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# opinión

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## TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CITIES, a matter of faith?

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Since the Brundtland Report coined the notion of “sustainable development” in 1987, global agendas under the auspices of the United Nations have made extensive use of it turning it into one of the most recurrent commonplaces of international policy. To what extent has it become a truth-generating concept?

Five years after the introduction of the concept, the Agenda 21, an action plan aimed at moving towards this “sustainable development” was adopted at the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). The latter initiated a process of almost three decades of semantic inflation that culminated in 2015 with the adoption of the new mantra of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The inflationary use of the term “sustainable development” has reached such level that at present, it seems to apply to almost any challenge of today’s globalized world. Including, of course, those related to cities.

This became clear in 1996, when the second edition of the United Nations global summit on urban issues, the Habitat conference, shifted its focus from discussing the main challenges of “human settlements” in a broad sense (Habitat I) to dealing more specifically with “housing and sustainable urban development” (Habitat II). The difference is not merely terminological, but rather responds to a political strategy to place the urban within the framework of growth.

Why? The notion of sustainable development was coined in the late 1980s at a time of political conservatism (Thatcher’s and Reagan’s governments dominated international politics). Written in this context, the Brundtland Report was permeated with ideals based on economic growth (although some eco-friendly and equitable additives were added). These ideals continue to prevail today. SDG 8 is especially instructive in this regard. It establishes the need to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,” as a tool to achieve the desired “sustainable development”.

Thus, behind the concept of “sustainable development” lies the difficult balance between economic growth, improvement of the quality of life and environmental protection. However, since the 1990s this horizon has been widely questioned by scientists and ecologists: it is not possible to separate economic growth from environmental degradation because higher production and consumption automatically entails higher energy expenditure and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Sustainable development is, therefore, hardly a realistic objective in the current context of depletion of the planet. Has it become, perhaps, a matter of faith? How can one otherwise explain the uncritical preeminence that this principle has acquired over the past three decades? Ecologists and experts in the field are clear: its wide acceptance has to do with its degree of complicity with the current economic system and its underlying logic of growth. Precisely because of the need to ensure continuous growth, the entry of cities into the debate is so strategic.

Urban growth is currently one of the most important conditions for the expansion of capital accumulation. Growth can take different forms in the urban context. Among the most common are the construction of urban infrastructures and housing (new urbanization), the redevelopment of degraded or former industrial areas, the promotion of mass urban tourism and a lifestyle based on consumption, and the commodification of urban goods and services, among others.

In the historical moment in which Habitat II took place (after the deployment of the agreements derived from the Washington Consensus), this functional role of cities with respect to the economic system acquired renewed importance as a consequence of the retreat of the welfare state after decades of social policies. The vacuum left by the state became then occupied by the market as a provider of essential urban services and of housing. Hence the greater economic interest in cities or - it would be better to say - in their *urban development*: cities had become an important source of profit generation.

Beyond environmental and economic criticisms, it is also important to highlight another key issue: placing the terms of the urban debate within the framework of "sustainable urban development" means understanding the urbanization of the planet as an inexorable phenomenon against which the only realistic response is to try to make it *sustainable*.

Do we want to enhance urbanization (even if sustainable) or do we want to ensure a good quality of life in existing urban areas? Do we want to create even larger cities (megapolization) or intermediary and small cities, as well as rural areas to ensure the necessary means and opportunities for the development of a good life?

Urban sustainability will not become a reality by subjecting it to the logic of growth or by promoting urbanization. Instead it requires moving towards an ecological transition, ensuring that water and energy are managed as common goods, promoting a lifestyle that is not based on consumption and accumulation, and building solidarity and inclusive links with the rural environment, amongst other necessary transformations.

All these changes are fundamental. But it is also necessary to go further: the urban debate cannot begin and end in sustainability. It should also be formulated in terms of equity and social justice, democratic quality, acknowledgement and valorization of differences, access to decent housing, as well as to health, education and culture. And this is something that cannot be formulated in terms of sustainability, but in terms of rights.

A number of actors stemming from civil society, academia, professional associations and even from some governmental institutions have been calling for these principles for 50 years under the flag of the "right to the city". This alliance became visible recently during the drafting process of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which was adopted during Habitat III in 2016. Through their intense advocacy work this group of actors managed to include a reference to the right to the city in the NUA. But the text - as is the case with the SDGs - is strongly influenced by growth ideals.

More efforts are thus needed in this field. Unless we manage to move beyond the growth paradigm, the road towards sustainable cities will not cease to be a matter of mere faith.