

EXCERPTS FROM:

"URBANIZATION & SUSTAINABILITY AFTER COVID/19 PANDEMIC"

Full article available in:

The International Journal of Social Quality

Author: Paolo Motta

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3167/IJSQ.2020.100102>

.....While has to be accepted that the urbanization process is probably now unstoppable, as the previous weak or late opposition has failed, at least actions to mitigate the trend can be assessed and implemented as soon as possible to reduce negative effects on pollution, environment, land-use and progressive natural resources shortages; the answer to new urban settlements must and can be different. Is urgent therefore a deep reflection on the entire urbanization processes support and reinforce the role of minor centers and towns, that have surely more internal values and resilience, saving the existing peculiarities, traditions, tangible and intangible patrimony, and all necessary elements that assure integration, social cohesion and permanent development. The actual urban development scheme is also unsuccessful for a fundamentally sector approach limited to some strictly functional aspects, and a scarce attention to the negative impacts on environment and heritage preservation nor to the related social modifications. Globalization, increased mobility, 4th industrial revolution, ITC networks, are among the factors that suggest to modify the entire vision of existing urban scenarios as well the principles and guidelines of intervention, especially through integrated urban planning, that takes in account also the close interconnections with economic, environmental and societal factors, as Social Quality Theory considers.....

Importance Of Heritage

The revaluation of smaller cities and towns, especially those with a rich heritage patrimony where still lives an important quota of global population, is necessary to mitigate the migration trend toward metropolises and megacities.

In fact the rapidly increasing of urbanization processes all over the globe, is posing new and problems unexpected till few decades ago, so precedent declarations and recommendations, related to single aspects as heritage preservation and patrimony enhancement, are unable to face the great complexity of actual urban realities. In recent years rising attention focused on the close interconnections between urban heritage, territory and natural resources, which are the unique peculiarities of each site, called "Genius Loci" or Spirit of Place in the ICOMOS-Quebec Declaration 2008 saying that : *"can be defined as the ensemble of material and immaterial, physical and spiritual elements, which give to the area a specific identity, feeling and emotion. The spirit creates space and at the same time, the space invests and structures this spirit.."* (17)

Heritage represented by minor cities and towns is in fact the living evidence of a past which formed them as a fundamental part of the every-day environment of humanity and their protection and integration into contemporary scenario should be a basic factor

in town-planning, land development and environment protection; any human dwelling, from hamlets to larger cities, is formed by tangible and intangible elements representing their specific heritage. The "Genius Loci" spirit, is progressively losing the original relevance in the fast growing processes of urbanization and gentrification all around the world, and the contemporary metropolitan agglomerations, built following standardized models and international patterns, are weakening the peculiarities that cities had before the diverse industrial revolutions. From the above considerations, the conservation of the heritage and the revival of the role of the smaller cities and minor towns is not only possible but fundamental, as one of the tools to reduce growing urbanization processes. In them remains a strong social cohesion and sense of community belonging of inhabitants, whose lacks facilitates the downgrading of the intangible heritage, values that represents the necessary *"..interaction between tangible orders and intangible elements of the city"* and: *"city can experience a boost for its identity and an enhancement of residents' living standards, when it maintains a mutually beneficial relationship, ..values without whose rises the risk that an heritage city progressively dies"*. (17b)

The sense of belonging /inclusion in a specific site is certainly one of the main objectives to be achieved through the type of interventions aimed at improving inclusion and identity. The lack of adequate and qualified public spaces or meeting points in the metropolitan areas also represents a serious handicap for socializing, being the old meeting point "forum" or "square" still present in smaller urban realities.

Also the European Union since some years has been considering the relevance of heritage as a necessary component of correct urban development, implementing through its cooperation programs studies and projects, among them in 2004 the RFO Pagus-Programme of Assistance for Governance of Urban Sustainability within the Interreg III, and similar issues have been focused since in many others (18).

In 2009 the European Commission DG Research, on a conference on sustainability concluded that urban research and policy are still highly sectoral and not adapted to handle the complexity of urban sustainability, and that was necessary a *"more creative management of the cultural heritage of cities and better engagement of citizens in local governance"* (19).

These considerations were included since 2011 in the UNESCO-ICOMOS "Valletta Principles" identified by CIVVIH - International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages, highlighting that human settlements since centuries have been based on an extended net of small medium size communities, mostly located at short distance from each other, with homogeneous and traditionally settled populations, intense community life accompanied by strong social cohesion and identity feeling necessary to preserve traditions and intangible heritage (20).

For these and other reasons is a priority need to focus on the enhancement of heritage that includes all the local territorial assets (cultural, environmental, historical, etc.), with the aim of promoting a strategy for integrated urban and territorial growth that include agriculture, craftsmanship, advanced technology and every activity linked to local culture and tradition.

Actually thousands of smaller urban realities with heritage value, not only in marginal territories, face the progressive reduction of original inhabitants migrating to bigger metropolis, with loss of daily-life services and activities, and a rapid decay of their heritage. This last was attentively kept by the original dwellers and can't be replaced by temporary second house's residents or tourists, neither only these can support local economy. In fact if the tangible patrimony can be restored and reused with the necessary attention, the immaterial heritage, that is represented by the original inhabitants values, can't be recreated or replied elsewhere lacking the societal characteristics of each specific place: therefore is a fundamental part for overall sustainability.

Climate Change & Pandemic Impacts

Minor cities, towns, smaller settlements and their surrounding territories also cover a necessary function of human presidium on the natural environment, made by climate change increasingly necessary, this is particularly evident in rural / marginal territories. Any territory needs different levels of protection and enhancement, articulating the degree of transformation through quality parameters, that original inhabitants apply. From the implementation of modern agriculture techniques in neglected/marginal territories, environment will have positive returns also on local economic development facilitating the permanence of inhabitants in their traditional settlement and continuous use of rural areas; the constant maintenance of the environment reduces the risks of natural disasters such as floods, forest fires, desertification and so on.

Attention on these issues has globally risen since the Rio 1992 Conference, and Millennium Goals increasing till the 2016 UN-Habitat III Conference, where AGENDA 2030 was approved, with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved for that date (21). But also this document provide partial and doubtful recommendation on this issue, just some general guidelines. In detail, no approach is found that can revamp the priorities inherent to the ecological quality, sustainability and resilience of cities. Similar little attention is given up to date by most other international institutions, including the E.U., lacking a serious debate on this important topics.

Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and objectives are relevant those related to infrastructure, cities and human settlements related, as in "Goal 9- Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation " that states that:" *Sustainable transport achieves better integration of the economy while respecting the environment. improving social equity, health, resilience of cities, urban-rural linkages and productivity of rural areas*" (22) and in "Goal 11 -Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" - where indicates as objective 11.A) :"*Positive economic support, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning*" (23). But there is not emerging an approach capable of re-launching the priorities inherent to the ecological quality, sustainability and resilience of cities, in light of the most recent developments in the green economy, the economy of sustainable development, the circular and bio-economies.

Close interrelation between mankind and the environment is, after some months of lockdown, clearly visible from the satellite photos relating to atmospheric pollution,

which has fallen enormously everywhere due to the decrease in production activities and traffic, almost permanent in many of Asian megacities and present in many other realities in all continents.. And urban settlements highly contribute to the mentioned impacts on climate, as all cities are heat islands and, also if globally their surface covers only the 2% of the planet, they are responsible for the about ten times more on climate change. as just for example, due to wild urbanization and the immense building development of the last decades, the Indonesian capital Jakarta itself is slowly sinking and flooding; so the administrative function will be moved to reduce the actual immigration flows. The huge informal settlements that surround globally many metropolis offer inhuman life conditions under every aspects: overcrowding, lack of water and sanitary networks, waste, air pollution. Significant examples are in India, that hosts 13 of the world's 20 most polluted cities, and where are affected over 140 million people, following data of a 2017 study, where pollution in the slums has increased reaching intolerable levels and determining serious lung diseases (24). In relation to the actual pandemic, reports from almost all countries show that Covid/19 pandemic grows where is a greater human concentration, so it is more difficult to reduce its spread in large urban agglomerations than in smaller settlements. Updated data arriving from: "slums in India, "townships" in South Africa, "favelas" in Brazil, and so on in all informal settlements, are confirming the difficulties to detect the contagious spread and to implement in those overcrowded contexts containment and social distance, measures that work better in smaller settlements. This is not the only pandemic or epidemic that has occurred in recent years, before were Crazy Cow, Ebola, SARS, MERS, Avian, etc, nor will it be the last, given that all forecasts agree that will be faced more and more recurrent similar events, caused by man himself, as the climate change. The forced lockdown, involving many countries globally with the stopover of industries and traffic, in about two months, had relevant positive returns on the environment, restoring the natural values of many years ago.

This confirms that, if are applied different territorial and urban development models. the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change mitigation can be reached in the expected medium-term. This pandemic is also highlighting the values of smaller agglomerations, on one side for the easier containment and monitoring of the contagious and on the other the greater reciprocal cooperation and assistance among the inhabitants, who already have a stronger social cohesion. For the previous considerations, the revival of the role of smaller cities and towns is not only possible but fundamental, as one of the tools to reduce urbanization processes and keep the inhabitants on the territory, but also as the human presidium of the environment, that climate change makes it increasingly necessary.

Social Quality Approach

All the main issues, discussed above, related to uncontrolled urbanization processes, climate change, and negative impacts on the environment and heritage, urban settlement patterns, urban–rural rebalancing are interconnected. The best way to achieve results in this regard has to be developed with a holistic vision. Actual urban constructions are a consequence of a one-dimensional type of planning, a model that is concentrated on the

physical aspects and especially the socioeconomic and financial aspects (or dimensions) of the city, and that neglects the socio-environmental, the sociopolitical, and the socio-cultural (welfare) dimensions of daily circumstances in the urban context. In the late 1990s, a movement began in Europe that aimed to overcome the current fragmentation of scientific strategies in order to achieve urban and territorial development within a framework of environmental sustainability. This movement continues to this day. It promotes the social quality approach (SQA), which is focused on the reciprocity between three main fields of societal and environmental circumstances, namely, the (1) field of societal complexities, (2) the field of rural–urban circumstances, and (3) the field of ecosystems.

It is the result of the collective theorizing about the outcomes of different social quality projects that were implemented in the Hague during the past decade (IASQ 2009, 2010, 2012). These projects resulted in the generation of ideas about connecting the pursuit of overall sustainability and sustainable urban development. Of course, the latter can be said to be a part of the former. It has no meaning in itself, unless it is understood as being dependent for its functionality on the first concept. The above figure suggests, or hypothesizes, that in each field all four main dimensions are relevant: the economic, the environmental, socio-political and the socio-cultural. We can speak about the functionality of this model if the outcomes of the relationships of processes between these four dimensions in the rural–urban context remain within the boundaries of a resilient system.

With regard to the IASQ framework, we may first suppose that it is model that takes into account the changes in the field of the rural–urban circumstances in the context of the changes in the field of societal complexities and the field of ecosystems, because in every field the four dimensions are in force. Second, thanks to the SQA, we can make use of an analytical framework applicable to all four dimensions in all three fields, namely the so-called “social quality architecture” of the constitutional, the conditional, and the normative factors of urban development. The changes in the four dimensions of each field can be measured by their respective profiles, indicators, and criteria (Walker and Van der Maesen 2012). This overcomes the current methods of assessing the quality of life, which are based on parameters such as per capita income, available services, housing surfaces, and so on, leaving out fundamental elements such as environmental, political, economic, and socio-cultural considerations that allow us to identify shared indicators like effective social cohesion and impacts on natural resources. For this reason, it is certainly appropriate to face the issue of urban settlement with a new perspective, one that is not purely market-based or consumerist, which re-evaluates the values of inclusion, participation, and solidarity that still exist in minor centers with living conditions that, thanks to modern technologies, can reach much higher standards than in the past in a widespread context of social quality. Various SQA studies move in this direction, both in the European Union and in other jurisdictions such as China (Larouche and Zepp -1997) and Ukraine, and they are aimed at defining social quality through new parameters that evaluate different factors that affect people’s daily lives, and analyze the relationships between economic and social development, so as to promote sustainable and environmentally compatible urban development. There

are also various national planning tools that are moving in this direction as well, for they are promoting the integrated socio-economic development of homogeneous areas by consulting all relevant stakeholders and looking at the issue from an integrated standpoint.

In this regard, I want to stress that the SQA considers the social element, or “the social,” not simply as a simple set of mutual values and relationships, but an integral part of its model:

An outcome of the interaction between people (constituted as actors) and their constructed and natural environment. Its subject matter refers to people’s interrelated productive and reproductive relationships. In other words, the constitutive interdependency between processes of self-realization and processes governing the formation of collective identities is a condition for the social and its progress or decline.(IASQ 2013)

The main objective of the SQA is to overcome the existing fragmentation in the evaluation of societal phenomena and to evaluate its processes of continuous modification through five main parameters: social justice, solidarity, equality of values, human dignity, and environmental sustainability. It seeks to look at these parameters as a unitary whole that is indivisible and necessary to define correct social policies at different levels. They are known as the normative factors of social quality.

Specifically, on the topic of sustainability in an urban context, there is a need for finding a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability, that encompasses issues of finances and economic development, nature and maintaining the natural foundation of life and the societal conditions in their togetherness. A widespread settlement model and the enhancement of smaller urban centers and rural settlements is in total harmony with the principles set out by the SQA because it too also addresses urban issues with an integrated vision, not limited to economic factors only, for the sustainable development of territory, environmental protection, and the enhancement of non-physical assets.

Conclusions

As stated above, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inadequacy of the current urban settlement model, which has accepted as the inevitable urbanization trend for much of humanity in the coming decades. Hence, there is a need to identify alternative models, which are now even more likely to be realized thanks to new technologies. This difficult situation, in which the whole planet finds itself, when it finally ends, will certainly have significant consequences in many sectors, not only the economy, whose recovery will certainly not be fast. Forecasts from diverse sources all agree that the impact of the pandemic will be higher than that of the Great Depression of 1929 and that the entire process will take some years. Hopefully, we can also expect positive impacts from the current globalized consumerist model, which will help think more in terms of global solidarity and in terms of improving everyone’s public health and quality of life on a permanent basis. The COVID-19 crisis clearly put in evidence the possible reduction of daily commuting, the availability of Internet learning and working from home, the efficiency of e-shopping, and many other issues that can bring about radical changes in transport, mobility, and logistics with a visible reduction, in just a few weeks, of atmospheric and other types of pollution in the big metropolitan areas of the

world. It has also brought about the reduction, for a time still not foreseeable, of the national GDP of most countries worldwide accompanied by a reduction of incomes for large categories of the population, which will lead to a cut in the consumption of so many items that, so far considered essential, will prove to be superfluous. This “new normal” and the accelerated epochal change based on the widespread use of technologies in all sectors can favour a desirable modification of the current global financial and economic rules, which are still based on concepts dating back over seventy years and established in a profoundly different context by Western countries at the end of World War II. For some decades now, in those urban settlements, atmospheric pollution and water shortages have been on the rise with no clearly defined intervention strategies in sight. This has been accompanied by an unrestricted use of territory without any respect for the existing peculiarities of local cities or their natural environments. The uncontrolled use of urban land and the growth of informal settlements both go against the principles, fields, and dimensions of the SQA. Accepting, then, that the urbanization process is now unavoidable, in as much as weak or late attempts to stop it have failed, there are still measures we can take to mitigate the ongoing trend that must be evaluated and implemented as soon as possible to reduce negative effects of pollution, environmental damage, poor land-use, and natural resource shortages by taking actions oriented toward. It is urgent, therefore, to start deeply reflecting upon urbanization processes and how to mitigate them and rebalance the unequal rural–urban equation in any way and wherever possible. We must do this in order to save local heritage, specific peculiarities of place, tangible and intangible patrimony, and other necessary elements to assure smaller cities and towns can undergo permanent, integrated development. Modern technologies can provide effective tools in favoring territorial reuse through compatible mobility infrastructures, communication networks, renewable energies, together conceived of as “smart corridors”, as a way to enhance human settlements and the social cohesion of their inhabitants, and to protect the environment, heritage, patrimony, and local economies. A comprehensive approach, as is currently being argued for by SQT, is still not only the best way to manage complex urbanization issues and to assure a urban–rural territorial rebalance, but it also the best tool we have to fight climate change and other future emergency events.

Paolo Motta is an architect who specializes in territorial and town planning. In the last fifteen years, he has focused his work on sustainable urban and integrated development strategies and policies, with a holistic approach not only to technical but also to economic and financial evaluation as well as a variety of social and environmental issues. Recently, he has been looking at issues involving historic patrimony, cultural heritage, sustainable tourism, and the identification of related operational instruments. He is presently engaged in opposing uncontrolled urbanization processes and exploring mitigation measures proposed by new urban settlement models and approaches.
Email:mottapa2@gmail.com

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