

Democracy and the *life* of cities



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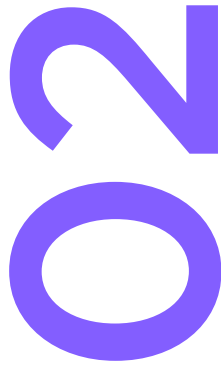
Democracy and the *life* of cities

MAY 2023 Edited by:
Samuel Kling
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Steven Bosacker



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Introduction

Samuel Kling, Florita Gunasekara,
and Steven Bosacker

The purpose of this collection is to probe the role of cities in generating and strengthening democratic practices in a way that is useful for policymakers at the local, national, and international levels.

In a world facing a “democratic recession,” cities are getting a reputation as a supposed exception.¹ At the geopolitical level, they have stood up against rising authoritarian and populist leadership in North America and Europe. At times, they have skirted gridlock and polarization at the national level to confront problems such as climate change and migration, coordinating through city-to-city networks. Cities have also used their global voice to bolster democracy, as articulated in the recent Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy, a statement so far signed by 207 mayors from 55 countries, representing cities such as Warsaw, Kyiv, Buenos Aires, Los Angeles, and Taipei.²

This role for cities—as global defenders of democracy—has also garnered interest from national governments wary of the intentions of China and Russia, including the United States.

But what is it about cities that makes them unique as democratic actors? Do they, can they, and should they fit the role projected onto them as global democratic bulwarks? What does local urban action really mean for democracy globally?

The idea of cities as global defenders of democracy arguably found its fullest expression in political scientist Benjamin Barber’s 2013 book *If Mayors Ruled the World*. Cities, Barber proposed, are “democracy’s best hope,” an elixir to national governments mired in partisan obstructionism and dysfunction.³ He pointed to the inherent pragmatism of urban politics, which hinges on mundane matters such as garbage collection and street paving rather than incendiary wedge issues. He noted the close connection urban voters have to city councillors and mayors, compared to relatively inaccessible national leaders (and, indeed, polls consistently show citizens trust local government more than national government).⁴ He argued that urban politics is structured at the neighborhood and community levels, not by national parties, adding to its pragmatism and coherence.

Cities also have other features, springing from their spatial realities, that shape their potential for democratic action. They are dense, diverse, dynamic, and frequently chaotic, bringing together people of different identities, perspectives, and means in proximity. The urban built environment, including public spaces from parks and markets to streets and sidewalks, helps structure social relations. These urban features and others can encourage accommodation and even new connections among residents. More ambitiously, they can encourage a new politics.

This narrative, perhaps romantic, captures important truths about the ways cities, as places and spaces, can bring distinctive approaches to democracy. But it also doesn't take account of the flip side: cities' real struggles to make democracy actually work. A long history of urban conflict and exploitation makes clear that cities are not simply beacons of democratic regeneration; they are also sites of the world's most pressing challenges. Myriad social problems are worse in cities, which tend to be sites of deep social divisions. Globally, many cities are struggling in the face of problems such as inequality, housing shortages, lack of opportunity, and an inability to deliver basic services. All of these problems reflect and reinforce the challenges associated with performing democracy itself.

What are cities to do? The answer matters locally and globally for many reasons, one of which is that the world is getting more citylike. Today, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, a figure that will grow to nearly seven in 10 by 2050.⁵ Therefore, the future of democracy is closely connected to urban democracy.

This collection of essays approaches these questions with perspectives from leading urbanists, policymakers, academics, and political leaders in North America, Europe, and Africa. The essays consider cities not just as sites of democratic action but also as the "independent variable" whose unique spatial, social, and political features can make them powerful and creative generators of democracy—and, alternatively, pose challenges to it.

The collection is divided into three parts. The first, "Foundations," explores the particularity of cities as democratic actors. Robin F. Bachin surveys the spatial building blocks of urban democracy, whose origins she locates in responses to the unprecedented urbanization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Blair Kamin asks whether the relationship between cities and democracy is inherently generative, using Chicago as a case study.

The next section, "In Practice," offers concrete policy ideas to strengthen urban democracy and city leadership on democracy. Essays from Mercy Brown-Luthango, Andy Westwood, Sheila Foster, and Scott Warren examine the role of various stakeholders and constituencies across geographies, from urban youth movements to multistakeholder partnerships in Philadelphia. Michael Cohen proposes a more democratic form of infrastructure provision. Hannah Abdullah asks how cities can foster an equitable and democratic climate justice movement. And Penny Abeywardena turns to cities' international engagement, connecting local politics in New York City to the city's global leadership.

The final section, “Democracy Evolves,” looks to the future of urban democracy. Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski writes of Warsaw’s efforts to confront authoritarianism at home and in the fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Daniel Agbiboia inquires as to what it means to look at booming African cities as global cities, asking what the rise of Lagos, Nairobi, and others portends for democracy worldwide. And Julie Nelson and John A. Powell examine the role municipal leaders can play in creating a just, multiracial democracy.

Collectively, these essays speak to the power and fragility of urban democracy and the constant work of rectifying its shortcomings. Many grapple with the injustices of 20th-century governance: cases in which urban democracy faltered—under the autocratic Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley, for example—or in which cities faced sinister, oppressive, and antidemocratic regimes, such as Apartheid in Cape Town and totalitarianism in Warsaw.

Contrast these examples with the most mentioned figure across this publication: Jane Jacobs, the urban theorist skeptical of centralized authority, who articulated the power of the spaces and places of urban life to generate community and social connection. It’s a view of urban democracy evocative of the ideas of another theorist cited in these pages, Abdou Maliq Simone, whose work examines alternative forms of governance emerging from an urban life marked by ambiguity and informality.

The continued relevance of their ideas is a suggestion that while cities can suffer the ills of democracy—and even create ills for democracy—the democracy they create is deeply, inherently shaped by the city itself. It is a democracy practiced not just by Barber’s world-leading city mayors but also by urban people and communities.

If cities live up to their billing as global democratic bulwarks, it likely won’t be at the behest of powerful national governments seeking a geopolitical edge. Instead, they can do so on the basis of the potholes filled, the garbage collected, and the injustices rectified. And, ultimately, by remaking democracy in their image.

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Foundations

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Deliberative Democracy: Cities and Civic Activism

Robin F. Bachin

Cities *can be* the seedbeds of democracy. They stand at the crossroads of the global flow of goods, people, ideas, and culture. Processes that take place at the macro level are articulated and take form in the urban landscape. It is in and through the production of urban space that shifting power relations often manifest themselves. This is not to suggest that the physical fabric of the city is a coherent reflection of global social, economic, and political practices. Rather, the fragmentations and disruptions that emerge from, for example, changes in work process, new concentrations of capital, and government disinvestment in the public realm are visible and legible in the built form of the city. Studying people's interaction in, engagement with, and conflict over urban spaces provides policy practitioners and scholars of the city with tools for analyzing the relationship between the built environment and urban culture and between

large-scale social processes and daily, lived experience.

Cities have been incubators of innovation and have provided the foundation for deliberation, debate, and democratic engagement in all geographic regions across time. At the turn of the 20th century, American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey articulated his belief in the valuable role cities could play in shaping democracy. Dewey highlighted the intimate connections among the search for knowledge, the process of social engagement in urban communities, and deliberative democracy. He wrote, "Democracy is freedom. If truth is at the bottom of things, freedom means giving truth a chance to show itself, a chance to well up from the depths."¹ Cities would provide the opportunity for such deliberation to take place since they fostered the clash of diverse cultures that enabled new visions of social engagement to emerge. Philosophers

It is in and through the production of urban space that shifting power relations often manifest themselves.

like Dewey and urban reformers such as Jane Addams, founder of Hull-House in Chicago, and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett saw local activism as the basis of urban democracy and as a vehicle for addressing pressing social problems at larger scales.

The unprecedented growth of American cities at the turn of the 20th century highlights how the city became the locus of questions concerning how diverse groups would lay claim to urban space and create mechanisms for mutual understanding and democratic deliberation. The tumultuous mix of cultures, languages, religions, and ethnic and racial identities that characterized the modern city brought friction and discord but also coalition building and the expansion of democratic access. Urban reformers sought

to overcome the overcrowded conditions, poor sanitation, lack of adequate breathing spaces, and transportation inefficiencies that plagued American cities. A wide variety of organizations, including settlement houses, art leagues, neighborhood improvement associations, municipal chapters of the Civic Federation, women's clubs, ethnic mutual-aid societies, and labor organizations, drew direct connections between localized urban improvement efforts and broader democratic reform. Out of these collaborative efforts came municipal policies to address issues such as factory safety, child labor, tenement reform, and the "smoke nuisance." So, too, came greater access to the political process, with women, immigrants, and—in more constricted instances—African Americans gaining political power through voting rights at the municipal level. These

efforts to create public policy related to urban reform set the stage for larger-scale state (and eventually federal) policies that provided enhanced protections for Americans and greater access to political participation.

The planning of urban space, though, has always laid bare the degree to which different groups exercise varying amounts of power over the process of city building. What architectural historian Dolores Hayden calls the “power of place” illustrates the variety of ways urban spaces are invested with meaning by multiple groups in the city. The processes that shape the physical landscape, including real estate development and speculation, architecture and design, state regulation and promotion, and residents’ uses of city spaces, reflect the contested nature of urban development.² They also highlight how different groups access and use urban space in a variety of ways, some that conform to the intended uses imagined by civic leaders and others that challenge those prescribed models.

The park planning movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides a window into competing notions of how urban space should be planned and for whom. Frederick Law Olmsted, the most prolific park planner in the late 19th century, saw large urban parks as antidotes to the disorder of the city. His design for Central Park in New York City, as well as many others throughout the nation, centered on bringing nature into the city to promote tranquility, harmony, and opportunity for quiet contemplation. Yet critics of large urban parks argued that they did not serve the densest city neighborhoods, given that they

most often were far removed from the crowded wards that stood to benefit from them the most. Moreover, residents of working-class neighborhoods wanted public parks and playgrounds to meet their social and recreational needs, as well as to provide open spaces to relieve overcrowding and unhealthful conditions. Thus, working-class residents of American cities led a movement at the turn of the century for small neighborhood parks that would provide for the recreational needs of city residents and also offer easy access. Yet as different ethnic and racial groups inhabited increasingly segregated neighborhoods in American cities, the parks that were intended to promote harmony and public gathering often became the sites of intense conflict and brutal violence, illustrating how battles over access to urban space reflected larger tensions about democratic rights to the city.

The changing physical contours of cities also provide a window into understanding the process of shaping collective memory at the local level. By connecting various histories of a place with the politics of placemaking, a variety of groups in the city can have a stake in the future of that landscape. Linking history and culture to placemaking provides an opportunity to create and inscribe ownership and belonging among a wide variety of groups. Of course, shaping collective memory often has within it the potential for contested memory. The preservation of historic buildings and landscapes could foster a sense of shared local identity or could raise questions about whose history is preserved and at what cost. An outcome of historic preservation could be the process of gentrification, for example, whereby some members of the community that shaped a particular cityscape

ultimately find themselves priced out of their neighborhood as more affluent groups seek housing there. Preservation efforts can help make cities legible as sites of collective identity, but they also can promote exclusivity and segmentation. Analyzing the impact of preservation projects on a variety of groups in a city enables scholars, planners, and policymakers to gain a better sense of how changes in the physical form of the city are part of larger social and economic transformations in a community.

It is through the varied uses of urban space that some of the greatest examples of the expansion of democratic engagement and access to the rights of citizenship have emerged. By appropriating public city spaces that had been made off limits to them through policies of segregation and discrimination as well as acts of intimidation and violence, ethnic and racial groups have made their cultures and traditions a visible part of the life of the city and helped to establish a sense of both local and national belonging. They have laid claim to their rights by physically occupying places where they had previously been deemed unwelcome. The so-called Bloody Sunday march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, for example, showed the impact that staging a visible protest against racial discrimination could have on moving public policy and expanding the right to vote. Ethnic celebrations such as the San Juan Festival in New York, the Cinco de Mayo celebration in Los Angeles, and the Chinese New Year festivals in San Francisco became ubiquitous features of urban activity that asserted the rights of immigrant groups to city spaces. And pride parades have enabled LGBTQ+ groups to celebrate their identities

in public and gain ground in the fight for acceptance and protections. These claims of the right to public access are mediated in urban landscapes and given new meaning as a result of the spontaneous interactions that occur among different people in these places.

Yet recent decades have seen the privatization of public space and the criminalization of free assembly. As cities have sold naming rights to sports arenas, museums, and recreational facilities, many advocates have worried that private interests would interfere with democratic access to public space. Indeed, new regulations imposed in cities to limit the size of public gatherings and prohibit the use of urban space for political rallies have signaled to many that private funding and political posturing are affecting public access and circumscribing political rights. The creation of “bum-proof” benches designed to keep the homeless from sleeping in parks, the increasing surveillance of public spaces through new technology, and the development of private parks in gated neighborhoods have forced local advocates to address the changing relationship between cities and democratic engagement.

Moreover, the process of dramatically transforming the natural environment to enable cities to develop and expand has contributed to the existential threats of global warming and other climate impacts that pose profound challenges for the future of urban life. The long legacy of the commodification of land, the rerouting of water flows, and the destruction of species biodiversity has implications not just for large-scale ecosystem health but also for the ability of cities to be sustainable. In

Ethnic and racial groups have made their cultures and traditions a visible part of the life of the city.

reflecting on the transformation of the South Florida landscape, naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson wrote in 1920, “There is something very distressing in the gradual passing of the wilds, the destruction of the forests, the draining of the swamps and lowlands . . . and in its place the coming of civilized man with all his unsightly constructions.”³ The consequences of those environmental changes are being felt even more acutely a century after Simpson wrote these words. For effective solutions for promoting urban sustainability to emerge, policymakers must look to scientific discoveries and technological innovation alongside the ingenuity that is rooted in local communities. Democratizing data, promoting community engagement, and understanding the on-the-ground, lived experience of cities’ most vulnerable residents will help guide solutions that can best ensure inclusive community development and urban resilience.

Social media has opened up new spaces in which democracy can happen, especially among young people. There are opportunities to connect and engage in new ways and in new places, both in our local neighborhoods and through our online communities. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok enable users to amplify their voices and launch national and even global movements calling for change, even as these tools can also sow seeds of disinformation and hatred. Organizers are using digital tools in combination with more traditional forms of political engagement and activism. In 2015, for example, Swedish high school student Greta Thunberg launched a “School Strike for Climate” that became a global movement by using social media to generate local protests. The summer of 2020 saw millions of people flood into the urban squares and downtown plazas that had emptied out as a result of COVID-19 quarantines to protest the murders

of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and demand racial justice. These protests and others are a reminder of the importance of creating equitable access to urban spaces to promote participation in democratic public life.

In her classic 1961 study, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, urbanist Jane Jacobs argued that the meaning of city life was defined by “the web of casual public life.” What was needed in cities, she claimed, was less planning and regulation, and more spontaneity. This spontaneity allows for voices of multiple groups to be amplified and for civic sensibilities to be activated. By providing the

spaces for diverse groups to deliberate about the common good and engage with people from all walks of life, cities can continue to be the sites of knowledge building, community enrichment, and deliberative democracy that Dewey imagined a century ago and that could shape vibrant, resilient, and sustainable urban futures.⁴

About the Author

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On Density and Democracy: Lessons from Foundational Thinkers and Recent Experience in Chicago

Blair Kamin

Does urban density facilitate democracy? With deep-blue US cities consistently delivering large majorities to candidates opposed to the toxic mix of authoritarianism and election denialism associated with former President Donald J. Trump, the answer would appear to be a resounding “yes.” Yet there is nothing inevitable about cities serving as bastions of democracy. Indeed, in the past, foundational thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson have portrayed large cities as formidable—even existential—threats to democracy. Today, with more than half of the world’s population living in urban areas and US cities struggling to solve endemic

problems such as gun violence, homelessness, and a shortage of affordable housing, new approaches are required if cities are to both effectively affect the lives of their residents and conclusively demonstrate that cities deserve to be characterized as foundations of the democratic project.

My own experience at the *Chicago Tribune*, much of it spent covering the 22-year reign of Chicago’s longest-serving mayor, Richard M. Daley, confirms the need to skeptically approach claims that correlate cities with the advance of (small “d”) democracy. In Daley’s case, “reign” is a fitting term, for the mayor ran his city—America’s third largest—like

a democratically elected king. While Daley acquired power by democratic means, through the ballot box, he exercised power from the top down, most notably (and infamously) in a stunning “midnight raid” that shuttered a small lakefront airport near downtown Chicago. For years, Illinois governors had thwarted Daley’s quest to turn the little-used airport, Meigs Field, into a park. Then, on the night of March 30, 2003, a little more than a month after Daley won a fifth term with nearly 79 percent of the vote, city backhoes gouged six X-shaped trenches into Meigs Field’s lone runway, temporarily stranding 16 privately owned aircraft. The naked display of power recalled the adage “Act now; ask for forgiveness later.” Except that Daley didn’t ask for forgiveness. He insisted to reporters that the shutdown was justified because the tiny planes that used Meigs might slam into downtown skyscrapers and cause countless deaths—an absurd claim given that the tiny planes were gnats compared to the hijacked jets that had brought down the World Trade Center less than two years earlier. But Daley got his way. Today, the airport is a combined concert venue and park with hills and wildlife habitats—a noble end achieved by ignoble means.

The midnight raid and a parking meter lease deal that is the most widely despised legacy of Daley’s otherwise effective tenure should serve as red flags for those who argue that cities are uniquely equipped to serve as bulwarks of democracy. Indeed, the optimistic notion that mayors “get things done,” as opposed to national governments paralyzed by political polarization, obscures the potential downsides of swift, unilateral action emanating from city halls.

Such tensions are by no means limited to Chicago. The archetypal clash of top-down autocrat versus bottom-up community activist pitted Robert Moses against Jane Jacobs in the 1960s when Jacobs blocked Moses’s scheme to ram traffic through Greenwich Village’s Washington Square Park—as dramatized in the recent off-Broadway play *Straight Line Crazy*. In a more recent example of bottom-up change, Chinese protesters forced the nation’s authoritarian leaders to ease draconian “zero-COVID” restrictions, an outcome that comports with the notion that cities contribute to the spread of democracy. It was urban density, after all, that enabled the huge gatherings. Likewise, city streets and squares served as camera-ready stages that enabled the demonstrators to convey their message to a global audience. It’s hard to imagine that the protests would have had the same impact if they had taken place in some remote farm village. Yet Communist authorities remain firmly in control, a sobering reality for advocates of democracy, given that China is home to some of the world’s fastest-growing cities.

In the United States, now approaching the 250th anniversary of its founding, cities have provoked starkly different reactions from astute observers and creators of democracy, Jefferson chief among them. To the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the nation’s third president, cities represented a mortal threat to the body politic. Densely packed cities, Jefferson believed, were breeding grounds for disease and corruption. His ideal democratic citizen was a self-sufficient farmer who grew his own food and provided his own clothing and shelter. In contrast, city dwellers depended on each other for such necessities and were



thus, in Jefferson's view, not fully free. Worse, he observed, cities tended to attract an unemployed underclass that threatened social and political stability. "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body," Jefferson wrote.¹ To Jefferson, dispersal was preferable to density, a stance that anticipated the Constitution's deconcentration of political power in three branches of government.

Yet his stance, it should be noted, was anti-urban, not anti-town. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who toured the United States in 1831 and 1832 for his classic two-volume study, *Democracy in America*, Jefferson admired self-governing New England townships and viewed them as

a model for settlement west of the Appalachians. In that spirit, the US Land Ordinance of 1785 created six-square-mile townships that could be subdivided into individually owned rectangular parcels, the progenitor of the checkerboard grid one sees while flying over the American Midwest. To early democratic theorists, a landscape of small farms gathered around a small town formed an ideal template for self-governance; geography and polity would be mutually reinforcing. As Garrett Dash Nelson wrote in *Places Journal* in 2018, "The vision of a few thousand people governing their shared concerns and living together in prosperous but unpretentious conditions seemed like the perfect negation of European monarchism, with its grandiose aristocrats lording over exploited peasants and enfolding ever

larger territories into the power systems of imperial states.”² In reality, such visions glossed over the restrictive mores and prying eyes that made both real people and fictional characters, like the protagonist of Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, yearn to escape small towns for the big city’s comparative freedom and cosmopolitanism.

The lightning-fast, late-19th-century urbanization and industrialization of cities such as Chicago rendered small towns relics of another time. The vastly expanded size of teeming metropolises undercut both face-to-face contact and the direct familiarity with issues that townships fostered. The consequences of mass urbanization, accentuated by propaganda and other methods of swaying the populace, were profound, as Walter Lippmann observed in his 1922 book *Public Opinion*. “The democratic fallacy,” he wrote, “has been its preoccupation with the origin of government rather than with the processes and results. The democrat has always assumed that if political power could be derived in the right way, it would be beneficent. His whole attention has been on the source of power, since he is hypnotized by the belief that the great thing is to express the will of the people. . . . But no amount of regulation at the source of a river will completely control its behavior.”³ Ronald Steel put it more plainly in his 1980 biography, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*: “While democratic theory decreed that the people were sovereign, in practice that sovereignty meant mostly the power to say yes or no, to throw the old rascals out and bring new rascals in.”⁴

Which brings me back to Daley, whom the people of Chicago never threw out. First elected in 1989, Daley was reelected five

times before stepping down in 2011, a 22-year tenure that eclipsed the previous record-setting run of his father, Richard J. Daley, Chicago’s mayor from 1955 to 1976. The second Daley restored normalcy to Chicago after the tumultuous period known as “Council Wars,” when white ethnic aldermen who controlled the Chicago City Council frustrated the reform agenda of Harold Washington, the city’s first Black mayor. The infighting was so bitter that the *Wall Street Journal* memorably labeled Chicago “Beirut on the Lake.”

In contrast, Daley tamed the City Council, turning it into a virtual rubber stamp. He beautified high-profile stretches of the city with planter boxes that ran down the middle of streets such as Michigan Avenue. Grand projects followed—most notably Millennium Park, whose crowd-pleasing public art (such as Anish Kapoor’s jelly bean-shaped “Cloud Gate”) attracted hordes of tourists and hundreds of millions of dollars of downtown investment. Such efforts helped ensure that Chicago did not go the way of Detroit and other Midwestern cities whose downtowns had hollowed. Dubbed “the city that works” under the first Daley, Chicago, as ruled by Daley the Second, became a postindustrial playground—at least for those who lived on its prosperous North Side. Sure, the thinking went, Daley was an autocrat, but he was the right kind of autocrat, promoting such progressive environmental causes as making Chicago “the greenest city of America.” Daley’s green thumb, it was said, made up for his iron fist.

Beneath the dazzling surface, however, two questions persisted: Was the city really working? And for whom did it work? In

Beneath the dazzling surface, however, two questions persisted:
**Was the city really working?
 And for whom did it work?**

reality, the Daley juggernaut was going off the rails, in part because years of autocracy had weakened the city's democratic checks and balances. So had a tacit political arrangement that the mayor would go largely unchallenged on citywide issues while Chicago's 50 aldermen would rule their wards as fiefdoms. The most egregious example of the breakdown of governance: a 2008 deal to privatize Chicago street parking. In exchange for an up-front cash payment of \$1.16 billion, a privately held venture made up of investors including Morgan Stanley and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority was awarded an exclusive 75-year contract to run the city's parking meters. Instead of scrutinizing the deal, the obsequious Chicago City Council passed

it almost as fast as you can say "deep-dish pizza." In the short term, the deal allowed Daley to avoid unpopular property tax increases, but its negative impact still reverberates. The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported in 2022 that with a little more than 60 years left on the lease, the privately held venture has recovered its entire investment and has already made more than \$500 million. Well into this century, then, billions of dollars in parking meter profits will be lining investors' pockets instead of holding down property taxes or paying off city employee pension funds. And the parking meter deal is the least of Chicago's problems.

The most pressing one, persistent gun violence that has killed hundreds of people

on the city's South and West Sides, eased somewhat in 2022, yet it remains the most visible evidence of what Chicago has become: a tale of two cities—one (mostly white) that's thriving; and the other (mostly Black and Brown) that's struggling, a consequence of decades of discrimination, disinvestment, and deindustrialization. Neither Daley nor his chosen successor, Rahm Emanuel, mayor from 2011 to 2019, dealt effectively with that problem, prompting the greatest exodus of African Americans from Chicago in its history.

Chicago's outgoing mayor, the progressive Lori Lightfoot, took a different tack from her predecessors' downtown-centric focus, most notably in a program that has amassed \$2.2 billion in public and private funds to redevelop commercial corridors in 10 South and West Side neighborhoods. Significantly, the program, called Invest South/West, uses the instrument of the public-private partnership, which traditionally has backed large downtown projects like Millennium Park. Yet Lightfoot, too, was often accused of acting like a dictator—for instance, when she rammed through a deal to build Chicago's first casino, dispensing with her campaign promise to be a different sort of leader than Emanuel. In February 2023, Chicago voters, weary of her combative style and frustrated by the city's crime wave, soundly rejected her reelection bid. The higher the political and financial stakes, it seems, the more mayors are tempted to act unilaterally.

Where, then, are we to turn as we ponder the relationship between cities and democracy? Elsewhere, legislative bodies may offer a promising check on executive power, but only a political naïf would bank on them in Chicago. While the city's aldermen are often

responsive to the needs of their constituents, the much-criticized custom of "aldermanic prerogative," which gives aldermen near-total control over zoning in their wards, has bred corruption. More than 30 Chicago aldermen have pled guilty or been convicted of crimes associated with their official duties since 1972, the *Chicago Tribune* reported in 2022. To be sure, the neighborhood activists who are Jane Jacobs's successors promise a purer version of power that emanates from the bottom up. But as Ezra Klein has observed in the *New York Times*, community activism can be a tool for disfranchisement, too. Some of today's most effective activists are affluent NIMBYs who thwart the construction of desperately needed affordable housing in coastal cities, blocking upward mobility for low-income people who could benefit from urban economic growth. Even many city dwellers appear to have considered the urban prospect and concluded, "Why bother?" A 2021 headline on the website of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, summed up the bleak picture: "Declining Turnout in Big-City Elections: A Growing Problem for Democratic Accountability."

Yet if it is anything but inevitable that urban density will foster democracy, then that hardly implies the reverse—that cities and the formation of democracy are mutually exclusive. At the very least, density affords a built-in opportunity for the sort of voluntary, self-governing associations that Tocqueville viewed as essential ingredients of American democracy. It follows, then, that restoring civic engagement should be a top priority of urban policymakers. But bringing back old-fashioned civics lessons isn't the answer, not in the wake of a pandemic that enforced physical separation. A more promising

Yet if it is anything but inevitable that urban density will foster democracy, then that hardly implies the reverse—that cities and the formation of democracy are mutually exclusive.

path is to revive struggling urban areas—and, in the process, rebuild people’s faith that if they become part of the political process, their voices will be heard and their participation will help produce tangible results that improve their lives. The same approach can and should be applied to the equally urgent task of reinventing downtowns whose future is in doubt because of high office

building vacancy rates caused by remote work. It is not enough for cities to vote against authoritarian candidates in national elections. Cities need to work at the local level, on the ground—not just for the benefit of their residents but also to demonstrate to an urbanizing world that democracy itself can work.

About the Author

Pulitzer Prize winner Blair Kamin, the *Chicago Tribune*’s architecture critic from 1992 to 2021, is the author of a new collection of columns, *Who Is the City For? Architecture, Equity, and the Public Realm in Chicago*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

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Advancing Socio-spatial Equality and Inclusion through Democratic Practices in Cape Town

Mercy Brown-Luthango

Cape Town, like many cities in South Africa and the world, must navigate myriad challenges and balance competing needs and imperatives. These include eradicating the remnants of past social and spatial injustices and delivering necessary infrastructure to stimulate economic growth and attract investment, all while doing so in an environmentally and socially sustainable manner. While this is a tall order and change happens slowly, a vibrant and engaged civil society sector is making incremental progress toward transforming the city through a combination of tried and tested strategies as well as new advocacy efforts involving the use of digital technology and social media.

South African cities have a well-known history of racial separation and exclusion that predates institutionalized segregation under Apartheid. The 1919 Public Health Act and the 1934 Slum Clearance Act, for example, enabled the forced removal of certain racial groups under the guise of health and planning policies.¹ The “Apartheid City” with its associated socio-spatial inequalities was therefore the culmination of a racial segregation and subjugation project that originated from the colonial era. The Group Areas Act of 1950, however, was the main legal instrument to create the Apartheid City, which brought about the forceful removal of 3.5 million people between 1960 and 1983.² Approximately 860,000 African, Coloured,

and Indian people (as defined by South Africa's Population Registration Act of 1950) were relocated from central areas where they had lived for generations to monofunctional settlements on the margins of the city, usually far removed from employment and other livelihood opportunities.³ Under Apartheid, cities and towns in South Africa were deliberately planned to provide strict separation between places of work and residential areas for people of color, and the public transport system was hugely subsidized by the state to transport Black people between places of work and places where they were allowed to live.

Today, nearly 30 years after the dawn of democracy in 1994, South African cities are still struggling to eradicate the legacy of Apartheid spatial planning. The South African government has since put considerable effort into the provision of housing to the poor and vulnerable through one of the largest subsidized housing programs in the world.

Approximately 5 million subsidized houses and serviced sites have been delivered since 1994 as part of this program.⁴ Despite these efforts, and due to a number of structural and institutional factors, the housing backlog in South Africa increased from 1.2 million in 1994 to 2.5 million in 2020 and continues to grow.⁵ Moreover, rather than bringing about more spatial and racial integration, the delivery of state-subsidized housing has further entrenched unequal spatial patterns because the majority of housing has been delivered on the periphery of cities, where land tends to be cheaper.

This process continues to trap the majority-Black urban population in a vicious intergenerational cycle of poverty. Even those who are fortunate enough to have employment can spend up to 40 percent of their monthly income on public transport to get to and from work. South Africa is now more than 60 percent urbanized, with more people moving to cities in search of

In the context of limited state-initiated spaces for democratic engagement, civil society organizations play a vital role in amplifying the voice of marginalized communities.

better opportunities. In this context, large and growing informal settlements, often on the periphery of cities, are among the most visible manifestations of spatial inequality (see image below of Monwabisi Park in Cape Town).

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Cape Town, South Africa's second-largest city, with a population of more than 4.5 million in 2019. Cape Town is often referred to as a tale of two cities. In this city, renowned for its natural beauty and a popular destination for tourists from all over the world, completely divergent everyday lived realities coexist. Cape Town has some of the most expensive and sought-after real estate in South Africa, as well as more than 400 informal settlements and a growing

number of backyard dwellings.⁶ This translates into a housing backlog of more than 300,000 housing units in the city.⁷ Here, persistent social, spatial, and economic fragmentation is evident in the huge disparities and stark differences between the levels of income and access to infrastructure and social services that exist across different neighborhoods in the city. Residents of informal settlements and backyard dwellings live in precarious conditions without access to basic services such as water, sanitation, and electricity. Low-income areas also lack much-needed social infrastructure such as schools, clinics, and recreational facilities as well as safe and quality public spaces. Persistent spatial inequality and a lack of spatial integration in Cape Town result from



several interrelated factors that reinforce the historical spatial processes mentioned above. These include a disjuncture between housing policy ideals and implementation, public-sector housing delivery that does not match demand, and an exclusionary land and property market in which private-sector delivery is still primarily geared toward those at the middle and higher end of the market. These factors, coupled with its history of violent dispossession and displacement of Indigenous people, contribute to making Cape Town one of the most violent cities in South Africa.⁸

The social and spatial transformation of cities has been a long-term concern and ambition of the democratic government, urban practitioners, decision makers, and academics alike. This has been expressed in the development of various policy and legislative tools, including the Urban Development Framework (1997), the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013, the Integrated Urban Development Framework (2016), and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, to name a few. The work of the City Support Programme (CSP), established by the National Treasury in 2011, has focused specifically on providing support and fiscal incentives to metropolitan governments to advance spatial integration and transformation in South Africa's major cities. The CSP's Built Environment Performance Plans (BEPPs), for example, required metros like Cape Town to identify catalytic human settlement and infrastructure projects that

would advance spatial integration and socio-spatial transformation. However, progress in delivery of these projects has been slow, and the BEPPs have since been phased out.

Despite rhetoric and a commitment on the part of all levels of government, at least in policy terms, to include citizens and urban residents in the development of policy and plans that affect their lives directly, these processes remain largely top-down and exclusionary. At the local level, for example, municipalities are mandated to include residents in the identification, prioritization, and budgeting of development projects for their neighborhoods as part of their Integrated Development Plans (IDP).⁹ An IDP sets out a local government's development vision for the city or town over a five-year electoral period. However, the IDP process is widely criticized for being overly "formulaic and routine" and not creating a conducive environment for residents to contribute to and influence decision making related to where, how, and which development projects are implemented.¹⁰ For reasons that include the timing and location of meetings and the use of overly technical language, very few residents are actually able to participate meaningfully in IDP meetings.¹¹

In the context of limited state-initiated spaces for democratic engagement, civil society organizations in Cape Town play a vital role in amplifying the voice of marginalized communities in the city. Organizations such as the Development Action Group

(DAG), Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU), and the Community Organization Resource Centre (CORC) have played an important role as intermediaries between the state and organized community groups to effect more-inclusive, participatory, and democratic practices related to the upgrading of informal settlements and the development of state-subsidized housing. They have enrolled informal settlement communities in the collection of data to improve the delivery and monitoring of water and sanitation infrastructure and a host of other social services.

For the past 12 years, Ndifuna Ukwazi, another local nonprofit, alongside the Reclaim the City social movement, has run various campaigns aimed at lobbying the state to reserve well-located, state-owned land for the provision of affordable housing in the central city to reverse the legacy of Apartheid spatial planning and bring poor and working-class communities closer to employment and other opportunities. These organizations, in partnership with communities, have institutionalized democratic practices such as participatory budgeting, enumerations, community-driven audits of infrastructure, and the reblocking of informal settlements.¹² Organizations like Ndifuna Ukwazi and Reclaim the City routinely make use of social media and digital technology to shine a light on exclusionary and unjust state practices like the disposal of state-owned land that could be used for affordable housing or the plight of homeless people

in the city. As a result of years of sustained civil society lobbying, significant inroads have been made in advancing the development of inclusionary housing policy at the local- and provincial-government level.

Within the academic sphere, the African Centre for Cities—a research and teaching center that is part of the School of Architecture, Planning & Geomatics at the University of Cape Town—has, for the past 15 years, actively curated different spaces and processes of engagement between various stakeholders in the city. Initiatives such as the CityLab program, the Knowledge Transfer program, and the Integration Syndicate have been instrumental in providing spaces and creative ways for various levels of government, civil society, and academics to share experiences and insights.¹³ Such initiatives also allow stakeholders to coproduce knowledge related to urban challenges such as the creation of integrated and sustainable human settlements, the upgrading of informal settlements, urban violence, climate change, and the relationship between the built environment and improved health outcomes.

These housing and urban development nongovernmental and community-based organizations, as well as academic institutions, are using a range of democratic practices and strategies to advance the right to land and housing in the city. Sometimes these strategies involve partnering with the local municipality in various upgrading and improvement efforts; other times, they involve

Cape Town has the potential to transform from the “Apartheid City” to a socially and spatially just society.

pushing back against undemocratic and exclusionary development processes.

Cape Town remains a highly fractured and deeply divided city, and there is still much that needs to be done to eradicate intractable socioeconomic and spatial inequalities. However, it has a vibrant and active civil society composed of a range of organizations and institutions with a rich

history and a wealth of experience in democratic engagement. This bodes well for the future of the city. With its complex history, array of urban development challenges, and promising participatory practices, Cape Town has the potential to transform from the “Apartheid City” to a socially and spatially just society.

About the Author

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- 13 The African Centre for Cities' CityLab program was initiated in 2008 and was aimed at bringing together academic researchers, members of civil society, and government officials on a regular basis to coproduce policy-relevant knowledge to reduce urban poverty and inequality. The Knowledge Transfer program was initiated in 2012 and involved a collaborative partnership between academia and the local municipality. Academic researchers were "embedded" within the municipality to conduct doctoral research on a policy-relevant topic, and municipal officials were partnered with researchers to document their practices. The Integration Syndicate was a series of 10 conversations (called "episodes") among academics, NGOs, CBOs, government officials, and the private sector, hosted by the African Centre for Cities over the course of one year, to unpack and provide responses to the challenges of socio-spatial integration in Cape Town.

The Experiment of Greater Manchester: The Mayoralty as Bully Pulpit

Andy Westwood

Greater Manchester (GM), one of the United Kingdom's largest city regions, has only had an elected mayor for six years. Like other city regions in England, Manchester's experiment with democratically elected leadership dates back to a series of agreements instigated by George Osborne, chancellor at the time, during the Conservative-led coalition government of 2010–15. The city regions of the West Midlands and Teesside also gained elected mayors at that time, with other regions following suit in succeeding years.¹ In each of these places, the mayors first elected in 2017 are now serving their second terms and are fast becoming key figures in both local and national politics.²

The changes establishing democratically elected metropolitan mayors are relatively new and experimental in both their institutional form and in their exercising of specific

powers and resources. They belie a 40-year trend of centralization and power hoarding at the center—in Westminster and Whitehall—and a succession of weak, ever-changing institutional arrangements in the rest of the country. Against this instability and inequality, the new English mayors offer a model with which city region-led democracy can push back against dysfunction and destabilization at the national and global levels.

Regional Inequality, Political Disaffection, and the Case of Greater Manchester

The United Kingdom is one of the most spatially unequal countries in the Organisation

The new English mayors offer a model with which city region-led democracy can push back against dysfunction and destabilization at the national and global levels.

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Alongside changing national voting patterns after Brexit, this spatial inequality inspired the Conservative government's "Levelling Up" agenda and the publication of its white paper addressing regional and local inequality in early 2022.³ Evidence suggests that the British state's overcentralization—especially in England—has contributed to this inequality.⁴ The state's recent history, dating back to Margaret Thatcher's time as prime minister, is of weak local and regional government and a low regard for government's role and importance.

GM is emblematic of these divisions.⁵ At the heart is the growing city center of Manchester with its universities and student population—liberal and increasingly dynamic—but the majority of GM is part of a second, poorer, less productive, unhealthier, politically dissatisfied England, described by Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker as the "bifurcation" into "two Englands."⁶ In the wake of the vote to leave the European Union (seven out of 10 GM boroughs voted to leave), economic

geographer Philip McCann described this divide as a "geography of discontent."⁷

But Manchester (and its surrounding region) is also known as one of the world's first industrial cities—or, in the words of historian Asa Briggs, "the shock city of the age."⁸ The Industrial Revolution and the modern factory both began in Manchester and its surrounding towns. Rapid industrialization spawned great social movements, and Manchester became known as a radical city where trade unionism and the Cooperative and Suffrage Movements were first established. Industrialization also inspired waves of radical economic thinking—from calls for global free trade, led by industrialists such as Richard Cobden, to criticisms of capitalism, such as by Friedrich Engels, son of a local mill owner, who wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1845 and *The Communist Manifesto* with Karl Marx in 1848.

Rates of mortality from COVID-19 were 25% higher than in England as a whole.

From a market town of about 40,000 in the late 18th century, Manchester grew rapidly during the 19th century into an industrial city and the epicenter of textile manufacturing and trading; in fact, it had so many mills that it became known as “Cottonopolis.” Given this industry and period in history, Manchester’s economy was a driver of the slave trade—but also of the campaign to abolish it. A statue of Abraham Lincoln still stands in a city square, marking a strike by Manchester cotton workers who refused to use cotton imported from the Confederacy during the American Civil War.

Today, GM is largely postindustrial and a poorer city region than in its heyday. Average life expectancy is nearly two years lower for both men and women than the average for England, and rates of mortality from COVID-19 were 25 percent higher than in England as a whole. GM residents also experience higher levels and lengths of poor health than in other regions, and ill health was identified in the Greater Manchester Independent Prosperity Review (GMIPR)

as a significant cause of poor economic performance.⁹ Education and employment levels are also comparatively low: only 39.0 percent of GM residents have higher-education qualifications (compared to 43.6 percent of the country as a whole), and 8.3 percent have no qualifications (compared to 6.6 percent of the whole).

The State of Local Democracy in Greater Manchester

It is fair to say that the political and economic context of GM is challenging, and there are few guarantees that the new “metro mayor” model will either endure or ever possess the kinds of powers enjoyed in equivalent places in Europe or North America. Furthermore, local democracy has been in a state of decline. The first mayoral election, in May 2017, attracted a turnout of only 28.6 percent, and local elections routinely attract similar

turnouts: in 2022, Manchester City Council saw a turnout of 25.0 percent, and there was a turnout of only 13.9 percent for a GM police and crime commissioner in 2012 (subsequently absorbed into the powers and role of GM mayoralty). In 2021, during COVID-19, the mayoral election turnout rose to 34.7 percent, with Andy Burnham elected for a

second term with 437,024 votes (67.3 percent of votes—up from 359,352 and 63.0 percent in 2017); however, even in his last election as member of Parliament (MP) for Leigh (in the GM borough of Wigan) at the 2015 general election, Burnham was elected on a turnout of 59.6 percent.



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The Mayor of Greater Manchester—Building Institutions and Democratic Engagement

It's against this backdrop that we can consider the track record of the current—and so far only—mayor, as well as attempts to reinvigorate the politics and economy of GM. First elected in 2017, Andy Burnham is midway through a second term, recently announcing his intention to stand for a third in 2025. He took on the role after a career in national politics, initially as MP for Leigh and subsequently as a cabinet minister (chief secretary to the treasury, then secretary of state for culture and health) under Gordon Brown.

In office, Burnham has prioritized new forms of policymaking and political engagement. Given the low levels of engagement and the very recent creation of the mayoral role, he has had to build capacity and new institutions and also develop local policies in a much more consultative fashion. Both Burnham and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) officials have been quick to deploy national and international—as well as local—expertise on a series of big economic and social issues confronting the city and region. They include GMIPR, established in 2018, and the Greater Manchester Independent Inequalities Commission (GMIIC), set up in 2020.¹⁰ In turn, both commissions have helped create the mayor's overarching program, Greater Manchester Strategy 2021–2031: Good Lives

For All.¹¹ Because of the lack of local powers and city region institutions, prior to these strategies and commissions, there had been no such approaches across GM for nearly 40 years.

Both commissions were bespoke and time-limited exercises, charged with wide public and stakeholder consultation and dissemination processes. To follow up, a series of standing organizations are taking forward policy design and delivery in key areas. They include a number of citizen advisory panels to “advise, support and challenge” GM's political leaders to tackle discrimination and disadvantage. Each panel is independently chaired and helps to code-sign policies, programs, and strategies for their respective communities. In total, there are now seven equality panels established and funded by the GMCA. They include panels for disabled people, women and girls, faith and belief, LGBTQ+ and equality, race, and older people. There is also a Youth Combined Authority, with representatives from each borough.

Mayor Burnham and the GMCA have also created other new institutions in GM that take forward recommendations from the GMIPR. This has included the formation of new city-region institutions that focus on key economic priorities and boost policymaking capacity, including Innovation Greater Manchester and the Energy Innovation Agency—both of which came from long-term goals, such as the target set out in the GMIPR to be a net-zero city region by 2038.¹² Innovation Greater Manchester is chaired by a local business leader and has been established to create an “innovation ecosystem across the city-region that will

help level up our communities . . . and create the conditions for more businesses in more places to benefit from global exporting and inward investment.” The Energy Innovation Agency has been designed to “transform Greater Manchester’s energy systems making them cleaner, greener, and more sustainable, lowering carbon emissions” and to “accelerate the energy transition towards a carbon-neutral economy.”

Leading Cities

Theodore Roosevelt once famously described the US presidency as a “bully pulpit”—a platform that provided an opportunity to speak out and be listened to on a wide range of agendas. When George Osborne first announced the creation of new city-region mayors in England in 2014, he said that there were “big advantages in having an elected mayor to represent your city—to fight your corner in the world” and to be “democratically accountable to the whole city . . . with issues like transport or economic development or fighting crime.”¹³ Nearly a decade later, there are now nine mayors in city regions outside of London, with several more to come. The platform created by democratically elected mayoral leadership and used by Andy Burnham in GM has been an important driver of economic and democratic change for all of them. However, given that the offices do not yet come with very many direct powers or resources and have only existed for a relatively short time, it may be that this platform or “pulpit” is the most important aspect of the role.

Over time, national politicians and officials may decide to grant more powers and resources to mayors and to city regions like GM. In turn, that may increase the stakes for local decision making and further boost political engagement and voter turnout. But that may be the wrong way of thinking about how policy change happens. Even lacking these powers, mayors can drive engagement and local support by tackling issues in innovative ways and championing the voices and needs of GM residents.

This is building power and profile from the ground up and demands more devolution and for power to be held in and by the city region. If England’s mayors continue to build that profile locally, further improving voting and political engagement as well as economic and health outcomes, national politicians of any governing party will find it impossible to resist further expansion of their roles and powers.

About the Author

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The City as an Enabler of Urban Cogovernance

Sheila R. Foster

The famous urban theorist Jane Jacobs once wrote that “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”¹ Contemporary urbanists have embraced this idea of a city created by “everybody.” It manifests, for instance, in the notion that creating inclusive and sustainable growth in cities requires the participation of—and partnerships between—the public and private sectors on the one hand and communities and universities or civil society on the other. For example, Goal 17 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations highlights the need for “multistakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement” of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²

A variety of place-based, multiactor, multisector collaborative arrangements have already taken root in US cities. Some of these include public-private or public-community partnerships that have been successful at managing features of the urban landscape

such as parks, streets, or urban gardens or small parts of the city budget (for example, participatory budgeting). Others involve a much more complex mix of private-sector actors, neighborhood civic organizations, residents, and, often, major anchor institutions that typically operate at a large scale in the core of major cities. By relying on pooled resources from the private and nonprofit sectors and leveraging the assets of local institutions and communities, these collaborative partnerships have the potential to redistribute decision-making power and influence away from a centralized bureaucracy toward a network of engaged urban actors.

Christian Iaione and I have argued that some multistakeholder partnerships have the potential to spur collaborative economies as a driver of local economic growth and promote inclusive urban regeneration.³ These are collaborative arrangements in which communities are the main partners and civil society organizations, knowledge institutions, and local officials support and coalesce around local communities to

enable them to collaborate on equal footing with public and private actors to create just and self-sustaining communities. We caution, however, that to create truly just cities, community actors must become shareholders and not just stakeholders in these arrangements. Instead of simply having a voice in development or a seat at the table, communities must share in the value and wealth produced by these partnerships. When established as such, these collaborative arrangements have the potential to create new classes of shareholders and stewards of urban development and revitalization.

Cities can play a transformative role as an enabler or facilitator of collaborative arrangements that center and empower even the most vulnerable communities as drivers of economic and social development. They can do so because of the unique role that cities play in these multistakeholder partnerships. These collaborative arrangements have taken root largely because cities have given them legal authority and financial, land, and other resources to catalyze and support them. In each of these multistakeholder partnerships, different stakeholders can assume distinct roles. For example, universities can often help bridge relationships between the public authority, the private sector, and civic or community organizations. Civic and nonprofit organizations can encourage bottom-up solutions and experimentation and create the spaces for broad and deep resident participation. Of all these actors, however, it is the city that can provide the most essential ingredients to realize these partnerships and provide the incentives for the codesign and cocreation of innovations that are oriented toward addressing huge place-based challenges

such as affordable housing or workforce development.

The city is a core enabling partner, providing the necessary built infrastructure, which it controls, and often legal authority to effectuate and sustain these partnerships. One of the ways that cities support these efforts is to reduce the costs of cooperation and to help relevant actors leverage their efforts to achieve high economic and social payoffs from their collective action. This support might include regulatory changes and fiscal or technical support that remove barriers to cooperation or make it more beneficial or convenient for individuals to engage in cooperative behavior. In addition, local governments exert the most control and autonomy over their own infrastructure—including developable land and buildings—and can use their ability to finance goods and services through taxes, fees, and special assessments to catalyze and support these collaborations. In other words, the city provides powerful incentives for the above actors to collaborate and to cocreate and cogovern parts of the city together.

Whether these arrangements result in an inclusive development vision and whether the benefits are to be shared by the most vulnerable and marginal communities in cities depends on how they are structured and which entities are driving them. One useful distinction in assessing who benefits from these arrangements is between top-down and bottom-up collaborative arrangements.⁴ Top-down partnerships are those that are driven mostly by large or corporate anchor institutions. In a top-down approach, these institutions initiate a project and then invite residents and community groups to

Instead of simply having a voice in development or a seat at the table, communities must share in the value and wealth produced by these partnerships.

participate in some fashion. In a bottom-up approach, those large actors follow the lead of community-based organizations or groups and provide support without taking over the project or initiative. One reasonable hypothesis is that whether these arrangements arise from a bottom-up or top-down orientation is likely to shape what kind of development—and for whom—they mostly benefit.

An example of a top-down partnership is Philadelphia's University City District (UCD), which operates as a coordinating body and financing vehicle for a variety of place-based economic development initiatives in West Philadelphia. UCD was founded by leaders from neighborhood nonprofit organizations, including the three largest institutions of higher education in the area, and now engages in a range of activities, including revitalizing commercial corridors, connecting low-income residents to employment, promoting job growth, and fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. UCD is empowered by state and local law through its designation as a special district that collects

voluntary contributions from a variety of institutional and community partners. UCD's governing board is primarily composed of the interests that fund it but also includes several community associations from the surrounding neighborhoods. Despite its efforts at community involvement and promotion of inclusion in public space, UCD has been heavily criticized for aggravating preexisting and persistent inequitable development patterns within its jurisdiction, even as crime has been reduced and commercial and residential real estate developments have risen.

Another example of a top-down multistakeholder urban partnership is St. Louis, Missouri's, nonprofit Cortex Innovation Community, which manages 4.5 million square feet of mixed-use facilities, a light-rail station, and new park space. Cortex emerged out of a collaboration among local universities, healthcare providers, and other anchor institutions that seeded the initial fundraising and planning efforts following successful redevelopment efforts in the city's Central

West End neighborhood. The Cortex collaboration in St. Louis was granted powers of eminent domain and the ability to provide tax abatements. A local ordinance also enabled the Cortex innovation district to capture increased tax revenues from rising land values. Cortex's governing board includes representatives from the city of St. Louis, the St. Louis Development Corporation, three area universities, small and large private corporations, a nonprofit healthcare provider, and a nonprofit economic development corporation, among others. It is not clear that local community organizations play any role (or a significant role) in the governance of this innovation district or others around the country. Innovation

districts tend to be largely focused on knowledge-based startups and tech enterprises, supported by large anchor institutions such as those represented in the Cortex partnerships.⁵

Multistakeholder partnerships that arise from community leaders or community-based groups are bottom-up. Bottom-up multistakeholder partnerships are less common, but one that stands out is the Southwest Partnership (SWP) in Baltimore, Maryland. SWP was formed as a community development nonprofit by representatives of seven Baltimore neighborhood community groups to create a master plan to guide neighborhood growth in Southwest Baltimore. After



the partnership was created, the seven neighborhood groups then invited to the partnership six area anchor institutions—including a major university, a science and technology development company, a local museum, and a local nonprofit health system—that had a strong presence in the area and resources to contribute. Although each partner has a vote in the organization, the structure of the organization ensures that its activities will be resident-driven and that community members have a supermajority on the organization’s board. Like UCD and Cortex, SWP was empowered by the city in its partnership with local anchor institutions. For instance, SWP was able to negotiate a development agreement with the city of Baltimore to have the first right of purchase on tax-sale properties in the neighborhoods represented by SWP. In addition, SWP’s master plan was adopted by the city planning commission in 2015, enabling it to further the vision of development that would best serve residents in the neighborhoods represented by the partnership.

SWP illustrates that cities can (and do) help create the conditions for marginalized communities to play a central role in cogovernance arrangements. Cities can provide not only legal authority to these arrangements but also institutional learning, capacity building, and digital and financial tools that increase the capacity of communities to engage in multistakeholder partnerships. The facilitation and reinforcement of bottom-up multiactor partnerships is also an opportunity for more robust participation from historically marginalized populations while helping these populations overcome

structural and fiscal constraints that are a consequence of systemic race and class inequities.

One of the ways that cities around the world are facilitating these partnerships and supporting local communities in driving them is through citywide and neighborhood-based urban collaborative labs—or “co-labs.” These labs bring together different stakeholders to participate in the codesign and coconstruction of solutions to neighborhood- or city-based challenges and more generally to experiment, innovate, and scale those solutions. Mexico City’s Lab for the City (*Laboratorio para la Ciudad*), which operated under its previous mayor, was led by a young, multidisciplinary team—most of whom had no prior governmental experience—that wanted to abandon a top-down approach to urban governance and orient the local administration toward cocreation of the urban landscape. The NYCx Co-Lab initiative under New York’s previous mayor sponsored neighborhood labs where residents and community-based organizations were expected to work alongside civic technologists, startups, tech industry leaders, and city agencies to ensure that the most vulnerable ethnic and low-income communities reaped the tangible benefits from the city’s innovation economy. More recently, Reggio Emilia created Italy’s first Open Lab as a space for cocreation, incubation, and acceleration of innovative neighborhood-based, community-owned services and infrastructure.

Despite these efforts, even the best-designed and bottom-up partnerships can be or be-

Even the best-designed and bottom-up partnerships can become problematic if they replicate power asymmetries.

come problematic if they replicate power asymmetries in which some partners have more influence and concentrated civic power than others. This includes access to the mayor or other local leaders and local power-brokers that exert outsize influence over policymakers. The further risk is that highly resourced, high-capacity private actors may form partnerships with local government officials and community organizations but then exercise and leverage their influence once the partnership is underway. For these reasons, cities can play a more active role in making sure that the benefits and revenue produced by these partnerships are directed toward local communities. Cities can facilitate this benefit and revenue sharing by requiring, or helping to negotiate,

community benefit agreements or benefit-sharing agreements in which local communities receive development dividends or limited equity in new development.

Increasingly, cities are leveraging their infrastructure and financial resources to support the creation of special-purpose institutions such as community land trusts (CLTs), cooperative and limited equity corporations, or participatory budgeting processes. These are designed to invest or reinvest economic capital into community initiatives and to support local collaborative economies. Recently, many cities have stepped up support of CLTs, in particular, to enable these nonprofit entities to acquire and develop land to create affordable housing, commercial space, or

green and recreational resources in communities that lack these assets. Cities such as New York and Los Angeles are supporting the creation of these entities by transferring vacant lots and underutilized buildings to CLTs, providing property-tax exemptions for CLTs, offering first priority in property-tax auctions to CLTs, and funding the rehabilitation of acquired properties into affordable housing and other community infrastructure. CLTs effectively create a shareholder or stewardship relationship between those that govern the trust—typically a mix of property users, community residents, and public and private stakeholders—and the users and surrounding communities that directly benefit from the goods and services it provides. Outside of the United States, cities are also treating empty or underutilized land and structures akin to common goods by recognizing the right of city residents to cocreate and cogovern these spaces through public–community partnerships that provide shelter for refugees and homeless persons, workspaces for remote

workers and artists, affordable long-term housing, makerspaces, and community gardens, among other uses.⁶

As these examples suggest, the city’s role as an enabler or facilitator of different kinds of collaborative partnerships can entail significant infrastructure investment in communities—not only as participants in larger economic development partnerships but also as coequal collaborators with public and private actors in promoting inclusive and sustainable development. The distributed urban cogovernance system that characterizes a collaborative city, or “co-city,” is intended to share the resources of the city to enable communities, particularly those with few resources, to become central actors in coproducing common goods and services responsive to their needs and to share in their material benefits. This sharing entails cities investing in their neighborhoods and communities as productive units of inclusive social and economic development.

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Understanding Youth Democratic Disenchantment: A New Frame for Youth Political Engagement in Cities

Scott Warren

Across the world, we are witnessing the worrisome rise of authoritarianism amidst widespread democratic decay. Governments are struggling to engage with a public, especially young people, that increasingly doubts that democracies can deliver equitable economic conditions. While the youngest generations are most distrustful of the promise of democracy, they also are most primed and needed to reimagine the governance system, especially at the local, city level that most affects their everyday lives.

Despite an increasing recognition from officials and scholars alike of the need to tackle democratic erosion, too many proposed solutions and reforms to consolidate demo-

cratic governance are focused on elite policy-makers at the federal level. National reforms to combat issues like corruption and promote citizen engagement are important. They are also insufficient. Instead, there is an opportunity—and a need—to focus on the unique role of cities in the fight for democracy. Because of the nature of their intimate work with residents, local governments are uniquely positioned to fight back against authoritarianism and demonstrate that democracy can deliver.

With cities taking center stage in the fight for democracy, local leaders should pay specific attention to the demographic perhaps most skeptical of democracy in the current moment: young people. Right now,

A majority of young people in the United States (56%) feel that the politics of today are no longer able to meet the challenges the country is facing.

young people in aggregate do not believe that current iterations of democracy can work. A recent Harvard Institute of Politics poll found that a majority of young people in the United States (56 percent) feel that the politics of today are no longer able to meet the challenges the country is facing.¹

Despite this pessimism, however, younger generations, endowed with energetic idealism and impatient irreverence alike, can play a pivotal role in democratic renewal. Young people are creating a sense of urgency and promoting new ideas to solving wicked and urgent problems such as economic inequality and climate change. While these challenges are global in nature, cities, because of their proximity to young residents, potentially provide the best opportunity to listen to the concerns of young people effectively and authentically and to engage the most skeptical yet critical demographic in the political process.

In a push to engage young people in reimagining democracy, traditional governmental tools call for reinvention. City

leaders can seize the opportunity to move past traditional and temporal mechanisms of engagement such as voter education and registration. Instead, local leaders should embrace a new frame for youth political engagement. Leaders must recognize young people's frustration with the democracy they experience and must engage them informally—outside of institutional politics. Cities have a unique opportunity and obligation to engage youth outside of the electoral process itself and, in doing so, reimagine democracy as a vibrant system that entails more than an election every two to four years.

Many city leaders recognize the imperative of engaging their youngest constituents in democracy but struggle in the endeavor. In meetings with local leaders as part of the German Marshall Fund's Cities Fortifying Democracy project, officials expressed dismay at their attempts to work with youth.² They noted that young people often would refuse to participate in the formal political process, as evidenced by low voting rates and attendance at city meetings. Young

people may also demonstrate unrealistic expectations of governmental officials, expecting immediate change to challenging issues such as safety and policing.

The result of this engagement is often a mutual misunderstanding and frustration between city officials and young people, which can lead to a vicious cycle: Young people turn away from formal politics, leading frustrated elected officials to deprioritize youth issues in favor of the issues of voters who do participate (who tend to be older and more affluent). When youth issues are deprioritized, young people feel unheard. The cycle continues—and worsens.

So how can cities break the cycle and look to work with young people more effectively, authentically hearing their views and concerns? One necessary solution is to view youth political engagement in a new frame—one that understands why young people are turning away from institutional politics and acknowledges that youth are participating in new and innovative ways. This is not to abdicate the importance of participating in the formal political process but rather to expand the definition of what it means to participate in democracy itself.

This new conceptualization is necessary because political leaders and pundits tend to view youth politics almost exclusively through the lens of electoral politics. As evidence of this, at the end of every election cycle, opinions abound on the role of young people. In the aftermath of the 2022 midterms in the United States, for example, some studies demonstrated that young people had a comparatively higher turnout—the second highest in a midterm in 30 years—affecting

key races.³ Other more local reports, predominantly in states without elections of national repercussions, focused on how young people lagged behind other demographics.⁴ The reality of this distinction gives credence to the argument that youth are too often treated as transactional assets in important elections, such as swing-state US Senate races, rather than as capable, independent political actors.

The subsequent analysis has vacillated between hope that young people are taking the reins and are uniquely fit to transform politics and pessimism about their apparent indifference, with others noting that a 27 percent turnout is still demonstrative of relative apathy among youth toward the political process. Irrespective of which view is correct, each focuses on traditional metrics, such as voting.⁵

The reality is that this horse race analysis of the role of young people in elections is an ineffective mechanism for understanding how youth view political behavior. Young people are increasingly frustrated with a form of institutional politics that they feel does not deliver results geared toward the fundamental issues they care about. This frustration manifests on the streets through protesting urgently for climate change or decrying a scourge of police brutality that feels unending.⁶ Young people want change. But they do not think, perhaps rationally, that the current political system can deliver it. Accordingly, instead of viewing engagement through formal politics, officials, especially city leaders, can meet young people where they are and recognize that youth are participating in creative, informal ways. Young people are using digital media to organize across cities and borders to combat the

Young people want change. But they do not think, perhaps rationally, that the current political system can deliver it.

closing of civic spaces; employing creative outlets such as music, art, and theater to express their opinions; and pushing for institutions that affect their daily lives, such as workplaces and schools, to become more democratic. Additionally, in the wake of the COVID-19 shutdowns, young people engaged in mutual-aid societies, providing support to their fellow citizens outside of formal institutional means.

The start to understanding this new frame is a recognition that young people around the world are increasingly becoming disenchanted with institutional politics itself. Almost half (42 percent) of young people feel that their vote does not make a difference. Young people are also skeptical that the government is serious about addressing issues of racial inequity. In the wake of the protests in Ferguson,

Missouri, beginning in 2014, and other racially charged conflicts, 49 percent of millennials said they had “not much” or “no” confidence in the American justice system.⁷

While there is sometimes a tendency to see our political issues as uniquely American, this youth frustration is bubbling up throughout the world. A 2021 European Parliament youth survey found that the majority of respondents felt that they do not have much—or any—say over important decisions, laws, and policies affecting them.⁸ Relatedly, a recent Bath University study of 10,000 young people in 10 countries (including the United States) found that 65 percent of young people believe the government is failing young people, 75 percent think humanity is doomed, and 92 percent view the future as frightening.⁹

Young people are manifesting their frustration by divorcing from political parties. A 2016 UN Global Youth Report found that political party membership is less prevalent among those under the age of 30 than among older adults.¹⁰

This exasperation is not irrational. Increasing inequality, potentially existential threats to the climate, and correlated governmental inaction propel cynicism. In the United States, for example, the Federal Reserve's Distribution of Household Wealth index demonstrates that while millennials make up close to a quarter of the population, they hold just 3 percent of wealth—whereas baby boomers held 21 percent of wealth at the same age.¹¹

Youth skepticism that governmental officials are serious about change leads to broader disillusionment with the system itself. Worrisome studies indicate that young people are turning away from democracy as a governing system, and that they seem more predisposed to authoritarianism than older generations.¹² In a recent poll, 43 percent of older Americans voiced opposition to the idea of the military taking over when the government is incompetent or failing to do its job. But only 19 percent of young people were opposed to the military taking over in such a situation.¹³ There may be other reasons that youth are straying from democracy, such as potential racial animosity, but at the core is a sentiment that democratic governance will not provide for their needs.

Relatedly, studies demonstrate that young people have become more predisposed to technocracy and to experts making decisions regardless of public sentiment. In the United

States, 46 percent of people aged 18 to 29 indicate that it would be a good thing for experts, not elected officials, to make decisions, whereas only 36 percent of those over 50 years of age indicate that belief—a 10-percentage-point (p.p.) difference. This gap is even greater in Australia (19 p.p.), Japan (18 p.p.), the United Kingdom (14 p.p.), Sweden (13 p.p.), and Canada (13 p.p.).¹⁴

As populists around the world gain power, definitionally using rhetoric that focuses on pitting “the people” against elites, there is a risk that young people will turn to alternative solutions. Young people have indicated a greater recovery in satisfaction with democracy when populist leaders come to power. On average, according to a global study from the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge, individuals aged 18 to 34 articulated a 16-percentage-point increase in satisfaction with democracy during the first term in office of a populist leader, irrespective of whether this leader expressed left-leaning or right-leaning tendencies.¹⁵ Young people, because of the aforementioned irreverence and idealism, are primed to rise against an elite that they feel marginalizes their opinions.

This glamorization of populists, technocrats, and other governing models poses a challenging reality for youth engagement. Young people are hungry for demonstrable change in a moment in which they have been so frustrated by a lack of real action from their elected officials. They are beginning to associate this lack of action not only with institutional politics but also with democracy itself, perhaps viewing democracy as inextricably intertwined with corruption and a lack of real and intensive policy action.

Herein lies the opportunity: young people in the United States (and throughout the world) want change. But they do not believe that institutional politics can achieve change. The corresponding action from city leaders should not be to dismiss young people but to engage them more effectively and authentically in our democracy.

First, city leaders must recognize and acknowledge that youth frustration with institutional politics is valid. Young people want to feel heard rather than being dismissed as not understanding how the system works. Because of their proximity to youth,

city leaders, specifically, can authentically bring young people into conversations and decision making.

Second, leaders should meet young people where they are rather than expecting them to continually engage in traditional politics. This could involve trainings with elected officials in how to engage on social media, avoiding the pitfalls of members of Congress clumsily speaking about technology.¹⁶ City leaders should also work to understand as valid the informal mechanisms of youth political engagement, such as using the arts to express frustration.



Finally, it is important to not completely discount the electoral process. It is critical, of course, that young people participate at the ballot box in addition to these informal methods. To do so, instead of focusing on slotting youth into existing electoral systems, city leaders can transform governance itself to ensure that young people recognize that their voices are valued. This could include following the example of many European countries and cities in lowering the voting age to 16, expanding the suffrage system.¹⁷ Cities should also focus on real, non-tokenized opportunities for youth to be involved in government, such as creating opportunities for participatory budgeting and

allowing youth to decide where tax dollars are allocated.¹⁸

There is no silver-bullet solution to engaging young people in the political process. But crucially, we need to reframe their engagement. Young people are not apathetic; they are thirsting for a new form of engagement that will help solve the pressing issues of the day and build a better future. Rather than chastising them, city leaders must listen to their concerns and support their creative forms of engagement. Young people may be the antidote necessary to saving democracy—if we only listen to what they are saying.

About the Author

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Infrastructure for Distribution: A Post-COVID-19 Challenge to Urban Democracy

By Michael Cohen

The infrastructure of cities is a determining factor in urban civic life. City populations have a significant need for physical infrastructure services (whether water supply, electricity, sanitation, transport, healthcare provision, or environmental management) and social infrastructure (for healthcare and education). How such services are provided affects much of the content of the debate about the quality of governance and the extent of social justice. In rich societies, urban residents frequently take infrastructure services for granted, but in many urban areas around the world, there are severe unmet needs for most services. The “how” here refers to the democratic processes by which user demands are framed, communicated, and received by implementing agencies.

This issue of infrastructure became a central problem in March 2020 through the international and national responses to

the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid contagion of millions of people worldwide demonstrated the weakness of health infrastructure in most countries. The policy response to the pandemic was social distancing and “flattening the curve,” which meant reducing the demand for health infrastructure services so that hospitals and clinics were not overrun with patients. In other words, most countries and cities did not have the infrastructure to care for sick people at the height of the pandemic.

Studies of infrastructure within the United States, as well as internationally, have shown that most infrastructure projects do not meet the expectations of engineers and planners. Such projects are projected to provide services for 50 years or more, but after 15 years, they are plagued by potholes, water-main breaks, failures in the electric grid, and uncertain maintenance.¹ Their benefits are not sustained, leaving

“More” is not enough. We need a *different* way to construct cities that reflects the needs and priorities of communities.

communities to face frequent infrastructure failures. This syndrome reflects a supply bias failure on the part of those who design and construct infrastructure. This supply bias has been identified in studies by the World Bank and the US National Academy of Sciences. The result is that users, communities, households, and individuals all pay the price of infrastructure failure. Nonetheless, the response of infrastructure providers is to say we need more infrastructure.

This situation is profoundly undemocratic. “More” is not enough. We need a *different* way to construct cities that reflects the needs and priorities of communities, not the providers. Infrastructure should not be about public-private partnerships and

assuring the return on capital of private investors. Rather, it should be about meeting the needs of the people who need it most.

This problem was vividly demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did we not have enough hospital beds to meet the needs of the people in city after city, but it also became clear that our cities had the wrong composition of infrastructure: too many highways and energy systems and not enough social infrastructure. The fact that New York City had to build “tent hospitals” in Central Park and request that the US Navy send hospital ships to the East River to receive COVID-19 patients in 2020–21 is a dramatic indicator of this badly unbalanced composition of infrastructure.

Our recent COVID-19 experience is the proverbial canary in the coal mine, alerting us that our built cities and their infrastructure services will not be able to withstand the real stress likely to come from climate change. Just as the US government should not be subsidizing flood insurance in coastal areas, our policies should be forward-looking, assessing the impacts of likely risks and determining our options in managing them. Similarly, the increased visibility of structural inequalities in the United States and other countries requires us to give priority attention to this subject.

We need to rethink the policy and theoretical contexts in which we consider infrastructure. Most policymakers—and certainly most economists—view infrastructure as an input to the process of economic growth. This goes back to the 1955 work of Nobel laureate

Sir W. Arthur Lewis, a West Indian economist, who wrote about what he called “social overhead capital,” a needed input to growth. Yet we know now that growth is a necessary but insufficient condition for sustainable development, social progress, or social justice. To achieve these objectives, we need a new way to consider infrastructure and the material world. I suggest we consider the concept of “infrastructure for distribution,” which refers to the central role that infrastructure should play in affecting distributive outcomes.

We need to understand that the justification of infrastructure investment must shift to include the challenge of reducing multiple forms of inequalities that also threaten democratic governance. This was well illustrated by the debate about the White House proposals for infrastructure in



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which President Biden sought to include childcare as a form of infrastructure. He was certainly correct. Parents without childcare cannot participate fully in job markets. Yet the Republican rejection of this broader definition of infrastructure forcefully suggests that our definitions need to change if we are to have truly meaningful shared prosperity.

Yes, bridges, subways, drainage systems, and many other forms of conventional infrastructure are needed throughout the United States—and, indeed, around the world. But social progress and social justice will not be achieved by pouring more concrete. We need to ask several key questions: Who is the infrastructure for, and what social objective is it designed to support? Which cities and neighborhoods are deficient in their stocks of infrastructure services? How can governments at all levels assure that deficient neighborhoods are not left behind?

These questions go to the heart of democracy. In the 1950s, urban planner Robert

Moses built highways throughout the New York metropolitan area in part by knocking down buildings and dividing neighborhoods. These tactics are no longer socially or politically acceptable. To some forward-looking thinkers such as Jane Jacobs, they were not acceptable then, either. I live on a block south of Washington Square in New York that was designated by Moses to be replaced by a highway—a block that only exists today as a result of the broader social vision of Jane Jacobs and her neighbors.

Infrastructure is a testing ground for our most basic democratic values. In the 1990s, one architect and urban planner critically defined architecture as a divisive force. We must do better—and we can. At that same time, George Rowe, the African American director of public works for Cincinnati, Ohio, decided that to plan an infrastructure improvement program for his city, he needed to walk every block of the city. He talked with residents to understand their priorities, such as which

corners were dangerous for children walking to schools. This led to a “user-based program” focused on what economists call “the demand side,” otherwise known as “the people.”

Asking people what they need should be the first step in building cities. It is also the first step in building local democracies. The sec-

ond step is listening to people and translating those messages into more-just social and physical realities.

Many communities around the world have figured out how to take these steps. But, as a Swahili proverb reminds us, “Those who have arrived have a long way to go.”

About the Author

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How Cities Are Connecting Climate and Social Goals to Strengthen Democracy

Hannah Abdullah

In our time of climate crisis and government pledges to lower emissions, democracies face a new challenge: to ensure that climate policies are transparent, democratic, and just.

Interlinkages between democratic backsliding and stalling climate policies are a global phenomenon that takes different forms, ranging from climate science denialism and disinformation campaigns to governments that stifle meaningful public debate on climate change and how to fight it.

At another level, democratic values are also undermined by climate policies that fail to equally distribute the benefits and burdens of interventions to reduce carbon emissions and to boost resilience to climate hazards across societies. Movements like the Yellow

Vest Protests in France, which opposed President Macron's fuel tax, brought into sharp relief how low-income households and frontline communities that are disproportionately affected by pollution and extreme weather patterns are often negatively impacted by legislative changes.

In many ways, the additional burden that decarbonization can place on vulnerable groups—from rising energy costs to job losses in carbon-intensive industries—is directly related to their historical exclusion from decision- and policymaking processes and barriers to accessing information. Lacking representation, a voice, and knowledge of climate and energy legislation, frontline communities face many obstacles to fending for their needs and interests in a warming world.

Cities play a pivotal role in the development of holistic climate solutions that seek to tackle rather than exacerbate inequality and that promote the engagement of marginalized groups.

Taking advantage of these tensions, populists like to accuse the climate agenda of being socially blind. But such debates often rest on a false dichotomy between green and social change that is upheld by badly designed, one-dimensional climate policies that have the sole goal of cutting emissions from sectors such as transport or housing. Instead, in today's world of multiplying crises, we need climate solutions that work across policy silos, addressing the interconnections between emergencies and their shared root causes. Soaring income inequality calls for integrative approaches that lower emissions while building a more just and democratic economy that supports those who have been most excluded and exploited under the current linear, extractive system.¹

As the level of government closest to the people and as sandboxes for policy innovation, cities play a pivotal role in the development of holistic climate solutions that seek to tackle rather than exacerbate

inequality and that promote the engagement of marginalized groups. Experimentation at the local level is showing how—if combined with a social agenda—green interventions such as the energy-efficient retrofitting of housing can help disadvantaged communities thrive and reinforce democratic processes.²

The passing of historic climate legislation in the United States and Europe has created both new needs and opportunities to strengthen the nexus among decarbonization, justice, and democracy. In 2022, the US Senate passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), allocating \$369 billion over the next decade to fight climate change and drive the clean energy transition, and the European Union finalized its “Fit for 55” legislative package, which aims to put the bloc on track to reach its Green Deal targets. Both pieces of legislation acknowledge the need to protect vulnerable communities and have put in place unprecedented financial provisions to this end.³ Translating these

climate justice ambitions into concrete programs will involve much trial and error, and success will hinge on fast learning. The US federal government and the European Commission would be well advised to work closely with—and learn from—cities in this process.

Five Climate Justice Principles That Guide Urban Action

Over the past decade, US and international cities have moved from viewing decarbonization as a purely technical challenge toward incorporating social- and environmental-justice goals into their climate and sustainability plans and centering the values of equity and democracy.⁴ Cities are increasingly recognizing that the work of confronting the climate crisis is an opportunity to build healthier and fairer communities.⁵

Local authorities have developed a wide range of practices and strategies to promote a just transition toward a carbon-neutral economy. The following five climate-justice principles come up repeatedly in these initiatives and drive climate action in cities around the world, especially in the United States and Europe.

1. Meeting the needs of the most vulnerable first. Cities are responsible for more than 70 percent of global carbon emissions.⁶ Decarbonizing urban life will involve fundamental changes to the main threads of the urban fabric, from housing to transport and land use. If introduced without adequate

guardrails, these changes can propel expulsions from living space, services, and professional livelihoods. “Green gentrification”—sudden decreases in affordability as a result of environmental interventions such as parks or low-traffic areas in previously low-income neighborhoods—is one of the most common environmental drivers of urban displacement.⁷ The principle of meeting the needs of the most vulnerable first ensures that vulnerable groups that have been wronged by past policies are not further excluded.⁸ A growing number of city climate plans pursue this principle by combining social and ecological goals. However, cities’ limited legal competencies in fields such as rent control, budgetary constraints, and the urgency for climate action often make this hard. Policy innovations such as community benefit agreements and participatory budgeting can help municipalities circumvent political, legal, and financial barriers.

2. Empowerment through community engagement and collective knowledge.

This principle is about democratically and inclusively pursuing climate policies that reduce inequality. Disadvantaged groups that suffer disproportionately from the burdens of climate action and inaction tend to be historically marginalized from policymaking processes as well as from climate and environmental knowledge and education. Working to address this problem, cities such as Malmö, Sweden, are promoting procedural-justice mechanisms that engage socioeconomically, racially, or otherwise marginalized peoples in deliberative processes concerning green urban interventions.⁹ With conventional town hall consultations often being an ineffective tool for reaching and engaging vulnerable groups, some

local authorities are developing “justice as capabilities” approaches that seek to learn from communities while empowering people with the knowledge, skills, and enabling conditions to make sense of and share their experience, evaluate options, and voice their needs and interests. A creative example of this is how Los Angeles is using citizen science programs to educate low-income communities on air pollution and engage them in measuring and tackling the problem in their neighborhoods.¹⁰ Programs like these foster community infrastructure and collective knowledge while promoting bottom-up climate action.

3. Energy democracy. Cities such as Boston; Austin, Texas; and Hamburg, Germany, are laboratories for decentralized energy systems that are powered by renewable sources such as solar and wind.¹¹ These cities promote the principle of energy democracy: the redistribution of energy ownership, decision making, and profit more equitably across gender, socioeconomic status, and race.¹² Energy cooperatives, publicly and community-owned energy infrastructure, and microgrids are all examples of how local, small-scale energy installations can combine the transition to renewables with the potential for social justice and democracy.¹³ By empowering households, communities, and businesses to own and manage local energy infrastructure, many cities are ensuring that profits stay within communities and help pay for services. Furthermore, cities such as Vienna, Austria, are embracing the principle of energy democracy by retrofitting and building energy-efficient social and low-income housing to lower residents’ bills and improve health standards.¹⁴

4. Polluter pays. Since the turn of the century, more than 250 European cities have adopted the “polluter pays” principle through the implementation of low emission zones (LEZs) that aim to tackle air pollution, reduce road traffic, and raise additional revenue for public transport. LEZs restrict vehicle access to central urban areas, banning the most-polluting vehicles or charging an access fee. While criticized for constraining spatial accessibility and placing a financial burden on disadvantaged groups, LEZs can potentially bring environmental justice to low-income communities that contribute less to but are more exposed to air pollution.¹⁵ Cities such as London, England, are addressing this tension between climate risks and socioeconomic vulnerability by building equity mechanisms—from scrapping and retrofitting schemes to free public-transport passes—into their LEZ policies.¹⁶ In the United States, where Santa Monica, California, is the only city to have introduced an LEZ pilot in 2022, much can be learned from how European cities are weighing and integrating considerations of environmental, social, and economic justice using the polluter pays principle.¹⁷

5. Circular and restorative economic policies. Local just transitions call for redesigning urban economies. Cities such as Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Portland, Oregon, are doing this by connecting their climate action with new economic thinking and acting that repurposes our economic system to generate positive environmental and social outcomes.¹⁸ At the core of this approach stands the principle of a circular and restorative economy that ensures everyone’s essential needs are met without putting too much pressure on the planet’s life-supporting

systems.¹⁹ The COVID-19 crisis underscored this principle, with many city leaders striving for a local economic recovery that not only secures livelihoods but also builds back healthier, more resilient, and just communities.

Transatlantic Learning around Climate Justice and Democracy

Integrating justice and democracy principles into urban climate planning is a complex task. Although an increasing number of cities are stepping up to the challenge, they face many hurdles. Some of these can be addressed by looking at how cities in other contexts and countries are tackling the problem.

US and EU cities, in particular, have much to learn from one another. While European cities are outperforming their peers across the Atlantic when it comes to setting and meeting climate and decarbonization targets, US cities are generally ahead when it comes to formulating integrative policies that link decarbonization with social justice and democracy.²⁰

Initiatives such as the European Union's Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission, which supports more than 100 European cities in becoming carbon neutral by 2030, testify to the climate ambition of European cities.²¹ However, many of these cities struggle to build broader equity and democracy mechanisms into their climate action. In Europe, debates about climate justice tend to be framed in terms of a just economic transition and focused on compensating communities, workers, and regions dependent on fossil



The future of democracy in the western world will heavily depend on climate policies being both ambitious and just.

fuels. At the city level, officials who want to adopt a multidimensional approach to climate justice that goes beyond economic redistribution to also address other inequalities related to race, gender, age, or disability often fail because of the lack of adequate data about racial and gender disparities and corresponding national or EU policy frameworks, among other factors.²²

By contrast, US cities tend to operate in a more established and nuanced climate-justice discourse. The US environmental-justice movement has fought for the rights of communities of color and marginalized groups for decades. These social movements have contributed to an environmental-justice legal framework as well as activist tool kits

that feed into policy debates and actions. Many US cities have equity officers (a rarity in Europe), and the collection of data on racism and other forms of discrimination allows them to understand equity gaps, set common indicators in order to assess the impact of municipal policies, and raise outcomes for all groups over time.²³ Large US cities are driving climate justice by increasingly drawing on these capacities and data in their climate work, especially to address interlinkages between racial and climate injustices.²⁴ For example, the climate action plan of Oakland, California, brings together many of the five climate justice principles listed in this essay to address the unequal distribution of environmental harms across the city's neighborhoods and to alleviate

the burden of pollution, high energy costs, and energy insecurity placed on low-income communities of color in West Oakland.²⁵ More transatlantic dialogue on interlinkages between climate risks and social vulnerabilities and how they are wrapped up in broader processes of democratic backsliding could benefit both European and US cities. European cities could learn from the multidimensional climate-justice approaches of their North American peers that tackle discrimination related to race, gender, and other factors and apply these to their ambitious climate goals. In turn, this knowledge transfer could inform and boost the more modest decarbonization goals of many US cities and drive climate ambition in North America.

The future of democracy in the western world will heavily depend on climate policies being both ambitious and just. As the level of government closest to people and their daily problems, cities find themselves at the forefront of dealing with the nexus between the crises of climate change and representative democracy. US and European cities are—each in their own way—leading policy innovation to address this complex challenge.

Through knowledge exchange and joint learning, they will be in a stronger position to advance policies that accelerate a just climate and energy transition.

About the Author

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Entrepreneurial Local Government for Global Impact: The Case of New York City

Penny Abeywardena

Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the mayor of New York City, is sometimes called the city’s “little White House.” Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela, among others, passed through its doors at critical points in their careers, making it one of the most storied buildings in America. It is where the impossible can suddenly become the possible.

In 2014, I met with Mayor Bill de Blasio, then just months into his first term, on the porch of Gracie Mansion overlooking the East River. He asked me to achieve a goal that, if not impossible, was certainly audacious: he wanted me to lead an effort to expand the mission of the Mayor’s Office of International Affairs (MOIA) from constituent services—providing diplomatic security, parking facilitation, and troubleshooting for thousands of United Nations diplomats—to agenda setting, outreach, and

collaboration on global issues such as climate change, gender equity, and sustainability. MOIA had been downstream of agenda setting; he wanted it upstream.

The conditions for such a transformation were, in some respects, perfect. Mayor de Blasio came into office with an unprecedentedly strong win at the polls, a significant budget surplus, and a close affiliation with global climate change via his advocacy for Hurricane Sandy reconstruction. The city itself was also an ideal environment; New York had a critical mass of international ties that no other city could match: the United Nations headquarters, 193 permanent missions to the United Nations, affiliate agencies such as UNICEF, 116 consulates, and dozens of economic trade missions. Furthermore, New York City has more foreign-born residents (more than 3.2 million) than any other American city. In 2013, the city implemented an innovative, environment-

friendly bike-sharing program that had been developed in European cities, and the program was proving to be very popular. Finally, Mayor de Blasio's predecessor, Mike Bloomberg, had primed the public for a more global collaboration with other cities through his participation in C40, a coalition of megacities fighting climate change.

Still, New Yorkers were ambivalent about the hordes of foreign diplomats who were temporary residents, the periodic traffic jams caused by UN events, and the idea that foreign public policies and programs could be useful in the five boroughs. The city's politics has always been byzantine. With a population larger than that of many nations, implementing any program or policy in a timely way posed considerable headaches. Moreover, the top of the de Blasio agenda was crowded with issues such as education, affordable housing, crime reduction, and income inequality.

Our proposal for the Mayor's Office of International Affairs had a few advantages. Foremost, its rationale was clear and readily understandable by stakeholders ranging from taxpayers to massive sister agencies. New York could at least learn from government successes and failures around the world, regardless of whether those came from cities in France, Brazil, or Kenya. Likewise, nations and cities from around the world could benefit from New York's experience. The mayor was willing to be flexible as we developed our approach and let our team move rapidly. Further, MOIA had an uncommon level of access: rather than channeling its work through a deputy mayor, as was the case with other agencies, MOIA had a direct line of reporting and face-to-face access to the mayor himself.

Listen Up

In politics, if the goal is to move fast and achieve something big, one needs to spend a lot of time listening. Genuine listening enables one to map others' needs and goals across the political landscape, identify assets and allies (especially incoming, optimistic leaders), and spot opportunities to be catalytic.

The first six months of my tenure were devoted to reaching out well beyond our primary constituency of diplomats to encompass our sister agencies that didn't work with MOIA or even know about us. Citizens, who had never been engaged in appraising the value of hosting the diplomatic corps in New York City, were brought into the process as well. This period of listening and engaging was invaluable. It helped ensure our programming was tailored to our unique position in city government, and it helped us ensure we wouldn't waste taxpayer dollars duplicating what other agencies were already doing. This process allowed us to maximize our minimal resources as well as identify the partners we needed so we could "punch above our weight."

Going Global

MOIA historically worked on operational and social aspects of supporting the diplomatic corps. Drawing on the feedback from our listening and outreach, we then shifted toward policy advocacy, strategic partnerships, and fostering local-government influence on the global stage. One of the biggest challenges was changing the mind-set of stakeholders within and outside of city government. Many had never worked with

MOIA and were not familiar with its mission and strategy. Others knew about us but did not appreciate our multiple value propositions. Still others recognized the value but initially regarded the reach as politically or geographically limited.

As we pushed for new systems and platforms, I was told dozens of times that the city's engagement with the global community happens spontaneously because, well, we're New York City. If the world will come to us anyway, why bother?

MOIA was a small, relatively obscure agency with a miniscule budget: a small fraction of 1 percent of the city's annual budget. But we were able to succeed and expand our reach by creating trust, building mutually beneficial partnerships, and being opportunistic. Roughly a year after my meeting with Mayor de Blasio at Gracie Mansion, we unveiled two programs that were the product of our new strategy. They were developed to showcase local policy as well as create more opportunities for civic engagement, and they became the linchpins of our strategy for the ensuing years. This meant bringing a diverse array of people into the dialogue and process, from city sanitation experts to youth in the South Bronx who worked to realize the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their neighborhood.

The first program was Global Vision | Urban Action, which served as a bridge between Mayor de Blasio's sustainability initiative, OneNYC, and the UN-led SDGs. OneNYC was the de Blasio administration's strategy to build a stronger and more just city for all New Yorkers. In April 2015, New York City committed to the principles of growth, equity, sustainability, and resiliency through a ground-

breaking strategy that became a model for sustainable development at the local level. The consultative process to develop OneNYC, which began in late 2014, included more than 70 agencies; city residents and businesses; and an advisory board of civic leaders, policy specialists, and community leaders.

The principle of leaving no one behind was central to OneNYC. To truly achieve our aspirations, New York City focused its efforts on interagency coordination and inclusion to ensure that all who wished to participate and contribute were given an opportunity. The explicit inclusion of the principle of equity in OneNYC was critical because a widening opportunity gap threatened the city's future. Accountability was also a crucial element, and it was solidified through clear commitments, milestones, metrics, and an annual progress report to be published every year on Earth Day.

When world leaders committed to the SDGs in 2015, we recognized the unmistakable similarities and synergies with OneNYC. The grassroots consensus created within NYC via OneNYC was connecting with the transnational consensus formed by the SDGs: different types of roads converging at the same location. We established Global Vision | Urban Action as a framework to learn from the SDGs as well as share the city's innovations in sustainability with cities and countries across the globe.

Our program mapped the links between OneNYC and the SDGs, invited NYC's diplomatic corps to visit our communities to see firsthand how NYC was implementing SDGs, and fostered dialogues about shared challenges. We brought city voices to the United Nations to infuse local perspec-

tives into policy discussions about SDG implementation. In addition, we convened events at the United Nations to enable the sharing of ideas among local, national, and international stakeholders on issues ranging from mental health and gender equity to decent work and economic growth. These events proved to be an excellent opportunity both to strengthen implementation by sharing best practices and to build broader political support for achieving the SDGs. Most importantly, they brought local government to the global conversation in an unprecedented manner.

Staying Power

The other key initiative MOIA launched in 2015 was the NYC Junior Ambassadors program, which targeted the need to engage young people in the mission of tying the local to the global. The program connected the work of the United Nations to students across the city, empowering them to learn and act like global citizens even at a young age. Young people from New York's most vulnerable communities were educated about topics ranging from climate change and gender equity to the refugee crisis. They learned to think critically about how to make a difference locally, and they committed to actions in their own neighborhoods.

These two programs, along with sustained engagement with the diplomatic corps and partnerships with governments around the world, resulted in a strong foundation, even as the political winds in Washington, DC, went awry with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. They provided a springboard that

would further raise New York City's profile and influence in other global venues, such as the World Organization of United Cities and Local Governments (a worldwide umbrella organization of local and regional governments) and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (a global network of more than 2,500 local and regional governments across 125 nations). In a first for MOIA, I was honored to cochair the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on the Future of Cities for several years. Our work resonated beyond the city. Both UN secretaries-general I had the privilege of working with remarked on the leadership of New York City in advocating for environmental accountability, migrant rights during the Global Compact on Migration negotiations, and equal healthcare access for the diplomatic community during the pandemic.

On-the-Ground Results

In public policy, new ideas take time to generate tangible improvements in direct and immediate ways. Public servants often work for years to create circumstances that allow solutions to inch in the desired direction. Reflecting now on the de Blasio years, I believe MOIA had a role in priming New Yorkers—and residents of other major cities—to consider, implement, and embrace or support changes that might have taken much longer to come to fruition. Further, MOIA helped encourage New York agencies to support the cross-pollination of their own ideas to other cities. Among them are the following:

Most Americans—much less foreign diplomats—do not fully appreciate the ability of local governments to outperform the federal government, regardless of the issue at hand, be it policing or education.

movement in which local governments showcased their local leadership on advancing the SDGs. When Washington abdicated leadership, New York City and other local governments filled the void.

Lessons Learned

One should always be cautious in propounding public-policy lessons. Successes and failures alike are often the product of rare, improbable, and fleeting circumstances. In my own case, I often reflect on how small the odds were that a 1980s child immigrant (a “dreamer”) from Sri Lanka would live most of her childhood undocumented, only to later become New York City’s global ambassador—the youngest and first immigrant commissioner to lead the agency. So I reflected many times on a handful of lessons that may have broader applicability. I believe public servants, whether leaders or team members, should view themselves as entrepreneurs because

risk taking and new ideas help improve the status quo.

Citizens and groups of constituents often feel they are too far removed from those who wield decision-making authority, but investing time in listening to their views regularly, not just at election time, always pays dividends. The rapport and trust that are created become “soft power” that can be very effective. Partnerships and collaboration can be a vital force for enabling agencies with few resources to “punch above their weight.”

There is no single solution—technical, programmatic, or political—for engaging citizens, those who matter the most, in a process of global engagement. It is a layered process. One needs leaders who frame appealing possibilities for voters; one needs agencies that have sufficient resources and flexibility in their agendas. Storytelling that includes memorable,

personal accounts of success and failures must be communicated often. Stories are a kind of public-policy passport that allows foreign ideas to be welcomed at home, and they allow the experience of individual Americans to go beyond borders.

Ultimately, two accomplishments that still bring me the most satisfaction have little to do with high-profile institutions, programs, or events. They are the Junior Ambassadors program, which continues our work and

values through its network, and the fact that former colleagues have remained with MOIA, carrying on their outstanding work. Ideas and opportunities come and go, but dedicated people—day by day, step by step—transform the impossible into the possible.

About the Author

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03

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A City That Does Not Surrender: How Democracy and Freedom Build Warsaw's Resilience

Rafał Trzaskowski

Confronted with a central government that seeks to destroy the liberal-democratic order in Poland, Warsaw has no choice but to resist and provide an example of a well-functioning local democratic community. In recent years, this commitment has been strengthened by hundreds of thousands of refugees who came to our city in the aftermath of the Russian attack on Ukraine. Ukrainians are fighting for freedom, values, and the stability of transatlantic institutions, and so is the city of Warsaw—locally, nationally, and globally.

Cities, like human beings, have a legacy and a memory. Warsaw is no different in this regard. As mayor, I side with those who use and learn the lessons of history to build a better city.

The Road We Have Traveled

Today's Warsaw is home to around two million residents. The city's per capita income stands at 160 percent of the European Union average and is high above Poland's. Oxford Economics expects Warsaw to be the fastest-growing major European city by GDP over the next five years.¹ The reasons include a large information and communications sector; lots of back-office jobs that have proved to be relatively resilient thanks to remote working; and a well-educated workforce, with 62 percent of workers having a degree (compared with the European

city average of only 42 percent). The fDi Intelligence 2023 ranking of European Cities and Regions of the Future named Warsaw the sixth major European city of the future and the second city in Europe in the category of business friendliness.²

This stable and healthy growth was initiated by Poland's membership in the European Union. In the last decade, Warsaw has been transforming from a city shaped by the post-Communist era—marked by the prioritization of car traffic, chaotic spatial planning, and large-format advertising media disfiguring streets and buildings—toward a city that is green, is convenient to live and rest in, and has a dense network of public transportation.

In the next two decades, the city will build three new metro lines, extending the network from 42 kilometers to 113 kilometers and providing more than 50 percent of residents with reasonable access to a metro station. Against this background, Warsaw welcomed the European Best Destination 2023 award as proof that the city is on the right track. The award was decided by voters in the prestigious European Best Destinations poll. Our capital city came ahead of Athens, Greece; Vienna, Austria; and Toledo, Spain.³

Faced with Backsliding Democracy

This success story is a source of Warsaw's tense relationship with Poland's central, national government. The city is a symbol of personal success, openness to the world, and social progressiveness—values that the

present national-conservative government of Poland finds difficult to tolerate. The examples of this hostile attitude are numerous. Our financial revenues are undercut through changes in the tax law, and the governmental media (referred to as “public”) furiously attacks policies and actions we take (even if they result from government decisions or commitments to EU policies—for example, limiting pollution from car traffic). In addition, the regional governor files charges against or overrules decisions made by city counselors or the city hall, even if those decisions are found lawful in other municipalities.

The core of the tension concerns not only opposite identities—that is, conservative versus liberal—but also a different understanding of the relationship between the citizens and the government.

The ruling Law and Justice government is state-centric and views citizens as subordinates to the state. It operates with a “government-knows-it-better” policy and attempts to dictate people's lifestyles, women's place in society, and how a “true” family is supposed to look. If part of the society does not want to follow the political guidelines, they are cut from public funding, their voice is disregarded in public media, or they are simply labeled as agents of foreign influence.

Warsaw, like many other cities and modern democracies, is in turn citizen-centric. We do not view our residents as subordinates but instead as partners in the ongoing dialogue about the city they want to live in. We believe that diversity of opinions and approaches enriches the city and strengthens local community. And we know that Warsaw's residents

The core of the tension concerns not only opposite identities—that is, conservative versus liberal—but also a different understanding of the relationship between the citizens and the government.

want a city that does not surrender to government pressure.

Let me share a handful of examples of how Warsaw works to remain an open and democratic city.

Education. Shaping the minds and attitudes of young people is a fundamental thing for any democratic society. Therefore, the national-conservative government decided to educate what they call a “new man” who, instead of thinking independently, would learn the only “correct” version of world and social history.⁴ New textbooks were produced, and the voices of parents and school principals were restricted in favor of government superintendents who were supposed to ensure compliance with the government’s political line. Since local governments are responsible for organizing education, the central government decided to limit these powers. It also prepared a law that prevented nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from

working with schools. Meetings and lessons on issues of sexual education, tolerance toward minorities, respect for the constitution, or other views of Polish history were to be subject to the consent of the school superintendents. Although participation in such meetings had always been optional and subject to parental consent, the government wanted one dissenting vote to prevent all other children from participating. Warsaw, in cooperation with cities, schools, and teachers, openly objected to the government’s proposals. We succeeded in convincing President Andrzej Duda to veto the bill. It would have had disastrous consequences not only for our pupils but also for NGO cooperation with schools during the refugee crisis following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

Women’s health protection. Another example is the protection of women’s health. The Constitutional Court, whose election was carried out in violation of the law, introduced a de facto ban on abortion. As a

result, women were forced to give birth to children who had lethal birth defects. Doctors were put under enormous pressure not to perform abortions, even in situations threatening a woman's life. Warsaw's response was to introduce procedures in the city's hospitals so that abortion decisions would be made by a college of doctors rather than by a single doctor. In this way, we want to provide legal security to doctors and the right to abortion to women when their health is at stake.

Grants to NGOs. Another example is the policy of supporting NGOs that help the city to solve social problems or carry out civic

activities. Warsaw allocates about PLN 300 million (\$68.3 million) to organizations, some of which have been deprived of government funding. These are organizations that not only deal with minority rights, including those for LGBTQ+ members of the community, but also help the homeless and organize sports or cultural activities. Many of these organizations are conservative in nature and linked to the Catholic Church. However, our rules for the distribution of grants are in no way dependent on the ideological nature of the organization. Any legitimate organization that meets the criteria has a chance of receiving grants. This contradicts government policy, which excludes liberal or left-wing organiza-



tions from the grant distribution system. This is how we show that equality and transparency are not slogans but rules we follow.

Guests, not refugees. Siding with residents and building a democratic city community created enormous resilience at the time when Russia attacked Ukraine. Millions of people fled Ukraine, and within a few weeks, 2.5 million refugees had arrived in Poland alone. Poland suddenly became the country with the second-largest refugee population in the world.

We estimate that more than a million refugees have passed through Warsaw since February 24, 2022. At the peak of the refugee crisis, 300,000 chose to stay in the city and its metropolitan area. In just a month, the population of Warsaw had increased by 17 percent. Today, the population remains around 150,000 residents larger.

Our Ukrainian friends were welcomed with open hearts. On the first day of the Russian invasion, we opened information points and reception centers and established a cooperation network among city hall, NGOs, and private and communal companies. Initial assistance was provided at railway stations, providing refugees—or, actually, our guests—with information, food, and medical help. Initially, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian arrivals were taken care of by their relatives, families, and friends. But ordinary people also opened their apartments to invite in and host strangers. That was one reason why there were and still are no visible groups of refugees on Warsaw's streets, no pitched tents in the parks, and no people living like nomads in provisional camps.

As the wave was culminating—Warsaw saw 350,000 refugees within the first couple of weeks—the city also provided accommodation in our reception centers, municipal buildings, hotels, and sport and youth centers. In other words, we transformed huge parts of our schools and sport infrastructure into first-line facilities for refugees. With the help of private companies, we have managed to quickly retrofit numerous office buildings so that they can serve as refugee centers. The Norwegian Refugee Council and the Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy (WOSP), which is one of the biggest charities in Poland, have built a state-of-the-art temporary transit shelter at the Warsaw East Railway Station.

Through the European Union, the Ukrainians have been granted temporary status akin to that of citizens in Poland and so enjoy free access to healthcare and education. Warsaw's city hospitals and clinics cared for thousands of patients—and there is a spark of hope amid the tragedy: more than 300 Ukrainian children have already been born in them. We have also accepted more than 15,000 Ukrainian children into our kindergartens and schools.

Cities are taking on most of the administrative burden associated with this care. Warsaw took on the task of registering refugees, including assigning them social security and identity numbers, as well as distributing government stipends to the hosts of refugees. As Warsaw was slowly becoming overwhelmed, it has been my responsibility to make sure the city continues to function normally. The generosity of the people should not be sapped by a decline in quality of city services.

Russian aggression must not distract us from the problems of democracy, populist politics, the gap between the rich and the poor, and climate change.

The Pact of Free Cities. It does not happen often that ideas and actions taken in the past turn out to be the best response to future challenges. When Matúš Vallo of Bratislava, Gergely Karácsony of Budapest, Zdeněk Hřib of Prague, and I launched the Pact of Free Cities in December 2019, we had no idea that it would become one of the key policy initiatives and platforms for discussion on cities committed to democracy. Today, it is an alliance of like-minded mayors focusing on defending democratic values, fighting national populism at the municipal level, advocating for cities at the EU and global levels, and helping each other

face global challenges in how we govern cities. By September 2022, the pact was enlarged by several cities from all over the world and now includes 32 members. As the pact states, cities have huge responsibilities in protecting and promoting common values of freedom, human dignity, democracy, equality, human and civil rights, rule of law, freedom of the media, social justice, tolerance, and cultural diversity. Starting as four founding cities and growing to more than 30 worldwide, we are united and stand strong to build a value-driven city network to rebuild and reinforce democracy; stand as a bulwark against the erosion of

the rule of law; and fight corruption, state capture, racism, and populist nationalism. We stand up for free and fair elections and democratic movements worldwide and facilitate the democratic participation of marginalized communities.⁵

We need a “democratic renaissance” that puts cities in the center of that process. We need to make the promise of a just, inclusive, and green world compelling to our citizens again. Russian aggression must not distract us from the problems of democracy, populist politics, the gap between the rich and the poor, and climate change. Putin’s Russia is not only a military aggressor; it fights against our freedoms, our democratic institutions, and our understanding of humanity.

It is my strong conviction that in these turbulent and dramatic times, all mayors have a special role to play. We have a duty to defend the core values that make our citizens proud of our cities: democratic rule, solidarity with the vulnerable, and the courage to shape the future. We have to be leaders who listen to what our citizens want or are afraid of. And we must stop the populism that is destroying our communities and making them less resilient to technological change or climate change. “United we stand, divided we fall”: this ancient phrase appears today timelier than ever.

About the Author

Rafał Trzaskowski has served as mayor of Warsaw, Poland, since 2018. He previously served as minister of administration and digitization and secretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland. He is also a former member of the Polish Parliament and the European Parliament.

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On the Future of Urban Democracy in Africa

Daniel E. Agbiboa

Africa's future is urban. And in many ways, the world's urban future revolves around Africa.¹ By 2050, most Africans will dwell in urban areas. What does this tectonic demographic shift mean for the future of urban democracy in Africa?

Africa's urbanization is projected to drive democratic change as new generations increasingly reject authoritarian rule in favor of people-centered and accountable government.² At the same time that processes of urbanization and democratization are twinned and represented as an opportunity for progressive change, pessimistic imaginaries of African cities as bastions of the abject circulate widely. This awkward tension between optimism for "the city yet to come" and pessimism about the lived experience of the city mirrors the disconnect between, on the one hand, elite-driven neoliberal aspirations to make the African city "world-class" and, on the other hand, the precarious now in which many people weave their daily existence.³ Such cruel urbanism marks the African city as a site of contradiction and intense struggles over—and beyond—access to critical urban resources.

This contentious politics forms the central connective tissue of urban democracy, defined here as an exercise of the collective "right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire."⁴ As a properly "political society," the postcolonial African city is an arena of negotiation, conflict, and struggle between the state and the subaltern.⁵

Using the wider context of the acutely urban COVID-19 pandemic, this essay calls attention to the cooperation and contradictions hardwired into the political economy of urban life in Africa. When it comes to understanding the future of urban democracy in Africa, we must think relationally rather than in a binary manner. In this light, questions of challenges and opportunities become less mutually exclusive than embedded within zones of ambiguity and complicity that meld the center with the margin and the here and now with the yet to come.

This essay identifies three areas where such provisional boundaries of the urban are most prominent in Africa today: policing, pandemics, and youth-led protests;

informality, social networks, and collaborative survival; and transport, transgression, and neoliberal urbanism.

The point, then, is this: the complexity of Africa's urban life compels a rethinking of the future of urban democracy as not so much a site of dysfunction and radical uncertainty than of the productivity of uncertainty and the reinvention of order. When it comes to city life in Africa, uncertainty is less a burden than a resource. And transgression is the rule.

Policing, Pandemics, and Youth-Led Protests

Widespread police corruption and brutality flourished across African cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased public demands and collective action for political change and accountability. While the militarization of COVID-19 responses may well have reduced the rate of COVID-19 transmission in urban Africa, it severely affected the workaday world of people on the margins of society, especially informal workers for whom COVID-19-related space and time restrictions came at the high cost of their material well-being and everyday security.⁶ In Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, COVID-19 became a convenient smoke screen for the escalation of predatory responses to popular and peaceful protests against police violence and elite corruption. In addition, state forces used pandemic measures as a pretext for dispossessing and displacing parts of the urban population (such as infor-

mal transport workers) that are considered surplus to modernizing visions of a "world-class" African city. In Zimbabwe and Uganda, law enforcement agents violently attacked political rivals and trampled upon media freedom. Inspired by "crisis narratives," Africa's COVID-19 response treated the informal economy as disposable and fungible, as a problem to be fixed.⁷ Several people died in South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria in the course of enforcing pandemic-related curfews and lockdown measures, resulting in a popular claim that the police in Africa constitute a far more lethal force than COVID-19.⁸

The #EndSARS social movement in Nigeria, which interpolated young people across the country in protests against police brutality and misrule, was in part a reaction to the country's scorched-earth pandemic tactics that deepened precarity for marginalized and suspect communities. Under the rallying hashtag #EndSARS, the "speak up" (*soro soke*) generation, as young Nigerian protesters styled themselves, demanded an end to the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)—an elite unit of the Nigeria Police Force. Their voice belied the long-held criticism that urban Africans lack the insurgent spirit of rising up and saying no, encapsulated in that popular Nigerian term, the "siddon-look" generation, a portmanteau of "sit down and look." The rise of the *soro soke* generation—along with coeval struggles and counter-conducts across urban Africa, including DRC's #CongoBleeding, South Africa's #Rhodesmustfall, Zimbabwe's #Tajamuka ("We are fed up"), Botswana's #I SHALL NOT FORGET, and Eswatini's student-led pro-democracy protests—called that docile subjectivity into question. At once,

they indicted past generations for having tolerated police brutality and signaled the readiness of Africa’s postmillennials to challenge incompetent governments and to renegotiate their place in dominant patterns of authority and control through the instrumentality of new media technologies—in particular, social media.

Informality, Social Networks, and Collaborative Survival

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the moribundity and dysfunction of critical physical infrastructure in urban Africa, notably healthcare systems. Yet that failure also opened a social space for rethinking the role of “people as infrastructure” that stitches the city together and keeps it on the go.⁹

Previous experience with confronting complex public health emergencies, most prominently Ebola, has taught African governments that urban democracy relies on the active involvement of formal and informal actors; in other words, that hybrid urban governance is a necessary condition for effective and affective crisis response. In Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital and Africa’s largest city, neighborhood health workers and local knowledge brokers—those whom Michel de Certeau calls “ordinary practitioners of the city”—plugged yawning gaps in the city’s healthcare system and

demonstrated how people themselves can serve as an effective antivirus infrastructure.¹⁰ In Senegal’s capital city of Dakar, community leaders and itinerant health agents constituted the spine of the country’s socially networked pandemic response. From Accra to Nairobi, Christian and Muslim communities united to overcome COVID-19 and to restore a sense of predictability to city life. Religious leaders sent out joint messages, urging congregants to take precautionary steps to curb further COVID-19 transmission. These examples blur the putative lines between the center and the margins; in other words, they shift the emphasis away from a bifurcated (read: Weberian) understanding of the state to a more pluralistic state in which security and order are coproduced. At the heart of urban democracy is this shift from government to governance.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for deconstructing pathological narratives of the African city as a dysfunctional black hole, out of which nothing of note or consequence can emerge. Instead, the invitation here is to pay closer attention to dynamic and adaptable forms of collaborative survival in Africa that allow for a “positive orientation to the near future.”¹¹

By reconstructing urban democracy from a primarily non-Western perspective, urban policies can engage African cities from a mobile rather than moored viewpoint. We must learn to work with rather than against the complex, open-ended flows of the urban ecosystem.

Previous experience . . . has taught African governments that urban democracy relies on the active involvement of formal and informal actors.

Transport, Transgression, and Neoliberal Urbanism

Mobility has been touted as the cornerstone of freedom, progress, and change. Yet urban Africa lacks an effective, orderly, reliable mass transportation system. Indeed, in most major African cities, the number of vehicles per person falls well below the global average, with the continent accounting for a meager 1 percent of worldwide car sales.¹² Today, Africa's teeming urban populations are generally serviced by informal (read: popular)

forms of transportation, mostly minibuses that are simultaneously marked by mobility and immobility, by promise and disappointment, and by danger and opportunity. Known in Kenya as *matatus*, in Tanzania as *daladalas*, in Ghana as *tro tros*, and in Nigeria as *danfos* (see image below), these local responses to transport poverty and mobility injustice have become a mainstay of Africa's popular urban economy, effectively becoming the vehicle of the urban poor for whom everyday life is war. In the absence—or inadequate presence—of formal public transportation systems, these popular modes of transportation have become a vital infrastructure that animates the city, both functionally and aesthetically. The colorful slogans and mottoes often displayed on the outer bodies of these commercial vehicles reflects how subalterns translate their

everyday struggles into art, as well as how they develop a unique competitive edge in an otherwise cutthroat and predatory business.

As a condition of their survival, public transport workers ordinarily “transgress the strict lines of legality.”¹³ That transgression makes them a primary target of elite-driven “world-class” city regulations that aspire to impose order on the chaos of city life in Africa. To this end, informal transport workers have been stigmatized as “dirty” and their spaces of survival deemed unlawful and, thus, dispossessable. Although couched in the language of progress and modernity, urban megaprojects represent what Saskia

Sassen calls a “savage sorting” of winners and losers.¹⁴ They are shaped by a meta-narrative of crisis and a logic of the market that focuses exclusively on what the African city *is not* rather than what it is; in short, that fails to treat informal urban workers as people. For this reason, these homogenizing narratives of the city reproduce precarity for poor urban residents through what Ananya Roy calls “the capacity to construct and reconstruct categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy.”¹⁵ All of these have left informal urban workers—“groups of population whose very livelihood or habitation involve violation of the law”—distressed about the present and fearful of the future.¹⁶ And yet, as AbdouMalig



Simone reminds us, “no form of regulation can keep the city ‘in line.’”¹⁷ Informal transport in Africa constitutes a way of life and an organizing logic that defies technocratic quick fixes.¹⁸

The future of urban democracy in Africa rests less on technocratic utopias of the “world-class” African city—peddled by so-called

big men who see themselves as exclusive architects of Africa’s urban future—than on the contentious politics, hybrid governance, subjugated knowledge, gendered webs of relationships, and complicities of all kinds that have always figured African cities as spaces of unclosed possibility and forms of inventive responses to contingency.

About the Author

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Expanding Just, Multiracial Democracy

Julie Nelson and john a. powell

As we witness democracy coming under attack across the globe, coupled with the rise of authoritarianism and nationalism, it is critical to understand the role that local municipalities can play not only in defending against democratic backsliding but also—even more importantly—in expanding the very nature of democracy. Municipalities can serve as primary drivers for establishing and strengthening democratic practices.

Our respective work to strengthen democracy is not incidental. We—john with the Othering & Belonging Institute and Julie with Race Forward—have long viewed threats to democratic norms and institutions as a perilous matter. We recognize that democracy is not possible without equitable systems that ensure fair access to all groups, whether we're talking about voting rights in national elections or having the power to influence decisions in city councils. Throughout the history of the United States, people have been fighting to expand democracy, recognizing that the inequitable exclusion of some based on race,

ethnicity, and gender has limited the reality of democracy.

At the structural level, we consider democratic institutions to be expressions of belonging. But to achieve belonging, those institutions must not only allow people to be included; they must also be able to make demands on and participate in cocreating the system. Belonging turns a guest into an active participant. Our goal is to build governing power for racial equity and belonging. Unfortunately, democracies across the globe are experiencing toxic polarization, fragmentation, mistrust of institutions and other people, and scapegoating of marginalized groups by blaming them for social and economic problems. These divisions are being exploited by far-right, antidemocratic leaders in their drives for power.

There are many causes for the challenges faced by democracies across the globe at this time. Many challenges are associated with authoritarian leaders' manipulative tactics to turn people against one another and create

fear and a sense of isolation. It is at the local level that elected officials and public servants can support democratic cultures of belonging for all groups so that all groups experience belonging, proactively addressing the dominant group's fear of being "replaced." There are robust indications that groups generally considered the favorite or dominant are subject to these same dislocation processes. We know that rapid change in important areas can trigger anxiety and fear. There are multiple changes happening across the globe that make our future even less certain. These include changes in climate, technology, and demographics, as well as those brought on by the pandemic. These are collective anxieties that are difficult to process. Autocrats promise a future that returns us to a mythical past when the dominant groups were supposedly secure and in control. This line of thought blames a designated "other" (based on some marker of identity, such as race, religion, gender, and so on) for this anxiety and helps to reshape general anxiety into grievances of the

majority and hatred toward the other. Thankfully, we believe there is a way local governments can help turn this grim situation built on othering into a global movement grounded in belonging. In this paper, we will provide four core points and ideas for understanding municipalities' unique role as laboratories for democracy, racial equity, and belonging:

- Municipalities provide the opportunity to expand democratic practice at the local level.
- To expand democratic practice, we must be explicit about groups that have been excluded and design policies and practices not only for inclusion but also for true belonging.
- We must move beyond a focus on individuals to focus on systems and structures.
- We must move beyond "ideas" to implementation and organizing for multiracial democracy that includes all people.

We believe there is a way local governments can help turn this grim situation built on othering into a global movement grounded in belonging.

We will close with a note about the need for infrastructure for sharing resources, knowledge, and learnings across the field. Let's dig in.

Municipalities as Laboratories for Democracy, Racial Equity, and Belonging

1. Municipalities provide the opportunity to expand democratic practice at the local level

Municipalities' engagement with community is key to shaping how members of those communities think about the effectiveness of democratic institutions, both locally and nationally. Engagement at the local level shows community members that they do have a voice and that they can solve problems through dialogue with their representatives. It offers them a sense of empowerment, produces trust, and makes them feel that they belong to a community that cares. Once a community is imbued with that sense of belonging, authoritarian appeals lose their potency.

When shown how democratic structures like municipalities can be drivers for positive change at the local level, community members will soon begin to consider engaging with their state and national governments. Similarly, municipalities can set an example for national governments around the world.

Mayors, council members, and other local government officials must spearhead these democratic practices. In turn, municipalities are the most personal way residents can exercise their democratic rights. In some places, municipalities are safe havens for democracy in countries battling democratic backsliding.

Local municipalities can foster equity by increasing representation of traditionally excluded groups; improving engagement strategies; and strengthening policies and practices to positively advance equity, inclusion, and belonging. Local municipalities can also organize on a regional basis—including between larger cities, smaller towns, and rural areas—building bridges across regions that advance multiracial and multicultural democratic practice.

It is crucial to study history to understand why cities and communities are experiencing difficult conditions and a lack of equity. In many but not all cases, the inequities we have today were intentionally created and maintained over the course of history. A reckoning with our history is necessary to strengthen democracy. Claiming a collective future in which all people belong is critical and should serve as the foundation for what we believe democracy and local municipalities should look like.

There are many examples where municipal governments have acknowledged their past roles in creating inequitable conditions experienced by members of their communities. And more importantly, they are

moving to the next step by creating avenues to build that collective future we desire. For instance:

- In Evanston, Illinois, the city has undertaken a reparations initiative for the Black community because of its role in housing discrimination.¹ As part of the program, eligible families can earn \$25,000 to put toward a down payment on a home or to use for housing repairs.²
- In Asheville, North Carolina, on July 14, 2020, the city council passed a resolution supporting community reparations for Black residents.³ The resolution calls for the city manager to issue recommendations to expand economic opportunities and create generational wealth for Black residents.
- In California, the Sacramento Region Community Foundation funded a program several years ago to address infant mortality rates. Data shows that infant mortality is far higher among Black people than white people.⁴ The program successfully targeted the most affected groups without excluding anyone, thereby improving outcomes for all racial groups.

Local municipalities should work in partnership with civil society to provide forums for reconciliation of history to align with a future in which our fates are intertwined and support equity, inclusion, and belonging. And even as this work takes shape at the local level, we must continue to call on the state and federal governments to do their part.

2. To expand democratic practice, we must be explicit about groups that have been excluded and design policies and practices not only for inclusion but also for true belonging

We are living with the insidious legacies of policies, implicit biases, and institutional and structural racism that have shaped our societies. Some of the practices were maintained by neglect. In the United States, you can observe this by the looking at the inequitable outcomes experienced by historically marginalized groups in many measures, including health, education, employment, and others (though we must also highlight the poor health outcomes of low-income rural white people, including in the opioid epidemic in what has been termed “deaths of despair”).⁵ Add to this protests against police violence, mass incarceration, and an uptick in hate crimes targeting a variety of groups (including trans people, Asians, Muslims, Arabs, Jews, and others), which undermine our concepts of representative democracy. All of these—and many more—demonstrate how far the ideal of the “American Experiment” has diverged from everyday reality.

The “othering and belonging” framework helps us understand the process in which certain groups are marginalized in policy and practice. Belonging, on the other hand, goes beyond inclusion and realizes its full power as a strategic framework for addressing ongoing structural and systemic othering, made visible, for example, in the wide disparities in

outcomes found across a variety of sectors and identity groups. And while this may be the case, the response to addressing such disparities must not be to ignore the needs or the struggles of nonmarginalized groups. A true democratic practice gives everyone a seat at the table.

Belonging allows people to participate in the creation of the various structures that affect them. That may apply to political and social spaces but also to cultural and work spaces. As we move forward, we must not fall prey to a zero-sum approach. The goal is to create practices where all belong and flourish and none are othered and left behind.

It's also important to realize that while the structure of racism and neglect may target marginalized communities, racism also has negative impacts on dominant groups. Consider, for example, that when Tennessee refused to adopt the Affordable Care Act due to a perception that it is a racialized program that helps immigrants and Black people, some 12,013 white people lost their lives

between 2011 and 2015 due to inadequate health coverage, compared to 4,599 Black people in the same period.⁶

We are seeing a growing body of practice of municipalities advancing equity and belonging—from the launching of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative in 2004, designed to address racism in the city and government, to the recent release of "Towards an Anti-Racist Barcelona," a racial justice measure to be carried out over four years.⁷ These sorts of municipal initiatives are important because they build beyond training and focus on operationalizing racial equity.

3. We must move beyond a focus on individuals to focus on systems and structures

Local municipalities have the opportunity to support a democratic practice that focuses on solutions, developing transformative and equitable solutions that build decision-making power for residents. We see success when we realign relationships between institutions and the people they are intended

The best way to fight authoritarianism is with large numbers of people and organizations working to advance democracy, with the clear imperative that all groups are included.

to serve by centering on accountability, transparency, and collaboration. Two such examples include:

- In Barcelona, the municipality has organized Young People Assemblies that allow for the participation of youth in decision making. The assemblies have been representative across racial, gender, and ethnicity categories, and participants are paid for their contributions.⁸ The set of recommendations has been very well received, with the city council accepting about 90 percent of the recommendations.
- In Dublin, the city council established an Intercultural Development Coordinator as a result of a study on the barriers to accessing services in the North East Inner City.⁹ The NE Inner City Program

helps improve neighborhood conditions and fosters community cohesion and democratic practices. An important aspect of the program is working to recognize immigrant communities through an intercultural ambassador program.

Effective cogovernance requires a focus on structural change for lasting impact. Municipalities need to engage with their civil society to focus on policies, practices, and programs where the municipality has the greatest ability to drive change. Focusing on long-term structural change means that leadership changes at the municipal level are less likely to be able to dismantle progress that has been made.



4. We must move beyond “ideas” to implementation and organizing for multiracial democracy that includes all people

While shared values and vision are important, there must also be a robust mechanism, with effective tools, strategies, and practices, to operationalize belonging at the local level. There are networks, such as the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) and the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR), that are working to promote just that.

GARE now has nearly 500 member jurisdictions from across the United States to provide a community of learning, resources, and community-building programs to help jurisdictions achieve racially equitable goals. And ECCAR works with municipal governments in Europe to pursue anti-racist policies.¹⁰

These two networks are building a field of practice of municipalities operationalizing racial equity and organizing within and between municipalities.

The Need for Infrastructure for Sharing Resources, Knowledge, and Learnings

Authoritarians will use any wedge issue to gain and maintain power. To counter this, we must mobilize to support democratic

institutions with the clear imperative that all groups are included. Local municipalities are uniquely situated to advance a just, multiracial democracy that recognizes and empowers all groups, including those that have traditionally been left out of decision making. This is an approach that benefits everyone, including groups that have been relatively privileged.

This recognition that elites are using divide-and-rule tactics for selfish ends to the detriment of everyone else in society is critical to get us to a point where we can cocreate cities, neighborhoods, and communities across the world where everyone belongs.

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