

Strategic Sectors | **Economy & Territory**

Covid-19 and Mediterranean Cities: What Will Remain? Or Covid-19 as Experienced in Mediterranean Cities: Lessons and Challenges for a Sustainable Recovery

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The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the scope of action by cities as key local agents. When they were able to act, their role proved decisive. This is particularly noteworthy at a time when local authorities in the Mediterranean are very unequally endowed with resources from one country to another, depending on the maturity of the decentralization framework (financial endowment from the national level), and in an unprecedented period during which local revenues have been declining everywhere (usage and occupancy fees, trading licences). So what will remain of the pandemic for the cities in this region? Will the agile processes implemented as a matter of urgency last? And will the new awareness change the way cities are planned and managed?

Nearly Identical Municipal Responses, but Unequal Resources

To fight the Covid-19 pandemic, local authorities were all put to the test to respond and take action on five shared fronts: fighting the spread of the virus, support for healthcare workers, continuity of municipal services, enforcing national measures on the local level, and solidarity towards the most underprivileged. They are detailed below with concrete examples illustrating this common “block” of measures implemented by Mediterranean municipalities (or unions of municipalities). The portal

www.citiesforglobalhealth.org/ has made it possible to collect and analyse the feedback published by the cities of Jezzine (Lebanon), Hebron (Palestine), Tetouan (Morocco), Sfax (Tunisia), Barcelona (Spain), Dubrovnik (Croatia) and Tirana (Albania). Even if the measures taken by the cities are ultimately very similar, demonstrating a real desire to respond in an emergency, the sources consulted reveal that the means to implement them are very unequal. The city of Hebron deplores its shortage of human, financial and technical resources to carry out sterilization and cleaning in public places and the impossibility of dissuading merchants from gathering at marketplaces. The experience of Sfax is interesting: in order to make up for the lack of municipal technical staff, and in view of the city’s growing need to support the population on the social, healthcare and psychological levels, the municipality’s actions have been undertaken by a “Volunteer Committee” established as a force to provide rapid intervention and support for the city government’s efforts, according to a daily work plan supervised in the spring of 2020 by the committee’s chair, under the direct supervision of the mayor.

What Will Remain? Lessons Learned by Cities

Municipalities, with or without sufficient means, rose to the occasion, showing responsiveness in the emergency and making it known through social networks or their websites, or through international organizations such as UN Habitat and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). In terms of learning, it is too early to assess the situation, but we can already guess that improvisation in implementing

TABLE 12 Municipal Responses

Emergency Measures	Example City	Complexity of the Measure
Deterring the spread of the virus		
Distribution of masks	Jezzine, Hebron	0
Disinfection of public places and public transport	Tirana, Jezzine, Tetouan	1
Generating data and liaison with national Covid monitoring	Jezzine	2
Support for healthcare workers		
Childcare for children of healthcare workers	Tetouan	1
Continuity of municipal services and compensation for disruptions		
Cleanliness and sterilization of rubbish bins	Tirana, Jezzine, Tetouan	1
Markets and lorry transport of essential agricultural products	Tetouan	1
Enforcing national measures on the local level		
Municipal police	Tirana, Jezzine	2
Solidarity towards the most disadvantaged and affected social groups		
Support schemes for shops and local producers	Dubrovnik	3
Aid for paying housing rent	Barcelona	3
Supporting food aid and providing free meals	Tirana	2
Supporting the local economy	Dubrovnik	3

Summary table of municipal response measures in the Mediterranean (data collected and processed by the author).

certain measures since the spring of 2020 has revealed both a real capacity for agility on the part of cities, which acted quickly, and at the same time, a lack of experience in organizing a structured response to the crisis. Cities realized that few of them had a municipal emergency and recovery plan in place for an exceptional crisis. Covid-19 brought decision-makers face to face with an epidemic situation, a phenomenon the memory of which has been forgotten by a large majority of countries in the world, and invited them to be better prepared, to better adapt and to “get back on their feet” if other health crises were to occur in the future.

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As we know, Covid has also triggered a reawakening of debate among experts and the general public since the spring of 2020, to the point of making the city the source of all evils, after a historically long consensus on its obviousness in the eyes of experts. Although

the city still has a bright future ahead of it and “de-urbanization” is not observable as a structuring phenomenon (but rather as a temporary one in the case of the peaks and waves of the pandemic), the virus and its spread accelerated by globalization, has both put a large number of mobilities, including urban ones, on hold and revealed that many territories no longer have autonomy as soon as their borders are closed off. In the Mediterranean region, is there evidence that mayors and their technical teams have begun to imagine other local policies beyond emergency responses to Covid-19? This is not easy to answer, as it would require a rigorous survey protocol (interviews with elected officials and technical services) and technical documentation that is not easily accessible to the general public. However, some interpretative elements can be proposed with caution. In the field of mobility, Covid-19 will leave its mark, since it has accelerated transformations that were already in the making, at least in northern Mediterranean cities, with a growing share of active modes (walking, cycling and scootering) and experiments (temporary cycle lanes, shared bicycle repair stands, closure of roads to cars, as in Barcelona, Milan and Marseille). In terms of housing, some cities have started to think about specifications for the production of new housing (greater multi-orientation, more generous minimum surface area for each type of housing, compulsory shared spaces, high-level digital access, shared office rooms for the inhabitants).

The revival of the economy will undoubtedly depend on the capacity of the public authorities to stimulate and encourage local entrepreneurship (through support, land, wasteland to be reclaimed and made available, subsidies and subsidized loans)

Regarding local production guaranteeing greater autonomy in the event of a pandemic and better mitigating carbon emissions, it is difficult to identify cities that have put in place municipal incentives for start-up companies producing locally, enhancing know-how, and demonstrating lower environmental and social costs than goods transported from far away. Mediterranean cities would undoubtedly have a card to play next to an Asia that is hegemonic in goods and supplies of all sorts. The relaunch of mask and respirator factories in Tunisia, Morocco and France in 2020 showed the need. The revival of the economy will undoubtedly depend on the capacity of the public authorities to stimulate and encourage local entrepreneurship (through support, land, wasteland to be reclaimed and made available, subsidies and subsidized loans).

Pathways to a Stimulating Future

The Covid-19 health crisis has made us revisit the crucial question of the resilience of Mediterranean cities, including their informal settlements, and of their inhabitants and decision-makers in relation to a globalization that is showing its limits, its excesses and its threats to the global climate. It also confronts national decision-makers and mayors with their responsibilities not to contribute at their level to relaunching on a high-carbon course, a “cocktail” with well-known ingredients (long goods and merchandise channels, low prices allowed by the global market, and logistic and digital circuits increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few conglomerates). While the drop in road and air traffic has seen a reduction in CO₂ emissions and an improvement in air

quality that seemed unimaginable, the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the sector’s long-term trajectory and its necessary decarbonisation will be written in the coming months and years: a return to the private car or a cycling boom, a drop in environmental standards or the emergence of the electric vehicle, green counterparts to the economic rescue of aviation... After managing the emergency, the period of counter-cyclical investments and recovery could lend priority to the agri-food chain for more productive land around cities, greener technologies in energy and mobility, and securing essential goods.

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