Chapter 8. "It's too late for pessimism"

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recently celebrated its 70th anniversary, but the road is still long. Poverty may be receding, but it has not yet been eradicated; and social inequalities remain and may even be becoming more apparent. Universal access to education is still not guaranteed across the globe. Populism is gaining ground, driven by ideologies diametrically opposed to basic universal principles, and geopolitical tensions endure. Climate change is now a given, and talk is no longer of global warming, but of climate change adaptation. The international community needs to take some bold political decisions because protecting natural resources and limiting global warming have become key challenges.

Towns and cities have a key role to play in addressing this global challenge by acting as trailblazers and advocates who can take action at the local level. City diplomacy is now the only way forward, especially given the current frailties of multilateralism.

As cities concentrate the most diverse populations, produce a significant proportion of wealth and are at the front line of today's challenges, it is up to cities to generate the impetus needed to overcome the major challenges of the 21st century and shape a better future.

Towards a necessary global ecological and social transition

Irrefutable evidence requiring a major shift

At the Johannesburg Earth Summit 17 years ago, environmental actors, governments, researchers, non-governmental organisations and citizens came face to face with the harsh reality of the first noticeable repercussions of global warming. We derided environmental thinking, considering it to be marginal and too cataclysmic to be taken seriously.

Today, the consequences of human activities on the planet are irreversible. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 2018 is clear: climate change has a face, that of millions of climate migrants fleeing drought and its consequences, rising sea levels or recurring cyclones. Countries which had been previously spared, especially in Europe, are now paying the price of global warming. Between now and 2050, it is estimated that the impacts of these natural disasters could force over 140 million people to leave their countries for a better life elsewhere, resulting in strong migratory pressures, notably in Europe.

National policies struggling to rise to the challenge

At the end of 2018, the international community met in Katowice, Poland to discuss, share experiences and take action within the framework of COP24, but the final agreement fails to address the issues at stake. The collective involvement of states is, however, essential, and elected representatives must become accountable to populations who are increasingly sensitive to these issues and the need to act.

International summits offer a platform for adopting global decisions. The Paris Agreement is a perfect example. Adopted on 12 December 2015 by 195 delegations after a hard fight, it represents a serious common foundation for working towards a carbon-free economy. Despite embodying everyone's hopes when it was signed, the vital task of translating it into concrete and tangible measures remains.

It is against this very backdrop, and in the face of threats against multilateralism, that we, mayors of towns and cities around the world, have used international networks of local authorities to create a multilateralism that is robust in that it is based on a commitment to serve citizens. This collective commitment needs to be strengthened.

This will take place through administrations and institutions that are more and more transparent, more participatory and more responsible. Together, we are fighting for this "new multilateralism", which combines economic progress, ecological transition and social justice.

Urban areas on the front line of change

Cities are powerful drivers of support for the necessary technological and demographic changes

By 2050, 70% of the world's population will be living in cities and metropolitan centres. This demographic increase must be taken into consideration and we must adapt our actions to accommodate these populations, all the while taking an in-depth look at our lifestyle, be it in terms of the built environment, and in particular the impacts of urban sprawl on urban areas and their outskirts, or the cost of rent, access to education and healthcare, culture and leisure activities, as well as in terms of policies in support of increasing the supply of public transport, intermodality and alternative modes of transport (carpooling, self-service bicycles, etc.) and even potential new forms of work.

At the same time, innovation has become a central notion in urban development policies. It is part of an interconnected digital world in which there are no artificial frontiers restricting information flows. Digital innovation has radically changed the way we live and, when used in the general interest (especially for making data available), can prove to be a genuine ally in addressing global challenges.

Intergovernmental co-operation must rely on local actors

It has emerged from the numerous discussions on energy and social transition that towns and cities are ahead of, and sometimes opposed to, the policies of states ruled by openly climate-sceptic governments. That is why intergovernmental co-operation must also turn to them for support.

And what if 2019 marked the beginning of a paradigm shift?

For this to happen, all the local actors – the public sector, the private sector, associations and citizens – must be mobilised in a dynamic process of sharing and co-construction. Only such a level of cohesion, between actors who place social and environmental responsibility at the centre of their concerns, will bring about genuine changes in behaviour. Cities have an important role to play, and can rely on international networks to share, pool experience and launch global initiatives: the C40, the Urban 20 and the OECD's Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth initiative.

Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that, "Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized". The right to live in a healthy environment is also an integral part of this world order and public policies must therefore take adequate action to ensure that it is enforced.

It therefore seems necessary to strengthen rights and obligations in order to ensure a decent life and living conditions for our children. It is our duty to protect future generations.

To address these common challenges, in 2015 Corinne Lepage, the former French Minister of the Environment, was given the daunting task of drawing up a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Humankind. The text is a reminder of how the future of nature is in major danger.

Article 8 of the declaration stipulates that, "Humankind is entitled to the preservation of public goods, especially air, water and land, and universal and effective access to vital resources. Future generations are entitled to the transmission thereof".

Human rights, the rights of peoples, the rights of humankind and the rights of nature are all interlinked.

Policies to serve citizens

Think "global village"

Paris lies in a natural basin that is rightly known for its rich diversity: the Paris area is not restricted to the capital, but also extends to the surrounding urban and rural areas. Energy transition offers a perfect opportunity to strengthen solidarity and reciprocity between those living in cities and those in the countryside, which is why it is important to examine the possibility of broader governance. And that is exactly what we are doing in Paris, a city that is keen to connect its regions.

A paradigm shift for more inclusive cities

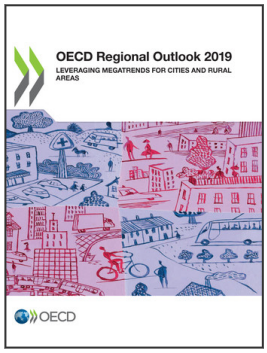
The main priority at the moment is to reduce greenhouse gases, and the economy holds the key. Steps must be taken towards creating a more resilient city, one which is carbon-free and environmentally friendly. The objective is therefore to move towards "greener" policies: public transport, soft mobility, pedestrianised areas, eco-neighbourhoods, recycling! The solutions are plentiful.

Wastefulness, substandard materials, overconsumption and overuse of resources, programmed obsolescence, are all factors which gave rise to global warming. It is therefore necessary to look to the development of circular economy networks. This promising economic model, which targets the sustainable production of goods and services, reduces the impact on the environment by limiting the transport of goods, respecting seasonality and making use of short supply chains.

Moreover, under Principle 8 of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration, economic and social development is essential for ensuring a favourable living and working environment for man and for creating the conditions on Earth needed to improve quality of life. This inevitably includes social inclusion, a shift in the balance of the relationship between individuals and their environment, and a significant reduction in global inequalities.

Towards a new global social contract?

It is not too late to act. Social movements, climate marches and fights for human rights have shown populations that they have a voice which can be heard. States and cities must now work together to address the challenges before us. Tomorrow is a reflection of today's decisions, and it is up to us to prepare the future, by taking care of … the present.



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