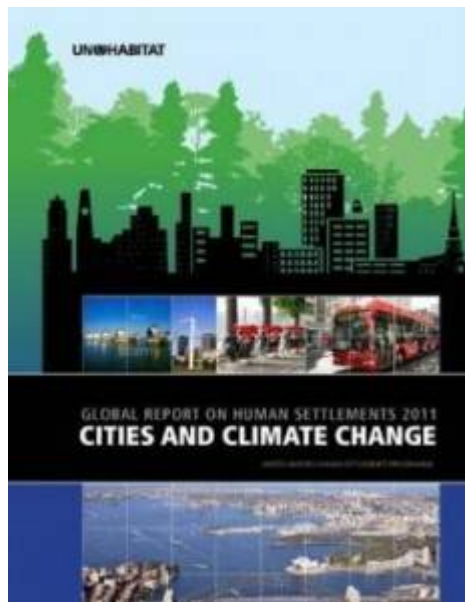


THE PARADOXES OF THE CLIMATE CHANGE- MUNICIPALITY RELATIONSHIP

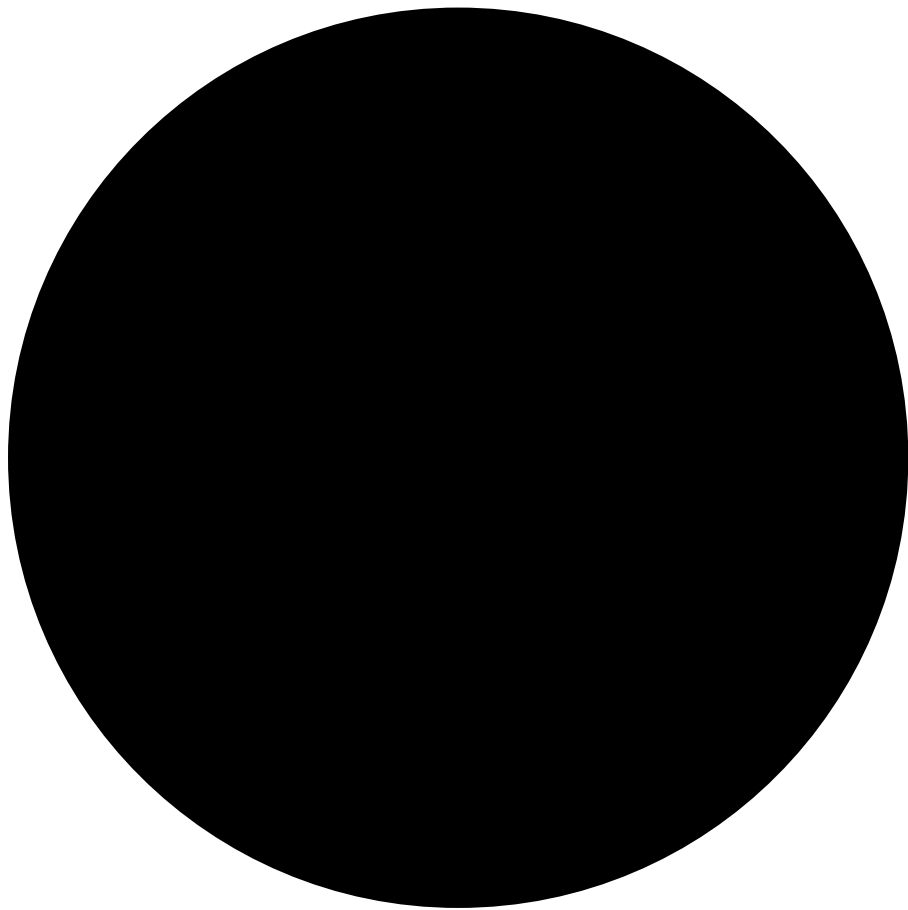
Posted on 13/06/2011 by Naider



Ago A few weeks ago, the UN-Habitat program made public the [Global report on human settlements 2011](#), dedicated to analyzing the **relationship between climate change and the urban world**. A fantastic compendium of the different aspects of this relationship, as befits this type of report which, despite its low influence, represents an annual reference and its monographic approach, a good radar for finding central issues in the urban debate. The document also follows a basic scheme that goes through topics such as the definition of the climate challenge for cities, the institutional scheme of agreements and climate cooperation, the origin of the contribution of urban areas to change climate, its impacts on cities and a review of the panorama of mitigation and adaptation actions from urban policies.

In such an urbanized world, the formula for collective organization of urban form is a central element of the debate on climate change. But how to measure the contribution of urban areas? What role does my city play in the increase in greenhouse gases? The methodological difficulty in finding a reliable, standardized and robust **calculation method** to measure the contribution of urban areas in the world to climate change makes it difficult to establish a figure for what this contribution is (difficulty in establishing the limits of the city, variability of the data depending on whether emissions are measured over production or over consumption, etc.). Actually, for global purposes it has little interest beyond the statistical one. The report itself acknowledges that this difficulty exists. More interesting is that cities can carry out their own calculations, carrying out emissions inventories at a local scale which, although they also face methodological difficulties, at least give an image adapted to the reality of each city based on what is wanted and can be measured in each case and provides a diagnosis to undertake actions to reduce emissions. In this sense, in March 2010 the [International standard for determining greenhouse gas emissions for cities](#), which aims to qualify at least some aspects of this inventory work.

As other times, I highlight my doubts about the impact of local mitigation actions. In many cases, and our country is a good example, the distribution of powers and the institutional framework in which municipalities operate greatly reduces their ability to influence the global dynamics of emissions. Possibly I am thinking above all of **mobility**, the real problem of CO2 emissions. The already classic figure that relates urban density to the energy consumed by the transport sector weighs like a stone when thinking that small sustainable mobility actions are clearly swallowed up by the enormous impact of the urban model in most of the world and in highly populated places:



Perhaps in terms of **building** the city councils have more capacity to redirect things, but this is also possible only with the help of supra-municipal legislation. The UN-Habitat report synthesizes into four major factors those that define the **level of emissions in a given city**: geographic factors from which certain needs for lighting, heating and air conditioning are derived, the demographic situation (A certain population pyramid denotes certain behaviors of society as a whole; the transition towards families with fewer members,...), the characteristics of the urban economy but, above all, the urban form and density, which is why, both the building and transport sectors are sectors in which experience is showing that, despite efforts, trends are not redirected, but rather, on the contrary, the enormous urbanization process in Africa, Asia and Latin America is adding more emissions into the atmosphere.

On the **mitigation** side, the UN-Habitat report is overly political. While it accurately recognizes the effect of cities on global emissions, situating the urban as a great driving force, it remains in rather weak and discursive arguments about the contribution of cities to mitigate these emissions. The much hackneyed "*cities are not the problem, they are the solution*" is justified by the level of responsibility that municipalities have in most of the processes that generate emissions, confusing responsibility with competencies and leadership , which would be weightier arguments. Along with this, he points out other classic resources that are not excessively convincing or generalizable in practice either: the role of a laboratory for solutions that cities can play, forgetting the difficulty of generalizing many experimental actions; or the concentration in the cities of individual actors adopting commitments against climate change, possibly thinking more of the industry than of substantial fundamental changes in consumption and lifestyle practices. In any case, the report recognizes that cities, on many occasions, are only capable of providing fragmentary responses and that there is a **paradoxical distance between rhetoric and action**, especially when the great challenge lies in large global cities and megacities. In the same way, after these years of local action against climate change, UN-Habitat recognizes another critical paradox: the **measures that are easiest to take against climate change from the local level are those that have the least impact** on in terms of reducing emissions, while those with a deeper impact are highly complex.

On the side of the consequences of climate change, urban areas face particular risks in terms of sea level rise, tropical cyclones, episodes of heavy rains that cause floods and landslides, episodes of extreme heat and droughts, strongly impacting on the different physical infrastructures, on the

economy, ecosystems and biodiversity, public health or social welfare, generating conditions of vulnerability of urban systems that each city must know how to interpret in order to respond to them. In this regard, the report points out the enormous disparity between urban areas in developing countries compared to that of more developed countries. But we also have a new paradox, because **large urban areas have an enormous weakness in their critical mass (scale of risk) but also a greater capacity for action** due to the accumulation of human and financial capital to face the consequences of climate change something that, however, is not fulfilled in most of the most populated urban areas, located in developing countries. The **suburbs of any megacity in these countries are, without a doubt, the areas most exposed to climate risks**, due to their evident lack of physical infrastructure for quality urbanization.

Lastly, the report is a good catalog of **local coalitions fighting climate change**. The governance of climate change rests mainly on a model of multilateral agreements promoted by the IPCC, a model that, in addition to the weaknesses known to all, barely manages to take into account the reality of local authorities. For this reason, the report reviews other frameworks for international consultation, both at the bilateral level (cooperation projects between countries where the local variable is usually more present, such as the [Global Climate Change Alliance](#) of the EU or the [Cool Earth Partnership](#) of Japan), as supra-national or regional, as well as other national programs, a category in which we would include, in our case, the [Spanish Network of Climate Cities](#). The international networks of local cooperation in the matter have become more relevant, where we have a wide battery of organizations: [ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability](#), the former [Large Cities Climate Leadership Network](#) (now known as [C40 Cities](#) following its recent [merger](#) with the [Clinton Climate Initiative](#)), the [World Mayors Council for Climate Change](#), [Climate Alliance](#), [Asian Cities Climate Change Resilience Network](#) or the [Covenant of Mayors](#) of the European Union. And, along with this, NGO networks such as [Climate Action Network](#), research platforms such as the [Urban Climate Research Network](#) or public-private partnerships such as [The Climate Group](#).

One such coalition is the [C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group](#), which has recently collaborated with [ARUP](#) in a post ([Climate action in megacities: C40 cities baseline and opportunities](#)) on the role of large cities -this is the focus of this coalition- in climate change, and has also produced a [video](#) which I leave here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=av_dK9ZOUjw

You may also be interested in:

- [target="_blank" rel="noopener">Why ecocities will not be the solution](#)
- [THE BIG ASK. ACT NOW. Poznan Summit on Climate Change](#)
- [The adaptation of cities to climate change scenarios](#)
- [Bill Clinton competes with Al Gore](#)
- [Thinking post-carbon cities -carbon](#)
- [Copenhagen, climate change and municipalities](#)
- [Municipalities and climate change: time for action](#)
- [Sizing the local contribution to sustainability](#)
- [Cities, sustainability and urban metabolism](#)
- [Copenhagen Summit and urban growth in Asia](#)

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