

Ecological Transition and Right to the City

Montreuil's People's Climate Summit
during COP21

Minutes from the debate of Saturday,
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Commission Inclusion
Sociale, Démocratie
Participative et Droits
Humains de CGLU

Context

Within the framework of Montreuil's People's Climate Summit, held during the COP21, Habitat International Coalition and UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, both of them members of the Global Platform for the Right to the City, organized a debate on the Ecological Transition and the Right to the City.

This debate had many objectives : to highlight the unsustainability of competitive city model, to raise the Right to the City as essential element for the ecological transition, and to strengthen the articulation between urban and ecologist movements, and between social movements and local governments.

According to the UN, in 2050, 70% of world's population will be living in cities. Whereas most of greenhouse gas emissions are produced in cities, and the consequences of climate change firstly affect the most precarious. Is this predominant urbanization model sustainable for our planet ? How to implement ecological transition in cities in order to ensure well-living and environmental rights for all ? How to think urban development regarding its articulation with the rural ? How to support new urban citizenships, connected to their rural and peri-urban surroundings ? How to boost popular ecology for all ? What policies for resilience at local level ?

This debate, organized in two complementary roundtables, gave the floor to ten speakers to discuss the challenges we face and the alternatives that the right to the city offers.

Gustave Massiah, its moderator, opened the debate stating that the ecological transition should be approached in a new way, through a social transition. From this point of view, issues such as everyone's access to rights and social equality are central. It is in this way that the Right to the City should be recognised and implemented.

First roundtable

« The challenge of climate change in an urban world »

« *We need to restore territories' sovereignty* »

Augusto Barrera, former Mayor of Quito and current director of the Research Centre of Public Policies and Territory at the Latin-American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), highlighted the nature, local and global at the same time, of the fight against climate change, and presented five trends of the Latin-American urbanization process that shape the ecological transition :

1. An urbanization process exceptionally intensive and extensive : world's population living in cities has grown from 20.5% in 1925 to more than 50% nowadays. These processes imply conurbation and metropolisation phenomena, as well as the growth of intermediary cities and a fast development of small cities, due to touristic investments and extractive activities. This process also expresses itself through the creation of satellite cities, trade corridors, urban sprawls around transportation routes or attractive infrastructures, and even the classical centre/periphery model. The diversity of urban expansion processes raised an extraordinary complexity to govern or manage the urban.

2. The enslaving process of economic globalisation generated throughout these last 20 years, which encompassed the financialization of the economy –which intrinsically generates inequalities and spatial segregation. Capitalism's mutations have reconfigured urban areas, which have become spaces for the exploitation of the land and the common goods, based on a service economy –sustained by employment's precariousness. Cities are also huge markets of consumers that exclude large sectors of society. All this have created a hierarchy between cities that depends upon their performance as centres of financial capital's management –which constrains their political autonomy.

3. Institutional transformations and de-regulation, boosted by regional integration processes, that have aimed at favouring free movement of goods, services and, especially, capital (but never people's movement!). This has been normalised by the idea that « good local government » means « less regulations and more competitiveness to attract capital » (strategic planning models without any relationship with the reality it refers to, public-private partnerships...). On the pretext of technical neutrality, urban models have been spread as « good practices » of management, empty of any critical political vision, through international bodies.

However, reality confirms that, faced with capital's concentration-centralisation, territories' management capacities are wakened.

4. Great societal transformations. The economy tertiarisation generated a deep employment precariousness –low-qualified, low quality and very temporary- which is usually accompanied by a social behavioural model based on consumption culture, individualism and banalisation. All this has deeply shaped patterns of collective aggregation, identity production and socialisation, and has made new social actors emerge –with new collective organisation patterns, dynamics and agendas : from the « occupy » movement to Brazilian anti-government protests.

5. Finally, diversification of urban issues all over the world has led to different ways to deal with them with no transferable model –which makes even harder the development of common theoretical, conceptual and political proposals. We are no longer able to act under a single motto for development and progress.

To tackle this situation, as well as the climate change, Barrera raises the issue of the New Urban Agenda : it should have a strategic global approach, and needs to directly question our production, consumption and wealth distribution patterns. That is what the Right to the City is about. To promote the Right the City means to enhance a critical mass–local, academic and social.

« Popular classes should not be victims of Parisian metropolis' competitive strategy »

Sylvie Ducatteau, local elected at Aubervilliers City Council and at Plaine Commune's urban community, explains the new vision of the metropolis that Plaine Commune is developing –a « sustainable and polycentric metropolis ».

« Opposite to classical metropolis, whose central city's choices generate inequalities, the polycentric sustainable metropolis aims at recognising peripheral and suburban cities».

Indeed, «popular classes shouldn't be victims of Parisian metropolis' competitive strategy». This defence of a peripheral centrality of suburban cities is actually a source of pride for peripheries.

« 15 of the 25 most affected by greenhouse gases cities are in Africa, whereas Africa only generates the 4% of the world's emissions »

Bachir Kanouté, ENDA-ECOPOP coordinator, speaks about the «environmental injustices» that are directly affecting Africa. What will be the future of African cities ?

Nowadays, «15 of the 25 most affected by greenhouse gases cities are in Africa, whereas Africa only generates the 4% of the world's emissions».

« Regarding climate change, new challenges for cities are appearing, such as the management of rainwater that generates floods or the energy needs intensification ». Some African capital cities do not have running water and electricity.

A « financial support » is needed, as well as the « participation and social inclusion of the different communities », especially in the participatory budget processes –which have to be implemented. Furthermore, it is necessary « to integrate climate changes in urbanistic documents » in order to properly fight against it.

« We need to invent new patterns of living in this planet »

Amaranta Herrero is an environmental sociologist ; she studies the relationship between human societies and the environment. « We are in a state of ecological emergency », she said. « The global world's temperature is 1oC higher than it was during the industrial revolution, and, unless we stop this growth, in 2100 it will be 3-4 oC higher. What kind of life can we imagine in a world with 4 oC more? According to a British research, it would be impossible to maintain an organized social life, the number of refugees would increase (due to many conflicts' emergence); in addition to this, water would be very scarce ».

In order to prevent this to happen, it is necessary to overcome five challenges that Herrero identified.

Firstly, it is necessary « to stop giving lessons and start giving a true social response by treating this issue as a systemic, transversal challenge », rather than an isolated issue in cities' ecology departments. Also, it is necessary « to communicate again and again about this issue in order for it to become a reality in people's every-day life and that we all become sensible to it as we are in regard to other issues ». A third challenge is to « work against social inequalities in cities that have different degrees of vulnerability » and that, consequently, have to deal with them in different ways.

This is way that cities should « articulate a true multilevel governance » that would enable the start of the cultural, social and political revolution we need. The last challenge we face, then, is « to articulate this governance with civil society's actors that are involved in all social processes, in order to « invent new patterns of living in this planet ».

« Local government shall ally with social movements »

Gustavo Petro was Mayor of Bogotá. In his view, one of the main challenges that climate change poses is « the local powers' alliance with social movements ».

The limits of capitalism have been reached by trying to face markets' current circumstances. The climate change implies the end of the humanity, « our dead ». In Bogota, as in many other cities, urban expansion has emptied city centre, and the city has been expanded to the peripheries –generating a foolish speculative market. The accumulation of capital generates urban exclusion. « In Bogota, after the novelty, the dynamism and the growth of incomes, it came the destruction of territories, nature and culture, as well as the raise of social segregation ».

Therefore, if we are not able to find the way to build and to articulate alternative patterns of social relationships, the current model will lead us to the end of democracy. Governments alone do not have the capacity or the willingness to change it all. The carbon market will not be able to transform a market that is precisely fed by fossil energies. If there is not a multitude of people in cities' streets, how can we foster the change of paradigm we really need ? Are we going to let governments that depend on oil companies to decide our future ? The change will come from the territories. Local governments can ally with social movements. « We can do it ».

« For us, the Right to the City is about taking charge of the city »

Dimitri Rossopoulos, founder of the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre, concludes this first roundtable. He explains all the processes led in Montreal by the citizens themselves, as well as the creation, in 1986, of the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre (CEUM), along with their neighbours. Mr. Rossopoulos also talks about the citizen summit on Montreal's future hold in 2000, which proposed a Charter of Montreal Inhabitants' Rights that was accepted by city government. One of the main strengths of this charter is the Right of Initiative : thanks to it, a public consultation on any issue can be carried out if there are enough citizens' signatures.

« Montreal is the most decentralized city of North-America ». Montreal citizens « are transforming the city as political, economic and cultural structure ». For Mr. Rossopoulos, the Right to the City is about « taking charge of the city in order to change it in depth ».

Following these four speeches, the floor was given to assembly members for them to express their views and questions.

« Constitution of an Earth citizens' Assembly ».

French citizen

« In Africa, people are living in flood-risk areas. Cities are urbanised areas. Responsibility does not lie on the citizen, but on the Mayor that approves it. We need to take care of it and to properly define Right to the City policies. »

Malian citizen

« There is a need of cultural transfers to the North. I've been in Paris for some days and I've seen that this part of the world does not have the answers to the issues we are dealing with. I encourage you to come to Nepal and to learn from us what sustainability may be. The city is not sustainable by itself. »

Nepali citizen

Many people take the floor and the debate focuses on these three main issues :

1. The need for a citizen forum for democracy and ecology –which, as pointed out by Dimitri Rossopoulos, already exists with the World Social Forum ;

2. The mutual knowledge between Global North and South. The North has things to learn from the South, and together we should be able to build a global strategy against global capital ;

3. The transfer of traditions –especially pre-columbines- that have historically linked citizens' rights to environmental rights.

Mr. Petro referred to a pre-columbine charter of Nature's Rights, whereas Mr. Roussopoulos came back to the Right to the City as societal base's decision-making power to transform the current paradigm.

Second roundtable

« Alternatives from the Right to the City »

« *Democracy shall confront the Rule of Law* »

Jordi Borja, president of the Observatory of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Barcelona), supports the need to « change the law » if we want to go beyond the current state of affairs. Despite of the efforts for the Right to the City and the will to go beyond the Right to Housing, the economic and political system has not been changed.

However, differences between the current political system and social claims have resulted in glaring tensions : « How can the Right to Housing be effective without changing land's ownership ? », « How can we ensure sustainability if we do not restore public ownership of privatizations we have carried out ? »

It is not possible to make all our aspirations real without changing the current legal system. Thus, we need to confront the Rule of Law to achieve the Right to the City, without which democracy cannot exist.

« *People have to go into neighbourhoods to structure and organize them* »

Jean-Baptiste Eyraud, co-founder of the Association for the Right to Housing (DAL), speaks out the fact that « the rich have already taken the best part of the city ». Sustainability is often a pretext to exclude and to satisfy bo-bo's aspirations. Mr. Eyraud recalls cases of social housing tenants that have been imposed improvements for the sake of energy efficiency and consequently have prevented the dwellers to access to housing for some months.

Social issues are at the heart of ecological transition's challenges, since we know that « world's top 1% consummates 2000 times over the poor » (T. Piketty). City's expensiveness, and also its ghettoization, accelerates « exclusion processes of popular classes ».

This is why DAL was created as a grassroots movement for the homeless and those in poor housing to claim for the Right to Housing and for better living conditions.

In this sense, the No Vox network was created to give voice to the voiceless, aiming to conquer laws and legal advances.

Only collective organization may enable us to change power balance. We need contact between human beings, between middle and popular classes, in neighbourhoods. As Albert Jacquart said, « human beings do not exist if they do not communicate to each other ».

Also, it is needed that « local governments accept to discuss ».

« We have proposed to 800 organizations a participative process to answer the question : What can we do to fight against climate change ? »

Eva Herrero, the Ecology Commissioner of Barcelona City Government, presented the collective work conducted by the city in views of the COP21. « The new local government wants to put the commons, those goods that belong to people, at the heart of local decisions », and climate change is part of these shared concerns. The Right to the City is also a duty regarding the city, the duty to participate.

Is in this way that Barcelona asked 800 local organizations, associations and others : « What can we do to fight against climate change? ». The final working document presents nine feasible projects -for instance, they have approved universal access to energy. This document was brought by Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, to the City Council, and has been also used as working basis for the Barcelona delegation to the COP21.

« If we want to get out of capitalism, it is good to look at those practices and values that precede it »

Lorena Zarate, president of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC), offers a historical view of the Right to the City. She points out academic considerations explained by H. Lefebvre and even D. Harvey, as well as some issues arisen after the 2001 World Social Forum in Porto-Alegre.

« The Right to the City is not a classical liberal tradition, but a proposal to reform the urban and to implement the well-living principle that interacts with different regions, dimensions and historical moments ».

To get out of capitalism, it would be interesting to look at those practices and values that precede the establishment of this system.

Lorena Zarate highlights two fundamental elements of the Right to the City :

1. The deepening of democracy, especially the direct decision-making power for affected people –and this is why it is important that we all get trained on the exercise of power by collectively learning.

2. The transition from a financial economy to a care economy –take care of others: of self but also of the environment.

After the speeches on the alternatives based on the Right to the City, two assembly members take the floor.

The first one, Benoit Filippi, highlights the link between « expensive city and unequal city ». Nowadays, we need to « stop talking about States as if they were united in a single group : social classes have never been as different as States are between them ». Against this situation, his idea is to create a « progressive taxation of people who damages progress ».

Another speaker makes different proposals. For instance, « in every neighbourhood, there should be common things, such as materials or others ». He also proposes that citizens themselves « make cities greener ».

Conclusion

After these two roundtables, **Gustave Massiah**, the moderator, concludes.

Firstly, he insists on two elements :

1. A strategy shall be rethought in order to properly respond to climate change and to the Right to the City : how do we articulate an urgent response and a fundamental transformation ?

2. The Right to the City is not part of a distant future anymore–some populations' living standards and the 2011 occupy movements are clear evidence of this.

He ends his statement by highlighting that “the combination of contradictions between States and economic actors is the main reason for us to be here”.

In this context, two new actors are being identified : local governments and social movements. Territories are strong actors, and there is an “alliance to build between local governments and social movements” –which must be strong enough to “transform economic actors and to rebuild States”. This is a proposal to keep working on.