

It is a commonplace to say that crisis reveal latent strengths and weaknesses. When the COVID-19 epidemic of 2020 hit, economies had barely returned to their pre-2008 level, meaning a net loss of several years of growth. Shipping is responsible for most of the world's trade, yet the growth of world trade, usually a leading indicator, was already lagging behind economic growth. Since c. 1990, probably due to climate change, natural catastrophes in coastal cities and regions have increased in cost and intensity. There is worse to come: rising sea levels affect nearly 1 billion people. We like to say that the weather is unpredictable, but now it seems as if forecasting the planet's future on the basis of global warming is less risky than predicting when international trade and travel will return to 2019 levels. Port cities face two different time-lines, one short-term, economic, the other medium-to-long term, environmental. Win-win solutions good for both will be rare.

There has been a specific port-city dimension to COVID-19.

- “Essential workers” include half a million people who work on ships, many of whom were stranded at sea for weeks after their contracts expired, and dock workers, oftentimes migrants housed in dormitories where the virus spread: whether in the Gulf or in South East Asia, port-related activities have created “clusters”, a word to fear. There will be major regulatory reforms.
- Storage capacity was unbalanced; the fall in demand for imports meant that there was a surplus of empty containers in Europe and a shortage in Asia, just when Asia was producing goods in short supply in Europe. Efficiency gains have only partially compensated.
- As borders closed, some ports in the Low Countries became the escape valves for Germany, France; nations will redefine supply chains and security to include more than food.
- Illegal traffic has been re-routed globally and organized crime has adapted.
- Island states risked isolation, a form of quarantine from the outside; archipelago nations like France had to organize supply routes across the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.
- Cruise liners emptied, to shelter off shore by the dozens, some eventually to be sent to the scrapyard – but those yards meeting EU standards quickly filled up, meaning that some ships would be taken apart in countries where workers would be exposed to toxic materials. Huge loss of physical capital.
- The port, no longer a gateway or a haven, became a barrier, to keep people out. Literally hundreds of thousands of people had to be repatriated by air, an unprecedented logistical

effort in peacetime far bigger than after the 1999 Tsunami in Asia. Improvised, it was messy – again exposing holes in regulation.

- The economic regeneration of waterfronts, especially in historic urban centres, cannot rely now on tourism, culture and the convention industry which in the recent past attracted investment.

The maritime system operates largely outside the control of nation-states but the pandemic has increased state intervention in the economy to an extent not seen in generations. An economic logic calls for measures to support demand, reduce trade barriers, expand global health regulations, reduce the vulnerability of the system to disruption (more automated goods handling, more ample buffer supplies, etc.). An environmental logic raises other questions, whether to set priorities to reduce greenhouse gasses or concentrate on coastal protection (including relocation) in anticipation of rising sea levels. Talk about paradigm shifts and “green jobs” is cheap because it is about tomorrow. In the short run, the strategy that produces the most short-term economic gain at lowest political cost is likely to get the most investment.

The pandemic however has made the public more willing to give the environment greater priority. Some argue that because so much of the economy has been disrupted, the time is now to undertake a major correction, presumably in favor of environmental protection. Some argue that the exploitation of natural resources – minerals, crops, sand and wood, oil – under the pressure of globalization disrupted an equilibrium in nature, causing the epidemic. In other words, it is our own fault – somehow. If followed through to its logical conclusion, this will set up a clash between virtue and sin which will split the body politic into a different set of winners and losers. Dogma will make the very idea of trade-offs anathema. In the post-pandemic era, politics may become more volatile and political coalitions more unstable as the electorate becomes even more fragmented, exactly what a climate-change agenda does not need.

In the June 2020 municipal elections, the French “green” party, EELV, came in first or second in Lille, Lyon, Bordeaux, Grenoble and Marseille. The new mayor of Marseille, Michèle Rubirola, who has promised more public transport is a Socialist, an unexpected outcome of the 2020 local elections. The largest Mediterranean port has never been in sync with the national government, which in years past struggled to get local elites to take the

challenge of urban regeneration and port competition more seriously. Marseille is spatially divided by income and occupation, making economic regeneration more difficult, but the city can ill ignore the port for the multiplier effect it has on employment. Marseille, which hosts the headquarters of CMA-CGM, one of the world's largest container fleet operators, has recently become a port of call for cruise liners. Regulating the sulfur content of fuel can be as conflictual as questions about the environmental impact of the electricity consumed by large liners at quay.

There was a time when port cities were the only very large cities in the world, and Marseille and Genoa were among them. Transport connections and infrastructure were a problem in Genoa, even before the disastrous collapse of the Morandi bridge carrying a highway in the middle of the city; 43 people died in August 2018. A new bridge was opened two years later; designed by Genoa native Renzo Piano, the new structure was constructed in record time, an inspiration for Italy, because no one else submitted a design and bid in competition, thus effectively suspending rules on public contracts. But the bridge cannot be used for traffic until the national government decides on the concession to operate and maintain it. Meanwhile, the M5S political party has been opposed to new infrastructure projects, a source of corruption, but also for environmental reasons as new rail and road routes alter the landscape. The party opposed a rail link between Turin and Lyon in a pristine region involving a major tunnel, as well as improved links between Genoa and the north. Given the economic stimulus from infrastructure construction and the productivity gain when congestion is reduced, those links are now more likely to go forward. Genoa also reminds us of an important lesson: there is no clear-cut sequence between the disaster itself with its focus on immediate human distress, and the post-disaster reconstruction, which must begin even before the end of the initial emergency.

We know from history that the inter-dependency of port and city has often brought stakeholders with divergent interests and perspectives to co-operate. When everyone blames everyone else, they are trapped in a circular argument. Look at Beirut, admittedly an extreme example of a port city whose links to global networks have been severed by mutually hostile clans unwilling to overcome their differences and by the interference of foreign powers. When the solutions to one problem give rise to another, the result can either be paralysis, or a virtuous cycle if the will to innovate and to adopt innovations is strong. There will be more crises.

How resilient will port cities be after 2020? The factors of resilience are weaker now in many places than they were years ago: entrepreneurship, social networks, economic diversification, the capacity to generate and absorb innovation and to welcome immigrants, the stock of public goods all have been declining in the 21st century and especially since the financial crisis of 2008. Resilience stories are about local contexts and institutions, usually recovering from asymmetric shocks. The pandemic however affected the world more or less simultaneously: we face **a crisis of a system made of interconnected parts**. Port cities have become just another category of problems which cut across the responsibilities of different ministries and levels of government. Cross-sectoral integration, like stakeholder co-ordination, is best undertaken before problems arise. In a crisis, *arguments over who controls what* take on greater importance than *what should get done*. Experience in times of crisis has been wanting in many countries. Things may get worse before the sectoral framework for decision-making is reformed. When we talk about the need for a new paradigm for economic governance, we forget that paradigm shifts are messy and take years.

Globalization, which depends heavily on maritime transport, is irreversible in an urban world. Reading news articles about the pandemic in which maritime issues have been mentioned, however, it is apparent how *ignorant* people are about how the maritime world on which we are so dependent actually functions. The largest city of 1800 was London at one million; today it is Tokyo at 35 million; soon it could be Lagos. A retreat from globalization implies a decline in the size and number of cities, a reversal of historic trends which can only be brought about by force. Now geo-politics in every region of the world threaten what port cities do best, receive people, rebalance supply and demand, renew the stock of innovations. The vitality and creativity of port cities will be the best signs that the next chapter in civilization is being written.

Head image: The Port of Marseille Fos.