

## **Blog article**

Resilience and Urban Governance:  
Securing Cities

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Cities are the engines of our time. More than a half of the world's population currently lives in urban areas, reaching [75%](#) in the European Union. Serving as hubs of economy, technology, innovation, science, political and social change, cities are also vulnerable to disruptions. They become increasingly difficult to govern and develop, amidst social, demographic and technical challenges, climate change and extreme weather.

It is in this context that *resilience*, or a capacity to withstand disruptions and continue functioning, has emerged as a technical and policy solution. *Urban resilience*, specifically – has turned into a buzzword, process and a desired outcome, and consequently boomed in cities, industries and organizations wishing to preempt, prevent and mitigate adverse conditions and events.

In a [book](#) recently published by Taylor and Francis, I trace the evolution of urban resilience in science, research, policy and industry over the past decade. The book poses questions about what urban resilience means, and how it is used and legitimized in different local contexts. In other words, *what does it do*, and to what extent is it helpful and relevant to address the challenges that cities currently face?

### **How resilience became urban**

The global spread of urban resilience was in part event-driven, from the 9/11 attacks to Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, large-scale urban blackouts and serious terrorist incidents in Europe throughout the 2000s. As a result, resilience experienced a conceptual and policy momentum in numerous fields from architecture and urban planning to crisis management and security policy.

International organizations such as the UN Human Settlements Programme ([UN Habitat](#)) have since developed an impressive range of programs labelled by resilience as a central term and objective, spreading to other international organizations, city associations, philanthropies, and industries across the board.

The book also focuses on how the urban resilience momentum has played out in the cities of Barcelona, San Francisco and Santiago (Chile) throughout the past decade. It identifies a number of similarities when it comes to processes, priorities, and trends in urban governance. At the same time, it distinguishes a range of specificities with regards to the cities' geography, society, administrative structure, and the topography of risk.

### **Climate, infrastructure and governance**

Despite these differences, the problems that the cities face and the objectives of development are remarkably similar. The common denominators of risk and challenges are the following:

**Climate change impacts.** From rising sea level impacting coastal cities, to extreme weather events in forms of floods or heatwaves, cities are facing a range of chronic and high-impact disasters. The latter are hardly ever entirely natural, often connected to environmental misbalances caused by human activity. The capacity of effective crisis management is key, as evidence yet again by the covid-19 impacts, bringing urban public health challenges to the forefront.

**Infrastructure challenges.** Much of the essential infrastructure networks in cities are stretched, overburdened and ageing. Maintenance of existing urban infrastructures and construction of new networks tend to be extremely costly, and require long-term political commitment. Major upgrades of transport or energy networks, essential for the city functioning, are long overdue – increasing the risk of large-scale technical failures with cascading effects affecting entire cities.

**Governance challenges.** City development is often limited by a lack of stable and coherent policies, affected by relatively short election cycles. As noted above, long-term commitment is essential for effective planning and development in cities. City leaders often prefer visible – albeit smaller-scale – interventions and investments appealing to their constituents. Oftentimes, compartmented administrative structure hinders effective decision-making and city-wide planning, which in turn poses obstacles to large-scale interventions.

### **What's next for cities?**

Becoming the latest black swan event, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought enormous disruptions to cities, urban populations and economies. With the impacts still developing - and yet to be fully understood and quantified, it brings a new perspective on resilience and governance of cities.

Urban areas are engines of technology, innovation and social change. At the same time, their open and interconnected nature makes them extremely vulnerable to shocks and stresses. The next black swan event can come in many different forms, revealing the importance of effective, well-resourced and adaptable city governance. Cities working well in times of normalcy have a better chance of managing and mitigating major disruptions – whatever their nature might be.

Urban resilience can serve as a useful perspective, allowing to address urban security and development holistically. It requires a forward-looking city leadership with a healthy network of collaboration with NGOs, civil society, private sector and international city associations. It enables the shift from thinking about cities as stable and relatively closed entities managed in a top-down manner. Instead, it engages them as open and dynamic networks, aiming to manage their vulnerabilities, and focus on their long-term development. For three in four of European citizens living in cities, this becomes a daily and ever-present need.