

The city we want in the post-pandemic

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The Coronavirus pandemic hits hard cities, their inhabitants, the business sector and the urban economy by large. When quarantine and strict social distancing measures were adopted, including the standstill of public transportation, entire populations were compelled to retreat from the public domain leaving behind empty public spaces, moribund businesses and a city living in silence and fear for an invisible enemy. Those in the peripheries and slums of cities in the developing world were double penalized. This is dramatically evident in cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, Brazil's and Latin America's largest metropolises. The retreat of people from the beaches, streets, public spaces and cultural and entertainment places caused a dramatic impact on people operating in the informal sector and living in favelas and popular neighbourhoods and who depend on the economy of agglomeration to earn their daily income and produce the livelihood for their families. The agglomeration of people disappeared abruptly followed by the collapse of the supply chain of several small-scale businesses resulting into the bankruptcy of many shops, businesses and loss of jobs in a domino effect.

Besides that, people living in inadequate, poorly serviced and overcrowded housing in the favelas and slums were subject to a myriad of impacts when forced into confinement in their homes such as high risk of contamination, stress, impoverishment, violence in addition to the loss of their food security and basic income. The pandemic crisis in Rio de Janeiro shows unequivocally that it is the people who runs the economy of a city. Take them away, put them in quarantine and the urban economy collapses completely. One of the lessons from this crisis is that public policies ought to be people centred, strengthen its human and social capitals and produce interconnected social and economic sustainability outcomes within a spatial structure that forges prosperity. The compact and interconnected city environment is equally essential for the sustainability of businesses and people's livelihood.

The seclusion of people has led to empty streets where previously the car was the absolute king and air pollution prevailed. Satellite photos monitoring Green House Gas emissions in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Brasilia showed a remarkable decrease when comparing data from 2019 and 2020². This unveils the relevance of environmental sustainability and the carbon footprint of cities that is closely associated with prevailing patterns of urban mobility and the use of motorized and fossil fuel-based means of transportation.

Thus, the pursuit of urban sustainability in the post-pandemic era will bring together people-centered policies that enhance human and social capital, meeting basic needs and generating jobs and ample opportunities for income generation and poverty reduction. This will be combined with policies that center on environmental quality. This means quality of life in an urban environment comprised of clean air, accessibility to public and green spaces, clean technology employed to public transport and overall urban mobility and increasing non-motorized transportation.

The fact is that the making of the sustainable, resilient, safe and inclusive city as aimed by the Sustainable Development Goal 11 of the Agenda 2030 must bring together social, economic, environmental and spatial sustainability in a new generation of public policies under the leadership of city governments and city leaders who ought to have the autonomy, means, resources and legal tools to implement the city we want in the post-pandemic.

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² Correio Braziliense, Page 5, 13 April 2020