

Climate, inequality and cities: How the world's mayors can make a difference

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Cities around the world are taking impressive initiatives to tackle climate change and reduce inequalities, but more can be achieved by aligning these policy agendas in mutually beneficial ways.

Poorer populations suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change. They are more likely to live in highly polluted, insalubrious neighbourhoods and to be more exposed to the likes of heat waves, mudslides and flooding, the risks of which will rise with climate change. Clearly policies that tackle poverty and inequality on the one hand and climate change on the other should go hand in hand. Yet well-intended policies to address climate change can unwittingly undermine measures to

entrepreneurship in green economic activities can equip disadvantaged social groups 

promote more social equity. For instance, restrictive land-use regulations that are intended to reduce sprawl and the carbon footprint of the built environment can actually drive up housing costs. On the flip side, policies to promote inner city mobility can boost greenhouse gas emissions. Cities are on the frontline of dealing with these twin challenges, and fortunately, there are potential “win-win” strategies that local authorities can pursue to deliver on both the climate and equity fronts. Well-planned public transit investments can open up new job opportunities for lower-income workers, just as local job strategies to promote skills and entrepreneurship in green economic activities can equip disadvantaged social groups with the skills needed for a greener economy. Similarly, measures to promote entrepreneurship and start-ups that tap into local public markets and resources can be devised not only in climate-friendly ways, but provide a channel for economic and social integration for everyone, not least marginalised groups.

In short, climate and equity policies must go hand in hand, and there are several exemplary cases to prove that such approaches work, from mobility projects in Rio de Janeiro to eco-friendly “circular economy” programmes in Paris. In fact, as well as being the venue of the historic UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in December 2015 (in which mayors played a prominent role), Paris has been playing a leading role in advancing a more integrated approach to addressing climate and equity challenges.

On 21 November the city’s mayor, Anne Hidalgo, hosted the second meeting of OECD Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth, in which she was joined by OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría, Ford Foundation President Darren Walker as well as mayors from around the world, from cities such as Dakar, Rotterdam, Cape Town, Medellín and Brussels, to launch the Paris Action Plan for Inclusive Growth in Cities. Under the action plan, participants have committed to work together to advance a comprehensive inclusive growth agenda based on four pillars: education; labour markets; housing and urban environments; and infrastructure and public services. The initiative is also supported by a number of institutional partners, including C40, Cities Alliance, Brookings Institution, ICLEI, National League of Cities, UCLG and United Way Worldwide.

The Paris meeting is no isolated event but part of a wave in which cities are well and truly taking a lead. In fact, just a fortnight after Paris, 50 mayors and 27 deputy mayors from the world’s largest cities met in Mexico City for the sixth biennial C40 Mayors Summit: Cities Leading Climate Action, with the aim of advancing efforts towards a low-carbon, resilient urban future.

The trouble is that while many cities have put climate change and rising inequalities at the top of their policy agendas, policy makers still need more tools to help them. This is why the OECD and C40, a network of cities that addresses climate change, are now joining forces to identify knowledge gaps, advance

research, and ultimately promote best practices and policy solutions for achieving more inclusive, sustainable cities.

It is a rich and promising venture, but our cities, however determined to work alongside each other, need all levels of government—national, regional and international—to double-down on their efforts and work coherently in the pursuit of climate and equity objectives. National governments in particular must do more to create a strong enabling environment, for instance, by finally putting a price on carbon and taking measures to promote skills and entrepreneurship, and underpin this cross-cutting agenda, which so many mayors from around the world now champion. When it comes to tackling inequality and climate change, better policies will come from working better together.

Visit www.oecd.org/inclusive-growth/champion-mayors/, www.c40.org and www.oecdobserver.org/cities

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