

Want to See How Governments Are Making Real Progress? Look to the Cities Tackling Our Biggest Problems

New energy is transforming our cities into hotbeds of democracy and progressive innovation.

By Sarah van Gelder.

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If you've been looking to the federal government for action on big challenges such as poverty, climate change, and immigration, this has been a devastating decade. Big money's dominance of elections, obstructionism by the Tea Party, and climate denial have brought action in Washington to a near standstill. But while the media focuses on the gridlock, a more hopeful story is unfolding. Cities are taking action.

Climate change is a case in point. Cities are already experiencing the damage caused by an increasingly chaotic climate. Many are located along coastlines, where rising sea levels coupled with giant storms bring flooding and coastal erosion. Some low-lying areas are being abandoned.

Others cities face protracted water shortages due to diminishing rainfall and shrinking snowpack. And cities are subject to the urban heat island effect that can raise temperatures to lethal levels.

Cities can't afford to wait for the ideological wars to play out.

On Oct. 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast, flooding lower Manhattan, filling subway tunnels, twisting up the boardwalk along the beaches in the Rockaways, and turning Long Island and New Jersey communities into disaster zones.

Just two weeks later, Munich Re, a major insurance company, reported that weather-related disasters in North America had increased five-fold over the previous three decades, causing \$1.06 trillion worth of damage. And the disasters are just starting, the report said.

While Congress debates whether climate change is a vast left-wing conspiracy, Houston is spending \$200 million to restore wetland ecosystems in anticipation of increased flooding. The 4,000-acre Bayou Greenways project will absorb and cleanse floodwater while creating space for trails and outdoor recreation.

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“Houston’s best defense against extreme climate events and natural disasters is grounded in its local efforts to leverage ... its bayous, marshes and wetlands,” Houston Mayor Annise Parker said in a press release.

In Philadelphia, if you look up while waiting for a bus, you might find you are standing under a living roof. Philadelphia is dealing with excessive storm water runoff by encouraging rain gardens, green roofs—large and small—and absorbent streets that allow water to soak through into the soil.

Given the threat posed by runaway climate change, one would expect ambitious national and international action to reduce greenhouse pollution. But cities are out in front, taking action to reduce their own climate impacts with or without federal support. From New York to Seattle, cities are adopting efficient building standards, taxing carbon, switching to energy-efficient street lighting, promoting local food, and financing building-scale conversion to solar energy.

Cities are responsible for a new surge in bicycling, not just on the crunchy West Coast, but in old industrial cities. In September, Bicycling Magazine named New York the number-one U.S. city for bicycling, noting its hundreds of miles of bike lanes, ambitious bike-share program, and long-term commitment to cycling. “One million more people will come to New York City by 2030, and there’s simply going to be no more room for cars,” Janette Sadik-Khan, commissioner of the Department of Transportation, told Bicycling.

Chicago, named number two, is set to meet its goal of creating 100 miles of protected bike lanes by 2015, and it will soon have the nation’s largest bike-share program.



Chicago will have built 100 miles of protected bike lanes by next year, and the Chicago Streets for Cycling Plan 2020 calls for a 645-mile network of bikeways, up from the current 215 miles, to be in place by 2020. The goal is to make sure every city resident is within a half-mile of a bike path. Photo by John Greenfield.

These developments are in part thanks to enlightened city officials, including those looking for low-cost ways to attract young, entrepreneurial residents. But cities are getting more bike-friendly in large part because of persistent pressure by

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activists. For more than 20 years, Critical Mass bike rides have taken over streets in more than 300 cities around the world, with large groups riding together and claiming the right to a safe ride.

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A citizens' group in Minneapolis made the point about bike safety by building pop-up bicycle-only lanes, using DIY plywood planters to separate the bike riders from automobile traffic. Bicycle advocates in Atlanta, Denver, Oakland, Calif., Fargo, N.D., and Lawrence, Kans., followed suit.

These urban climate solutions are not only homegrown. Increasingly, cities are sharing their best climate innovations. In September, the mayors of Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Houston announced the Mayors National Climate Change Action Agenda. The initiative will be built on other urban collaborations, including the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, and the Urban Sustainability Directors Network.

Responsive to the poor and excluded

Cities are leading in other realms, too, where the federal government has failed to act.

Immigration reform is stalled at the national level. But Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Haven, Conn., and New York City are issuing identification cards to undocumented residents, allowing them to open bank accounts, sign leases, and access city services.

On issues of poverty and inequality, cities have a mixed track record. Some neglect poor and minority neighborhoods or steer polluting projects and noisy highways to those areas. Others promote policies that displace the most vulnerable residents, making desirable land available to the wealthy and well-connected. Some cities have even criminalized homelessness.

But in many cities, strong people's movements are electing leaders with a greater connection to the poor and middle class.

New York City, one of the most unequal cities in the country, is a case in point. The top 1 percent of New Yorkers took in 32.3 percent of the city's total personal income in 2009, according to the city's comptroller. The bottom 50 percent shared just 9.9 percent.

But organizations like the Working Families Party have spent years building a grassroots power base, and their work paid off when they helped elect Mayor Bill de Blasio in November 2013. Today, de Blasio is working to boost the minimum wage and is requiring developers to offer affordable housing. And thousands of new prekindergarten slots opened up this fall, with the goal of universal access to free pre-K.

Richmond, Calif., and Newark, N.J., also have progressive mayors elected in cities with

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strong popular movements. Both were hit hard by the foreclosure crisis and the predatory lending that especially targets poor people and people of color. And both cities are now exploring using eminent domain to reduce home mortgages to current market value and restructure loans so that current homeowners can retain ownership.

Seattle is leading the nation by raising its minimum wage to \$15 an hour, following a successful grassroots initiative in the nearby city of Sea-Tac, and an insurgent city council race that focused on a higher minimum wage. Popular movements across the country are pressing for better pay and human rights for the working poor.

Why cities?

What is it about cities that enables them to move forward while the nation as a whole is stalled?

Benjamin Barber, political scientist and author of *If Mayors Ruled the World*, thinks a lot about what makes urban leaders effective problem solvers.

City leaders can't afford to be ideologues, Barber said in an interview with YES! Magazine. "Their job is to pick up the garbage, to keep the hospitals open, to assure fire and safety services and that police and teachers do their jobs."

This pragmatism requires civility. "Mayors simply can't afford to trade in bigotry," he said. "A businessman like [former New York Mayor Michael] Bloomberg has to deal with the unions, and a progressive like de Blasio has to deal with business and developers."

Perhaps this focus on getting work done explains why nearly two-thirds of Americans polled by the Pew Research Center have a favorable view of their local government, at a time when just 28 percent approve of the federal government.

Along with pragmatism, cities have the advantage of multiculturalism and the innovative spark that goes with it, Barber says. "Cities are points of intersection, communication, sharing, and travel," he said. "And cities have always—to paraphrase Whitman—contained multitudes."

Nations, on the other hand, are a more recent idea, more oriented around independence than interdependence, and more competitive. "The last 400 years of nation-states ruling the world has gone very badly, with war, genocide, rivalry, and very little social justice as a consequence," Barber said.

Cities are solving problems while nation-states are failing, Barber said. So it's time to put cities in charge. Of the whole world.

Barber laid out a plan for a global parliament of mayors in his recent book, and now he's working with city officials on bringing the idea to reality.

Should cities rule the world?

Mention global governance, and some people imagine black helicopters. But Barber

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insists he is not proposing a top-down system. Instead he sees mayors and other city leaders reaching consensus on solutions and then bringing the policy ideas home. The result, he said, would be a sort of horizontal, pragmatic, noncoercive form of global governance.

Cities could agree on a universal minimum wage, for example. Such a move would remove incentives for companies to relocate to low-wage regions. Metropolitan regions are where most economic activity is happening, Barber said. So if enough cities agreed on a minimum wage, companies would just have to pay it, thus helping to alleviate poverty and inequality.

A first step in making this vision a reality is to incorporate the suburbs and central cities into metropolitan regions. Such a move would make sense for cities whether or not they rule the world. If Detroit, for example, were redefined to include the well-off suburbs, instead of being bankrupt, it would be the fourth most prosperous metropolitan region of the United States, Barber said.

From that foundation, cities could lead even in arenas like immigration that are not normally part of urban decision-making. If more cities begin issuing their own immigration documents, “you’re going to have a fast track to citizenship inside cities, since 85 or 90 percent of undocumented workers are in cities,” Barber said.

A global parliament of cities “is a means to regulate the global economy, address climate change, deal with immigration and global trade,” he said.

It’s a bold idea that is capturing the imagination of an international group of urban leaders. On Sept. 19, mayors, city planners, and others met in Amsterdam. If all goes as hoped, Barber said, 600 mayors could join him in London in September 2015 to launch a pilot parliament.

Not everyone thinks cities are up to the challenge. Following the Amsterdam meeting, Reinier de Graaf, a Dutch architect and city planner, wrote in *European Magazine*, “The current vitality of cities is largely based on the luxury that more heavy duty political responsibilities are kept at bay.”

But British journalist Misha Glenny found the proposal intriguing. In a column for the BBC he wrote: “This group of can-do politicians may end up rewriting constitutions across the globe ... by doing what they always have—getting on with the job.”

The idea is worth exploring when so much else isn’t working, Barber said.

“In a time of pessimism about democracy, pessimism about government, a sense of too many problems, I believe the cities movement is a powerful note of hope and optimism,” he told YES!

“Moving the focus from states to cities is a new brief for democracy,” he said. “It’s a new brief for hope. And a new sense that maybe we can, after all, control some of the forces that seem to be pushing us toward an unsustainable, unjust world, so we can move instead in the direction of the more sustainable and more just world.”

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