Fragile or vigorous: Two narratives of the contemporary city

Cities are compelling, but they also have a darker shadow. Cities are the most complex artefact created by human beings and their most significant investment. They make civilisations manifest. They drive cultures, they embody their values, they push development. They are accelerators of opportunity, hubs of potential, they force feed transactions and connections. Expertise and talent cluster in them as do trade, commerce and industries. This generates vitality, energy and the possibilities from which prospects and cultural richness grows.

Cities are the wealth generators increasingly rather than nations especially in a knowledge intensive economy. They create about 80% of the global economy. This requires dense circuits of information exchange, clever, talented people and high levels of expertise and research competences allied to complex production capacities largely found in cities.

Cities remain the focus of attention for most people on the planet as setters of trends, as arbiters of fashion, as the well springs of aspiration. They vie with each other for status and compete to attract headlines, investment and celebrity citizens. Some are rising in importance with their leaders becoming global players others are failing falling into a spiral of decline trapped by inherited problems and unable to adapt to new circumstances.

The complex threats

The predominant narrative for cities focusses on their triumphant achievements.[1] We hear less about the vulnerabilities and threats to the stability and well-being of cities. The most dominant are: Climate change, the food, health, resource, poverty and inequality crises leading to a security problem and the financial crisis which limits the resources available to deal with them. Add to these a growing population which exerts pressure on everything and the mass movement of people across the globe, which can cause the identities of cities to shift often with explosive impacts as often people are living side by side with fundamentally differing views about how life should be lived. The inability to grasp the complexity of these risks and how to deal with them causes an intense governance and management problem. Finally there is urgency and limited time to act, which is a crisis in itself.

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[1] See Edward Glaeser The Triumph of the City ETC or Cities are good for you

This is the interlocking risk landscape cities find themselves in and it encapsulates an emerging, darker narrative of accumulating internal and external stresses which threatens to turn our cities from pinnacles of hope into places of despair. These patterns of risk, often global in scope, are combining to form a crisis that cannot be dealt with by business as usual. To avert the worst of these risks requires cities across the world to play a more prominent role in national life, both practically and politically. They can act more nimbly than national governments to deliver the innovative and integrated responses required, but they need to be more alert to the thresholds at which this combination internal and external stresses becomes unmanageable. Cities are the natural engines to drive the necessary innovations and they have the critical mass to implement them. But the contract between cities and their host governments will need to be significantly rewritten to allow them to play their full part.

City & state: **Shifting the balance**
Remember we are witnessing the greatest mass movement of people in history. The inordinate pace of growth of cities is immensely stressful conditioned largely by an exploding population that has increased from 2 billion in 1945 to 7 billion today. It requires ever more elaborate infrastructure, well-functioning institutions and public services for cities to survive and flourish. The predicted growth in cities is driven suggests that $100 trillion needs to be spent over the next 15 years on infrastructure, such as roads, airports, sanitation systems or housing. - imagine the energy output of all the steel and cement required and their effects on climate change. More will need to be spent on health and social services for ageing populations, or to attract investment to generate jobs for burgeoning numbers of young people. Increasing ethnic or religious diversity will require thoughtful social and political management.

Compounding these internal stresses will be the impact of growing global stresses including the historical pattern of endless energy consuming growth which will threaten to make the internal ones unmanageable for even the most innovative and imaginative city leaders. The global financial crisis that began in 2007 fed back immediately and painfully into cities everywhere. Public expenditure priorities of national governments changed overnight as they sought to restore financial stability and so considerably cut back resources available to many cities to deal the pressures of growth, change and more mouths to feed. Climate change, for instance, threatens to undermine food, water and energy security. This leads to price increases which exacerbate urban poverty and

inequality and add considerably to the stress of managing the multicultural melting pots of modern cities. Food price spikes are clearly linked to outbreaks of violence in cities and played an strong part in initiating the Arab Spring.

Cities acting on their own can have little impact on these systemic problems despite the huge range of local initiatives they are already undertaking. They are constrained by inadequate national policies from creating the necessary incentives and regulations to drive solutions more forcefully. Policy failure by national governments however threatens not only to overwhelm local efforts to manage these risks but also to intensify the existing internal stresses on city leaders. Resolving this nexus of risks so as not to undermine the prosperity and security of the three quarters of the world's people who will be living in cities by the middle of the century is the dominant political challenge of the next four decades. It is not clear that our political systems are up to it.