

A Prospective Approach for Cities in Transformation: Vision of the Leipzig Charter in the Light of the Covid-19 Experience

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1 ABSTRACT

Covid-19 acted as a trigger of an extreme situation that affected all aspects of life worldwide. Its effects on cities have been and are devastating. Covid-19 also revealed the lack of resolution of previous persistent urban problems and the reluctance of many governments to face up to short-term, politically unpopular solutions. Conversely, the pandemic has led to the emergence of trends whose effects could give rise to new sustainable urban dynamics in the medium and long term.

The paper explores how positive and negative changes of the built environment and its uses altered by the pandemic could be harnessed as lessons for sustainable post-Covid-19 urban development. It concentrates on identifying the main challenges of the Leipzig Charter's objectives - the "just, green and productive" city, pillars of sustainable urban development - to cope with the effects of worldwide calamities. The global and all-pervasive nature of the pandemic offers planners an opportunity to reflect on prospective scenarios that address truly resilient urban development.

Keywords: planning for the new normal, EU Leipzig charter, Covid-19 pandemic, scenarios, cities for the common good

2 PANDEMICS AND CITIES

2.1 Conceptual framework

The official recognition of sustainability as an objective at the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992 and of concern for climate change at the Tokyo Summit in 1997 were the milestones that directed universal action towards a collective objective, which was challenged in 2019 by the effects of Covid-19.

The uncertainty that characterises contemporary urban societies stems primarily from the combined effects of an unsustainable development model, a looming climate emergency and a pandemic that has revealed unresolved imbalances in cities. These three phenomena are interdependent and do not unfold in a vacuum. They are framed by the relentless exploitation of the planet, the political, administrative governance systems of nations, the current state of cities and their dynamics and also, critically, by human behaviour and underlying socio-cultural values that intertwine intrinsically in shaping unpredictability. The adaptation of contemporary societies to the effects of the pandemic depend to a large extent on collective as well as individual human behaviour which are shaping the direction of travel within an exceptionally turbulent context, giving rise to crucial conceptual questions.

Which directions of travel?

To-date and despite difficulties, the tri-partite economic, environmental and social nature of sustainability - although a rather elusive concept, possibly deliberately so - has been used for half a century to guide development policies around the world at global and local levels with varying results. The evolution of climate change and the urgency to act are well documented by scientific knowledge, observation and modelling. Now, the unexpected emergence of the pandemic deepens uncertainty about the planet and its inhabitants. All three phenomena are characterised by their universal nature. The urgency to act globally on the effects of the pandemic is testing the resilience of cities the effects of the health crisis on economic and political structures have taken priority at least for the time being over environmental and climate change initiatives, while redressing social inequalities inherited from the industrial era is again lagging behind.

Why is it so difficult to move in sustainable directions?

Corporate, collective and individual interests stand in the way of overcoming the obstacles that limit sustainable development, combating climate change and overcoming the effects of Covid-19. Governance has become more inclusive in many parts of the world, but the current global neo-liberal economic model remains dominant despite moves towards alternatives, such as the circular economy, the sharing or regenerative economy, collaborative consumption, co-working and consumer-production. At the local level,

Transition Towns, Citta-Slow and the 15-minutes-city have pioneered some of these principles but such initiatives are few and remain fragmented.

Can a pandemic process be a turning point towards new breakthroughs?

Living in society means being in contact with viruses, parasites and bacteria. This cohabitation has produced recurrent epidemic and pandemic events whose effects have marked the fate of many cultures and civilisations throughout history.

It is said that the Athenian Plague (431-426 B.C.) put an end to the Athenian hegemony in the Peloponnese. The Antonine plague (165-180) affected the Western Roman Empire providing conditions for its decline but also the expansion of Christianity. The Plague of Justinian (541-750) affected the Byzantine Empire encouraging the decline of Antiquity and the spread of Islam. The Black Death (1347-1353) marked the end of the Middle Ages, the advent of the Renaissance and the economic power of Europe. The recurrent global epidemics of cholera (between 1817 and 1973) led to the birth of international medical cooperation. The Spanish Influenza (1918-1919/ 1920) contributed to the end of World War I, the discoveries of modern medicine and the advancement of public health. The Health Organisation was created in 1923, replaced by the World Health Organisation in 1948. The 20th and 21st centuries recorded the greatest number of global events: Asian Influenza (1957- 1958), Hong Kong Flu (1968), AIDS/HIV (1981-) SARS (2002-2003), Zika (2007-), Influenza A (2009-2010), Ebola (2014-2016) and now COVID- 19 (2020-). The search for vaccines led to accelerated activities of scientists and pharmaceutical companies and fostered greater international cooperation. This short historic overview shows the emergence of transforming socio-cultural and political changes once such tragic episodes were overcome. What will be the effects of COVID-19 on today's societies in the medium and long term? What new opportunities will they mean for cities?

2.2 An opportunity for urban planners?

The effects of the pandemic on cities offer a new approach for urban planners in the 21st century. The relationship between the physical environment, human behaviour and the governance of European cities challenges the principles proposed by the New Leipzig Charter (European Commission, 2020).

The paper focuses on physical-material changes necessary to make cities resilient. It refers to the recommendations of the New Leipzig Charter following a simple methodology:

- to discuss the aspects of the ‘just’, ‘green’ and ‘productive’ city proposed in the New Leipzig Charter using these issues as an analytical filter to detect the positive and negative aspects that emerged during the pandemic as a basis of future urban scenarios;
- to conjecture scenarios for the medium term - prospective visions for 2030
- as a means to promote the “power of transformation of cities for the common good”, the key concept of the New Leipzig Charter.

3 THE COMMON GOOD AND THE NEW NORMAL IN EUROPEAN CITIES

3.1 The scope of the New Leipzig Charter

The New Leipzig Charter - the Power of Transformation of Cities for the Common Good - approved in November 2020 by the ministers responsible for urban affairs of the EU promotes integrated and sustainable urban development in European cities, calling on the transformative powers of cities for the common good. The Charter responds to the demands of global agreements endorsed in 2007 by the first Leipzig Charter. Among them are the 2030 UN Programme for Sustainable Development (2015) and its New Urban Agenda (2017); the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (2016); the EU Urban Agenda (2016), the EU New Green Deal of the European Commission (2019), the EU Circular Economy Action Plan (2020) and the EU Territorial Agenda 2030 (2020).

The role of the New Leipzig Charter is particularly prominent in the Territorial Agenda 2030. The occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic during the process of drafting the Territorial Agenda changed the outlook for Europe's future development, which recognises the importance of territorial cohesion in the recovery process, essential to increase the resilience of municipalities, regions and countries. The role of cities in this process is relevant and the New Leipzig Charter is the instrument that provides them with guidance on urban resilience in the face of global challenges, including pandemics. The principles of good

governance and quality urban design are fundamental to ensuring attractive, inclusive, durable and adaptable places.

The New Leipzig Charter provides a roadmap for action to achieve fair, green and productive cities, with a site-based, multi-level and participatory approach. It aims to promote resilient and robust cities and urban systems to respond to disruptive events and chronic stresses, supported by nimble governance for the common good, underpinned by predictive and preventive policies, plans and projects including diverse scenarios to anticipate challenges of all kinds. This requires resources, finance, leadership and governance at all levels of government including key actors, both governmental and non-governmental.

3.2 What is expected of cities according to the Leipzig Charter?

According to the Leipzig Charter, the transformative power of cities is achieved by integrating the social, ecological and economic aspects of sustainable development which translates into ‘just’, ‘green’ and ‘productive’ cities: three cities in one.

The just city

The stated aim of the ‘just city’ is to provide equal opportunities and environmental justice regardless of gender, socio-economic status, age and origin, equal access to education, social services, health care and culture, energy supply and adequate, accessible, safe and affordable housing.

The green city

The "green city" is expected to contribute considerably to combating global warming by promoting polycentric, compact and dense multipurpose settlement structures with an adequate access to green and recreational spaces and efficient, carbon-neutral, safe and multi-modal transport and mobility systems.

The productive city

The "productive city" fosters the knowledge-based society and supports a diversified, digital, innovative and competitive economy, with a skilled, service-oriented and low-carbon workforce. It provides an innovative environment with attractive locations with social, technical and logistical infrastructures.

3.3 What is expected of the "new normal" in the post Covid-19 era?

The current "new normal" will remain in place at least until science reverses the spread of the virus or manages to eradicate it. The responses to the new normal in cities have been two-fold. Governance tended to concentrate on changing human behaviour (“hands, face, space”: wash hands, keep social distance, stay at home) while physical adjustments took place at city level, in neighbourhoods and in homes, both spontaneously and planned. Most of them were temporary in response to Covid-19 government regulations, often in terms of emergency measures based on the latest scientific knowledge, aimed at curbing the spread of the pandemic, mainly to alleviate pressure on the health service, however with severe adverse impacts on the economy. What was hoped to be a short, sharp, shock has developed into a far longer term issue and is predicted to stay on in mutating form, akin to other virus diseases.

What aspects of the old normal will be permanent? What aspects of the Covid-19 situation will remain? What will the world be like after Covid-19? How will urban societies evolve? The proposed scenarios will address these questions.

3.4 How do “new normal” changes affect the sustainability principles?

The “New Urban Agenda” adopted at UN Habitat III in Quito in 2016 specifies the goals of sustainable development, inclusive urban economies and environmental protection for signatory governments to transpose into policies. Despite widespread consensus to reach such goals, there is hesitancy in implementing these measures. How can these goals be achieved if the general public lacks confidence in the responsiveness of their governments in charge of driving these changes forward and in the businesses which should spearhead a circular-plus economy leading to a more sustainable way of life of today’s societies? The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the fragility of the dominant economic model and the lack of resilience both at global and local levels. It also shows that cities are ill prepared for future pandemics, potential energy crises, technological blackout and the biodiversity erosion.

4 IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE THREE LEIPZIG CHARTER PILLARS

4.1 New effects or reinforcement of existing trends?

Covid-19 has added new trends to the “three types of cities in one” proposed in the New Leipzig Charter but, most importantly, brought to the fore existing inequalities and contradictions. The dominant economic model in Europe may provide some explanations: enhanced social divergence; government hesitancy towards social welfare; unequal access to healthcare and education; gender and ethnic inequity; and lack of genuine channels of participation for people to express their demands and achieve satisfaction. New effects are still in the making during the unpredictable evolution of the pandemic.

4.2 Just cities

Socio-cultural inequalities were a serious issue for cities before the pandemic but Covid-19 has made them more apparent and demands for a fairer society have become more vocal. Covid-19 has exacerbated political instability and accelerated uncertainty, reaching unprecedented levels of turbulence, growing populist nationalism and heightened fragility of liberal democracies.

In European neo-liberal market economies many parts of society are experiencing inadequate social wellbeing and welfare. Existing social-spatial polarisation, continuous shortage of affordable housing, weakness of the public health system, lack of adequate channels of participation to express their demand, and precarious employment or joblessness have increased more among the most deprived in society. So has domestic violence in vulnerable households. Women are carrying the brunt of the pandemic effects; burdened with even more unpaid work, child care and home education, they are also most at risk of job loss.

The young are likely to flout pandemic restrictions due to frustration and have the highest incidence of mental illness, while anti-social ideas of individual freedom are flourishing. Mental illness is also detected in older people, linked to loneliness, a structural problem in mature societies. Even in highly cosmopolitan cities, discrimination against minorities prevails, expressed in unequal service provision, poorer health conditions and lower life expectancy.

Regarding the justice system, the pandemic demonstrated the ineffectiveness of existing legislation to deal with high-risk situations, demonstrated by the need to adopt ad-hoc laws and the resistance to passing them in the parliamentary system.

4.3 Green cities

Covid-19 shifted awareness and concern for the environment and climate change towards maintaining public health. The shutdown of all activities and government instructions not to use public transport and travel by private car reduced air pollution to low levels during the early stage of the pandemic. Regrettably, this situation changed drastically during the de-escalation, reaching previous pollution levels across Europe. The need to maintain social distance has highlighted the difficulty for cities to accommodate travel by public transport and more walking and cycling were restricted by lack of safe space on streets and pavements.

The inherent inertia of the current often densely built up areas with sealed surfaces hampers the transformation of cities into a balanced green-blue-grey environment. The housing stock in cities is generally energy inefficient, with retrofitting measures scarce and poorly financed or subsidised. The lack of policies that resolve the dilemma of benefiting the owner-investor or the tenant is an issue that hampers energy adequacy of buildings. Public realm for social activities has proven scarce during the pandemic. High urban densities without adequate green space pose an insurmountable challenge, as transforming urban land for buildings into open space without real estate profitability contradicts the current economic system.

4.4 Productive cities

Hyper-globalisation underway before the pandemic may be countered by the need of countries to resort to local production of essential goods and services, or at least to reduce extreme dependency on global trade. After exceptional worldwide economic decline brought about by measures against Covid-19, economic recovery may take decades and progress only resume in a generation's time. Meanwhile, national debts may rise due to increasing interest rates and inflation, leading to austerity policies and cuts in public spending, even as welfare (especially health and infrastructure) may have to be strengthened to cope with future pandemics, notwithstanding the need to attenuate growing social-spatial inequalities to prevent social unrest.

Covid-19 has also brought to the fore latent changes in the world of work which may persist in post-Covid-19 organisation of business and working arrangements. Covid-19 accelerated the existing trend towards digitalisation: teleworking, robotics, artificial intelligence, automated services, telematics. This was already affecting the labour market and is likely to create new structural unemployment or underemployment in the longer term. The existing digital, spatial and social divide, the danger of excessive surveillance and risks to privacy protection have become more acute under the pandemic. The shift to homeworking is disadvantaging specific groups, and especially women who have to combine work with domestic activities and lower wages, as well as families with children affected by lack of computer equipment and technical skills, cost of broadband and inadequate space to work and study.

5 EMERGING CONTRADICTIONS

5.1 Covid-19 contradictions

Due to the urgency to act, the pandemic brought to the fore critical contradictions about the relation between competing interests. First among them is the contradiction about the relation between the economy and public health and how their mutual recoveries are seen either as oppositional or interdependent. While corporate interests and neo-liberal politics are contrasting economic recovery with overcoming the coronavirus and attributing priority to the economy over public health, science puts the right to material wellbeing on a par with the right to health. Scientists and environmental lobbyists consider humans as an inherent part of the global ecological system, in need of coping with existing realities, shaped by human behaviour and framed by continuous trade-offs. In their view the pandemic and the economy require integrated and hopefully synergetic solutions.

The pandemic has highlighted the complexity of human behaviour which, far from assuming a unitary response based on equality and solidarity, relies on emotions that contribute to the disruption of consensus. In the name of freedom, large segments of the population put individual rights before collective norms enacted to safeguard the common good by imposing spatial and functional lockdowns. Denial and anti-social behaviour, espoused by various groups including political parties, is reaching disturbing levels of intolerance.

The pandemic temporarily limited the fight against adverse climate change as it was unavoidable to take measures to address the health crisis, such as the production of plastics and non-reusable materials to avoid contagion. The new generation of waste associated with pandemic needs increased domestic energy demand, and the gradual return to global mobility of goods and people are challenging the GHG reduction targets.

Moreover, political responses to balance the demands made by economic and social sectors urging a return to the "old normal" have led to diverse types of measures, some of which difficult to reconcile with formal rule of law. The Covid-19 crisis has served as an excuse for many governments, at any level, to strengthen their power, potentially curtailing citizens' rights, the actions of domestic political oppositions and even intraregional or international cooperation. Most importantly, citizens do not trust governments.

5.2 “Three cities in one” contradictions

Similar contradictions can be identified between the three types of cities proposed in the Leipzig Charter, analysed in isolation instead of “in one”. For example, economic growth philosophy (underlying the productive city) contradicts ecological capacity-bound resource consumption (defining the green city), while unfettered competition (driving the productive city) contradicts the collective common and mutual support of those most in need (motivating the just city). For the time being, the Covid-19 crisis has displaced the three pillars of sustainability expressed as productive, green and just cities. However, it provides the opportunity to reshape them to assist interdependent public health and economic recovery and, beyond that, to act upon the intrinsic links to climate urgency and adopt a broad understanding of social-spatial justice needed to underpin a genuinely sustainable city.

Not only are the “three types of cities in one” always treated separately without considering the overall structure of which the three pillars are an integral part, but the Leipzig Charter's vision does not take account of the political-administrative system and its pivotal role in achieving the common good of the sustainable city. Similarly, the Covid-19 effects on the three productive, green and just cities are analysed separately, without making the necessary connections between them which would uncover the contradictions inherent in

this tri-sectoral understanding of the ‘sustainable city’. Some of their implied objectives may well be incompatible and the dichotomy between economic and public health recovery, a key debate of the political arena, is shining some light on this.

5.3 The missing fourth pillar: politics

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates the intersection between politics, economics, public health, environmental and social considerations. Although experts had warned of this potential pandemic, no government was adequately prepared to address this health threat. Investing time, money and political capital to tackle an abstract possibility is not part of the political agenda, as the focus on the next election reduces interest in funding policies with benefits beyond their term of office.

Responses to the crisis have varied across countries, depending on the interplay of relationships between different local interest groups, whether they are producers (industries, banks, corporations, trade unions) or consumers. Whatever the weight of these groups, the battle between interests of different nature is waged in the political arena which, in turn, decides the votes in elections in the short term and the survival of political parties in the long term. The policies adopted by governments to deal with the effects of COVID-19 have been strongly influenced by domestic pressures from the electorate, as well as by the action of international institutions (World Health Organisation, EU, OECD) in charge of coordinating a cooperative global response to the crisis.

5.4 A new model of thinking

A new model of thinking becomes necessary. It has to incorporate the political dimension of urban development as overarching all sectoral objectives and with the democratic mandate to establish a sustainable balance between all divisive interests. Such a model should incorporate the many innovative approaches to a more sustainable future promoted by enlightened business, ecological lobbies and social movements, as well as the political goals of achieving zero GHG emissions by 2050, a regenerative economy and social-spatial inclusion.

Once the pandemic is under control albeit not necessarily eliminated the other urgencies and how they have to be dealt with by urban development and change will need to be brought into mainstream policy and action again. The scenarios are imagining alternatives which may be able to respond to the new challenges brought about by the pandemic, the need for economic recovery and also for a more equitable society. At best society could resort to synergetic actions to achieve a better post-Covid ‘new normal’; at worst adversarial human behaviour could undermine balanced economic, environmental and social recovery from Covid-19.

6 TOWARDS A DESIRABLE TRANSITION: TENTATIVE AND PROSPECTIVE MEASURES FOR POST-COVID CITIES

6.1 Opportunity for more people-led city powers?

Unprepared for Covid-19 cities responded with haphazard measures and governments imposed arbitrary restrictions on citizens, while people had to adjust to their externally determined situations with ad hoc reactions. Many of these spontaneous and often creative actions may well show the way to more permanent adjustments, although others may vanish as soon as the situation resorts to some normality.

While globalisation is trying to claim back its supremacy, nations are re-affirming greater sovereignty and mega-regions are demanding more devolution. Cities are also insisting on more autonomy and seize this unique opportunity of the pandemic to experiment with alternative productive, green and just models, aiming at smaller ecological footprints and more equitable deployment of human resources.

6.2 Towards a diversified economy in an innovative business environment

Despite global efforts towards sustainable development, the economy is bound to take priority in recovery and in shaping the post Covid future. For that reason, it may be necessary for a “new productive city” and its people to push for fundamental changes by resorting to alternative economic models, more conducive to generating sustainable development in an innovative business environment. Many such experiments have been tried already. There exists an extensive literature on alternative economic initiatives, too extensive to quote individually but succinctly referred to in the bibliography.

Such an alternative economic transition advocates an economy with a purpose, shifting from the unlimited growth ideology to an economy in which organisations identify their purpose and the impacts they want to generate in society aligned on the Agenda 2030 global goals. Alternative proposals have been designed for different levels and sectors: e.g. an economy for the common good; the “B Corps movement”, fair trade, ‘banking with values’ or ‘impact investments’; combined producer, consumer and user associations.

New alternative, more people-centred metrics have been developed to measure the success of the global economy and the performance of companies. Examples are OECD Better Life Index, UN Human Development Index, the New Economics Foundation Happy Planet Index or the Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Index for national economies, or the common good balance sheet or triple bottom line for business. In Europe, these measures intend to promote the JEDI concept - Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion principles - and pledges to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050.

These changes are supported by the Circular Economy principle, based on the concept of a "regenerative economy" that respects nature in order to mitigate the negative effects of climate change and the destruction of ecosystems. It is about achieving a resilient economy capable of achieving self-sufficiency at the local level with locally generated productive resources to face pandemic, energy or food crises. The new economy is also based on changes in consumer attitudes. “Consume less and better” has become a key concept, whereby consumers can become producers or participate in collaborative consumption. Likewise, the Circular Economy blurs the boundaries between production and consumption into co-production, giving rise to collaborative consumption or “prosumption” networks, compounded by change of behaviour to reduce consumption and ecological footprint altogether and reinventing the worth of work. Advances in technology enable this cultural and lifestyle change. These economic considerations and many more are included in the targets of the European Green Deal to transform the EU’s economy into a sustainable future.

6.3 New planning and design principles to achieve a greener urban realm

The transition to the “new productive city” impacts also on the other two Leipzig pillars – the “green city” and the “just city” - which aim at zero pollution; preservation and restoration of ecosystems and biodiversity; fair, healthy and environmentally sound food production and consumption systems; sustainable and smart mobility, and ‘leave no-one behind’. The financing of these objectives will support specific EU targets: maintaining the 2030 and 2050 climate goals; use of clean, affordable and secure energy; boosting the circular economy in industry; and encouraging construction and renovation using energy and resources in an efficient way.

The principles of sustainability and the climate change urgency had already prepared the ground for change to a more sustainable future and greener cities before the pandemic. Cities have already implemented many ‘green’ measures, physical, fiscal and behavioural. e.g. building insulation and retrofitting; congestion charging to curb motor traffic air pollution and congestion; shift from car use to public transport, cycling and walking and to electric vehicles and machines; waste recycling and reduction; reuse and repair of materials and products instead of discarding them; greening cities with trees, green walls and roofs; de-sealing surfaces; urban agriculture and more open space; and overall planning for greater resilience of buildings, neighbourhoods and cities. These measures to revert excess adverse climate change into ecological equilibrium and self-recovery will now have to be combined with measures to make cities more pandemic-resilient in the future as pandemic resilience is guided by the same ecological and sustainability principles.

Post-pandemic recovery is providing an opportunity to rethink sustainability criteria for cities comprehensively. This means taking into account the interdependence between productive, green and just city – the need to incorporate human health wellness, economic welfare and social wellbeing. Most important though is to obtain government support to realise change toward city sustainability. This also requires a step beyond a circular ‘going-round’ economy towards a sustainable ‘spiralling-up economy based on primary resource sufficiency. Supported by political will these are achievable goals. An example is how the response to Covid-19 agreed in 2019 at EU and city level has strengthened the European New Green Deal.

6.4 From abstract promises to equal rights

The pandemic shed a new light on social relations, equal opportunities and environmental, spatial and social justice and main points to latent social change towards a just city. Public discourse moved identity politics

from social class to women, demographics, ethnic minorities, and gender. All these different identifications are influencing the notion of the just city. Pandemic lockdowns created new socio-economic divides and inequalities, affected by and affecting collective as well as individual human behaviour, albeit without a clear notion of how lasting these changes may be. An example is the enormous decline of mobility and its unequal effects. Staying at home meant less social contact, less travel for work or leisure by car, train or plane, but also a shift to virtual reality. The existing digital divide is affecting personal as well as professional communication and it remains an open question whether the necessary infrastructure to provide more equal access to digital communication, seen by many as a basic need akin to energy and water, will be forthcoming during or after Covid-19.

Overcoming the pandemic successfully means to compound constructive behavioural change towards it while coping simultaneously with climate change urgency and resource sufficiency. Most importantly, strong political will is required to curb the persistent dominance of the economy over ecology, sustainability and social-spatial justice. It also requires power of persuasion to gain cooperation from collectivities as well as individuals to change their habits. Conversely, communities and individuals can make an invaluable contribution to post-pandemic sustainable development. This would require resorting to genuine public participation, shifting from its lip-service position in planning to public engagement with real teeth, powers and responsibilities, including a share of material rewards resulting from improvements currently reserved to the development industry and the public sector alone. Citizens' voluntary actions should no longer be considered as free labour and information, but be rewarded according to its true economic as well as social and environmental value. This would mean enshrining effective powers, rightful roles and material awards for citizens into the development process of an integrated productive, green and just city.

7 PROSPECTIVE SCENARIOS FOR POST-COVID CITIES

7.1 Scenarios and their context

For 'Futuribles' (Hugues de Jouvenel) "the future is the domain of freedom, power and will", thus the usefulness of building 'prospective scenarios', of structuring reflections on the future in a situation of uncertainty. 'Foresight' explores possible scenarios to define desirable and doable futures. Scenarios can be beneficial during crises like the present pandemic and aim to provide long term assistance in terms of anticipation and action to the elaboration of public policies. For the OECD 'Foresight' can support government policy-making with better anticipation, policy innovation and future-proofing (OECD, n.d.).

Scenarios have to start from the here and now, no matter how much they take account of the past. This also applies to the post-Covid future, linked to a rapidly evolving and hard to grasp present, and it is important to detect, understand and highlight its latent trends. At the time of writing consensus on the 'is-state' includes the possibility of Covid-19 to persist for a long time in its current or mutated form which means that lifestyles need to adjust to this 'new normal'. This includes long term policies of prevention and preparation for future pandemics beyond the scope of this paper. Another latent trend is that governments worldwide aim to realise economic recovery and to resolve practical issues emerging from over a year of cohabitation with Covid-19 accordingly. Technological innovations such as artificial intelligence and robotics will essentially influence businesses and economic institutions rather than social responsibility, while national interests as well as ideological standpoints will continue to motivate the political apparatus.

7.2 UN scenarios for post-Covid cities

In "Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future" (UN, 2021) the United Nations propose four issues for analysis and action: "rethink the form and function of the city"; "address systemic poverty and inequality in cities"; "rebuild a 'new normal' urban economy"; and "clarify urban legislation and governance arrangements".

According to the UN, different uses of buildings and outdoor spaces during the pandemic already point toward changes in urban morphologies, and provide an indication of how they could be made more resilient to recurrent pandemics. To this end, inclusive spatial planning should incorporate specific interventions designed to address inequalities in cities and mitigate their impact on poor and vulnerable groups. Most important for these changes is a more integrated and cooperative multi-level governance. With regard to the urban economy, tackling the crisis involves seeking innovative financing mechanisms for services and

infrastructure while ensuring social protection programmes to encourage sustainable production and consumption patterns. It includes support for renewable energy transition, green building methods, land use regulation and investment in digital technologies to improve logistics and supply chains, as well as support for smaller enterprises, informal workers and risky sectors.

Such measures, together with inclusive local development would also contribute to enhancing social relationships, combating poverty and inequality in cities and improving living conditions for all. At a broader and necessarily longer term scale mismatch between populations, inequalities in the built fabric and occupancy rates which accelerated virus transmission would need to lead to restructuring city forms and functions. In conjunction it postulates nimble and flexible urban governance, as well as leadership acting transparently, building trust and fostering community engagement at all levels to obtain public support in crisis situations, get short term measures accepted and produce sustainable long term solutions.

7.3 Scenarios for a new understanding of sustainable cities

The scenarios presented here are visualised in terms of their overarching goals: ‘business as usual’, ‘genuinely-sustainable’, ‘build-back-better’, ‘pragmatic-realistic’. They rest on the dialectic between people’s right to the city and the tasks of political-administrative governance to balance economic, environmental and social development equitably. However, any post-Covid future remains constrained by the staying power of both human behaviour and political interests. This pragmatic selection of four scenarios is based on people’s preoccupations about their future during the pandemic on the one hand and the political roadmaps on the other hand, both set against an ideal-state akin to that depicted by the UN.

Nevertheless, the scenarios focus on a ‘new normal’ framed by past habits, responses provoked by Covid-19 disruptions, political interventions at all levels, together with events outside anyone’s control. Combined with creative initiatives in everyday life all these aspects are contributing to shaping the changes towards a post-Covid reality. After initial optimism and activism, the mood has been hardening with Covid fatigue and the ‘new normal’ could well be less palatable than the old one, expressed in the ‘business as usual’ scenario. Although a return to the ‘old normal’ is not considered desirable it is acknowledged as a very realistic option and therefore the “materialistic scenario” follows current trends and projects them into the short and medium term.

Conversely, the other scenarios are imagining a range of possible sustainable futures based on promising changes which took place during the pandemic and starting points detected for local action and related governance reform and they also propose examples of practical planning and urban design solutions. The sustainable scenario projects the desired future for a better world; the optimistic scenario proposes the lines to follow under new rules of the game; and the expert foresight proposes feasible proposals.

7.4 Back to the pre-Covid scenario: a return to the ‘normal’ past?

This urban scenario overcomes the limitations of the "new normal" and returns to the "normal" trends of the previous context. Even if it adopts certain changes in economic, social and environmental attitudes, its effects will remain limited as long as the deep structures of society remain intact. Despite serious warnings about climate change, systematic destruction of the environment, increasing social polarisation and political imbalances, there will be no substantial changes that will help the model to adapt and develop.

Its economic context is a very flexible capitalist system which will recover rapidly, organising new models of production, especially those related to the collection, management and commercialisation of data (surveillance capitalism). Global corporations, the concentration of power and decision-making and the accumulation of large fortunes will become more widespread. Even if companies are adopting criteria of social responsibility and respect for the environment ("green capitalism", "green and digital transformation"), the economy would take time to decarbonise, create jobs and reduce poverty. Demand for goods and services and for energy and materials will continue to rise. The loss of trade union power, the disappearance of regulatory agencies and the removal of control over international movements of capital, fuelled by digital technology, will increase the polarisation between rich and poor and deepen inequality, precariousness, unemployment and urban poverty.

In urban societies people's daily behaviour will return to previous lifestyles, albeit embracing the changes brought about by digitisation during the pandemic of work, shopping, education and leisure. Teleworking will lead to sedentary lifestyles and isolation, with physical and mental consequences for some segments of

the population, accentuating the symptom of burnout generated by the freely assumed obligation to maximise personal productivity. Collective awareness will disappear in favour of "Covid-NIMBYism": let others take precautions. The economic downturn will impose harsh conditions: precariousness of employment, increase in temporary work (the gig economy), need to adapt to professional transitions and polarisation of income related to types of activities.

Regarding city form and function the rise of telework, tele-education, tele-health and techno-finance are likely to stimulate migration from metropolitan regions to medium-sized cities, towns and suburbs which could increase their economy, cultural life and diversity if people take root. The search for safe urban spaces will promote segregation between traditional neighbourhoods and self-sufficient neighbourhoods with locally generated energy and self-sustaining agriculture, small-scale industries, proximity care services, coworking spaces and telework-friendly housing. Housing will become an even more essential commodity, increasing its value in the housing market. The lack of social housing in favour of public rental policies will deepen social inequality.

In terms of governance the role of the political-administrative apparatus will have to focus on balancing emerging social, economic and environmental tensions. The positioning of the sectoral groups affected and the entrenchment of the prevailing ideological parameters on the political left and right will generate circumstances that are difficult to control: loss of confidence in governments and political parties, deterioration of democracies, strengthening of extremist movements, consolidation of populism and independence movements and the reduction of the welfare state will generate massive protests.

7.5 Genuinely Sustainable Scenario: a universal paradigm?

Such an 'ideal-state' future is improbable but could be an inspiration for a desirable and possibly necessary future. It combines the three e's of sustainability: economy, environment and equity, together with taming and preventing pandemics. It aims at universal human material wellbeing, ecological survival of the planet and inclusive social-spatial justice. What underpins this blue-sky-thinking is that these dimensions are totally interdependent for a sustainable future. Efforts to reduce green-house-gas emissions had been displaced by fighting Covid-19 but climate change urgency remained in the forefront of collective consciousness, especially of younger generations. Conversely, the pandemic has exacerbated social divides and spatial segregation, most of all in deprived areas, often with disadvantaged populations and ethnic minorities, in greatest need of redressing. It means that economic recovery has to be accompanied by more integrated and cooperative governance, redistribution of resources, access to services for all and empowered citizenry. This applies to all levels from neighbourhoods to the global sphere, thus requires action and consensus among political opponents and across continents.

Unfortunately, even at the EU level on which this paper is focusing, agreement on how to operationalise the New Green Deal remains under debate, although there seems to be convergence on the climate change targets. However that leaves divergent views on economic recovery, with those opting for austerity and self-reliance, while others are seeking more inclusive solutions with fairer tax burden sharing and solidarity across generations and territories regarding employment and welfare support. Only thus can social and spatial polarisation be redressed comprehensively, based on regenerative economy and a sustainable ecological footprint: in this scenario the foundation of 'build back better'.

Such an "ideal" future also promoted by the Leipzig Charter is improbable but inspiring as it proposes to coordinate interdependent responses that are difficult to connect: sustainable economic recovery; redressing of growing social and spatial polarisation, including the digital divide; action on the environment, especially climate change; and anticipation and prevention of pandemics and other catastrophic events. Nevertheless, over the last three decades many initiatives have been taken at city level to achieve a greener economy and a more equitable future achieved by more integrated and cooperative urban governance. Under the constraints of the pandemic, designers focused on compact, mixed-use neighbourhoods which make it possible to satisfy basic needs within walking distance, with a road network that supports active mobility and more accessible and equitable green spaces as a move towards the morphologically sustainable city. The pandemic led to more neighbourhood living and non-motorised travel, although reduced use of public transport remains unrealistic for cities dependent on mass transit. In some cities participatory platforms for decision-making based on the views of residents, entrepreneurs and community organisations were promoted and were effective in meeting the needs of residents during mandatory lockdowns.

To what extent political decision makers will seek post pandemic synergy between alleviating and/or preventing future pandemics, coping with climate change urgency, redressing the growing social and spatial inequalities in cities and dealing with the need for governance reform remains unknown, although such an integrated approach may be the only viable strategy for the long term survival of the planet and humankind.

7.6 “Build-Back-Better” Scenario: towards a new social contract?

Aiming at a return to the ‘old normal’ seems unrealistic and undesirable. However, a ‘new normal’ - a post-Covid or with-Covid future may either be better, albeit most likely only in parts, or worse, with increasing polarisation within and between cities and countries as well as globally; only paying lip service to targets for climate change with little or no action, everyone waiting for others to take the lead in accepting environmental constraints and reducing consumption; and leading to a neo-liberal economy with even fewer regulations and welfare provision.

Politically “Build-back-better” is understood as a ‘new normal’ after the pandemic whose economic recovery has to include a plan to repay unprecedented national debts, reinstate jobs and restore economic sectors particularly damaged by past lockdowns. So far, there is little sign of fresh, let alone structural or innovative government rethinking towards a more equitable future. Speed of economic recovery considered essential for a better livelihood is of the essence, to which all other needs - better lives, health and social care are subordinated. During Covid, spontaneous, shared and sometimes altruistic initiatives have given way to sectarian claims competing for dwindling public resources and financial support, thus short-termism towards “build-back-better” may lead to harsher, skewed hardship and conflicts. In some countries, government emergency laws claiming to pursue unity gave rise to exceptional powers and centralisation which, if not reversed, may well provoke claims for more devolution of decision-making and resources, and thus to fragmented and uneven economic and social recovery.

The pandemic has highlighted the mismatch between population size, high densities, overcrowding, virus transmission and mortality rates globally, although cities are better equipped to absorb the effects of calamities. Spatial inequalities manifest themselves in physical segregation as well as uneven distribution and access to basic services and infrastructure, affecting deprived urban areas most, but also low density remote suburbs. Change of use of spaces in cities due to the pandemic and lockdowns is pointing towards more permanent urban transformations. For example, the design of urban spaces will be relevant in accommodating more and safe outdoor activities, improving hygiene measures, converting buildings to absorb home-working and designing buildings for more flexible use. It will be necessary to rethink planning regulations and building codes to manage safe, affordable, reliable and efficient public services, including reducing the digital divide in disadvantaged communities. It will require neighbourhood improvement strategies and the promotion of new lifestyles, new treatments of public space and the incorporation of mixed uses with co-working spaces to energise neighbourhoods. Quality of recovery should be led by pro-active local governments with public participation in inclusive planning and decision-making about the transformation of people’s neighbourhoods into viable local economies satisfying both residents and businesses and a green and healthy environment. Transparency and trust building will be of the essence to obtain public support and facilitate compliance. Overall, as a desirable future “build back better” needs to redress spatial-social segregation and re-direct neo-liberal economics to ensure greater welfare.

7.7 Pragmatic-Realistic Scenario, towards a post-Covid form of capitalism?

For this scenario it is particularly important to have a clear understanding of the “is-state”. The main transformations emerging from over a year under the influence of Covid-19 appear in change of working habits, shopping, education and mobility. Already homes and offices are being restructured to accommodate pandemic conditions. More homeworking is already leading to more diversified office activities and affecting mobility with lower use of public transport, more active movement, fewer trips made overall replaced by digital communication, as well as less travel and especially long distance journeys for leisure, business, and even possibly tourism. Clearly public transport is indispensable for the functioning of cities, and while cycling, walking and other personalised small scale mobilities like scooters and curbing especially single occupancy car journeys are positive contributions to curbing GHG emissions, the whole road network will have to be reimagined for a more sustainable modal balance which may also be affected by longer term need for social distancing. The issue of density of use as well as of buildings will need revisiting and

allowances made for more open and green spaces, public and private in cities, including spaces for growing food and local recreation. The accelerated shift to online shopping is affecting retail premises. All these changes are having adverse impacts on hospitality, culture and leisure, most acutely in centres of large cities which usually concentrate a broad range of urban functions. The current empty premises due to fewer commuters and tourists, at least in the short term, have left behind blind ground floors and less footfall and require innovative solutions for the recovery of city centres.

These and many other urban design considerations are serious challenges for planners, designers and the property industry, but they present opportunities for creative newcomers with creative ideas about post-Covid urban life. Small scale, alternative, experimental, doable and already realised regeneration projects, recycling and in-fill buildings can add up and make a valuable contribution to urban sustainability. However, they are neither comprehensive nor 'universal' and cannot replace the current strategic political objectives of the current neo-liberal economic capitalistic system.

The 'pragmatic-realistic' scenario which is geared towards cities concentrates on initiatives likely to become the focus of post-pandemic reality.

8 CONCLUSION

This paper imagines four scenarios for cities in the near future based on the social, economic, environmental and political processes generated during the pandemic. The content of these scenarios rests on a two-prong basis: proposals for actions at European (Leipzig Charter) and international (UN New Urban Agenda) levels providing the methodological framework; and the urban situation facing the health crisis, revealing the lack of resilience of cities to cope with unexpected calamities.

The paper outlines four different visions of the path that cities could take in the near future:

- one that continues past trends
- one that projects a desired future for a better world
- one that proposes to change the rules of the game
- one that seeks feasible proposals within the current state of affairs.

It is recognised that the results of all four paths will always be partial. They may not even be encouraging, considering the weight of the legacy of existing cities and, in particular, their material constraints and political-administrative structures. As the pandemic left the basic material structure of cities intact there is no urgency of reconstruction, except for social coexistence.

The future will also be shaped by ongoing social, economic and environmental processes taking place in cities. In part they depend on a network of global relations framed by international treaties like the UN sustainability goals and the Leipzig Charter objectives aimed to steer their implementation, albeit with uneven and unpredictable results in practice. Conversely, Covid-19 has also unleashed fragmentation of the globalising world and retrenchment on local concerns which may make cities looking more inward. Added to these contradictory trends is uncertainty of both collective and individual human behaviour and how they will influence the realisation of change.

Nevertheless, several issues have been emerging during the pandemic which are likely to persist or be desirable to retain after recovery:

- value of science in its mission to save humanity
- increase in the symptom of burnout, driven by the need to increase performance by a model of exploitation without legitimacy
- need to change lifestyles which proved their limitations during confinement.

Covid-19 is not the first and will not be the last pandemic, but it is hoped that its consequences will serve as a lever for change to improve living conditions in cities.

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