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driving change

by Nicky Gavron

Cities have an extraordinary responsibility and motivation to act on climate change. They consume three quarters of the world's energy and are responsible for four fifths of its carbon dioxide emissions. They are also highly vulnerable to the resulting impacts of climate change: to take one example, about 20 of the world's 30 largest cities, London included, stand on low lying coasts.

They also have great opportunities. Concentrating people and activities at high densities, they can use energy, materials and land efficiently. They are the places where high level, knowledge-based activities congregate, with the expertise to tackle climate change. Many are the drivers of their national economies. Five US cities — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and Philadelphia — together constitute the world's fourth largest economy. Bangkok and Sao Paulo with just 10 per cent of their countries' populations, generate 40 per cent of national wealth.

Innovation and progress in taking action on climate change action is most likely to be achieved in cities. Mayors and their municipalities have the powers and levers to reduce carbon emissions, and can show leadership in taking decisive and radical action. They control the development of land, have housing powers, and regulate — and often manage — transport. They have varying degrees of responsibility for collecting and processing waste and such other environmental infrastructure as energy and water. They own and manage buildings and vehicle fleets. And they have huge purchasing power. Although leadership from national governments is crucial in negotiating international agreements, setting frameworks and standards and providing fiscal and financial incentives, cities must lead when it comes to practical action on the ground.

All over the world, city governments are taking their own initiatives, recognising the need to cooperate across national and international boundaries. Almost one thousand municipalities have made substantial carbon reductions through the 'Cities for Climate Protection' campaign of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability. Over 750 US mayors are mobilising to meet or beat Kyoto targets.

In October 2005, many of the world's largest cities met in London and established the Large Cities Climate Leadership Group, agreeing — amongst other things — to create municipal procurement alliances, jump-starting the supply and demand for climate change technologies and measurably influencing markets. The next year its chair, Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, joined with former US President Bill Clinton to launch a partnership with the Clinton Foundation Climate Initiative (CCI), which acts as the Group's operational arm, working on accelerated programmes of carbon reductions in each city.

Participation in what has now become the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group spans the globe: including Berlin, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Caracas, Chicago, Delhi, Dhaka, Houston, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Karachi, Lagos, London, Los Angeles, Madrid, Melbourne, Mexico City, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rome, Sao Paulo, Seoul, Shanghai and Toronto — and an affiliated group of smaller cities — such as Curitiba and Copenhagen — that are exemplars of innovative practice. C40 cities are expected to act as catalysts for change within their country or region.

We have plenty of best practice to share. The city of Berlin in partnership with the Berlin Energy Agency organises retrofits for large government and commercial buildings, achieving energy efficiencies of around 24 per cent. So far, 1,400 buildings have been upgraded, delivering CO₂ reductions of more than 60,400 tonnes annually. These retrofits cost the owners nothing and the buildings make immediate savings. Average payback periods are between 8 and 12 years.

Similarly Copenhagen's district heating system supplies 97 per cent of the city with clean, reliable and affordable heating by capturing waste

heat from electricity production, normally released into the sea, and channelling it back through pipes into peoples' homes. The system cuts household bills by €1,400 — and saves the emission of 665,000 tonnes of CO₂ — annually.

Bogotá recently introduced a Bus Rapid Transit system through the city — with 850 buses used daily by 1,400,000 passengers — which has reduced travelling time by 32 per cent, taken 2,109 public service vehicles off the road, and cut greenhouse gas emissions by 40 per cent. Seoul's car free day has succeeded in taking two million cars off the road every year, decreasing traffic volume by 3.7 per cent, and CO₂ emissions by 9.3 per cent. Chinese cities — including Shanghai and Beijing — have been developing similar initiatives. And Paris has introduced a scheme that has revolutionised the streets and the way people get around: over 10,000 brand new self-service bicycles went up for rental at 750 ranks across the city — and in the first two months were used five million times.

As soon as London's first directly elected Mayor took office in 2000, he set an overarching vision: "to develop London as an exemplary sustainable world city". The London Plan and its related strategies — transport, economic development housing, energy, and waste, — took that vision as their starting point, as have initiatives such as congestion charging. In February 2007, all policies and implementation programmes were pulled together into the London Climate Change Action Plan, setting the ambitious target of reducing London's carbon emissions by 60 per cent by 2025. The Action Plan is a comprehensive, holistic approach addressing transport, new and existing buildings, energy supply and aviation as well as seeking fundamental changes in behaviour.

C40 launched its first procurement package at the second climate summit hosted by New York's Mayor Bloomberg, in May 2007. The Energy Efficiency Buildings Retrofit programme, developed by the CCI exemplifies the approach of negotiating deals between customers, suppliers and financial institutions to establish economies of scale, reduce costs and accelerate the introduction of technologies. The initial deal involved sixteen cities, four energy services companies and five banks offering city authorities and building owners an energy audit, and a comprehensive discount on the goods and services to achieve emissions reductions. The financing comes from energy savings and is underwritten by the banks. This will be followed by procurement programmes on transport and waste, among others, in a new way of doing business that scales up and catalyses markets for public goods and services. Once developed, these programmes will be opened up to other cities.

Adaptation to climate change is another crucial area of engagement. Many cities are already hit hard by it. Asia, for example, is threatened by flooding, storm surges and sea level rise — with cities in low lying areas along the east and south China coast, and the delta of South and South East Asia, particularly vulnerable. C40 has an important role to play in ensuring that best practice is shared between cities and that adaptation measures are consistent with reducing emissions. The economic benefits of wise adaptation strategies that dovetail with mitigation measures should be a focus for cities in 2008.

At the international negotiations in Bali last December, an unprecedented coming together of key organizations, representing Mayors and local governments worldwide, launched a global agreement to accept responsibility for addressing the challenge of climate change and seize the economic opportunities it presents. The climate debate has shifted from whether the scientific evidence demands global mandatory targets to what level those targets should be and how to meet them. No global partnership on climate change can be delivered without the full involvement of cities. The C40, working with other city networks, can be globally significant in making deep cuts in carbon emissions, and reconfiguring global markets for cutting edge technologies. If this is to be achieved — and the highest reduction targets reached — governments need to put cities in the driving seat. 