Out of the coronavirus crisis, a new kind of urban planning must be born

Post pandemic urban and regional planning and the lessons that can be learned from Coronavirus pandemic 2020

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1- Aim:

This paper discusses the post pandemic era and the essence of urban and regional planning, the lessons that can be learned from Coronavirus pandemic 2020 and the necessity that a new kind of urban planning[1] must be born out of the coronavirus crisis[2].

This paper is not about the underlying reasons of the Coronavirus and the Coronavirus pandemic 2020, its origin and its spreading within cities, regions, nation states and from country to country. What this paper is concerned about is emphasizing and referring to the need as this pandemic "highlights the importance of planners to join the discussion and openly elaborate the right approach" and "to think about their role and responsibilities in mitigating them in the future"[3]. This involvement is important as this pandemic or other future ones "could affect cities for years"[4]. As correctly the UN secretary general[5], said: recovery from the coronavirus crisis must lead to a better world. To this must be added a plea for a just and devoid of greed and war world. In this regard, there is a need to not only "rewrite local regulations to promote sustainability and equity"[6] but also there is a need to radically change the political economy of societies to embrace an adapted urban and reginal planning system.

It can be stressed that "pandemics are also an urban planning problem"[7]. Not only it can "radically alter urban life"[8], as some have said that "we'll need to reopen our cities, but not without making changes first"[9].

The lessons that can be learned from this pandemic in terms of urban planning is "that 'urban hardship' is not only related to climate change and natural disasters, but also to viral viruses penetrating and harming human bodies[10]. Thus, is that there is an urgent need to adapt planning thinking and practice in a way that is more responsive to disasters: natural and human-made.

As the immediate focus for cities is on stopping the spread of COVID-19, the second point is that what would be the longer-term impact of a pandemic situation on urban (and regional) planning. This paper deals mainly with the second one with some unavoidable though concise references to the first.

2- Quiddity of the problem under study

As a pandemic such as the current one, i.e., the COVID-19, is not a single problem; and it is a set of interrelated problems, the agenda for an adapted planning thinking and planning practice to define these problems and evaluate potential solutions -- but not just the substantive and procedural aspect of urban planning and problem-solving -- but also the underlying polity of planning and problem-solving. This has a more complex process than a mere approach that involves identification of problems and needs, resources, priorities as well as uncertainties, constraints and obstacles. Such a "process is often complex; even if we identify a theoretically optimal solution, successful implementation requires stakeholder support and overcoming financial, legal, or institutional obstacles" and the ones brought about by lack of information and well-devised decision support systems. This pandemic has brought forward a situation not only that "this is a time when many stakeholders are willing to cooperate; governing bodies' challenge is to use this opportunity to help achieve both short- and long-term goals. It is generally best to define such problems broadly"[11], but also that it is a time to rethink about the role of planning in generating a situation of enhancing, consolidating and integrating the duties, decisions and actions of different sectors of public sector dealing with urban planning and problem-solving under a unique and integrated framework: a framework that integrate urban and regional planning and management with risk management, disaster planning, and so on. "Solutions can address similar risks and lay a foundation for more comprehensive, long-term solutions"[12] [13].

3- Problem under study: the inability of planning and its root causes

A question that can be posed at this stance of human history everywhere around the world is that: What are the root causes of the inability of "planning and management systems and mechanisms" at all levels of administration (from national to local), to respond and to respond effectively and sustainably to disasters, natural and human-made.

The economic damages of this pandemic is immense: the local economy of each city and each country, will experience a significant loss, income from all sorts of tourism would for some time diminish; and "the long-term impact on the affected cities and regions is still not foreseeable"[14]. The threat of recession hangs over world economy, and as always that will mean the heaviest burden has fallen on the lower socio-economic groups of each society, in more or in less developed nations, worldwide.

4- Dilemmas of planning in times of a pandemic and most important Questions

The questions posed in this respect are: what is the nature of such dilemmas? How can they become overcome? Dilemmas of planning in times of a pandemic though common in some respect, are varied in different cities around the world. Some stress upon the overall policy changes, some on substantive planning issues such as fortifying public transit systems, and some on urban design aspects such as closing streets to cars and streets to be opened to cyclists and pedestrians[15].

What is important is preparedness of cities against hazards of all sorts, natural and human-made, varies around the world. Their level of development and the socio-economic determinants play a major role.

Cities with a high concentration of urban poor and deep-rooted inequalities are potentially more vulnerable than those that enjoy less socio-economic and cultural inequalities, are better resourced, are less crowded, and can be considered to be more inclusive." Cities that have robust governance" – considering that health infrastructure and health management, inter alia, is one part of governance; "might be in a better position to manage pandemics"[16].

To argue about the need to radically change the polity and practice of urban planning, some crucial questions can be posed, such as:

- Could Coronavirus transform the international order? Coronavirus has thrown up questions about what form the international arena will take over the coming decades. This crisis forces people to reimagine the purpose of the international arena and to imagine an international law that goes beyond the protection of capital, and the one that is prepared to face not only the next pandemic, climate crisis or humanitarian disaster but also willing to confront how global trade produces the global inequalities that exacerbate, and in some cases cause, these disasters[17]. This pandemic has been said to "trigger for global transformation?[18]"and that as "serious epidemic diseases are inevitably "political" -- as it is a part of the language of health governance -- they have the potential to redefine the patterns of political affinities and loyalties domestically and globally[19].
- Was it a "Bad City Planning" that made "the Coronavirus crisis worse?": is density and clustering, make residents more vulnerable to diseases, terrorist attacks, crimes and traffic accidents and natural disasters[20]?. When it comes to infectious disease outbreaks, cities are dual-edged: (a) cities are a big part of the problem as they intensify the spread and transmission of infectious disease through increased human contact: (b) cities play a central role in preparing for, mitigating and adapting to pandemics[21].
- Is it possible to seal off a city? Most urban planners don't design a city with the idea of sealing it off [22], and should cities be designed for lockdown? Many advocate for the opposite: making cities as free-flowing as possible to

encourage tourism and attract workers.[23] Public health officials in many affected countries, "advise people to stay home and minimise contact with other people. Such quarantines are difficult for people with stable homes and reliable incomes; they are virtually impossible for people who are homeless or living in crowded or unhealthy homes. Many communities have programs to reduce homelessness, but a pandemic makes these efforts far more urgent"[24]. Rather than only considering risks to homeless residents, it is better to also consider risks to residents with inadequate and unhealthy homes: crowded, shared, dirty and homes and even tents[25] [26].

- What is urban versus rural risks: Some assume that infectious disease risks make cities dangerous, and suburban and rural areas safer and healthier. This is generally untrue. Although pandemics present special risks to cities, they also present special risks to suburbs and rural areas[27].

5- What can be done?

planners will need to reckon with this disruption, paying particular attention to the urban poor, who were already being left behind in many cities and will likely suffer more during the pandemic without careful thought. As governments reassess priorities and consider stimulus packages, the imperative for more resilient, equitable, low-carbon cities remains unchanged. Public transit systems are still essential for city dwellers and should not be allowed to be crippled financially[28].

What can be done in short-term and during such a pandemic and long-term, are concisely discussed below:

5-1- Measures during a pandemic

"A lack of governance, poor planning and decentralised health care systems" during a pandemic, "can undermine pandemic response, by generating confusion, fear and higher costs"[29] [30].

These are measures for the middle-class residents of a city and for the lower socio-economic groups and the badly-housed and the homeless, could not be applied. What is the impact of COVID-19 in inner city and outer city slums and in informal settlements that suffer inequalities and vulnerabilities?[31] "growing levels of inequality" within many countries worldwide "alongside recent economic stagnation and constraints have resulted in diminished opportunities and increasing insecurity for many citizens"[32]

This aspect is beyond the agenda of this paper so it will be dealt with concisely and categorically:

- "Adopting a combination of proactive surveillance, routine communication, rapid isolation and personal and community protection (e.g. social distancing) measures is critical" during this period[33]. "Urban planning" can "consider the services that citizens might need if their city were on lockdown because of a

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disaster: healthcare clinics for individual neighborhoods so people don't have to travel far from their homes for treatment"[34].

- the number, quality and accessibility of hospitals, internal care units, hospital beds and IV solution and respirators can determine whether a city effectively manages a pandemic, or not[35].
- Both software and hardware of prevention-functioning surveillance systems of pandemics to ensure effective pandemic response, is needed during this period: (a) "The hardware of providers and health infrastructure", i.e., healthcare system, is necessary but insufficient; and (b) software such as established and tested protocols, proper provider education, and close collaboration between qualified doctors, nurses and others from the national to the local levels[36].
- In many cities faced with this pandemic, "it could radically alter urban life": (a) private hospitals have faced pressures to open up" for public use "and for those in need; (b) homeless have seized vacant homes; (c) the sudden proliferation of mutual aid groups ,designed to provide community support for the most vulnerable during isolation – has brought neighbours together across age groups and demographic divides"[37]; and (d) it has reduced the number of trips within cities and by it to reduce the air pollution of some large cities worldwide.

5-2- Post-pandemic and long-term measures: Comprehensive Solutions
"One principle of urban planning is that individual, short-term decisions should support strategic and longer-term" decisions. "While mainly it has been focused on current pandemic risks," planning systems must focus on "long-term objectives, including overall public health, plus economic, social and environmental sustainability objectives"[38].

The reasons for the incompetence of planning to give appropriate answers in such instances must be sought within the politico-economic features that have brought about a situation in human settlements that has made them uncontrollable. The uncontrollability of human settlements is against the rationale of "planning". In fact, the neoliberal management of cities itself is against the very idea of "planning". The dominant neoliberal policies of many cities all around the world, some with more severe neoliberal policies and some with lesser such policies, in both less and more developed countries, that has faced this pandemic, have common features. These policies have attacked the public welfare systems and especially the public health systems of many countries around the world. The common features as a result of neoliberalism[39] is large scale privatization policies of public spheres and means of production and consumption in many countries, that has affected the societies by vastly extending the gap between the rich and poor. In many aspects as the private sector financial resources has diverted the

resources that if it was in the hands of responsible public sectors with "public welfare" as their main agenda, could be allocated to:

- the much-needed housing for the lower income groups and groups of people with no incomes, i.e., those considered to be "homeless"; to build luxury housing and out-of-demand shopping malls. "Homelessness and Housing is considered a crisis"[40] within the crisis of COVID-19 pandemic.
- providing welfare systems that could guarantee decent jobs, full employment and unemployment benefits for the whole population.
- providing decent welfare services for the population, instead of wasting public money to embark on luxury projects.

The societies must rebuild post-Covid-19 "not with another decade of austerity, but with a decade-long program of intensive investment in our social and physical infrastructure to end our dependency on fossil fuels once and for all, and construct a green economy, sharing the wealth and quality of life that it engenders"[41]. To this end, planning, broadly speaking, and urban planning, specifically for the purpose of this paper, worldwide has "an urgent need"[42] to such measures as below[43]:

- integration: a integrate urban planning, urban management, and disaster-response approaches.
- reinforce the planning and decision support systems: integration of smart technologies in urban management[44].
- Information systems: decision support systems (DSSs), planning support systems (PSSs), Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Plus setting up urban dashboard[45]. are all necessary tools for an adapted planning system and health monitoring and management of human settlements. "The lack of standardization between smart city technology suppliers can lead and is leading to noncommunication between cities and data platforms and resulting in a non-productive system in the case of virus outbreaks"[46]. This there is a "need to democratize the smart city technology sphere to encourage equity and transparency amongst stakeholders, thereby providing more possible cooperation in the case of disasters"[47].
- Pursuing purposeful urban research and urban planning: diverted to considering socio-economic and cultural inequalities and due regard for the more vulnerable sections of each society.
- Avoiding speculation as it disables urban planning for the welfare of the totality of population and diverts precious resources (financial and else) to private beneficiaries and devoid a community of the public services needed during disasters/hazards as well as normal situations.
- Planning for Resilience of cities to cope with Pandemics / disasters /hazards: By advocating planning for resilience of cities to cope with Pandemics / disasters/hazards, it is not meant repeating the slogan that has been so far the hallmark of planning without being practiced in actual terms. "Resilience

refs to a system's ability to accommodate variable and unexpected conditions without catastrophic failure. Many communities have goals to increase resilience of physical infrastructure and public services, plus resilience to economic shocks and disasters"[48]. If planning is "seeking ways to incorporate resilience and flexibility into it, it must encompass such strategies as:

- Infrastructure redundancy (e.g., ensuring that have multiple access routes, diverse transport systems, multiple water and energy sources, plus emergency supplies for communities)[49].
- Well-defined emergency plans[50].
- Robust communications systems[51].
- Ability to re-prioritise[52]s.
- Diversified economic structure that can maintain employment and business activity despite economic shocks[53].
- De-privatisation of public services: If the resilience is to cope with such disasters or any other form of a disaster in the foreseeable future, "the new system for planning and managing human settlements publicly owned and democratically controlled public services"[54].
- eradicate the individual economic insecurity: "What this crisis has also exposed is that many people do not have the financial resilience to deal with an unexpected hardship imposed upon them. The new society must eradicate the individual economic insecurity that comes"[55] mainly from lack of appropriate legislation to protect the workforce, lack of overall social security system and welfare systems to cover mainly the lower income groups as well as the non-incomed groups of each society, and low pay for many people. The years of austerity under many reasons and mainly neoliberal policies, has "targeted attacks on the unemployed, the poor, children, disabled people and others that and therefore that everyone needs a safety net"[56]

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