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THE GREEN, DIGITAL AND SOCIAL TRANSITIONS: Towards a New Eco-Social Pact

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1. Introduction

The post-pandemic recovery of the world economy has presented cities with the opportunity to "build back better", as urged by the UN Secretary-General. In this context, many local governments have promoted recovery programmes to initiate and accelerate the longer-term transformation of their city, from public transit and green spaces to energy transition-resilient infrastructure.

City leaders are facing two pressing challenges. On the one hand, climate change is having a disproportionate impact on cities, bringing urban heat, water scarcity, sea-level rise and population displacement. Advancing a green transition has become a matter of collective responsibility to protect the future and mitigate the impacts of climate change. At the same time, the spread of digital innovation is deeply changing the nature of work, human interactions and relations with government, presenting great opportunities for progress but also risks related to inequality, transparency and privacy.

These two interlinked processes, climate neutrality and digitalisation, must drive the transformation of cities. As such, recovering from COVID-19 means addressing multiple dimensions of development and connecting goals that are usually approached separately. While local leaders are under pressure to act fast to restore their economies and create jobs, business-as-usual approaches can only deepen existing inequalities exposed by the pandemic. In fact, inequalities that were already apparent before the pandemic, including poverty, social exclusion, governance failures and the digital divide, have deepened.

While a growing number of climate and digital governance schemes are explicitly considering equity and justice, important questions remain unaddressed. What does it mean, programmatically and politically, to develop and implement a just green and digital transition? What roles do cities play within this multi-scalar process? How can alliances between cities, other urban stakeholders and the international community support a new eco-social pact?

This *CIDOB Briefing* discusses how cities can approach the post-pandemic recovery through a rights agenda. The paper (1) explores how current transitions are bringing about new inequalities in urban contexts, and (2) makes recommendations to enable and accelerate a just green and digital transition.

2. The green and digital transitions create inequities at multiple scales

Rapid urbanisation is putting pressure on cities to meet the demand for goods and services (i.e., food, water, energy, healthcare, education and transportation). Urbanisation has also accelerated the role of urban spaces in climate change, environmental pollution and biodiversity loss, as well as their vulnerability to them. In this context, cities worldwide are exploring what policies and resources are required to transition towards low carbon and sustainable growth.

This transition requires investment in clean energy production and circular economy projects, drawing low-carbon and sustainability roadmaps, and promoting nature-based solutions and urban greening strategies. The overall aim is not only to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis but also to improve the residents' health, resilience and quality of life. Cities have become the most visible space where this transition takes place, from the greening of the public space, bike lanes and rainwater gardens to new mobility, alternative energies and efficient housing.

Projects like the New York High Line and Barcelona's Superblocks (*superilles*) are examples of these greening investments. Yet, while becoming greener and more sustainable seems like a desirable practice, too often greening projects are designed and implemented top-down or following tokenistic participation schemes that do not take into consideration the specificities of the most disadvantaged communities.

National green transition policies should not remain blind to the political economy of climate change. Key policies towards the green transition also generate a sense of injustice within certain communities affected by this transition. For instance, a net-zero future entails closing down entire segments of the fossil fuel industry, leading to great economic and social distress for regions whose workforce largely depends on it. The climate agenda needs to connect to social and economic outcomes to prevent further geographical and social inequalities.

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a. The negative externalities of climate action: new green divides

The notion of distributive justice has found a new resonance in how cities approach the green transitions as it helps assess how inequalities, risks and responsibilities are generated and distributed within, as well as between, cities worldwide.

Most cities worldwide are steadily promoting green interventions, such as greenways, parks, community gardens, ecological corridors and other types of green infrastructure to enhance their sustainability credentials and bring economic, ecological and social benefits to their residents. These new green infrastructures and policies can trigger undesirable side effects.

A new green divide is exacerbating and deepening social and economic inequalities between spaces and communities. Recent research shows that greening and re-naturing projects in cities have increased pressures on rent and real estate, accelerating the exclusion and displacement of underprivileged residents. Studies demonstrate that some greening projects may create "enclaves of environmental privilege when low-income and minority residents are excluded from the neighbourhoods where new green space is created" (Anguelovksi et al., 2019). Cities must therefore ensure an equitable distribution and access to green spaces and amenities to prevent a phenomenon often described as green, ecological, environmental or climate gentrification.

At the global level, climate change entails a "double inequality" (Barrett, 2013) between countries through the inverse distribution of risk and responsibility. Developed countries and cities from the Global North bear more responsibility for the negative consequences associated with climate change, yet they generally face only moderate adverse effects. They are also better resourced to invest in climate mitigation and adaptation. Conversely, poorer urban agglomerations from the Global South bear less responsibility and yet experience higher threats to livelihoods, assets and security.

b. Inequalities through technology: new digital divides

Digital innovation is a crucial enabler and accelerator of sustainable development in cities, offering new pathways to address the most pressing challenges cities face in education, health, mobility and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Cities worldwide continuously launch new digital services, driving their urban development through technology. However, the technology revolution has also created new inequalities between people, between workers, and between places.

While digitalisation enables unprecedented access to knowledge, education and opportunities, the monopolistic dominance of digital services by a handful of companies challenges the ability of cities to ensure equitable, transparent and ethical access to digital technologies.[1] In this sense, the social pact applied to the digital must ensure that the digital transition works for everyone, through open architectures and interoperability frameworks.

A widening digital divide separates those who can benefit from digital infrastructures and connectivity from those who either cannot afford them or do not have the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape. This digital divide goes beyond connectivity: it is now also about how the digital society is enabling new inequalities. For instance, widespread access to the Internet enabled the gig economy, which promised flexibility, independence and shared prosperity. But digital platforms are increasingly trapping workers in a precarious existence, since they rely on the unequal division of labour and the precarious nature of the work to create labour markets (Lata et al., 2023).

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At the macroeconomic level, the rise of advanced industries (i.e. software development, hardware manufacturing, semiconductors, data centres) has increased the power of "agglomeration" economies, rewarding the concentration of skilled workers and tech companies in dense, tech-heavy urban areas, especially large coastal cities. The concentration of digital innovation in a few cities is creating a new map of geographical inequalities. Progress toward an equitable tech ecosystem has stalled and even regressed in most regions. In the US, research shows that between 2014 and 2021, there was only a 1% increase in Black representation in large tech companies.

3. The way forward and proposals

As national and city leaders invest in the recovery from the pandemic, resources, attention and policies must first target the most vulnerable places and populations in order to mitigate these new divides. In cities, decision-makers must use the climate emergency and the COVID-19 recovery as a starting point to rethink the way they govern, and remake policies in a way that advances sustainability and inclusion. Using evidence-based policymaking, they must reconnect two agendas that tend to be approached separately: advancing a green agenda and promoting technology, while leaving no one behind.

a. Embedding equity and inclusion in green policies

So that green projects do not further marginalise vulnerable groups, cities must ensure that equity is baked into their greening efforts. The right to the city movement encourages city leaders to advance green inclusive policies. Defined by the Global Platform for the Right to the City as ensuring "the right of all inhabitants, present and future, permanent and temporary, to inhabit, use, occupy, produce, govern and enjoy just, inclusive, safe and sustainable cities", this agenda promotes an anti-displacement and anti-gentrification approach and creates community wealth instead of excluding parts of the population. For instance, Barcelona, a city with low public housing supply, has adopted a "protected housing" policy that limits rent increases in order to avoid the displacement of people while it invests in the greening and appeal of the city. Barcelona City Council has built new protected public housing units (*protección official*) next to superblocks (*superilles*), which are areas that are meant to green the city and promote mobility.

While having a stronger stock of social and public housing is helping mitigate the gentrifying potential of green projects, other elements need to be taken into account and addressed as well, such as the role of private property. In cities like Portland, local leaders are experimenting with involving migrants in green economy projects via cooperatives owned by Latino residents, including building, retrofitting, green infrastructure provision, landscaping, and advocacy for new green spaces. Meaningful involvement instead of "tokenistic" participation fosters community and individual wealth creation. This also entails advancing multi-sectoral and de-siloed approaches and better connecting the efforts of engineers, ecologists and landscape architects to municipal housing departments.

Housing security and control may also limit the displacement impact of infrastructure projects. For

1. Point raised by Renata Avila (CEO of Open Knowledge Foundation) at the seminar.

instance, the project to build a green bridge over the Anacostia River in Washington DC was meant to unify two communities. Before the construction of the bridge an alliance of nonprofits and residents put in place an equitable development plan to ensure housing preservation for lower and middle-income residents. They developed a Community Land Trust, enabling land use to be controlled by the community, rather than external developers.

b. Ensuring a fair digital transition

To ensure a more equal territorial distribution of opportunities stemming from the digital transition, US decision-makers are exploring new place-based policies to invest in lagging regions and spread innovation through the development of growth centres and innovation clusters.

use the SDGs to shift their policy focus to long-term and transformative change and resist the "dash for growth". They often start by mapping their existing strategies onto the SDGs, enabling them to identify gaps in current priorities and put concreteness behind the larger visions to "build back better" and accelerate a "just transition".

Beyond mapping and reporting, cities are taking action. Local governments like Malmo, Strasbourg and Sardinia have started applying the SDGs to their budgeting and investment decisions. Cities like Bristol have applied the SDGs in their governance models to break silos and connect the efforts of government, philanthropy, business, academia and civil society. This model of governance enables regular engagement and conversations between actors in and out of government and aligns disparate efforts around common goals.

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Bridging the gap in opportunities and access to tech jobs requires the talent pipeline to be diversified through training and providing access and apprenticeships to underrepresented groups. New approaches to hiring will be needed to facilitate the recruitment of underrepresented groups. Major businesses have been slow, but are now making commitments, with Google joining other large technology companies including Netflix and Cisco on a Business Roundtable to advance racial equity in technology.

To build inclusive tech ecosystems, city leaders can make investments in digital social innovation. Cities need to encourage the development of technologies made by people in a participatory and inclusive way. For example, the DECIDIM project in Barcelona provides a digital citizen-participation platform to promote a democratic city, made openly and collaboratively using free software. At the policy level, cities are also taking action to advance a rights agenda that ensures an ethical and fair transition. For instance, the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights has developed a framework to protect privacy, freedom of expression and democracy when harnessing new technology and rolling out new digital services to residents.

c. Adopting the SDGs to drive an inclusive green transition in cities

A global movement of cities is embracing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their local policymaking. The SDGs have emerged as a roadmap to ensure that equity is baked into local sustainability initiatives. Cities

d. Increasing the influence of local actors on global agendas

As they aim to shape a green and just transition, mayors are also recognising their constraints and the fact that the environment they operate in and the policies that affect these challenges are decided by others, mainly national governments at major intergovernmental platforms such as the Conference of the Parties (COP), the United Nations and the G20.

Mayors and local leaders have been combining their collective economic and political weight to influence global multilateral processes and elevate a city perspective at the global level. Mayors are connecting across borders with their peers to exchange best practices and knowledge. City networks like UCLG, ICLEI, C40 and the U20 have emerged as alternative sources of cooperation in the multilateral space. Cities and city networks are increasingly innovative when it comes to identifying the strategic pathways to achieve influence in the multilateral space.

National governments must adapt to the fact that cities are on the frontlines of the green and digital transitions, as well as other global challenges such as migration and global health. As cities are already running international strategies, national governments must cultivate constructive partnership and dialogue with their cities to support their international engagement. In a growing number of countries, such as France and Argentina, ministries of foreign affairs are organising to harness cities' international leadership. Most recently, in October 2022 the United States created a Unit for Subnational Diplomacy within the Department of State to support the global initiatives of US cities in a way that delivers on certain domestic and foreign policy goals.

Conclusion

The green and digital transitions take place at multiple scales, from the local to the national and global levels. But cities, local leaders and their communities are on the frontlines of these challenges. They are where change takes shape and where decisions and investments have tangible effects. They can help make solutions driven by regions and nation-states into urban realities. Many cities are already building a new eco-social pact, placing justice at the core of their digitalisation strategies and integrating equity into their climate action to ensure that no person or place is left behind. These lessons can inspire national leaders and international organisations to support this eco-social pact promoted by cities and better integrate local leadership in multilateral platforms.

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