

FINAL REMARKS:

Position on sustainable cities for Mexico

Throughout the book, we have shared a conceptual, theoretical and operational *position* on sustainable cities -initially for Mexico but perhaps also for Latin America and the Caribbean. This *position*, which requires a process of continuous improvement and construction, is characterized by the following premises:

- i) The engines for economic growth and human development in Mexico are our cities. In order for them to be *competitive* they must be *sustainable*. Three out of four Mexicans lived in cities in 2010, and the number is only increasing. Cities are a source of *opportunities*, but they can also be a source of *problems* if they are not managed appropriately. This occurs when public policy and institutions are dysfunctional, when the socio-spatial distribution of opportunities and development costs are unjust, and when cities destroy the environment. Whatever occurs in cities will outline the future of Mexico in terms of economic growth, poverty and inequality reduction, demographic modulation, environmental sustainability and human rights. We must accept a new paradigm that underscores the *benefits* of urbanization, as well as its *risks*. We acknowledge that no country has been able to satisfactorily develop without powerful cities, and that there is no *automatic* correlation between growth or city size and the problems a city faces. Our position is not one that seeks to *halt* urbanization, but one that tries to *make the best* of the opportunities offered, and minimizes contingencies. The question is: how will we reach competitive, fair and responsible cities, while still protecting the environment? In other words: how will we build *sustainable cities*? All sustainable cities require the support of a strong agricultural sector: they are two sides of the same coin.
- ii) Sustainability in cities must be a *guiding principle*, not something we should strive to *achieve*. We understand that sustainable urban development is a *guiding principle* for public policy, and not an ideal state that must be attained as soon as possible. It is, then, a permanent process, a process of continuous improvement, a long-term ideal. We have identified five *goals of the highest level*, four *fundamental public policy tools*, and five *evaluation criteria* that will allow us to measure the advances made in our urban sustainable development policies. The *goals of the highest level* are:
 - a. Poverty reduction;
 - b. Inequality reduction;
 - c. Rational use of resources and natural capital;
 - d. Promotion of low-carbon economic growth; and
 - e. Increased access to urban opportunities.

Our central policy tools are:

- i. To offer high quality public services that are inclusive;
- ii. Land use control;
- iii. Solid and robust local public finance; and,
- iv. Urban and metropolitan laws and regulations.

Our criteria for evaluation are:

- i. Efficiency (*i.e.* cost-benefit relationship, in general terms);
- ii. Equality (*i.e.* access to urban opportunities; improvement of life conditions and quality of life);
- iii. Effectiveness (*i.e.* how our strategies will help us achieve our highest level goals);
- iv. Time frames (*i.e.* opportunities that may arise and duration of a policy: “when”); and
- v. Territorial scales (*i.e.* spatial scales at which the policies will be applied: “where”).

iii) **Urban sustainability is multidimensional and requires a coordination and balance of policies, strategies and actions.** The key dimensions considered here are: *social, economic, environmental, political, demographical, mobility-related, those related to access to urban opportunities, as well as institutional*¹. These dimensions are all equally important and are not only highly *interrelated*, but also *overlapping*. They are represented separately in order to more easily define them as *analytical categories* (see Figure I.1 in the Introduction to the book). Coordination of (public and private) policies, strategies and actions in different dimensions can generate important *synergies* and *multiplying effects*. However, if they are undertaken without coordination they may dilute any achievements and, in some cases, even *offset*² them. Coordination between local governments is *crucial* for a country that is predominantly urban, where 62.6 million people (55.7% of the total population of the country) lived in 59 metropolitan areas in 2010. In this same year, 11 cities with more than one million inhabitants were metropolitan areas (*i.e.*: cities led by several municipal governments; cities guided by several *pilots*).

iv) **We require spatially integrated public policies.** In order to be successful (socially, economically, environmentally), public action must be *correctly located* on at least three different levels: the *sectoral* level (strategic sectors), the time level (they must take place at the right moment in time) and the spatial level (the right place, at the right scale). If that location fails on any of these three levels, the social effort will fail. Public policies will be more efficient if they include a space-time-sector perspective, that is, if public policies are *spatially integrated* (and take into consideration the interdependency and overlaps that occur between space, time, economic structure and

¹ We are referring to both *formal institutions* (*e.g.* governments) and the *rules of operation of a society* (*e.g.* systems of incentives, norms, regulations, values, traditions, laws, beliefs, power relations, cultural interests and practices, that formally and informally delimit the type of interactions and behaviors of individuals and public and private organizations) (*see* Chapter 2).

² For example: advances made in water treatment may be offset by an increasingly irrational use of this resource or due to mistakes made by a new administration.

society). In Mexico, this requires a *shift in paradigm* with regards to developmental planning: we must conceive the country, first and foremost, in *spatial* terms (different scales: megaregions, cities, neighborhoods) and then in *sectorial* terms. First, we must define the *where*, and then the *what*. This vision allows us to more easily identify: in *what* to invest (social criteria), *when* to invest (time criteria), *where* to invest (spatial criteria), *how much* to invest (scale criteria) and *what the results* should be (not through artificially separated sectors, but through spatially integrated scales). In addition to this, space as an *articulating node* for public policy allows us to *evaluate* with greater certainty advances made in terms of urban sustainability. On the other hand, *purely sectorial* evaluations (artificially broken down into non-related activity sectors) will frequently lead to *false positives*: sectors that seem to fare well *individually*, but that are not producing the expected benefits to society; for instance, education without employment, employment without opportunities, opportunities without justice, justice without GDP, or GDP without equality. Without a sense of *where*, everything occurs anywhere or in a non-place. This, in turn, is inoperative, even paradoxical, in terms of public policy. Space and time are essential to nearly everything we think and do.

- v) Sustainable cities are a key component in the shift from a traditional economy to a highly competitive industrial and post-industrial economy. Governments can play a part in this process by promoting the necessary spatial transformations for development and not only sectoral changes. Increased concentration (*i.e.* density, distance reduction, greater accessibility, interactions and connectivity) will continue to be key in the social and economic advancement of countries, regions and cities. This implies selecting intervention scales that go beyond current political-administrative limits –which are often dysfunctional– as well as making localization decisions, modulating different flow types (*e.g.*: people, merchandise, ideas) and a socio-spatial redistribution of the benefits and burdens of development, among many other things. It is worth noting that cities are rarely adequate units for environmental management. Also, cities are not autonomous entities that can achieve sustainability solely through endogenous change processes.

Urban centers connect with much more than their surrounding regions; they are intensely linked to international and national flows and networks of trade, capital and innovations. The global dynamics of urban development tend to weaken and diminish local efforts aimed at advancing the sustainability of cities. The city in itself is not a closed system, and it exerts a strong environmental pressure on larger geographic areas. The correct scale for sustainability analysis is not the urban area, but the area of influence in which the ecological footprint and raw material and waste exchanges occur. Perhaps the most adequate scale would be the megaregion, understood as a multidimensional space in which network links among cities, metropolitan regions and rural areas are structured by a series of activities interconnected through common resources, cultural identity and shared economic opportunities.

vi) We should not confuse the problems that occur *in the cities* with the problems *of the city*. The former are problems *located* in cities because this is where society concentrates. However, they stem from the current social order (*i.e.*: they are *structural* problems). The second ones are problems generated or exacerbated by the *poor operational and management practices* of cities (*e.g.* land use conflicts, inefficient and highly-polluting transportation systems, irrational management of natural resources, dysfunctional governments, uncompetitive local economies). A recurring example of this frequent confusion is to consider that cities *generate poverty* when there is *no single piece of evidence* suggesting this. Cities are a space for opportunities and positive pulsations, but they are also a place where a synthesis of *social relations* occurs. The city does not generate poverty, *much the contrary*: the city *mitigates* and provides opportunities for the poorest members of society (including agricultural migrants), and offers them urban opportunities including the *right to the city*.

Successful cities attract populations that are seeking better opportunities to build their futures and follow their life plans (a large part of this population is comprised by women; many of these opportunities are *meager*; a large part of these migrants are *ill-equipped* to take advantage of these opportunities). Many of those who come to the city are poor because of structural social issues; *the city did not make them poor*. Eliminating poverty requires a *deep change* in social organization: *it is not enough* to improve how the city operates, notwithstanding the importance of urban effects. Structural changes, however, may take *too long*, and waiting for things to happen before taking action is, perhaps, the *most costly (and conservative)* stance we can take.

