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AQ FEATURE

Ask the Experts: Sustainable Cities

BY Sergio Fajardo Valderrama, Sérgio Cabral , Dr. Fran Tonkiss and Anne Palmer

How can sustainable cities serve the working poor?

Sergio Fajardo Valderrama answers:

Cities must trade in their paternalistic and overprotective orientation for a more independent mentality.

Government helps, but citizens do not depend on it completely.

We must invest in education so that citizens can be the agents of their own progress.
In parallel to this, we must set in motion comprehensive social programs to further protect citizens' rights and to expand economic, social, cultural, political, and territorial rights, which benefit their well-being, development and empowerment.

Investing in education is a political decision. When I came to office as mayor of Medellín in 2004 and later as governor of the state of Antioquia in 2012, we pledged to transform the society through education.

In the broadest sense, this includes science, technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, and culture. In the government of Antioquia, we devote half of the budget to education, one of the most important things we could do for the state.

Another crucial component for reducing poverty is fighting corruption. To me, corruption is a criminal business no less difficult to combat than gangs and guerrillas. The corrupt line their pockets, reducing opportunities for everyone and leaving just crumbs for the poorest in our society.

Urban planning must also commit firmly to the dignity of space and the dignity of people. This is why we say, "The most beautiful things for the most humble people," meaning we must work to protect nature, provide public space and ensure access to culture and art for the poor. Public space is the site of social equality, coexistence and integration.

A key to accomplishing that is ensuring that citizens have the rights and opportunities to participate. As promoters of participatory democracy, we work to advance citizen management of the public sphere and citizen oversight of government.

Sérgio Cabral answers:

Promoting the sustainable development of Rio's 92 towns has been one of our most successful strategies. Over the past seven years, our efforts have significantly raised Rio's sustainability standards. We have introduced closer dialogue and cooperation among the three levels of government, something that Rio had been missing in recent decades. We have also improved our financial situation to become the first state to be rated investment grade. This has helped us gain financing for social and infrastructure projects, contributing to Rio's new image as a responsible, safe and pragmatic state, thus attracting private investment.

In parallel, we have deployed a bold neighborhood program in communities that had been dominated by armed gangs. With innovative community policing practices, we gained citizen trust in the fight against violence with preventive actions, especially with the presence of the state. To offer real prospects of prosperity to the underprivileged citizens who live in the metropolitan area, we made two efforts: in Brazil we were pioneers in adopting the single transport ticket, which reduces intercity transport costs, and made further investments in high-capacity systems. Faced with the challenges generated by long-lasting demands for infrastructure, in collaboration with the federal government, through the *Programa de Aceleração de Crescimento* (Growth Acceleration Program), we started a number of infrastructure projects combined with social programs. Some were never before available in the *favelas*—such as *Biblioteca Parque* (Park Libraries), the 24-hour *Unidades de Pronto Atendimento* (Emergency Care Units) and *Centros Vocacionais Tecnológicos* (Technological Vocation Centers).

For the first time ever, larger *favelas* received major interventions, such as the cable car in the Complexo do Alemão. On the outskirts of metropolitan cities, a local program known as *Bairro Novo* (New Neighborhood) includes street drainage and paving. We have also invested in programs aimed at reducing the risk of disasters to those who live on the banks of rivers or on slopes by conducting dredging and containment works, resettling households and ensuring access to the benefits of sustainable development.

Dr. Fran Tonkiss answers:

Efforts to create more sustainable cities are only really meaningful when they address the conditions of the urban poor. Cities in general are seen as big polluters, but the emissions profile of poorer citizens is dramatically different from that of their affluent neighbors at every level: in consumption and waste, energy demand, transport behavior, recycling, and re-use.

The urban poor subsidize the emissions impact of the rich, but bear an unequal share of environmental risk. The urban poor rely on walking, bicycles and public transportation, and suffer most from road traffic injuries and deaths, from exposure to exhaust emissions and noise pollution, and from the stark spatial barriers caused by roads and traffic congestion. An urban commitment to developing walking and cycling infrastructure and to providing broad, accessible public transportation is more sustainable in all three senses of the term— environmentally, socially and economically: lowering emissions, promoting public health, and cutting time and money costs for urban workers.

More sustainable cities create environmental economies of scale for combined and alternative power sources that can open up access and hold down energy costs for poorer households and businesses. Better-quality open and green space improves urban quality of life regardless of income. And more compact urban forms provide better spatial access to urban services and amenities, job opportunities and consumer choices, decreasing economic segregation and spatial inequalities.

In thinking about how more sustainable cities can benefit the working poor, we have to think about sustainability in this broad sense—taking the economic and social dimensions as seriously as we do environmental sustainability—and continually ask the question: more sustainable for whom?

Anne Palmer answers:

Food system reform has attracted a variety of movements—anti-hunger, sustainable agriculture, living wage, community food—whose demands, if met, will require fundamental, incremental, long-term policy change.

Low-income individuals are visible in many of these movements.

What exists is a constellation of initiatives, policies and programs that are in fact slowly reforming the food system in metropolitan areas across the country. Communities are using food as a platform to transform vacant land by growing vegetables, creating green spaces and planting fruit trees, thereby increasing their capacity for food self-reliance and neighborhood desirability. Planning departments are rezoning land for use as community gardens, beekeeping and raising chickens—all developments that can better connect people to the land and deepen appreciation for those who grow our food.

Public health experts advocate for increasing access to “good food,” using policy change as a means of addressing disparities of diet-related disease. Fair wage campaigns seek social justice for underpaid farm

and restaurant workers, the majority of whom are people of color. Faith communities encourage their congregations to become better stewards of natural resources and to support living wage legislation. Federal legislation that supports using federal nutrition assistance program benefits at farmers markets helps improve access to locally grown produce, and increases the customer base for farmers.

Food programs have the power to reach across movements and income levels if executed using humility, knowledge and inclusiveness. There are many examples of low-income citizens leading such efforts. Many municipalities now see the value in supporting policies that enhance food programs and build connections among low- and middle-income communities. These efforts seek to create a fair, healthy and sustainable food system for all.

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