

## **FIRST IN THE WESTERN WORLD MILAN GOES FROM BOOM-TOWN TO EMERGENCY HOT-SPOT**

*Milan and the wider region of Lombardy were the first epicentre of COVID-19 in the Western world. Considering this extraordinary role, other places have much to learn from the failures and successes of the city's crisis management. Despite severe resource shortages, Milan already began planning its socioeconomic recovery in mid-April. Building on public-private partnerships and a comprehensive adaptation strategy, the recovery measures address the current health crisis as well as future urban challenges.*



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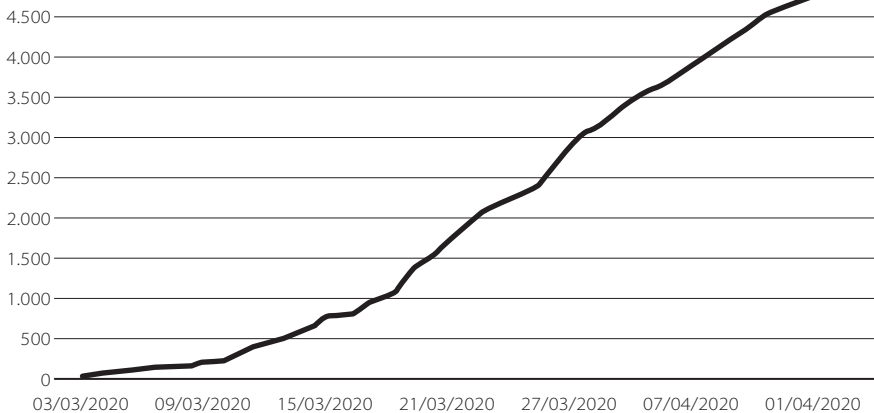
**T**wo months ago, Milan was booming. As capital of Lombardy, one of Europe's richest regions, the city is Italy's economic powerhouse. It is central to various economic sectors like finance, trade, fashion, design, furniture, human sciences, publishing and the media; and its influence on the Italian productive system goes way beyond its administrative borders. In the 20th century, Italian factories were concentrated in the so-called "industrial triangle" between Turin, Genoa and Milan. Today, economists consider the "triangle" between Milan and the cities to its south and east, Bologna and Treviso, to be more significant in terms of GDP and logistics. In recent years, Milan has also become one of the most visited tourist destinations in the European Union (in 2019 it received almost 11 million visitors). Since the city hosted the 2015 World Expo, people from around the world have enjoyed its pleasant lifestyle, cultural and culinary attractions, and global events such as Milan Fashion Week and Salone del Mobile. Even the weather has changed: renowned for its fog, Milan has become sunny as never before, probably because of climate change.

Milan's boom phase has experienced an abrupt slump since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the city in February 2020. Milan and the wider region of

Lombardy found themselves being the first epicentre of the pandemic in the Western world. Considering this extraordinary role, other places have much to learn from the failures and successes of the city's crisis management.

Everything happened very fast. On February 19<sup>th</sup> a 38-year-old man tested positive for the new virus in a health centre in Codogno in the province of Lodi in the Milanese hinterland. Two other people were infected in Veneto, the adjoining region. On February 23<sup>rd</sup> schools in northern Italy were closed and ten towns in Lombardy were placed under quarantine, in so-called "red zones" whose borders were controlled by the police to prevent people from entering and leaving. In Milan, many public offices, museums, shops and restaurants closed. They reopened for a few days, when the mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, launched the social media campaign "Milan does not stop" in an effort to help keep everyday life and business running. While the initiative was at first welcomed, it was soon criticised as irresponsible. On March 4<sup>th</sup> the central government shut schools in the whole country. Four days later the Italian prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, declared all of Lombardy, an area of 10 million people, a red zone. On March 10<sup>th</sup> a nationwide lockdown was imposed.

**Graph 1. Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Milan**



Source: MilanoToday / Region of Lombardy

When analysing the impact of COVID-19 on Milan and the city's response, it is important to emphasise that although the capital of Lombardy has been on the frontlines of the emergency, its administrative powers and economic resources have been very limited. In fact, as the Italian healthcare system is the responsibility of the regions, they have led the response to the pandemic – as has been the case with State Governors in the United

States. Further, while the Italian government is mobilising hundreds of billions of euros to manage the health, social and economic crises provoked by COVID-19, the Municipality of Milan, a truly global city, was only able to allocate a few million euros to tackling the emergency. Indeed, the city government's departments have had to cut their budget by 22% to compensate for the drop in city taxes that have resulted from the pandemic. Direct support from the national government has also been meagre. The government only transferred around 7 million euros to the Municipality of Milan, which were earmarked mandatorily to helping poor people with food and medical supplies.

The city's lack of resources and its dependency on the regional and central government are described in the Milan 2020 Adaptation Strategy (Comune di Milano, 2020), released by the municipality on April 24<sup>th</sup>. The document details how, in order to launch the city's recovery phase, which involves implementing new healthcare policies and measures (mapping, tracing, treating, etc.) as well as addressing socioeconomic shocks, support will be required from higher levels of government.

**MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ALLIANCES AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS WILL BE VITAL TO ADDRESSING THE SOCIOECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS OF THE HEALTH CRISIS.**

Yet despite operating with severe limitations, the Municipality of Milan has taken various measures to address the emergency in its territory. To increase the number of intensive care beds, it collaborated with the Italian army on building the city's first provisional hospital, and with the Department of Civil Protection to design a second brand-new hospital. That said, having various levels of administration involved in these interventions has certainly reduced their speed and efficiency. It may be argued from these experiences that in an emergency, big global cities work better when managing policies autonomously and coordinating directly with the federal government. This also became evident in the poor handling of the crisis in retirement homes (managed by the regions), in which large numbers of people died, and jails in Milan and other cities (managed by the Ministry of Justice), where riots broke out in the first days of March.

The City of Milan has demonstrated great inventiveness in overcoming its financial constraints. Mayor Sala launched a Mutual Aid Fund to raise money from the private sector and individual donors, which has been very successful. The fund's effectiveness contains two lessons: firstly, that municipal governments increasingly depend on a variety of urban stakeholders and, secondly, that public-private partnerships are fundamental to fighting the pandemic.

Multi-stakeholder alliances and public–private partnerships will also be vital to addressing the socioeconomic repercussions of the health crisis. Milan has a very strong network of organisations devoted to solidarity that reacted promptly and efficiently. Many disadvantaged groups have been helped by the Church, companies, philanthropists and civil society organisations, and important entrepreneurs have supported hospitals and research centres. Recognising the great value of these initiatives, the Municipality of Milan created the website “Milanoaiuta” (“Milan helps”) to coordinate support in four main areas: funds for food, assistance for elderly and fragile people, home delivery and volunteers willing to help.

**AN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY FOR MILAN IS NOT ONLY CRUCIAL IN ORDER TO MITIGATE CLIMATE CHANGE BUT ALSO TO PREVENT FUTURE EPIDEMICS.**

Showing foresight, Mayor Sala was one of the world’s first mayors to initiate plans for the post-coronavirus socioeconomic recovery of his city. In an interview with the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper in early April he identified three priorities for Milan’s step-by-step recovery: the adaptation of digital and mobility infrastructures to the requirements of social distancing; the creation of new rules of conduct for public spaces such as stadiums, cinemas and theatres; and support for the local economy,

especially for small businesses, shops and other commercial activities that are at risk and that constitute the “soul” of the city (Giannattasio, 2020). The abovementioned Milan 2020 Adaptation Strategy lists five further governance priorities for the recovery phase: 1) civic empowerment and social inclusion; 2) support for companies and shops, digitalisation, urban regeneration and social innovation; 3) employment; 4) mobility, public space and the creation of a “15-minute city” (an approach currently being implemented in Paris); and 5) sustainability. Policies in these areas will be particularly geared towards vulnerable groups, including the elderly, children and women.

Mr. Sala’s leadership in initiating recovery policies for his city was also recognised by the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, which appointed him Chairman of its Global Mayors COVID-19 Recovery Task Force, which was launched on April 16<sup>th</sup>. The C40 Taskforce will pay particular attention to the relationship between health and climate policies, a topic that will also be of central concern to Milan in the future. Milan and the region of Lombardy are among the most polluted parts of Europe and it has been argued that this environmental condition favoured the spread of the coronavirus in the area. By contrast, in Rome, where pollution levels are lower, the outbreak of the virus was far better contained, in spite of hundreds of trains travelling

between the two cities daily until March 8<sup>th</sup>. An environmental sustainability strategy for Milan is thus not only crucial in order to mitigate climate change but also to prevent future epidemics.

The coronavirus crisis in Milan and other cities calls for a more general discussion about the future of cities. Urban areas need to become both flexible and efficient, open and able to prevent another major outbreak of the virus. In particular, this balancing act will require cities to address the following challenges:

- Too many levels of responsibility reduce efficiency: the administrative relationship between global cities and the federal government needs to be rethought in order to increase effectiveness.
- Investments in healthcare, urban regeneration and environmental transition will be necessary to prevent future epidemics and attract new visitors.
- Urban infrastructures and mobility will need to be completely reshaped in order to allow for social distancing.
- Social segregation is a big threat: vulnerable communities are more exposed to the virus and need to be protected, or they can put everyone in danger.
- Working and leisure habits will need to change, but cities also need to protect their “soul” (events, streets, shops, etc.) if they want to continue competing globally.

In order to deal with these challenges, new urban governance qualities will be required: creativity, flexibility and the ability to cooperate will be part of the essential skill set of any effective future municipal government and mayor.

## References

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