomplete and partially obsolete forms of political and institutional organization in response to profound economic and societal changes.

Recovering from the Covid-19 through cities, which are the frontline of the response, might only reinforce pre-existing social and economic imbalances and governance flaws, unless 'cities' become part of larger scale coordinated responses. A critical problem that lies ahead of us is that mega-regions and urban corridors have become key drivers of wealth creation, with barely any corresponding political incarnation and institutional organization. Such political entities would indeed largely run counter to national and even to local/mayoral interests if they are not properly integrated. In the absence of new forms of power balance, the 'metropolitan century'<sup>4</sup> has become a loosely governed period with negative impacts at city and country level, in urban but also in rural environments and globally and that should not continue.

We argue that the better responses to the Covid-19 throughout 2020 have been achieved in places where the mega-regional scale plays a primary role and the articulation of cities within this space a secondary but essential intermediation role. This large scale territorial aspect

aligns well with local governments, and in some cases, self-contained local areas and sustainable neighborhoods. In Asia, the emergence of such more mature socio-political urban structure could explain, in part, the relative success of China but also Vietnam, South-Korea or the connected metro areas of Taipei/Taichung/Kaichung in addressing the pandemic and benefiting from a collective sense of social solidarity and empathy and a strong neighborhood based social organization.

As a mega trend, as a series of intertwined social, spatial and economic transformations, urbanization has been a driving force at the crossroads of production and trade systems, jobs and the future of work, wealth distribution, consumption, spatial and societal changes. Yet, aspirations for development and shared prosperity have been overshadowed by a premium for connectivity and mobility with real estate, housing and physical infrastructure as primary goals, a direction that has only been reinforced by the G20 macro-economic response to the 2008 global financial crisis.

Physical and digital infrastructure have taken over social infrastructure but as the world has been urbanizing steadily in the past decades, its cumulative impacts have also triggered an emerging societal substructure made of culture, creativity, innovation, ethnic and cultural diversity, community governance with a global reach, and the development of new productive and cognitive capacities. Therefore,

urbanization deep impacts are also about memory and values, singular and collective identities, the symbolic uses of space, the reevaluation of the soul of a city –another word for sense of place– the development of new cultural-spatial nexus. All this does not happen in one specific city at a time, but across urban regions and neighborhoods in the world, creating the bricks and mortar of future urban culture.

The level of cohesiveness of the mega-regional cultural and economic space within national political and/or regional organizations, could become a relevant indicator for future policy making and a distinctive feature in a post Covid-19 recovery and development perspective. Empirical illustrations seem to confirm that countries suffering from public distrust, discontentment, related conflicts among governance levels and poor metropolitan redistribution may be more acutely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Better articulation of multilevel governance and local responses could dramatically reduce the vulnerabilities and exposure of poor communities to pandemics and other global risks by addressing structural inequality problems that have exacerbated contagion and death tolls. Vulnerability is not just about place but also about mobility and work organization. In the United-States, studies have shown that more than 60% of people infected in New York were blacks and Hispanics, a direct consequence of their exposure to contagion risks in their workplace and while commuting to work across metro areas. In the United-Kingdom,

10 to 15 categories of jobs have been accounting for over 60% of reported cases in 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic highlights that in many cities in developed countries, the vulnerabilities associated to mobility, public transportation and type of work transcend political and territorial boundaries and are more significant than those associated to place in the sense of housing typologies. Empirical evidence tends to be confirmed by growingly consolidated research about the metropolitan imbalances of Covid-19 dynamics. A recent study by Marron Institute of Urban Management of New York University in the fall of 2020 has shown how much the contagion patterns were linked with the spatial distribution of economic activities and flows within multi-county metropolitan areas... 'without an additional and critical institutional layer (...) for the effective management of present and future pandemics.'<sup>5</sup>

Transport and development planning, combined with a notion of welfare and social and political participation, need to be added to the post Covid-19 equation of our global urban age. This would be the very right moment for a third way beyond centralized planning and laissez-faire. In the past twenty years, the benefits of urbanization and connectivity have contributed to support global growth but many national governments, notwithstanding multilateral institutions, have failed at capturing the benefits to reinforce welfare, adding to inequalities in various grounds. In developed and emerging countries alike, the multiplication of new urban and real estate fronts (as a contemporary form of the for-

mer pioneer's fronts) has leveraged indisputable economic benefits but also very low levels of redistribution in the absence of effective regulation, and a poor, unsustainable urban forms.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, 75% of the cities in the world have become more unequal, meaning that over 2 billion urban dwellers have seen their access to resources, income, public goods growingly restricted, or unfairly distributed. Urbanization has too often prospered in the absence of effective regulation and when governments have not been able to control the use of resources, starting from land, the very notion of shared prosperity and welfare state has been eroded.

While seeking to restore prosperity, empirical evidence shows that with few exceptions, prosperous cities are usually to be found in prosperous regions. This might be a relevant scale to ensure that wealth production and growth are not being captured by narrowing social groups and to scale up development and environment priorities. To foster an economy of well-being, 'health should be in all policies', reviving the Helsinki Statement of 2014<sup>7</sup> and the G20 Health Initiative of 2017<sup>8</sup>. This starts by restoring and developing new welfare capacities across the local/regional political space, articulating larger territories with sustainable neighborhoods and cities.

1. The Covid-19 in an urban world, United Nations Secretary General policy brief, July 2020, [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid\\_urban\\_world\\_july\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid_urban_world_july_2020.pdf)

2. The New Urban Agenda, <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/> The New Urban Agenda was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador, on 20 October 2016. It was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly at its sixty-eighth plenary meeting of the seventy-first session on 23 December 2016

3. The Value of Sustainable Urbanization, UN Habitat World Cities Report 2020, <https://unhabitat.org/World%20Cities%20Report%202020>

4. The Metropolitan Century, Understanding Urbanization and its Consequences, R. Ahrendt (dir), OECD, 2015 <https://www.oecd.org/fr/gov/the-metropolitan-century-9789264228733-en.htm>

5. Why pandemics, such as Covid-19, require a metropolitan response, Shlomo Angel and Ajejandro M. Blei, the Marron Institute of Urban Management of New York University, Oct. 2020

6. In Mexico, 8 out of 10 housing units are being produced outside any urban plan.

7. The 8th Global Conference on Health Promotion 'Health in All Policies' was held in Helsinki, Finland from 10-14 June 2013. The meeting builds upon a rich heritage of ideas, actions and evidence originally inspired by the Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care (1978) and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986). These identified intersectoral action and healthy public policy as central elements for the promotion of health, the achievement of health equity, and the realization of health as a human right. Subsequent WHO global health promotion conferences cemented key principles for health promotion action. These principles have been reinforced in the 2011 Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of

