

ARE WE HEADING FOR A GREEN POST-COVID RECOVERY? In Europe's cities the signs say yes

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An ecological turn has been underway in cities and locally governing democratic parties across Europe. Rather than reversing this turn, the Covid-19 crisis appears to accelerate it. Cities around the world but especially in Europe have introduced measures to support social distancing and general health that are in alignment with green city planning. For this momentum to be sustained in the long term, cities will require substantial support from national governments and the EU.

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France witnessed a political landslide in the final round of its local elections on 28 June. For the first time, the green party, Europe Ecologie Les Verts (EELV), won the vote in the country's major cities. Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille and Strasbourg will be governed by green mayors and in Paris the greens will be part of the new administration of socialist mayoral re-elect Anne Hidalgo. The green party has traditionally played a marginal role in French politics and many of the party's mayoral candidates were little known before the election. But their recent success has shown that ecological and climate issues have become a major public concern in France's urban areas with which elections can be won.

In part, this shift in city politics only continues a trend towards ecological transformation that many French cities already embarked on for several years. Paris' Mayor Hidalgo, who also prioritised sustainable transport and carbon reduction during her first term (2014-2020), has led the way in this regard. One of the main projects realised during Hidalgo's first term was the conversion of the Voie Georges-Pompidou, one of the city's busiest highways on the right bank of the Seine, into a pedestrian zone. The key pillar of her re-election campaign was the "15-minute city" plan, which strives to reduce pollution and stress by creating a polycentric city of short distances, in which essential services (from food shopping to sports and culture) and even work are just a walk or bike-ride away.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit Europe in February/March 2020, this green approach to urban governance gained additional relevance, and not just in France. Cities around the world but especially in Europe have introduced measures to support social distancing and general health that are in alignment with green city planning: from the widening of pavements to pop-up walking routes, the pedestrianisation of entire neighbourhoods, and the creation of new bike lanes and green corridors.

The city of Milan, which was the first epicentre of the pandemic in Europe, and which is located in one of the most polluted parts of Europe, was quick to acknowledge the link between the city's poor air quality and Covid-19 deaths. As a response, its centre-left coalition mayor, Giuseppe Sala, has launched one of the most ambitious green recovery plans, which aims to simultaneously tackle the pandemic's socioeconomic repercussions and fight climate change. Sala also heads the **Global Mayor's Covid-19 Recovery Task Force** of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, which supports city halls around the world to place green actions at the heart reopening efforts.

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While none of the urban planning measures rolled out in response to the outbreak of the coronavirus are new, their implementation has been radically accelerated and expanded as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, political opposition to the ecological remodelling of cities has decreased and some local governments are now talking about making the measures permanent.

Build back better through urban experimentation

There has been much talk about “building back better” at all levels of government since the immediate health emergency has been somewhat under control. In Europe, these conversations are taking place against the backdrop of the European Commission's announcement to mobilise its recently adopted Green Deal to boost sustainable post-crisis growth, create fair jobs and reduce inequality. Such holistic and long-term thinking and action is perhaps nowhere more advanced than in Europe's major cities.

Over the past decade, cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, Bristol, Brussels, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Helsinki, Lisbon, London, Milan, Oslo, Paris, Rotterdam and Vienna have implemented innovative urban climate actions in collaboration with city networks and other cities around the world. Taking the form of technical and social experiments, many of these actions have created new political spaces and fostered multi-stakeholder and cross-sector partnerships.¹ The pandemic has only reminded municipal authorities of the urgency of climate mitigation and that they must be better prepared to face climate impacts, which will stay with us for much longer than Covid-19. They cannot choose between addressing one or the other crisis.

1. See Bulkeley, H. and Castán Broto, V. (2013) 'Government by experiment? Global cities and the governing of climate change', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38 (3), pp. 361-375.

What way forward?

Budget cuts and economic pressures will no doubt make it hard for mayors and local policymakers to stick with their pre-Covid mitigation and broader ecological ambitions. However, a great asset of cities such as those mentioned above, are their wide-ranging experiences with climate policy experimentation and the strong cross-sector alliances they have built to this end over the years.

One of the most interesting and aspirational urban strategies launched since Covid-19, that seeks to embed socioeconomic recovery in a long-term sustainability and resilience strategy, is [Amsterdam's Circular Strategy 2020-2025](#). This approach, which has been in development since 2019, is based on [Kate Raworth's doughnut economics](#) and aims for Amsterdam to become a fully circular city by 2050. Rather than abandoning or postponing implementation in the face of the coronavirus crisis, the city launched its plans in April with the goal of guiding Amsterdam out of the economic recession in a manner that ensures a good life for all citizens within the planetary boundaries.

The case of Amsterdam's Circular Strategy is of interest not only because of the cities' sustained commitment to its ecological ambitions in the midst of the health emergency. It may also guide other post-crisis urban sustainability policies in terms of the multilevel governance approach build into it. The strategy details how in policy areas that lie beyond the cities mandate (e.g. taxation), it actively seeks cooperation with regional authorities, the Dutch government and European Union (EU).

Such multilevel cooperation will be urgently needed in order to support European cities (which are home to about 74% of the EU's population and account for 60-80% of carbon emissions) that are working hard not to side-line or postpone climate action. As part of a multilevel governance approach, the EU will also need to make recovery funding directly accessible to cities, as members of the network Eurocities outlined in a [joint declaration](#) in June. Such funding will be essential for cities to effectively develop and implement ecologically-oriented long-term recovery strategies, as well as to monitor results that can guide the scaling up and out of effective policy responses.

The "green wave" that swept French cities in last month's local elections is not unique to France nor is it limited to parties that identify as explicitly green. An ecological turn has been underway in cities and locally governing democratic parties across Europe. Rather than reversing this turn, the Covid-19 crisis appears to accelerate it. However, for this momentum to be sustained, cities will require substantial support from national governments and the European Union.