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Engaging with global urban governance in the midst of a crisis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis offers a chance for urban scholars to play an even more explicit role in shaping ‘global urban governance’. Recognizing this international political realm, and the fundamental role that information exchange plays within it, urban studies can help drive a more progressive and inclusive global urban imagination.

Keywords

COVID-19, global urban governance, infodemic, urban imagination

Introduction

While locking most people ‘in place’, COVID-19 has also stressed the shared experience of billions of urban dwellers around the planet. The challenge is momentous but also one that we, as urban scholars, should not discount our contribution to. Here I call not only for a more explicit account of global *urban* governance in our scholarly conversations, but also to engage with it as an arena for practical action. This is a view that extends planetary urbanization sensibilities to a discussion of the underlying (world) politics in which they are steeped – what international relations scholars call ‘global governance’ (e.g. Weiss, 2016). It is a perspective that does so without doing away with the recognition of the ‘city’ as an important actor, site, and issue in world affairs, but also not necessarily buying into simplistic views that cities ‘can save the planet’ as much urban rhetoric has espoused (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2019).

Processes and institutions of global urban governance have very tangible implications on everyday urban life. Hundreds of formalized partnerships of cities now habitually exchange best practices, policies, and data about urban development across very different contexts such as Sierra Leone, Italy, and Canada. Hundreds of millions of dollars of philanthropic investment, and even larger financial and multilateral investments, have regularly swayed the direction of service provision across both major international hubs and secondary cities the world over. Global agendas and commitments have repeatedly made their way from the halls of the United Nations to very local debates over strategic urban planning in town halls around the planet.

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Information exchange and mobilization underpin much of these processes and thus serve as an apt entry point for urban scholars. In what I would argue is one of the best essays out yet on the COVID-19 crisis, Indian writer Arundhati Roy (2020) has argued that the pandemic can best be understood as a ‘portal’: while facing heightened urban inequalities, this is a moment ripe for imagining what ‘comes next’ and for taking progressive steps forwards through the portal. Urban scholars can do much to ensure this step is toward more progressive urban futures by taking an active part in shaping the ‘global urban imagination’ that underpins global urban governance.

A system in (locked-down) motion

As the world is at a locked-down standstill, global urban governance continues to operate across continents. The urban response to the pandemic highlights how this complex ‘ecosystem’ operates. Urban responses to COVID-19 stress the role of the multilateral system and the private sector as conveners of the global urban conversation, the ‘rise’ of city leadership and networks in global agendas, the urban investments (and shifting trends) of philanthropy, and the key place of media in charting urban narratives.

The United Nations, and multilateral entities more generally, continue to play an important animator role to cast the ‘urban’ on an international stage but do so often tentatively and in very different ways. The World Health Organisation (WHO), for instance, has stressed the continuing importance of regional politics in urban governance via its European or East Asian programs. Yet it has also epitomized the hesitation by most multilateral institutions to formally recognize cities at the heart of their infrastructure, not just their agendas and projects. Only a handful of UN agencies have explicitly ‘urban’ units. The usual cross-sectorial suspects, like the World Bank, have emerged once again as important nodes between disparate concerns.

Local governments have been increasingly present on this international stage. Transnational coalitions of city leaders have fast risen to the occasion

even though none of them had infectious disease at the heart of their agendas prior to the pandemic. The ever-popular C40 Cities group has fast pivoted into action, as it ‘temporarily transformed from being a climate leadership organisation to a COVID-19 support group’ (Watts, 2020). The crisis has offered a chance for a re-launch of the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities Network (now Global Resilient Cities Network) as a much more bottom-up initiative of cities. Participation of clear and sound academic voices to these debates, while still occasional, could be central to veer away from simple policy mobility or simplistic ‘global city’ tropes toward a more nuanced sense of urban issues internationally, accounting for those ‘off the map’ of global city thinking and encouraging better evidence-based discussion.

Much global urban governance has, once again, been proven to depend on the role of private philanthropy and donors. Unsurprisingly, Bloomberg Philanthropies rapidly announced both a US-focused program for American mayors and a \$40 million Global Response fund for vulnerable low- and middle-income countries. Relatedly, the private sector is busily intervening in many variegated ways both on an explicitly urban COVID-19 investment front, as with Siemens and IKEA, as well as animating discussions on the impact of COVID-19 in cities, as with HSBC, Jones Lang Lasalle and World Economic Forum.

At the same time, major media outlets continue to hold a centre stage that while often acknowledged is rarely discussed in urban research. The locked-down nature of the COVID-19 crisis, in fact, puts an even greater premium on the capacity to shape the global urban imagination. Media, news brokers, and information circulators like the *Financial Times*, with its much-recited contagion trajectory graphs, but also popular urban blogs like *CityLab*, have been playing an important role with the general public, as well as with the global urban governance actors noted above, in shaping what the ‘urban’ narrative of COVID-19 is.

This underlines the central role of knowledge circulation within the system of global urban governance. Many tangible decisions are being made by national, regional, and local governments, as well as

the private sector, on the basis of the global depiction of the ‘state’ of the pandemic and the urban imagination that goes with it. Major global urban governance actors inherently understand this connection between imagination and policymaking. The World Bank’s \$12 billion COVID-19 recovery package is, for instance, flanked by reviews, blogs, and tweets calling for attention to the ‘new urban poor’ emerging from the crisis, and by hosting an ‘urban resilience’ speaker series with the Global Resilient Cities Network. Other city networks, UN agencies, and philanthropies are busy convening webinars, producing reports, and constructing shared resources and lists like the Metropolis Cities for Global Health COVID responses repository.

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars had already made important contributions in the formulation of the ‘global urban agenda’ (Parnell, 2016). This work has stressed the important (but also politicized) ‘translation zone’ (Apter, 2006) that the interplay of multilateral institutions and city-based initiatives offer to engaged scholars in casting what the international imaginary of an urban planet might be. The pandemic and its growing urban questions – from density and inequality to mobility and city networking – should provide yet another chance to strengthen and widen this role. A key way to do so is, in my view, that of contributing to shaping the urban imagination that underpins global urban governance.

Shaping a ‘global urban’ imagination

The critical urban agenda that needs to emerge in the academic response to COVID-19 is not just one of scholarly inquiry. While COVID-19 highlights the need to better understand the politics of global urban governance, it also more pressingly presents the emergence of a space for action. This is a key moment for the geopolitics of urban knowledge and the relationship between information and action in cities (Robin and Acuto, 2018). It asks us to pay attention to the type of ‘urban’ that is being written into the headlines of our COVID-19 chronicles but also in the programs of UN agencies and donors. Urban scholars can play this fundamental role not just in response and recovery, but also to counter the

current ‘infodemic’: an epidemic of misinformation and rumours about the virus and its urban underpinnings that even the WHO lamented to be a clear feature of the COVID-19 crisis (Zarocostas, 2020). Timely and graspable scholarly efforts can have tangible roles in global urban governance as presented in evidence-based efforts like the well-known John Hopkins University’s COVID-19 dashboard (Dong et al., 2020) or Oxford University’s COVID-19 Policy Tracker (Hale et al., 2020). Scholarly advocacy work, like that of the Institute of Development Studies and the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre on the informal dimensions of the crisis (e.g. Wilkinson, 2020), is also critical.

Central in this effort is our capacity to help people (including policymakers) to imagine and fight for a different urban world. We might have to do so going ‘beyond the enclave of urban theory’ (Zeiderman, 2018: 1114) into a much more explicit dialogue and political presence with the ‘field’ of global urban governance. Opportunities are available. In the COVID-19 context, several venues are already attuned to a more progressive conversation that accounts for urban inequality. For instance, the OECD, via its Champions Mayors, has also made steps in this direction, while advocating for relatively silenced urban agendas, like that of immigrant vulnerability and inequality – something the Mayors Migration Council has also sought to address.

Strengthening our ‘global urban’ role

Urban scholars are well poised to contribute to policy discussions on global urban governance following the recent early-2000s debates that have encouraged a move from global city theorizing to a broader ‘global urban’ approach. As Connolly et al. (2020) have aptly stressed, these lessons, compounded by the coronavirus crisis, invite us to take a more nuanced appreciation of the multiplicity of contemporary processes of extended urbanisation, including a recognition that sub-urbanisation, post-suburbanisation, and peri-urbanisation are critical to understanding the ‘urban’ dimensions of COVID-19. Here the ‘global’ in ‘global urbanism’ (Robinson and Roy, 2016) is very much framed in a cosmopolitan sense rather than a globalist one, with

a clear urban equality agenda. Acknowledging and *engaging with* the system of global urban governance, as it continues its motion through the COVID-19 crisis, is a key need to encourage a more progressive global urbanism.

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