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Ester R. Fuchs

This article examines the linkages between urban governance structures and an economically successful and environmentally sustainable democratic city. It will consider both developed and developing cities and the policy challenges that confront them in the twenty-first century. It is important to understand the political causes of urban economic decline, the unique fiscal and legal constraints on city governments and the opportunities for democratic participation and sustainable economic growth that only cities can offer. Urban policies or programs are only successful if they harmonize with city politics and with a city government's fiscal and operational capacity for implementation. The objective of this article is not simply to present the challenges of governing the twenty-first century city, but also to describe the structural characteristics of cities that promote democratic participation, effective urban governance and policies that support public safety, economic growth and environmental sustainability.

In the last half of the twentieth century, national policy makers in both the developed and developing world averted their attention from many of the problems facing urban areas. In the United States, the migration of the middle class out of cities after the Second World War indicated that America was becoming a suburban nation. The American Dream moved to the suburbs, where single-family homes, SUVs in the driveway and fenced-in backyards became the norm. At the same time, America's industries also abandoned cities, moving first to the suburbs and then abroad to find cheap land, cheap labor and the fewest government regulations. America's great cities were left in economic free fall, with concentrated poverty, unemployment, high crime rates, failing public schools and severely deteriorating physical infrastructure, including roads, mass transit and parks. Academics and policy makers agreed that cities were irrelevant to America's economic future; they would become places for poor minorities who could not afford to move to

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the suburbs. Urban policy became code for social-welfare policy.¹ Some historians have argued that national policies like the Federal Highway Act of 1957, which supported massive road construction, and the Federal Housing Administration, which promoted the construction of single-family homes over multifamily homes, contributed to suburbanization and the economic decline of America's most important cities.²

Cities in both the developed and developing worlds are facing many of the same challenges.

In American national politics, intergovernmental transfers to cities began declining in the late 1970s during the administration of President Jimmy Carter.³ However, the real turning point was in 1984, when Ronald Reagan's reelection showed that it was possible to win a presidential campaign while losing the vote in America's major cities.⁴ Afterward, urban voters were further marginalized and their issues of concern

became toxic in American national politics. Even presidents like Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, whose electoral coalitions included urban voters, continued to cut funding for programs that benefited cities. Obama's current budget includes a \$390 million cut to the Community Development Block Grant program, one of the few remaining federal programs that send funds directly to cities and not to states.⁵ The "metropolitan area"—a geographic unit that includes a city and its surrounding suburban counties—has become the preferred unit of analysis among academics and policy analysts in Washington.⁶ While metropolitan areas are important economic units and should be considered when formulating policy, very few states have created governance structures that are coterminous with metropolitan areas. Consequently, there is little operational or fiscal capacity for the government to implement metro-area policies.⁷ A 2007 World Bank study of international metropolitan areas found that metropolitan governance structures are defined by political rather than economic boundaries, which would be more useful to policy makers. And given the nature of politics everywhere, these boundaries are difficult to modify.⁸ Most significantly, in the places where metropolitan governments do exist, they rarely have sufficient resources or the fiscal autonomy to raise the funds they need to deliver public services.⁹ It may now seem obvious that cities are crucial to the global economy, but this is a fairly new idea. It was not until the early 1990s that the academic and policy consensus in the United States shifted from the position that "cities are places where economic opportunity goes to die" to the position that "cities are the engine of the global economy."¹⁰ At a 1997 conference in Nairobi, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, or UN-HABITAT, formulated a global plan of action called the Habitat Agenda. The plan concluded that cities, when "properly planned and managed, hold

the promise for human development and the protection of the world's natural resources through their ability to support large numbers of people while limiting their impact on the natural environment."¹¹

The dramatic growth of urban populations in the United States and globally has contributed to this paradigm shift. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the majority of Americans now live in urban areas.¹² Global policy discussions now begin with the startling facts that over half of the world's population resides in cities and that urbanization is expected to continue unabated through the twenty-first century.¹³

As a result, cities in both the developed and developing worlds are facing many of the same challenges. Most significantly, cities worldwide cope with the highest concentrations of unemployment and poverty when national economies are weak. The dangers of environmental degradation are magnified in cities, whether they are older industrial cities in the United States and Europe or rapidly expanding cities in Asia and Latin America. Finally, a lack of public safety in cities can lead to civil unrest, political corruption and authoritarian rule. How can cities meet these public-policy challenges? They cannot be remedied by unilateral decisions made in the private sector or by civil society, particularly at the state or national level. The most effective way to address these twenty-first-century challenges is by strengthening institutions of urban governance.

STRUCTURING CITY GOVERNMENTS

The only way cities can meet the economic, environmental and security challenges of the twenty-first century is with an accountable and fair governance structure that delivers effective and efficient public services. In addition, democratic political institutions must be coterminous with the city's legal authority, its bureaucratic capacity for delivering services and its mechanisms for resource allocation. These linkages enable the citizenry to hold government accountable. According to the research done by the Global Campaign on Urban Governance and the Global Urban Observatory, the capacities of city governments to meet twenty-first-century challenges vary wildly. The Global Campaign, run by UN-HABITAT, identifies the five principles of good urban governance: effectiveness, equity, participation, accountability and security. An Urban Governance Index based on these principles was field-tested in twenty-four cities and offers a useful "starting point for local adaptation and development."¹⁴

However, the Global Campaign researchers acknowledge a significant limitation of their work, in that their "data does not differentiate between urban agglomeration, metropolitan and municipal areas."¹⁵ This reflects a larger problem in the global studies of urbanization. Researchers rarely focus on the legal institutions

of governance and their relationship to political participation, which makes it difficult to identify causal elements in any model of governance. If we really want to understand how democratic institutions support effectiveness and accountability in government, we must be clear about which governance entities have the legal authority to deliver services.

In much of the developing world, city-government capacity to provide basic services and build the infrastructure for supporting a robust, environmentally sustainable economy is strained or nonexistent.¹⁶ In India, the federal government only recognized the existence of city governments in 1992, through the Seventy-Fourth Constitution Amendment Act. Indian state governments have historically viewed city governments as adversaries, a common phenomenon in federal systems. Cities like Mumbai, New Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore have robust economies but weak city governance structures relative to their state governments, and are characterized by uncoordinated service delivery, chaotic administrative structures and personnel with weak management skills.¹⁷

In Latin America, which is home to cities with strong governments like Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Medellín, Colombia, governments are strained beyond their fiscal capacity, and growing populations are swelling the demand for public services. Urban violence has become an epidemic problem that state actors have given up trying to solve, especially in poor communities.¹⁸

In parts of the developing world that are experiencing rapid economic expansion, like China, national and provincial governments retain legal authority over land use and local-service-delivery bureaucracies. Regardless of codified rules and the appearance of city autonomy, the national government will intervene in city governance whenever it chooses. All levels of government use their authority to stifle attempts at building local democratic institutions.¹⁹ A recent survey conducted by Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and China's Shanghai Jiao Ton University to determine citizen satisfaction with government services found that "first-tier Chinese city governments (Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen) were less efficient and lacked adequate public participation."²⁰ Cities built by authoritarian regimes and that emerge seemingly overnight are often hailed as great success stories of urban development. But this efficiency must not be confused with responsiveness to the needs of the people. These cities do not have even the pretense of democratic participation from their citizens. However, they have demonstrated a capacity to govern, provide public safety, make livable neighborhoods and create opportunities for upward mobility despite obvious limitations on political participation. Their delivery of sufficient services is in some cases what makes these regimes tolerable to the population.

Why is it so important to focus on service delivery? A city government that

has legal responsibility for service delivery must provide shared goods in the public interest. This is particularly important in nations with a multicultural population or with deep-rooted ideological or religious differences. Fiorello LaGuardia, a Depression-era mayor of New York, once said about politics that “there is no Democratic or Republican way to pick up the garbage.” Efficient, fairly distributed public services are in the interest of the entire city population, and city governments that deliver on the promise to provide them can reduce sectarian strife. Every group has the same stake in ensuring that government services are provided in their community. In addition, because of city government’s proximity to citizens, it can respond more quickly to changing conditions in communities than distant national governments. Accountability, fairness and effective service delivery will be achieved most often under a democratic system in which the needs and aspirations of citizens are connected to a government that has the legal responsibility and fiscal capacity to provide services.

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Is there a trade-off, then, between efficiency and democracy in developing-world cities? There is no question that in the short term, China has created a powerful model of urban growth that has succeeded based on many indicators of economic development. Yet there are several problems with this model. The first is that it is not environmentally sustainable.²¹ The second problem is that the Chinese system cannot effectively reconcile public opposition to government policies. As the citizens of Chinese cities demand more equity and fairness from their government, the need to create formal institutions of democratic governance at the city level will grow.²² The current national-government-directed model of economic growth may work in the short term, but it is already showing strain.²³ The national government, which invests substantial resources in political repression, will eventually have both political and financial incentives to support democratic institutions of governance at the city level.

There is a reinforcing relationship between the effective and equitable provision of services and the existence of democratic institutions of government. If cities have legal responsibility for service delivery and the leaders of government are democratically elected, then there is a clear line of accountability. But the public must see the process that produces policy outcomes as fair. In a city with a democratically elected executive and legislature and a robust civil society, the maximum number of citizens is likely to engage in the political process, often through

political parties and interest groups. This bolsters the government's legitimacy and makes it more likely to promote fair, efficient policies.

LESSONS FROM NEW YORK CITY

The federal system of government in the United States has allowed cities to develop strong democratic institutions of local governance with the fiscal and operational capacity for service delivery. While there are weaknesses in the American model, which cannot simply be exported to other cities, it provides a starting point for understanding how other cities can approach the challenges of the twenty-first century.

There is no other city that better epitomizes the economic decline, transformation and resurgence of America's cities in the twentieth century than New York City. The city emerged from the near-death experience of its 1975 fiscal crisis with little assistance from the national government. Through a political agreement with New York State, the city was able to restructure its debt, pay off creditors and keep salaries and benefits intact for a drastically reduced municipal workforce, but was left with fewer resources to dedicate to basic city services.²⁴ New York and America's other great cities experienced unprecedented economic decline in the late 1970s. Cities continued to shrink, crime increased dramatically, infrastructure deteriorated, public schools failed to educate children, businesses left, sometimes abandoning their property, job opportunities disappeared and poverty deepened.

New York City did not begin to change this economic trajectory until the last decade of the twentieth century and did not become a net private-sector job creator until 1993.²⁵ The city began to confront the full complement of twenty-first-century challenges when Michael Bloomberg became mayor. When Bloomberg took office in January 2002, New York City was just starting to recover from the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Many experts believed that the city's economy would never rebound; even the Federal Reserve issued a white paper advising the financial-service sector to decentralize its operations—which in effect meant moving jobs out of the city.²⁶ The mayor responded defiantly that New York was "open for business." Instead of giving in to fear and defeatism, Mayor Bloomberg used his legal authority to invest in the public sector and outlined a vision for a twenty-first century New York City that would embrace accountability, economic growth and livability. The sales strategy for the businessman-turned-mayor was that for New York to thrive as a sustainable global city, it had to be a place where working people wanted to live and businesses wanted to locate. His policy recommendations followed from this basic principle.

The mayor had the latitude to make these reforms because New York's governance structure gives its leaders significant fiscal and operational legal authority.

Other cities should note that this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for delivering effective and efficient services. In order to understand how Bloomberg, who is currently serving his third term as mayor, uses New York City's existing institutions of democratic governance and city-agency operational capacity to develop policies that drive economic competitiveness, the next section will discuss two recent policy innovations: "PlaNYC" and the city's efforts to expand the technology sector and small-business economic base.

The "PlaNYC" Initiative

In 2007, Mayor Bloomberg introduced a planning process called "PlaNYC" that links economic development to city policies that promote environmental sustainability. The initiative is one of the most significant of the Bloomberg administration. Cities have to make difficult decisions about planning that balance the need for open space with the need for density and that balance citywide interests with those of local communities. Therefore, successful planning depends on the leadership of elected officials and their ability to communicate with and seek support from the public.

One of the reasons for PlaNYC's success is that New York City has a robust, institutionalized land-use planning process that involves mayoral agencies, the city council and many community and business organizations. The process is not perfect, but it creates opportunities for civic engagement to inform professional planning. It has also created a political process in which communities are expected to participate and in which a citywide representative council makes the final decisions. Participants in the city planning process include the city council, the five borough presidents, the mayor, the Department of City Planning, the Board of Standards and Appeals, the Landmark Preservation Commission, the community boards, the Department of Environmental Protection and advocacy and community groups. The process requires extensive public review under the uniform land-use review procedure, or ULURP. Public hearings required at each stage of the planning process are held by community boards, the City Planning Commission (CPC) and the city council. After the CPC decides a matter, the city council votes; the mayor can veto the council's decision or, if the council does not act, he can veto the CPC decision. A two-thirds vote in the city council can override a mayoral veto.

PlaNYC has taken New York beyond its traditional land-use planning process and has become a model for cities around the globe.²⁷ When Bloomberg decided to

Cities have to make difficult decisions about planning that balance citywide interests with those of local communities.

develop a strategic plan for New York City, he initially thought of it as a straightforward economic development and land-use plan. However, data on global climate change and projections about city population growth (an increase of one million people by 2030) compelled him to change the scope of the planning process. PlaNYC was released in April 2007 with 127 initiatives focusing on housing, open space, brownfields, water quality, water networks, transportation, air quality and climate change. An updated PlaNYC was released in 2011, making some changes

PlaNYC was not a dormant document but a practical roadmap.

to these overarching policy areas, adding solid-waste management and neighborhood livability.²⁸ The plan included launch dates, milestones, sources of funding and a chart showing the government agencies and private-sector and community partners that would implement these initiatives. PlaNYC was not a dormant document but a practical roadmap.

The process of developing PlaNYC is in some ways as significant as its policy achievement.²⁹ A Sustainability Advisory Board was appointed with seventeen experts representing business, labor, environmental advocates and planners. Commissioners of city agencies, members of the city council and state agencies also attended meetings. The advisory board had fifty hours of meetings, including with the public, over the two months leading up to the announcement of ten sustainability goals on 12 December 2006. In addition to the Sustainability Advisory Board, eleven public town hall meetings were held, over fifty presentations were made to groups throughout the city and staff met with more than fifty advocacy groups in brainstorming sessions.³⁰ A website that asked New Yorkers to share their ideas was launched. The day after the mayor released PlaNYC, more than seventy organizations rallied together in support of the plan.³¹

Since then, the city has been monitoring the progress of its initiatives and regularly reporting to the public through a monthly newsletter and the annual *PlaNYC Progress Report*, which updates implementation progress on the 132 (originally 127) initiatives.³² In addition, the city updates its greenhouse-gas inventory annually and reports on the progress of climate-change mitigation initiatives. In July 2011, the city launched Change by Us NYC, a social-media website that allows New Yorkers to connect online to find resources and create neighborhood sustainability projects.³³ Accomplishments to date include a 9 percent decrease in citywide carbon emissions, the conversion of 30 percent of the city taxi fleet to hybrid vehicles and the designation of seven hundred acres of new parkland. Some 250,000 New Yorkers live within ten minutes of a park and two hundred bike lanes have been installed. The Office of Environmental Remediation was established in 2008 to clean up all contaminated land by 2030.³⁴ The mayor continues to lead

PlaNYC policy development and implementation and works to keep environmental sustainability connected to the city's economic development plans. In February 2012, the mayor convened a first-ever PlaNYC summit to make sustainability a part of local communities. The public continues to be engaged through traditional forms of outreach, the city's website and social media. Most importantly, the work is being done through the mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, which is now a formal part of city government. PlaNYC is a work in progress, but that is one reason why it has been successful.

Expanding the Technology and Small Business Sectors

City governments must be capable of generating enough revenue from their tax bases to support reasonably efficient and high-quality services. Otherwise, they will lose the confidence of the business community and middle-class taxpayers who have the mobility to leave in search of better services and lower taxes elsewhere. This is why the post-9/11 recession was such a threat to the vitality of the city.

Bloomberg's response to the recession contrasts sharply with the city's response to the 1975 fiscal crisis. He was faced with a \$6.4 billion shortfall in revenues and an economy that was in free fall.³⁵ The city economy lost 240,000 jobs between 2001 and 2002.³⁶ Some efficiency savings were found by cutting the budget, but the mayor raised property taxes 18.5 percent, raised sales taxes one-eighth of a percent, increased personal income tax for high-income earners and increased taxes on cigarettes from 8 cents per pack to \$1.50 (on top of the state's existing \$1.50 per-pack tax) so that the city could continue funding quality-of-life services; in effect, the opposite strategy used in the 1975 fiscal crisis.³⁷ As a consequence, the economy rebounded more quickly than anyone expected. While service delivery capacity is strong, fiscal issues remain challenging. New York City constantly struggles with New York State and with the federal government for its fair share of resources. Only 17 percent of the city's fiscal-year budget in 2012 budget came from state aid and 10 percent came from federal grants. The remaining 73 percent of the city's \$62.9 billion budget was raised from city taxes and charges.³⁸

The Bloomberg administration's expansive and innovative view of economic development policy has positioned the city as the leading private-sector job creator in the United States after the 2008 global recession. As of January 2012, New York City has exceeded its prerecession level of jobs and added 162,200 jobs since the recession ended.³⁹ He continues to use traditional economic development strategies, like packages that include tax incentives, low or no-interest loans, and the lifting of land-use regulations to retain businesses threatening to leave.

Bloomberg has positioned New York to attract twenty-first-century busi-

nesses and jobs through a transformed and innovative New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) and Department of Small Business Services. New York City has almost 190,500 small businesses (500 employees or less).⁴⁰ Small businesses employ nearly two million workers, or 53 percent of the city's workforce.⁴¹ The Department of Small Business Services is the lead agency

New York City's vibrant democratic institutions are evidence that urban democracy is not an impediment to effective, efficient service delivery.

for programs that support small businesses, but it is unrecognizable from previous administrations. In 2003, Bloomberg's new vision realigned workforce-development policy to support the needs of the business community and made it a part of the city's larger economic development plans. In addition, the city's Department of Employment runs interactive websites called NYC Business Solutions and NYC Business Express, along with Workforce1 Career Centers, that offer services for small (and large) businesses including business planning, business courses, financing, legal review of contract, hiring


and training funds, navigating government regulatory requirements, workforce training, funds facilities and instructions in creating business improvement districts (BIDs). Their programs are being replicated globally.⁴²

The NYCEDC has become the primary engine for economic development, driving growth, promoting entrepreneurship and creating jobs. NYCEDC created a "city-wide network of incubators" by building affordable workspaces across New York, accompanied by training and mentoring programs, to help grow fledgling businesses. These incubators offer the capacity to house over one thousand businesses and 1,200 entrepreneurs in the five boroughs.⁴³ One new initiative in particular is worth mentioning. The Applied Sciences NYC initiative is a historic partnership to build a two-million-square-foot applied-science and engineering campus on Roosevelt Island in New York City. The city selected a consortium from Cornell University and Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology, to develop the project, which seeks to increase New York's capacity for applied sciences and will dramatically transform the economy. The new facility could create hundreds of new companies, generating upwards of \$6 billion in economic activity and tens of thousands of new jobs.⁴⁴ This example is instructive because it illustrates the expansive role government can play by building partnerships with businesses, community groups and other governmental entities to support innovative approaches to urban economic development.

CONCLUSION

Too many of the world's cities have governance structures that are incapable of dealing with the challenges of the twenty-first century. New York City's vibrant democratic institutions—representative, participatory, formal and informal—are evidence that urban democracy is not an impediment to effective, efficient service delivery. Strong city governments are necessary because the primary focus of national governments will invariably be issues that are national and international in scope. Even in representative democracies, national institutions are geographically distant bureaucracies that tend to be insulated from the public and disconnected from the problems of service delivery in communities. Without a clear link between the representative or participatory institutions of government and the delivery of public services, it is difficult to ensure the legitimacy of government. If citizens cannot connect government to the lives of their communities in a positive way, it becomes difficult for them to accept the authority of government to protect their property, resolve conflicts and collect taxes. City governments can provide this tangible link. In a representative democracy, citizens will accept the fairness of a plan when they have been consulted and when elected officials are accountable to them.

Defining and constructing a policy agenda is of course not the same as implementation. Mayors must have the legal authority to build robust service-delivery systems. When services are contracted to the private sector or NGOs, government must have sufficient expertise and fiscal capacity to provide oversight. Legislatures must approve budgets and land-use and contract decisions. They must also provide oversight of executive agencies through public hearings. A robust civil society must hold government accountable, especially in the periods between elections.

City governments must be intentionally structured with sufficient fiscal and administrative authority to provide the public services that will make them economically competitive. City governments will continuously face economic challenges that can only be addressed by national governments and international institutions of global economic governance. Certainly, the costs of development—especially mass transit and infrastructure—must be planned regionally and shared equitably with state and national governments. New York City's recent history indicates that fiscal capacity is a continuing challenge. Recognizing the shortcomings of American federalism, there are important lessons other cities can learn from New York's quality-of-life initiatives, economic development and environmental-sustainability strategies in the twenty-first century. Leadership from city government, and especially mayors, is critical to the long-term planning that is required for sustained investment in infrastructure, economic growth and environmental sustainability that will ensure any city's viability in the future. 

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