Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe

Thematic debate: The post COVID-19 city   **15 June 2021**

The role of place-based leadership in post COVID-19 recovery

Keynote speech by Robin Hambleton

Opening

I thank Bernd Vohringer, President of the Chamber of Local Authorities, for inviting me to contribute to this important debate today. It is an honour and a privilege.

In these remarks I will draw on my recent international research on the way towns and cities are responding to the COVID-19 calamity.

More details are set out in my new book, *Cities and communities beyond COVID-19. How local leadership can change our future for the better*. This book documents the experiences of some of the most innovative towns and cities in the world, and shows how local leaders are developing recovery strategies that promote social, economic and environmental justice.

My central message today is that towns and cities should play a central role in helping our societies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Local leaders have always had an important role in improving the quality of life. However, the nature of the complex challenges raised by the pandemic have now elevated the importance of local, collaborative leadership.

I will divide my remarks into five parts.

1) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dual impact on our lives.

On the one hand, it has delivered appalling suffering. As of today over 176 million people have been infected and over 3.8 million have died. Moreover, the disease has revealed how shockingly unequal many societies had become long before COVID-19 arrived on the world scene.

On the other hand, the lockdowns have created an enormous upsurge in social solidarity and community-based caring. The contagion has helped us understand that wellbeing isn't individual. We are dependent on each other. The way people have come together to provide help and assistance to neighbours and needy groups of various kinds is heart warming.

It is important for policy makers, at all levels of government, to pick up on this second aspect of the pandemic. This awful calamity is prompting many

people to rethink their priorities in fundamental ways and this presents exciting new opportunities.

2) The complex challenges local leaders now face

The leaders of cities and towns across the world now face four major challenges at once:

- The COVID-19 health emergency

- A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic

- The global climate and ecological emergencies

- Deeply disturbing increases in social, economic and racial inequality.

Efforts to meet these challenges are happening in a context in which the task of political leadership is made more difficult by the erosion of public trust in government. In many countries misinformation, or 'fake news', gets in the way of purposeful efforts to understand these challenges and come up with imaginative solutions.

The key point I want to make here is that, if societies treat these four challenges as separate problems, disappointment lies ahead. Rather any effective response to these enormous societal challenges needs to be **integrated, place-based and relational**.

The good news is that, across the world, local and regional leaders have responded with both compassion and creativity to these complex challenges, and cities and towns are becoming increasingly effective in learning from each other.

A key finding presented in my book is that, in many societies, the role of the state has already shifted dramatically. I would like to highlight two shifts:

- A shift in core values towards **caring for people and the planet**. This shift recognises that we depend not only on each other, but also on the natural environment.

- An imaginative upsurge in **collaborative problem solving** at the local level. Elected local authorities across the world are breaking new ground in linking together actors from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors.

3) Why should towns and cities be prominent in post COVID-19 recovery?

There are three main reasons why towns and cities should play a prominent role in societal recovery from COVID-19 – and these reasons all relate to the **importance of place** in modern life.

i) Place has meaning

First, place has meaning for people. To claim that place is significant could seem to be an odd, even out-of-touch, way of viewing the modern world. Some may feel that, because the internet and mobile phone technologies have transformed our abilities to communicate across space – not to mention the way globalization has altered economic and social relations across the entire planet – talking about the importance of place is to swim against the tide.

They would be wrong. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that much of life remains, and will always remain, stubbornly place-dependent. Place forms an important part of our identity as human beings, it contributes to our sense of belonging. To argue for recognizing the significance of place for our psychological wellbeing is not to contest the value of personal connections made digitally across space.

ii) Place underpins democracy

Second, place provides the spatial units for the exercise of democracy. Elected local authorities not only provide the basis for local self-government – they also provide the democratic building blocks that underpin nation states and, ultimately, international democratic institutions. This is, of course, a major theme in the important work of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

Adopting an international perspective enables us to recognise that those nations that super-centralise power have been poor performers in responding to the COVID-19 calamity when compared to those that respect and value local democracy. For example, in Germany, where elected local authorities enjoy constitutional protection, the COVID-19 death rate per million people is 1,077. This contrasts with a death rate per million in the UK, a country with a super-centralised approach to decision-making, of 1,875. Various factors explain this striking difference but the differences in local power are a key factor.

iii) Places are different

A third argument for valuing place is that places are different and, most important, local leaders understand these differences better than those working in distant national governments. The leaders of towns and cities see public challenges 'in the round' and this enables them to develop more effective responses.

My research on place-based leadership suggests that the most effective approaches are, at root, collaborative. They bring partners together, from inside and outside the state, who **care about the place.**

4) An example of successful place-based leadership

Hundreds of towns and cities across the world are breaking new ground in relation to collaboration. In my book I celebrate the efforts of six of them: Bristol, UK; Copenhagen, Denmark; Dunedin, New Zealand; Freiburg, Germany; Mexico City, Mexico; and Portland, Oregon.

As time is short allow me to say just a few words about the Bristol One City Approach. I live in Bristol and I have worked closely in recent years with Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, and other civic leaders, on the development and delivery of the Bristol One City Approach.

The Bristol One City Approach [Insert link to: https://www.bristolonecity.com] is designed to unite civic purpose in our city. It brings a wide range of voices into local policy-making processes, and acts as a catalyst for collaboration - to identify and define challenges and opportunities and the actions the city needs to take.

At the first City Gathering, held in July 2016, 70 civic leaders drawn from every sector of the city shared ideas on the big challenges facing Bristol and agreed to work together in a new way to tackle them.

At the twelfth City Gathering held in March 2021 over 400 civic leaders participated. More and more leaders have joined in – from local businesses, trade unions and local communities - because they see great value in this inclusive approach to community problem solving.

The Bristol One City Approach combines structural with cultural innovation. We get people together at these gatherings, and also through the thematic boards we have set up to drive work on specific areas such as homes and communities, climate and sustainability, transport and children. And we introduced a way of working we describe as 'Make a big offer and make a big ask'. This involves asking partners to approach the city with a big offer, then ask for what is needed to enable delivery of that offer.

The beauty of this approach is that it invites leadership and guides people to look at the possible through imaginative responses to the challenges and opportunities facing the city. Many civic initiatives designed to tackle issues relating to fairness and prosperity in the city are now making an impact on the quality of life in the city and these are documented in the One City Annual Reports [Insert link to: https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/One-City-Annual-Report-2020.pdf]

Here are just three examples of inspirational local leadership.

The Feeding Bristol Healthy Holiday 2019 Programme [Insert link: https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com] delivered over 65,000 meals to needy children and other vulnerable people. Council staff took on a leadership, enabling role, but it was voluntary sector activists who led working with businesses, faith groups and volunteers from every ward of the city to make sure that no one went hungry.

The Period Friendly Bristol Initiative of 2020 [Insert link: https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com] is already recognised as a world-leading example of a civic initiative designed to address the problems encountered by women and girls being denied access to menstrual products. Again the initiative was a joint effort between the council, business and civil society.

Launched in 2018 the Bristol Housing Festival promotes better ways to live in cities [Insert link: https://www.bristolhousingfestival.org.uk] In January 2021, residents moved into the first Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) development of its kind to be completed in the UK. The Zedpods homes were built on stilts above a council car park. The eleven affordable and low-carbon apartments house young workers and vulnerable households. The scheme was driven by a local social entrepreneur working with Bristol City Council, Zedpods and the YMCA.

Launched at a City Gathering in January 2019 the Bristol One City Plan [Insert link: https://www.bristolonecity.com/about-the-one-city-plan] looks forward to 2050 and sets out, in detail, how the city intends to become a fair, healthy and sustainable city.

This is not a conventional city council plan – it is a collective plan that sees the council's efforts as part of a broader civic effort. Better than that, it is reviewed annually with our city's youth mayors having a direct say on what the top three priorities should be for each coming year.

Each year the European Union invites cities from across the continent to apply for the award of European Capital of Innovation (iCapital). This is a very competitive process involving rigorous evaluation of bids by an international panel of experts. It is a credit to Bristol that, in September 2019, the One City Approach led to our city being recognised as one of the six most innovative cities in Europe [Insert link: https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/prizes/icapital/icapital-2019_en#runners-up-antwerp-bristol-espoo-glasgow-rotterdam]

5) A call to action

In closing my remarks I identify three suggestions for the discussion today.

First, the top-down 'silo' approach, traditionally employed by central governments, simply cannot comprehend, let alone respond effectively, to complex modern challenges.

Second, it follows that towns and cities should play a prominent role in post COVID-19 recovery. This is because place-based leaders bring detailed understanding of the complexity of life in their localities. More than that, they recognise the importance of caring for local people as well as caring for the natural environment on which we all depend.

In some countries elected local authorities have a good relationship with their central governments. In countries where local democracy is given respect, significant decision-making authority and substantial fiscal power the response to the COVID-19 calamity has been more effective than in those where the central state attempts to tell local authorities what to do.

Third, leaders of towns and cities can make a significant contribution to societal recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because they can bring local actors together to share understandings and co-create solutions. In many localities leaders are putting care and human rights, alongside a commitment to addressing the climate crisis, at the heart of their strategies and this is encouraging.

Thank you for your attention.

About the author

Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership, University of the West of England, Bristol; director, Urban Answers.

His new book is 'Cities and Communities Beyond Covid-19. How local leadership can change our future for the better'. Bristol University Press.

More details:

https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19