

UKRAINE RECOVERY AND RECONSTRUCTION: Cities Must Be Part of It

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We still do not know when and how the war in Ukraine will end. But it is not too early to start thinking about recovery and reconstruction. The Ukraine Recovery Conference held in Lugano last July was a first step, and the Berlin Conference on October 25 will provide further impulse to this endeavor. As we move along with the long list of issues to be addressed and actors to mobilize, it is imperative that urban issues be integrated in the development plans and that cities be brought in.

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The terrible human suffering and material destruction brought about by Russia's aggression was amplified through the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian cities, as they are not only home to large populations but also centers of political and economic power, as well as hubs of culture and national identity.

There is an urban dimension to this war. And there will have to be an urban dimension to recovery and reconstruction.

Like elsewhere in the world, Ukrainian cities provide essential infrastructure and services to their citizens - water, mobility, housing to identify but a few - and play a critical role in sustaining the social fabric. Their capacity to do so has been partly destroyed in the last few months. Yet, their leaders and citizens have often proven heroically resilient in the face of adversity. If Ukraine is to recover, much of the work will have to be done by cities and in cities.

Beyond Ukraine's boundaries, many cities have already been brought into action in relation to the war, not only by hosting refugees in huge numbers, primarily in Europe, but also by engaging in the political arena and providing support of their own to those affected by the conflict. The international municipalist movement will be keen to contribute to Ukraine's reconstruction.

We know reconstruction will be a monumental task, fraught with the usual challenges that come with any such undertaking, including coordination

between a host of international as well as Ukrainian actors. The German Marshall Fund has put forward a proposal to set up a Recover Ukraine Platform to ensure effective coordination. Ultimately, decision-makers will have to design mechanisms that suit the peculiar circumstances at hand. Starting with the fact that, unlike several other post-war situations, Ukraine is not a failed state; it is imperative that it be in the driver's seat.

Urban issues and the role of cities were certainly not front and center at the Lugano Conference, but not totally absent either. The draft Ukraine Recovery Plan does include certain elements related to the needs and role of cities, as well as regional and local governments more broadly. It also calls upon actors at the sub-national level, such as cities, to develop partnerships with foreign counterparts. However, it does not appear that Ukrainian cities and subnational governments were directly involved at the conference, nor was the international municipalist movement.

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Further, they will have to make space for Ukrainian cities as well as cities from other countries to be involved. Cities themselves will have to actively work their way in to get their "seat at the table". As to cities from outside Ukraine, this is most likely to be done through representation by regional and international city networks.

International city partners will likely want to provide material assistance, both for immediate emergency relief and reconstruction. But the amount of funds they might bring will be dwarfed by that of national governments and multilateral agencies. The real value-added of cities is likely to be their know-how and expertise, from urban planning to the provision of basic services and handling of social issues.

This being said, international cooperation has demonstrated time and time again that resources and good intentions do not necessarily make for good and effective development. How many assistance programs have been ill-advised, ill-conceived, and failed in their implementation due to lack of local knowledge, dysfunctional partnerships, sub-par management, incomplete risk assessment or unforeseen circumstances. This goes for

any type of international program, even those implemented by the most experienced agencies. Cities are not immune from these risks.

In order to make a useful contribution, cities from outside Ukraine will have to attend to different dimensions. First of all, they will have to strategically identify the proper mechanisms to channel their support - bilateral city-to-city relations or otherwise through national governments, international networks or multilateral agencies. In this regard, developing sound partnerships will be key, first and foremost with Ukrainian counterparts who should be in the lead, but also with other actors and donors, from their own national government to multilateral agencies. Cities should focus on their value-added, likely to be their hands-on experience of urban issues and technical expertise, complementing their local resources with international development expertise. To sum up, cities from outside Ukraine will need to carefully identify the right kind of intervention, in light of overall needs and plans as well as in coordination with a complex web of local and international actors.

In conclusion, cities will need a proper dose of ambition, strategy and realism, lest they fail both the Ukrainians as well as donors, including taxpayers. If well done, the involvement of cities could make a critical contribution in helping Ukraine build back better. It could also serve as a useful precedent for other post-conflict situations in the world, which also deserve attention and support.