

# Cities in times of pandemic: sketching ways forward in five key themes of urban sustainability and justice

*A report on the outcomes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the UrbanA Arena event, held online, June 2020.*

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More than half a year after the first COVID-19 cases were diagnosed, we are today still finding ourselves challenged by the incremental and unequal ways in which the pandemic, and the measures taken to control it, are impacting urban residents in Europe and all over the world. Systemic inequalities in housing, transit, public space and food systems continue to disproportionately put marginalized communities at risk. In this configuration of multiple crises (ecological, health and socio-economic), the second Arena event, held online and organized by the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability and UrbanA partners, aimed at fostering a transversal dialogue on what we mean by ‘justice’ in urban sustainability.

UrbanA Arena events are co-creative spaces aiming to bring together practitioners, decision-makers, activists and representatives of local communities and reflect on the processes that can pave the pathway to just and sustainable cities. With 41 participants from 15 different countries across Europe and the world, this two-day event served to reflect together on the manifestations and drivers of urban injustice in the context of urban sustainability, and to discuss ways forward.



During a pre-Arena webinar with UrbanA fellows and invited participants, we presented and crystalized five key themes that shape the present challenge of moving towards sustainable and just cities: 1) Renaturing cities, 2) Green gentrification, 3) Local & sustainable food, 4) Social and climate justice, and 5) Ecofeminist approaches. We explored how these key themes and the concepts connected to urban sustainability and justice, find expression in the cities of today. What are the lessons and ways forward that the current COVID-19-induced crisis is teaching us for the future? Below we summarize some of the insights harvested through our conversations during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arena event.

## Renaturing cities equitably

Renaturing cities, through what has often been termed as urban Nature-Based Solutions, aims to address sustainability and human health through the integration of natural and biodiverse systems and/or functions encountered in nature, in the urban environment (e.g. green roofs, vertical green, sustainable architecture, parks, greenways and gardens, ecological corridors, insect hotels and pollination hot spots, eco-districts, constructed wetlands, restoration of natural floodplains etc.<sup>1</sup>). But what do we mean by “nature” in renaturing and how do we ensure it encompasses inclusivity?

Some of the core questions that have emerged in literature around urban environmental justice concern exactly the tension between the social and health improvements brought by the introduction of more green/blue natural spaces, and how access to such spaces is conditioned by their positioning in geographical

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive mapping of NBS in 100 European cities, see <https://naturvation.eu/atlas>.

terms, their form and composition, as well as the meanings they carry and the types of activities they welcome.

Examples of green gentrification are abundant in recent decades, where re-naturing makes neighborhoods more attractive for investors, international capital and business, and upper-class homeowners (see next theme). Another type of re-naturing strand which uncomfortably exists with the above is greening and renaturing as a way of focusing on peoples' health and the democratization of space, as seen in the examples of community gardens proliferation in many European cities. Entering in COVID-times, tensions over urban re-naturing are also confronted with new realities: people need more space to move and interact safely outdoors, and urban nature helps coping with the anxiety and physical challenges that the epidemic (and semi-/lockdowns) has brought to our lives. This has meant that inequalities in access to such spaces have had even stronger impacts during the epidemic: those without access to private green spaces depend on what is often scarce or unwelcoming public space.

Participants thought critically around some trends which need to be questioned and resisted:

- **Green spaces with limited accessibility or green for profit.** Private green spaces include for example green roofs or gardens. Such interventions should be subsidized especially in social housing and disenfranchised neighbourhoods, while perhaps opening access for collective use by non-owners (e.g. neighbourhood groups or collectives). Greening is also often placed strategically to allow for the value and benefits of urban nature to be captured by certain economies (e.g. tourism), leaving many local residents outside.
- **Unwelcoming (green) spaces,** are often the result of interventions which have not adequately considered the existing pallet of uses and desires and rather take a top-bottom approach where a neighbourhood or space is considered a “blank sheet” of nothing worth preserving or consulting with. We need to do away with paternalistic approaches to what kind of renaturing is beneficial and work with communities to formulate green spaces with cultural meaning.
- **Fragmented or co-opted urban environmentalism,** which often puts too much emphasis on certain aspects of planning, development, technology, and personal behaviour (e.g. individual recycling, LEED certified buildings, electric cars, greening detached from biodiversity or climate concerns) while not addressing structural causes of climate change and wider environmental degradation.

In turn, the following promising aspects were discussed as ways forward in urban justice and sustainability:

- **Nature to mend parts of the broken systems.** Indeed, nature's ability to regenerate life is crucial when thinking of how to ameliorate the living environment in urban areas. In Dublin constructed wetlands are used to filter pollution that was for years present in the river stream in Tolka Valley Park. At the same time, urban nature and greening, when done right, can empower people and help communities in reclaiming their “place” in the city, and their right to healthier environments.
- **'Commoning' for urban sustainability.** Examples of cooperation and 'commoning' abound and have also proven crucial for helping urban residents go through the pandemic: farmers being

supported by citizens in harvesting and getting fruit in return, food baskets reaching those with no means, community fruit trees and edible borders are only some examples. In the US, car parks take up huge space in cities and during disaster situations, people have been using those spaces for church services, setting up food banks, disaster aid, and gathering, transforming them into safe common spaces. In some cases, public land is made available for collective activity, but there is a need for long-term guarantee and safeguarding of such projects.

- **Co-creation and bottom-up greening.** Community engagement and dialogue is core for equitable and just urban interventions. It is crucial to be able to understand the composition of local communities within a neighbourhood and a city in order to co-design sustainable interventions. The process of inclusion starts from how those participatory processes are envisaged and who they welcome. In order to build ownership for public space, including urban nature, there needs to be processes of building trust and knowledge sharing between formal and informal local institutions (collectives, organizations, governments).

## Addressing Green Gentrification

Green gentrification, or gentrification through greening or related sustainability-inspired interventions, has been termed as the “appropriation of the economic values of an environmental resource by one class from another”, a process which “richens” and “whitens” the city for the sustainability class (Gould and Lewis, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. We know that greening alone is never the only stressor and that gentrification requires multivariate analysis, including of structural economic, as well as cultural/institutional factors. But what the current COVID crisis makes more evident is that treating the city as a limitless pole of attraction for tourism, the creative class, and large gatherings/events, creates striking inequalities that can also strike back in times of epidemics.

Participants outlined the following two fronts where resistance and change need to take place:

- **Dehumanization and commodification of housing:** housing needs to be recognized and protected as a human right, and for this to happen the housing market needs to be controlled. De-financialization of housing is key in order to make possible affordable homes for all. Here, the tourism-driven short-term rental economy also plays a role in pushing prices up and creating the dynamics for displacement.
- **Profit driven regeneration processes:** often urban regeneration especially in disadvantaged/disenfranchised neighborhoods take place detached from local needs, erasing the processes and realities of local residents, aiming at demographic turnaround. Instead, more investments and efforts should be made on empowering, benefitting and protecting the rights of the communities who already live in these neighborhoods.

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<sup>2</sup> Gould, K. A., & Lewis, T. L. (2016). *Green gentrification: Urban sustainability and the struggle for environmental justice*. Routledge.

They also saw potential in promising approaches already put in place in some urban contexts, such as:

- **Right to housing and to livelihood.** Prioritize housing as a basic need, protect the principal home from market competition and global financial interests. The rent strikes across the world during the pandemic showed how important it is to mobilize around issues of housing and reclaim that right. Regulating the touristic rental sector is as important as regulating rental prices and the housing market as a whole. Some municipalities have pioneered in this regard (e.g. Berlin, Vienna), while others are creating housing stock that is outside the private market (Barcelona). These examples should be supported, replicated and magnified, not less by giving municipal authorities the power they need to make this a reality. In the same vein, protecting the local small businesses is also a way to fight against gentrification. Moreover, participants suggested the importance of fixed proportion of quality social housing especially in newly built areas and with contracts that guarantee their social use in time. At the same time, the shift towards collective house ownership and use (housing cooperatives), as supposed to individual or single family-units, is gaining traction as a more equitable and sustainable model. Here, community land trusts can play an important role in facilitating such a model. Last, increasing tenant protection and rights was also seen as important and missing, particularly considering that most socio-economically vulnerable people in cities are not homeowners.
- **Participatory budgeting:** in other words, the direct involvement of communities in decisions taken around how public money will be spent in their locality was discussed as a promising way of moving away from investment, and instead prioritizing local communities.
- **Community organizing.** People coming together to discuss problems of their locality and everyday life, organizing towards and enacting equality from below. Being able to share and articulate problems and demands helps in keeping public authorities accountable and in actually performing the changes that communities feel they need in their neighborhoods. Community organizing is core for a healthy democracy.

## Towards Local & Sustainable Food

How did food access play out in cities during the current pandemic and is the role of healthy, fresh food of proximity being re-considered? Given the connections between 'big farm' and emerging pathogens that have been documented, what would sustainable and just food systems look like in, for, and beyond cities? In the midst of pandemic, work in the fields and the meat factories becomes "essential" yet continues to be precarious and -in many instances- particularly unsafe especially in relation to the pandemic. The number of people dependent on food banks has increased during the pandemic, as a lot are losing their source of income. In other places of the world, local farmers and food cooperatives have more demand now than ever. Sometimes people who lost their job started working the land. Is there a new potential for Community Supported Agriculture Projects to gain members & popularity?

Participants critically engaged with the following issues where they felt that change is needed:

- **Food industry, consumption patterns and subjecting food to market prices:** International competition on the global food market might drive down food the prices, but these generally do not reflect the full environmental and social costs of food production, processing and distribution. The food sector relies on efficient crop production, detrimental for soil quality and biodiversity. The requirement of cheap labour for volatile wages dependent on market prices puts farmers and other agricultural workers in highly vulnerable positions. Moreover, big grocery stores and commercial centres are increasingly taking up the global food market. Able to buy bulk orders for relatively low prices, they favour large scale farms while for many farmers it becomes difficult to connect with consumers. Moreover, big food stores often favour a broad array of products over sustainably and ethically grown food. This drive for oversupply is also leading to large amounts of food waste.
- **Farming undervalued and land workers under protected:** Farming in Western Europe relies on a seasonal influx of cheap labour, mainly from Eastern Europe. At the start of the pandemic, however, agricultural workers were blocked at the borders. Consequentially, British farmers were struggling to find potato and raspberry pickers, whereas in Italy lettuce and beans risked being left to rot in the ground. This is symptomatic of the fact that farming is too often underappreciated as a type of work, and the fact that there are no legal support structures for poorly paid immigrant workers. As a response, in France<sup>3</sup> and The Netherlands<sup>4</sup> online platforms were created to connect people who were out of work during the current crisis with farmers who desperately needed workers. This nonetheless did not address the question: how can farm work be re-valued in society while also protecting the rights of vulnerable migrants?

The conversation resulted in participants formulating pathways to move forward:

- **Alternative food networks:** To overcome the structural issues of the regulated global food market, unformalized forms of food production should be stimulated. Regulatory barriers to food markets often make alternative food solutions invisible to or expensive for consumers. However, many alternatives exist (e.g. networks for sharing surplus-food, solidarity networks, food banks, community-supported agriculture) that address both issues of sustainability as well as social justice. It could be fruitful to see how the current COVID-pandemic has stimulated food activists, community organizations and producers to push sustainable (urban) food systems onto local political agendas.
- **Local food production:** A mix of urban farming cooperatives with, for example, micro-solutions like hydroponic or aeroponic agriculture, could reduce the dependency on big food stores and cheap labour while providing regional food security. Furthermore, rethinking the logistic of big supermarkets is an important step in re-focusing food distribution to local production and consumption. This does not necessarily mean that food import and export should disappear. Indeed, in a system where cooperation rather than competition is the point of departure, locally oriented food communities can still exchange with other local food hubs across borders. Focusing on local food production and consumption can foster a sense of community. Consumers are often estranged from food production—the globalized market makes it difficult to know where food

<sup>3</sup> <https://desbraspourtonassiette.wizi.farm/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kasgroeit.nl/>

comes from. The spur in local food networks during the current crisis has been able to re-articulate community connections.

- **Food education:** Education on consuming less can help go beyond deep-rooted issues of consumerism. People are willing to spend less on food production to spend more and more on other (non-)essential products. Creating programs for schools, with videos, reading material and real-life experiences in farms, could raise awareness about the many issues in our current food system.

## Ecofeminist Approaches to Urban Sustainability

The role of care in this pandemic is emerging strong. On the one hand, we are appreciating more the crucial role of professions like nurses, cleaners and teachers for our everyday well-being, physical and mental “survival”. Not only these professions are feminized, they are also under-valued and underpaid. At the same time, the pandemic has exacerbated the unequal way in which care work falls on women’s shoulders, compromising women’s professional development and personal/family balance. Intersectionality, as the combined attention to class, race, ethnicity and gender, is central when trying to map who has suffered more from the pandemic both as a direct health threat (morbidity and mortality), but also indirectly through increased violence, loss of income, and mental health impacts.

From an ecofeminist perspective links have been drawn on how “the patriarchal and crisis-prone world economy also increases nature’s vulnerabilities through its dependence on growth”. Ecofeminist argue the climate change crisis is completely related to the crisis of care, which has become evident in the context of the pandemic. What should be key priorities in times of coronavirus for driving urban sustainability towards ecofeminist approaches that have nature and care at their core?

The conversation resulted in a number of systemic issues that should be addressed:

- **Narrow conceptualizations of the “city”:** Cities are often important drivers of economic growth, and are subsequently focused on spheres of production, such as paid work, tax-free zones, or financialization. Capitalism favors patriarchal systems that privilege upper- and middle-class, white men over other (intersectional) identities. The full range of diversity in cities is often marginally considered. In other words, a narrow conceptualization of “the city” fosters growth without limits, without (fully) considering ways to address social and environmental issues that, from a capitalist and patriarchal perspective, do not fall into or contribute to the (formal) economy.
- **Global crisis of care:** the constant drive for growth has created societies that are dependent on unpaid care labour. This still mostly falls on women’s shoulders as they are the main caretakers. In an unequal labour market, women structurally take more unpaid leaves to take care of children while also being victims of the gender pay gap. In the private/home sphere as well as in the workplace, gender, racial, ethnic and class-based inequalities persist. Comprising a large part of the ‘essential work force’ such as nurses and cleaners, and simultaneously carrying the burden of being responsible for tasks at home, women are the most affected by the social-economic COVID-crisis. Moreover, unpaid or underpaid care work is often undertaken by underprivileged groups, such as

migrant women, who in the current crisis have been hardly hit -both in terms of being exposed to COVID, but also of being exploited as workers- because they work in the informal economy.

- **Ignoring intersectional vulnerabilities:** Some groups have been more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others, because of their precarious jobs and conditions of housing/transport. Some could continue working from home, while others had to continue going to work and thus were much more exposed to COVID-19 (taking care of the sick, producing or distributing food, working in factories, or collecting garbage). Our political-economic systems have so far proven unwilling to address or overcome such systemic inequalities.

Participants also highlighted a number of ways to move past and beyond the current crisis of care:

- **Towards an economy of care and planetary health:** Currently, there is limited public debate or thinking on what healthy living means. Re-conceptualizing healthcare could mean a shift away from our current model that is focused on consumption and economic growth, and which lies at the core of many intersectional vulnerabilities and a global crisis of care. Whereas health-care is often placed outside of the realm of economic development, a more holistic approach of an *economy of care* would put care, health, planet and people at the centre of values, decision-making and policies. Rebuilding cities' economic functions from the perspective of care would align them with ecological thinking that actively incorporates nature and environmental values into urban landscapes.
- **Feminist urban planning:** An economy of care would require redesigning our public spaces. Feminist urban planning perspectives move beyond car- and bike-dominated cities to create infrastructures of mobility and transport that are inclusive. It also proposes thinking beyond housing that puts emphasis on the private/individual sphere (in apartments and studios, housing for the 'nuclear family'), to open up the possibilities for shared forms of housing that could facilitate care-oriented ways of living and caring.

## Social and climate justice in city politics

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed many governments to take social welfare more seriously. Private hospitals and tourist accommodation are being used in the service of public health care, mortgage payments are freezing, and basic income is strong back on the table. Simultaneously, -albeit temporarily- air pollution has dropped, and oil prices have fallen below zero. The interlinkages between local well-being and global environmental devastation and global interdependencies have never been made clearer. At the same time, and similar to environmental justice claims related to climate change, those who have contributed the least to spreading this disease globally (frequent air flyers and hand-shakers) are the ones who suffer the most from it (poorer, most precarious workers, racialised groups and women). What does that mean for the future of climate action and how can social welfare be combined with climate policy in cities? How can we work towards urban sustainability that addresses local realities of injustice and global dynamics of environmental change in a way that shows the urgency of both? How would degrowth proposals materialize in cities?

Participants identified the following points related to social and climate injustices in cities:

- **Precariousness of living:** As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, millions of people worldwide have lost their jobs and filed for unemployment. Millions of others, working for example in informal economies, have not been eligible to receive state benefits. As such, the pandemic has highlighted the fragility and inadequacy of many of our systems, related to employment but also of food provision and care, among others.
- **Housing and living conditions:** Often people in precarious working positions are living in worse housing conditions, having, for example, a lack of access to outside spaces (terrace/balcony/garden). Consequentially, the more vulnerable have been suffering more from confinements. Such social and environmental inequalities were already present in cities, but with COVID-19 they become all the more exacerbated and impacting health. We should question the “we’re all in the same boat” narrative. During the current crisis, we are actually *“experiencing the same storm, but we’re not in the same boat”*<sup>5</sup>.
- **Top-down city politics:** Despite trends that have increased bottom-up decision making in addition or in place of top-down structures, the latter is nonetheless dominant in the framing of issues and the design and implementation of solutions. Illustratively, during COVID the top-down imposition of the British national government stood in the way of city councils taking sufficient action during the pandemic. Moreover, when bottom-up approaches appear to have been implemented, it has often been in the form of *exclusionary* participatory practices—approaches that are not actually or sufficiently inclusive, do not engage with people on a structural long-term basis, and do more harm than good. In these ways, top-down city politics contribute to or create new social and climate injustices.

In search of how to facilitate more just and sustainable cities, participants discussed a number of ways forward:

- **Make visible inequalities and address their complexity:** Cities need an intersectional approach to justice that points out multiple injustices. Recognizing COVID-19 as a *wicked problem* with multiple causes and responses on different scales can illuminate its interrelatedness with social and environmental crises. We need to get rid of siloed responses to crises that are framed in isolation to each other.
- **Enhance green/open spaces as places of inclusion and community:** Make urban green/open spaces that offer opportunities for leisure and community-building. During the pandemic and its confinements, inequalities have been deepened and highlighted the importance of an equitable distribution of environmental amenities. This is possible—the current crisis has shown that governments can in fact act and take stringent measures when they value them necessary. This paves the way for claiming the same urgency for environmental and social crises.

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah McAdam (2020): <https://transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/responding-to-covid19/>

- **Build participatory structures to enable bottom-up proposals:** Spaces for the articulation and debate of existing needs and demands are needed. Urban planning should not be overly restricted by bureaucratic practices and needs to be in meaningful dialogue with citizens and community groups. We need to understand people's deep-seated needs, which requires flexible and resilient institutions. Participatory approaches to decision-making need to be inclusive and allow for conflict to be expressed –the very process of conflict negotiation should be central in inclusive decision-making. We need to be comfortable with differences to overcome unhealthy forms of collaboration.