

# Social Infrastructure

## OVERVIEW

Social Infrastructure is the very fabric of a well-functioning city, the foundation of public space and public life. It is an aspect of urban life that has suffered much in the Covid-19 pandemic, and, in many cities, from policies of austerity in the decade following the financial crisis. The successful rebuilding of social infrastructure will be key to achieving many of the goals set out in the Global Parliament of Mayors 2020 Roadmap, with its ambitions to develop more ecologically sensitive, socially inclusive and democratic cities. In a time of great movement of peoples around the world, it will also be a necessary factor in generating a welcoming and inclusive urban environment for new migrants to the city. While infrastructure has long been understood to encompass water, energy, road, rail, and communication networks, Social Infrastructure covers such diverse components of the urban fabric as parks and green spaces, sidewalks and roads, housing, transportation, public amenities, public squares, museums, galleries, libraries, points of digital connectivity, places of worship.

At their best these places and objects are the locales and connective tissues that bring people together to meet and mix, and are the necessary conditions for social connectivity. They counter social isolation, exclusion and polarisation. They are the places where citizenship, community and a democratic ethos are fostered. The provision of social infrastructure within a city, or its lack, says a great deal about the governance of a city, and its political priorities.

Engaging with the problems and policies related to social infrastructure is particularly urgent for the

Global Parliament of Mayors. Moving towards more ecologically sensitive urban models will also require shifting infrastructural paradigms to more local, less energy intensive and less automobile reliant forms. Ambitions for a post-pandemic reset also mesh with longer term trends. Previous decades have seen an increasingly privatised and ‘splintered’ urban infrastructural paradigm in many cities around the world, generating entrenched exclusion, polarisation and inequalities that must be addressed.

The ambition for a reset of social infrastructure provision also finds resonance and opportunity in the changing international environment in which cities find themselves. International and internal migration are increasingly prevalent urban issues, and putting in place effective social infrastructure will be key to an inclusive and welcoming response to new migrants to the city, facilitating support networks and integration. But there are also profound political and geopolitical shifts underway that relate specifically to the nature of infrastructure provision.

Infrastructure investment is increasingly used as a geopolitical tool, and cities will be caught up in the emerging infrastructural competition between major powers. The vast size of China’s decade of international infrastructure investment, under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, has kickstarted competition between Great Powers over infrastructure investment around the world. This is reflected in recent big policy responses, such as the US-led G7 Build Back Better World Initiative, and the European Union’s Global Gateway initiative.

The coming together of geopolitical competition, infrastructure investment and global urbanisation is also driven by the need to transition to a net-zero energy paradigm – and different visions of how to achieve this will fundamentally impact cities and their leadership over the coming decades. This also presents cities with opportunities to bid for and shape infrastructural investment finance. This was recognised in the May 2022 **G7 ministerial communique**, which recognised *‘the importance of cities in developing and financing sustainable infrastructure as well as municipal, local, and regional governments’ processes for the transformative shift, collaboration among them and the significant role of central governments in supporting their initiatives. The G7 express this by supporting effective multi-level*

*governance, international knowledge sharing, and stronger financial and planning capacities at the local level'.*

Finally, and relatedly, the rise of authoritarianism and popular nationalism in international and national politics requires cities committed to a democratic ethos to build the social infrastructure that is essential for a functioning democratic city and society. Cities with the requisite social infrastructures to foster free speech and free association will be a vital bulwark against the spread of authoritarianism and popular nationalism.

## **POLICY BRIEF**

Cities are thus uniquely positioned to act to help to solve these issues via the provision of social infrastructure that supports the aims of social inclusion, enhancing and protecting natural systems, and bolstering democratic processes. Cities have unique powers to influence guidelines and legal frameworks for social infrastructure. They can exercise power over the infrastructural procurement process with their ability to convene coalitions of public, private and civil society actors. They are increasingly active in multiple transnational municipal networks, from which they can draw on learning, expertise and the best practice of many other cities around the world in order to enhance social infrastructure provision. Mayors also have a unique legitimacy to speak for and include citizens and neighbourhoods in the co-production of visions of social infrastructure development.

Three key considerations which shape social infrastructure may be considered:

**1. Designing for better social outcomes** – Cities should incorporate systems thinking and technology in order to empower communities and policymakers alike to provide better social outcomes. 'Participatory Cities' allow for change to start with local communities, taking a ground-up approach to planning, co-creating places with the city government, and advising on better outcomes for social infrastructure. An example of this is the interdisciplinary research group 'Living Urban Districts', a platform that equips urban designers and planners with "socialised" metrics - on racial demographics, college graduates, rent-burdened individuals and low-income earners - alongside the kind of data that would normally be considered, such as overall population, housing units, jobs, transit stops and retail

units, in a way that encourages planners to assess developments that is conscious of the social nature of infrastructure.

**2. Enhancing natural systems** - It is imperative that ambitions for enhancing natural systems are integrated with social infrastructure, providing cleaner air to residents, better pedestrian and cycle routes, and green spaces available to all. A successful example can be seen in the Mexican city of Valle de Chalco. Working together with the local community, designers 'All Arquitectura' - in collaboration with a non-profit organisation - provided low-tech interventions to create Xico-parque Sur 23, the green restoration of a former public sports park. Before the restoration design was finalised, designers took part in a long process of listening to the local residents in order to understand the problems they faced and their most pressing needs. By taking a low-tech regenerative approach to green space, the project shows the combined benefits of providing support for both urban greening and social infrastructure.

**3. City diplomacy in promotion of social infrastructure** - City and municipal governments are taking an increasingly visible position in international affairs via city-to-city diplomacy, influence within International Organizations, and transnational city networks. This is a source of considerable power and influence for cities to shape global development agendas. But it also highlights constraints that need to be addressed. Not all cities have the capacity to engage, particularly smaller cities that make up the majority of the world's urban population and have fewer financial resources, and those without existing connections to the multilateral system. In addition, city diplomacy may be hindered by diverging ideological agendas; for example, cities in Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia are often under the direct influence of their national governments as they negotiate or engage in deliberations within city-to-city networks.

### **Proposition and Policy Recommendations**

- Identify best practice internationally, and strengthen mechanisms for sharing knowledge and expertise across transnational city networks.

- Develop longer-term programmes of research into the relationship between democratic governance and social infrastructure.
- Focus on new opportunities for infrastructure investment emerging from new major infrastructure initiatives at the national and international levels driven by emerging geopolitical competition.
- Explore new development coalitions of private, public sector and civil society actors to facilitate new visions for social infrastructure, including opportunities for co-creation and co-production of those visions by urban citizens and communities.

## QUESTIONS FOR THE DEBATE

- How are democratic values currently expressed and enabled, or constrained, by social infrastructures in cities?
- How are public, private and civil society coalitions currently configured in the provision of social infrastructure, and how could this balance be improved upon?
- To what extent are urban citizens included in co-creation and co-production of social infrastructure design and policy? Can this be increased, and by which mechanisms?
- What should be the social infrastructure provision priorities endorsed by the Global Parliament of Mayors?

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