The World is Urban: A Policy Imperative for Today's Leaders

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Around a quarter-century ago, humanity crossed a pivotal threshold, becoming an urban species as a majority of the global population shifted to areas classified as "urban" by their governments. This demographic transition, fueled by migration and natural population growth had been gathering speed for some time, ultimately reshaping our world. Today, the Americas lead the urbanization of the world, with over 80% of the continents' population residing in cities, followed by 75% in Europe and more than 50% in Asia. Africa, while still predominantly rural, is rapidly urbanizing and closing in on an urban majority.

The urban revolution initially garnered significant attention. The United Nations revitalized its settlement agency, UN-Habitat, and incorporated an urban-focused goal into its 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 11: to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable). Resettlement organizations recalibrated their efforts upon realizing that more displaced people lived in cities than in refugee camps. Environmentalists began to view energy-efficient cities as potential contributors to effective climate action.

The urban spotlight dimmed prematurely, however. The rise of right-leaning populist movements redirected political attention away from cities. Anti-urban sentiments resurged, with cities once again viewed as the source of problems, rather than solutions. The rise of the internet, coupled with the Covid-19 pandemic, fostered a misguided belief that physical place had lost its relevance. Yet, despite these shifts in perception, the urban growth persists unabated.

Three pervasive myths continue to hinder our collective understanding of our new urban reality: the notion that cities are parasitic; the belief that political institutions are immutable; and the illusion that reverse migration back to the countryside is a viable large-scale option.

Parasites or economic engines

The most pernicious myth is the deeply ingrained belief that cities are mere parasites living off the countryside. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that cities generate more wealth, boast higher incomes, and provide superior services compared to rural areas. The assumption that cities achieve this by exploiting the resources of rural regions is deeply rooted in many cultures, yet it fails to acknowledge the inherent wealth-creating potential fostered by vastly different people living together. As Jane Jacobs argued in her 1985 classic, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, cities are engines of prosperity.

Outdated political institutions

Our political institutions, shaped by outdated self-perceptions, have failed to evolve with the changing urban landscape. Cities remain defined by political boundaries even as economic, social, and cultural activities take place across regions. Our conceptualization of cities—and, consequently, our political institutions—must adapt to encompass vast metropolitan regions rather than adhere to obsolete lines drawn on out-of-date maps.

Moreover, the way we think about what constitutes a city is woefully outdated. The modern urban reality manifests more often as a medium-density metropolitan region punctuated by occasional urban centers – more akin to Los Angeles than Manhattan. This new urban form demands a recalibration of our policies and governance structures.

Reverse Migration

The dynamics of urban-rural relationships are far more complex than commonly perceived. The act of migration represents an attempt to access urban-centric wealth and opportunities. However, the notion that migration is a one-way journey is misplaced. Rural families often designate one or two members to go to seek opportunities and send resources back home. Seasonal patterns frequently dictate back-and-forth movement. Migrants employ various strategies, including circular migration, temporary migration, and sending those community members most likely to succeed.

Embracing our urban reality does not require us to neglect the countryside. We must cease thinking of our metropolitan regions as locked in a zero-sum relationship with their rural hinterlands. Instead, we should recognize the evolving, interactive systems that connect town and country. Addressing our most pressing challenges requires us to reimagine these relationships, transforming perceived urban problems into potential assets.

As we confront mounting environmental disasters, widespread conflict and the displacement of millions of people, and public health officials struggle to contain virulent diseases, we cannot afford to pit different settlement types against each other. As Jacobs concluded in *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, “Societies and civilizations in which the cities stagnate don’t develop and flourish further. They deteriorate.” The urban age is upon us and it’s time we adapted our thinking, policies and institutions accordingly.

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