

PRESENTATION AT THE URBAN THINKERS CAMPUS - MEGACITIES' POST-COVID PLANNING

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Cities are engines of economic activities. They are alive and abuzz with energy. Many people want to come and live in the city because city life promises opportunities that do not exist in rural communities. There have been huge resources dedicated to the growth and development of cities. These relate to transportation and housing as critical integrators – health and education towards the productive capacity of cities and their citizens.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life as we know it in cities. It has changed the cities in unprecedented ways that have never been seen since the last few decades. The economy has become fragile like it was in the 1930s, during the depression and recession. City spaces are empty.

The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest public health and economic emergency facing humanity in cities in peacetime history since the Spanish influenza of 1918 which infected 500 million people and killed around 50 and 100 million people.

According to Roubini, the COVID-19 pandemic found the economy already moving into “a perfect storm of financial, political, socioeconomic, and environmental risks, all of which are now growing even more.”

The economy has as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 returned to what Paul Krugman described eloquently in his book: *“The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008,”* when he argued that governments did not draw lessons from the 1930s, the early 1990s, Asian and the Latin America crisis, in dealing with the 2008 economic-financial crisis.

Accordingly, the pandemic is revealing the weakest links and blind spots of health, social, and economic systems within countries, more evident in cities and thereby shining a spotlight on poverty and inequality.

From a theoretical perspective, Covid-19 challenges central place theory, and all normal truths that go with it such as centralisation, densification, mass transit etc. this questions decades of planning theory. It amplifies the urgency for addressing unstructured and overcrowded densification in informal settlements while at the same

time recognising the role played by such settlements. How do governments and individuals balance live vs. livelihoods?

Covid-19 pandemic also challenges the property sector a great deal. It questions whether we still need traditional office spaces, school buildings, gymnasiums, arenas, and indoor restaurants. As things stand, companies are scaling down on office space, homes have become places of work and schooling. During the easing of lockdown, Cafes in Paris took over the streets highlighting that business was moving outdoors. What does this mean for the property sector? For example, in Toronto people participated in an outdoor studio where each participant was given a protective bubble to keep them safe from COVID-19. What happens to the facilities such as gyms, are we doing away with enclosed gyms and moving to outdoor gyms?

The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought into sharp focus income and wealth inequality that exists in cities. It has resulted in income disruption and food security, especially for vulnerable households, those who live in homelessness and grossly inadequate housing, often overcrowded, and suffer from multiple social and health impediments.

Cities as economic engines are faced with a huge task of balancing economic growth and protecting the lives of citizens. Therefore, cities need to work with national governments at a more granular level in developing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while also focusing their efforts on growing their economies. This is important since cities are the most hard-hit by COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses will have to address the effects of the economy and livelihoods of citizens given existing poor health conditions faced by its citizens.

Cities need to play a bigger role in the health of its citizens. This includes investing in recreational spaces to promote healthy lifestyles, among others. This is because the lack of sustainable interventions will be felt by poorer communities who are at the forefront of bearing the brunt of the ghastly health and socio-economic consequences as COVID-19 spreads. This is the case in many cities, because, despite policy interventions, COVID-19 has exposed the lack of coherent policy responses to urbanization and inequality.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for cities to identify plans and strategies that will result in new cities, such cities should be characterized by inclusion, social justice and must be based on the principles and notions of equality, such that no one is left behind, more especially in the provision of healthcare. As mentioned the pandemic has brought to the surface glaring inadequacies in service delivery provision, however, it has also provided some valuable lessons in governance and integrated planning that could be sustained to realise long term plans such as the National Health Insurance (NHI).

Therefore, cities post-lockdown if they are to be considered inclusive, in the first instance they must value all people and respond to their needs equally. Secondly, residents-including the most marginalized of poor workers must have a representative voice in governance, planning, and budgeting processes of cities beyond the IDP processes. Thirdly citizens in these cities should have access to sustainable livelihoods, housing and serviced stands and affordable basic services such as

water/sanitation and electricity supply. Fourthly, cities need to invest in technological capabilities to build sustainable and resilient cities. Lastly, cities must invest in environmental protection strategies, which will include intensifying cleaning of cities and towns and the mitigation of gas emissions and climate change.

This is the new normal!

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