

The enabling conditions of post-pandemic city government

EPB: Urban Analytics and City Science

2020, Vol. 47(7) 1143–1145

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DOI: 10.1177/2399808320950041

journals.sagepub.com/home/epb**Susan Parnell**

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Most visions of the post-COVID-19 city concentrate on opportunities and expectations of the urban future, rather than why cities across the world have managed this and previous pandemics so badly or how an alternative pandemic-proofed city might be achieved. Perhaps we are an inherently optimistic species, or more likely, issues of public administration, institutional reform and state systems are boring to most people and even to many urban scholars. Yet, over the last year, widespread failure of effective government preparation and response to a predicted outbreak of disease is a stark warning that, for even a very basic post-pandemic recovery, all cities (big and small, rich or poor, progressive or conservative, old or new) have to be governed better and governed with very different outcomes in mind. We will need to reset the parameters and expectations of urban government, refocusing on issues of bureaucracy, state craft, public administration, planning and urban public policy.

Central to making cities, where COVID-19 and many other pandemics have concentrated, safe from diseases is the imperative to protect the public good as a foundational principle of all state action, including at the city scale where local understandings of the built environment, social protection, environmental and economic dynamics underpin the deep contestations that mark out local from national political practice. The normative positioning of (local) states will require scrutiny but the point of this intervention is more pragmatic – I argue that building capable states that can action the urban commitments of the global body politic is essential. Paradoxically for some, the question of post-pandemic urban government emerges not only as a purely local concern but goes to the heart of international problems of government in the twenty-first century.

For COVID-19 reconstruction to work, all of government has to become more active and visible not just in rolling out stimulus packages but in making the much long-term commitment to reshaping how urban systems function for the public-good and how money and power are distributed at the sub-national scale to provide protection to the vulnerable and uphold safety and security for all. Pandemic proofing cities, like urban climate proofing or

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localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), requires major adjustments in the rationale, operation, capacity and power dynamics of the government of cities. When these long-term goals and their implementation plans are considered in concert as they must be at the city scale, synergies and contradictions will emerge and the delivery mechanisms will have to be adjusted. National urban policy and city strategies, led by government, will need to be amended, and aligned to navigate incommensurability across the multiple aspirations and competing demands (Keith et al., 2020). The state is the hub of this form of strategic integration and prioritization, acting as it does both as a political and technical arbiter. Moreover, it is government that must co-ordinate temporal sequencing, spatial and fiscal targeting, legal reform and technology choices linked to the implementation of large-scale change in development trajectories of the kind that pandemic mitigation and recovery and other global challenges demand.

Government cannot define urban strategy or run cities alone, but healthy cities (like resilient cities, climate proofed cities or inclusive cities) cannot be achieved without well-informed and effective government that has credibility, capacity and good information at the local scale. To achieve pandemic resilient urban places, the instruments of national and local government have to be repurposed to address the pressing challenges of the day. Current urban fiscal systems have to be upended to ensure locally viable tax revenues, access by local government to capital to deal with infrastructure and investment needs must be enhanced – cities need enough fiscal capacity to drive subsidies and sustain operations on which healthy populations depend. In response to local needs, cities are well placed to drive local redistribution programs and provide social safety nets. Improved intergovernmental co-operation and high levels of expert advice is essential if biomedical, infrastructural, economic and social imperatives are to be aligned; and for most contexts, greater decentralization to ensure locally appropriate risk preparation and response will need to be advanced.

Post-pandemic reworking of urban government entails not just the reform of law, finance and the powers and functions of the state, but also a major reskilling of the civil service. It is not sufficient to simply expand the size of the state in response to the COVID crisis, though in some contexts, especially in cities of the global south, a bigger, stronger and well-financed local state is imperative if city government is to effectively serve and protect all residents before, during and after the pandemic. To properly respond to the scale and complexity that crafting post-COVID city government implies, there must be radical adjustments made to the qualification frameworks of civil servants, professional standards and the training emphasis of the millions of service providers who make cities work on a day-to-day basis. In short, a fundamental reworking of key elements of how we govern cities is required – though the form this will take will vary hugely from Detroit to Dakar.

Post-pandemic visions of governments' imperatives must embrace and not displace other transformative urban agendas – a tricky balancing act that demands good leadership and state capacity across the urban system alongside a functional multi-lateral system (Acuto, 2020; Connolly et al., 2020). If we want a more secure urban future, the government of cities, all cities and their interconnections, must be made fit-for-purpose. In a post-COVID era, and so the role of 'development' finance and is obliged to take more seriously the global urban question. What post-pandemic fit-for-purpose city government means is reworking the fundamental modes and practices of urban government to achieve universal rights and standards that safeguard human health. This was always the morally defensible position, now that the reminder that city, national and regional boundaries are no barrier to virus transmission, it is again clear that upholding universal aspirations for every city to be well enough governed, that it is possible to ensure that no one or no place is left behind, is also a strategic decision.

Conclusion

While there is no question that the global experience of disease has highlighted that what government does matters, the focus has fallen largely on global and national health governance and risk management and not on the local prism of regulation and enforcement – a corrective is due. The utopian reconfiguration of city networks, sidewalks, public transport systems, health and safety regulations and social safety nets, however, presupposes investing massively in building a capable state that functions in and for the city. Central to the global post-COVID-19 reconstruction of urban government capacity is a recoupling of the health and planning agendas and the foregrounding of the governance imperatives for realizing long-term public good objectives in cities. Building state capacity for realizing post-pandemic cities in ways that also work to advance the SDGs and other crucial developmental agendas might focus on (i) the governing imperatives of affordable, sustainable and universal built environment functions (water, waste, transport etc.); (ii) ensuring multi-scale and multi-sector state functionality at the city scale (devolution and cooperative government); (iii) generating effective government through mobilizing the interfaces between urban experts, administrators and political actors; and (iv) building robust data and analytic capacity to help mediate the complex decisions that governments must make to rebuild, literally, the places in which we live to make them less exposed to risk.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author's research is funded through PEAK Urban programme, UKRI Global Challenge Research Fund, Grant Ref: ES/P011055/1.

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