

Foreword

I first began really thinking about cities and climate change back in the 1990s, when I spent some months in Curitiba, Brazil. This provincial city should be on every traveler's list, and not just because it's on the way to Iguazu Falls. It shows what happens when city leaders truly set their minds to making change. Mayor Jaime Lerner pioneered many developments, from vast parkland expansion for flood control to a huge system of municipal bike paths to – crucially – the first instances of what we now call bus rapid transit. And in the process he created a city where people really enjoyed living: when he left office because of term limits, his popularity topped 90 per cent.

Making change in national capitols is crucial – but it's also slow, and hard. The lobbying power of incumbent industries, especially those involved in fossil fuels, is often strongest in federal congresses and parliaments, and so when change comes it often comes too slowly. Also, many national legislatures give extra power to shrinking rural areas, meaning that these regions can veto change. Cities, by contrast, are nimbler and often inhabited by more progressive, younger, and more gregarious citizens. And the people who run them are much closer to the issues that matter. So it's been truly encouraging to watch the C40 Cities emerge as a key part of the effort to bend the carbon curve and change the outcome of the climate drama.

As this fine volume makes clear, the opportunities are enormous (and never more so than now, when the COVID-19 crisis has opened our minds to the possibility of inhabiting our great urban areas in new ways). We see, just in the last few years, cities such as London and Paris moving decisively to shift their transit mix toward buses and muscles; we see cities such as New York standing up to landlords by forcing them to retrofit existing buildings for energy efficiency. (The landlords will end up thanking them, as energy costs drop sharply.) We see cities outlawing gas connections for new constructions and making deals with utilities to provide renewable power. And, happily, we see cities figuring out how to put pressure on the larger systems of our society: the widespread move to divest civic pensions from the fossil fuel industry, and now to pressure banks that do business with municipalities to stop lending to businesses that operate within this industry, will play a large role in reordering power at the national and global levels.

All of this will not only help to ward off sea-level rise and forestall more giant storms – it will make for better, cooler, cleaner, happier, more resilient cities. And ones that are more fun too!

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