Afterword

A GLOBAL URBAN FUTURE

With the rising number of urban dwellers in the world, in absolute numbers and in their proportion to the overall population, the world is already an urban world. How can the future of this world be envisaged and in what directions is it likely to travel? How can its problems best be addressed?

The future of the urban world is likely to be an increasingly integrated one. Technologies of transport, information and communication have created a new global division of labour, linking the parts of the world together in new ways, making them both stronger and more vulnerable. This has been a growing trend for centuries and is likely to accelerate further. The notions of North and South, East and west, the first, second and third worlds, developed and developing worlds are all melting into the reality of a single interdependent, though uneven, world. Its tensions are also increasingly more interdependent and interpenetrating, such as migration, war, and terrorism. While in the short term it has shown an increase in the number of these global tensions, it needs to find ways of managing this interdependency for the benefit of all humanity.

This world, however, has so far been an increasingly uneven one. The ambitions of the previous generations in eradicating poverty and creating a more equal world have given way to accepting inequality as a fact of life. Urbanisation is a manifestation and a generator of this inequality, both across the territory and inside the city. Large cities grow while rural areas, small towns, and peripheral areas decline. Within cities, spatial organisation reflects this unevenness, where palaces and slums are not far from each other. The older models of the relationships between the state, market and civil society are changing in fundamental ways. The role of the state is transformed as its ability to manage the global issues, and therefore local issues, is limited, raising the risk of social upheaval. The challenge of the urban civilization is to find ways of reducing inequality and working towards a better life for all.

The biggest challenge that is yet to have its most significant impact is climate change. Urban living may cause ecological problems but also offer solutions to some of these problems. Urbanisation can accelerate and mitigate climate change. Large cities and countries can be submerged, and the poor environmental qualities of cities, air, waste and water can uproot large numbers of population and jeopardise the safety of many others. Climate change poses many sided challenges that could transform the basic conditions of cities and societies.

At the same time, the growing maturity of the urban world may offer a chance to find time to address some of the urban problems, making it easier to provide infrastructure and services. Now that the majority of the world’s population lives in urban areas and is likely to grow, the urban problems are the world’s problems. Alongside the acceleration of urbanisation, we are witnessing the ageing of popula-
tion and maturity of the city in many parts of the world. From Latin America to Asia, informal areas, which can be considered the infancy of new cities, are both growing and being upgraded and improved.

Meanwhile, urban living fuels the fluidity of social institutions. With increased mobility and diversity of populations, and accelerated rates of change, social institutions become ever more fluid and unstable. In democratic societies, this fluidity is often addressed through associative activities, public infrastructure and services, alongside well established mechanisms of control. However, where peaceful and democratic management of change may not be in place, the fluidity of social institutions is primarily managed through violence or resorting to regressive measures. Democratic governance, therefore, is the best way to mobilize financial and institutional capacities and work with social fluidity, and be a valuable alternative to the authoritarian models of development.

The challenges that face this urban world are numerous and the chapters of this book have analysed some of these challenges in different parts of the world, offering a global perspective into the problems facing cities and the solutions that they may adopt. The problem facing many urban societies in the rapidly changing parts of the world is the discrepancy between the speed of change and the ability to manage this change. As urbanisation matures, this discrepancy may be best addressed through democratic governance. A most important challenge for all cities is to develop the ability to find solutions and to implement those solutions effectively. This often comes down to the problem of governance, on how the human, natural and technological resources are mobilized and used, and how the relationship between different actors are regulated and energized. Without this ability, the freshest human capital, the best technologies and the highest amount of resources may simply be wasted, while with an effective governance capacity, even meagre resources may be effectively deployed to maximum effect.

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