

Transformation of Urban–Rural Relationships in the Context of Global Challenges

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Abstract

This article updates and further develops the reflections of “Urbanization and Sustainability after the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Motta 2020). It is now even more urgent to focus on the urban–rural relationships that are being modified by the pandemic, climate change, and the impacts of conflicts, causing serious human insecurities and increasing precarious circumstances worldwide. The fast-changing situation and recurrent emergencies confirm the need for a new urban development approach, related to the specificities of the surrounding environment and based on the revival of towns and settlements spread over territories. This should function as a complementary tool to mitigate urbanization flows and urban–rural gaps, identifying new relationships. This requires the review of current urban paradigms, which are no longer able to respond to modified conditions and demands with an innovative vision. This is actualized on the basis of the principles of the social quality theory (SQT) and approach (SQA) and their emphasis on processes in and between the four relevant dimensions of societal life. In the past decade, these principles have been developed tentatively in working papers about sustainability and urban issues from a social quality perspective.

Keywords: comprehensiveness, social quality, mitigation of metropolitan flows, obsolete and palliative urban models, urban–rural inequalities

Introduction and premises

The objective of the article, in the complex context of the urban “problematique” is to explore the interrelated issues of urban conditions and human relationships, calling attention to the need to mitigate current urbanization processes and to identify innovative settlement designs. We initially highlight the pandemic and climate change impacts on urban areas, the excessive use of natural resources, and the increase of disruptive natural events. Then we discuss the sustainable development goals and analyze current urbanization trends, with reference to demography and migration. Afterwards we summarize the opportunities offered by the new technologies, circular and informal economies, the ongoing concepts of smart and compact cities, gentrification and



densification, and a will list some urban mega-projects, all palliative models based on obsolete schemes. Then we describe an innovative settlement hypothesis of territorial, balanced development, through re-ruralization programs oriented to attract in towns and villages a rising number of citizens leaving big cities. Finally, we underline the necessary paradigm shift regarding complex urban issues that can be faced successfully by applying the principles and comprehensive vision of the social quality theory (SQT) and approach (SQA).

A close relationship with the surrounding environment, considered the basic element of productive, agricultural, and natural resources and the safeguard of a territory over time, has historically regulated city–countryside interrelations. Living in a context of physical and intangible heritage, where adequate societal relations can be developed, is a main factor that has, over the centuries, determined the localization and growth of human settlements, which have gradually increased from villages to towns and cities. However, urban development in the last century experienced an exponential growth that led to unbridled land use, precarious settlements, extended commuting, and increased pollution. These are the main negative impacts that have progressively reduced the advantages of urban living, which thus far has been considered an inevitable paradigm, but is now questioned by the widespread use of new technologies, the implementation of green and circular economies, and the urgent need to mitigate climate change, for which large urban agglomerations also have responsibility. All of this led us to reflect on whether existing urban development models are still valid in this profoundly changed context, and to search for a new approach capable of overcoming the current shortcomings and the aforementioned negative impacts.

The Evolving Scenario

Ongoing military conflicts, with their still-unpredictable developments, will change many geopolitical scenarios, with not only significant impacts on energy and food shortages, but also structural consequences in many sectors, such as migration and international commerce; it is therefore necessary to implement a total change of vision. The impacts of war on cities, which represent the strategic nerve centres of a country, highlight their vulnerability at all levels. The concentration of the population inevitably involves more collateral damage in addition to civil victims, such as the destruction of the built environment, service networks, and urban infrastructure that have always been the basis of urban structure. In light of the above, a review of the current territorial paradigm is necessary, as is analysis and evaluation of new socioeconomic changes that are now possible thanks to new technologies. Their rapid diffusion has had better results than expected, for example the increased productivity of companies, banks, and public administration, overcoming traditional deficiencies with consequent positive impacts. This process has initiated a structural change of the contemporary way of living, leading to more attention to safeguarding the environment and to sustainable development and societies, and less emphasis only on consumerist values.

The Pandemic's Impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses of and critical issues related to large urban agglomerations, modifying original attraction values that have been gradually losing themselves distorting many intrinsic elements that have been gradually losing themselves in metropolises and megalopolises worldwide. This is also discussed in the double themed issue of this journal on the societal impact of the pandemic (Nijhuis and van der Maesen 2021). The greater diffusion of contagion in high-density areas, the difficulty of successful isolation, and other negative impacts raise growing questions about the further growth of huge urban areas (Benfan et al. 2022). COVID-19 is not the only pandemic or epidemic of recent years—recall mad cow disease, Ebola, SARS, avian flu, and so on—nor will it be the last, as all forecasts agree on more recurrent similar phenomena to come. The health emergency underlined the difficulty of managing epidemics in urban agglomerations; in fact the major outbreaks developed in “global cities” and their airport hubs, which have become the main spaces of international contagion diffusion (UN n.d.: UN-HABITAT 2021). An example is the recurrent resurgence of outbreaks in China, confronting the authorities with the locking down of large urban areas, millions of confined inhabitants, and reduced production activities (Davidson and Yu 2022). Because in the short-medium term, we will coexist with COVID-19, and other pandemics are predictable in the future, it is advisable to improve the necessary prevention measures in minor towns and villages, and to ensure a widespread presence of health services, which have been significantly reduced in recent years in many countries. In these minor centers it has generally been possible to reduce contagion and take more incisive measures to manage the pandemic, thanks also to easier isolation facilitated by the networks of mutual assistance and support among the local communities. The question is whether these mechanisms of solidarity and social cohesion can be reproduced at metropolitan scale, and what is needed other than their physical support, in terms of intangible and traditional local values.

Climate Change

The Role of Urban Agglomerations

It is recognized that metropolitan areas are among the main causes of climatic change, and are responsible for extended land use, reduction of natural resources, and the concentration of polluting factors, all elements directly responsible for the increase in temperature. As concluded by David Dodman (2009) a decade ago, urbanized areas, while occupying only 2–3 percent of the Earth's surface, are responsible for 20 percent of global atmospheric pollution, from the emissions caused by productive activities, boilers, vehicular traffic, and other sources. The UNEP (2019) also notes that cities are a key contributor to climate change, as urban activities are major sources of

greenhouse gas emissions. Estimates suggest that cities are responsible for 75 percent of global CO₂ emissions, with transport and buildings among the largest contributors. In addition, cities are heat islands, now even more so due to the presence of entirely glass buildings and widespread air-conditioning systems; in fact, banning these is being increasingly discussed (Pacheco 2019). In order to achieve the seventeen sustainable development goals of Agenda 2030 (UN-HABITAT 2016) and mitigate rising climate change impacts, intervention is now indispensable. During the pandemic, atmospheric pollution fell everywhere due to reduced production activities and vehicular traffic, but with recovery, current energy shortages, and the use of fossil sources, these values have increased to levels higher than those recorded before the pandemic. Nor has urban concentration significantly reduced the flows of mobility and commuting, which have been increased by the greater use of private vehicles in the pandemic.

The Use of Resources

The world population, according to the majority of forecasts, is destined to largely stabilize after 2050. The UN states: “The latest projections by the United Nations suggest that the global population could grow to around 8.5 billion in 2030, 9.7 billion in 2050 and 10.4 billion in 2100” (UNDESA 2022: 3). It is perhaps possible, then, to better manage natural resources and mitigate the migratory flows toward metropolises. The forecasts concerning the agricultural use of soils for food production predict a reduction with greater profitability, as stated by the Food and Agriculture Organization: “Human use of land and water for agriculture has not yet peaked, but all evidence points to slowing growth in agricultural productivity” (FAO 2021). This adds another factor that allows for planning not only the use of these resources, but also overall land use. This process, together with a stabilized world population, will facilitate planning territorial and urban development with less pressure and rebalancing among various land uses.

Natural Destructive Events

In addition, large urban areas are increasingly affected by catastrophic events, such as floods, landslides, tornadoes, and fires. These events are largely anthropic, caused by neglect and progressive abandonment of the agricultural areas surrounding urban agglomerations. Many anthropized areas on which urban development has been increasing are affected by the rapid climatic change that is modifying environmental parameters: “Climate models predict increasing frequency, intensity and amount of heavy precipitation as the global climate changes. More intense rainfall is increasing the risk of landslides, extreme erosion and flash floods” (OECD 2021). Many cities are incompatible, due to the progressive extension of their urbanized areas, with the natural, orographic, and climatic characteristics of their surrounding environment. Many of the world’s metropolises were developed near seas, estuaries, or rivers, and are

thus exposed to the risks of expected sea level rises. Or they are sinking on marshlands, unable to support the exponential growth of buildings and urban infrastructure. We also see an increased number of floods, due to frequent catastrophic rainfalls, of rivers and waterways whose courses flow within urban areas (FAO 2021).

Sustainable Development

Agenda 2030—Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The UN-HABITAT III conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito in 2016 established seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) for Agenda 2030. Recognized herein is the central role of cities in achieving sustainable and equitable development. This confirmed the need to adopt overall indicators of well-being (not just economic), and above all to have well-being at the center of attention. Among the seventeen SDGs, there are those relating in particular to the infrastructure of cities and human settlements, such as Goal 11, which refers to “positive, social support and environmental ties between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening the planning of national and regional development,” or Goal 9, which states: “Sustainable transport allows a better integration of the economy in compliance with the environment. [It is necessary to] Improve social equity, health, resilience of cities, urban-rural connections and the productivity of rural areas.” The SDGs do not provide specific indications on urbanization processes (UN-Habitat 2016).

The European Union has been moving in this direction since 2015, and all member countries have adopted the SDGs. The recent strategies and guidelines, as summarized in the Europe Sustainable Development Report, are aimed at achieving common well-being by promoting integrated and environmentally friendly development (EU 2020; SDSN 2020). This strategy is not only reflected in environmental policies, but represents the EU contribution to the achievement of the SDGs, as stated in a reflection paper of the European Commission (EC 2019a): “Achieving the Goals requires a comprehensive review, the identification of areas where changes are needed, and the development of coherent policies which produce lasting social, economic, governance and environmental co-benefits, recognizing and acting on inter-linkages between all goals and targets.”

Environment and Heritage Safeguarding

The lifestyle in towns and villages facilitates daily contacts, reduces the marginalization of some categories of inhabitants and of ethnic areas, and offers more accessible health and educational services, thus deepening social cohesion and inclusion, as understood in social quality theory (van der Maesen and Walker 2012; IASQ 2019). Also relevant are specific meeting points that favor socializing, such as the squares or piazzas

still present in most minor urban settlements (Bjelland 2010). The use of virtual networks and virtual reality, which has grown exponentially in recent years, cannot replace the direct human relationships at the basis of social cohesion, even if it allows you to connect with anyone, anywhere, in real time. Uncontrolled urbanization has produced a progressive depopulation of rural and marginal areas, a phenomenon that has increased over the past decades and that can be reduced by increasing the permanent population living in smaller settlements and providing a similar level of standards as in major metropolitan areas. The reuse of marginal territories and the application of traditional activities will have positive returns for the environment and local economic development, retaining inhabitants in towns and villages as a precious and permanent garrison for the given territory. The reuse and application of traditional architecture will also benefit the environment, providing a lower use of soil and lesser need of infrastructures and services. Such architecture has always taken into account specificities such as winds, temperature, availability of water, sun, and other elements (Motta 2020). For all the above, a new vision of urban development is necessary, focusing also on closer relationships between environment, heritage, and culture.

Urbanization Trends

Demographic Data

A fundamental element modifying every urban structure is population increase, and to elaborate any hypothesis of future development, it is essential to analyze and evaluate global demographic data and its aggregations. The growth rate per year of the world's population has slowed down from its highest peak of 2.19 percent in 1964, with this value almost halving by 2008. Since then, generally, the population growth rate has continued to reduce, and the projections for the decline of the world population after 2050 only are speculative forecasts. The growth rate in the near future will not be homogeneous, but will vary from one area of the planet to another; for example, in 2027, India will exceed China and become the most populous nation, and the population of sub-Saharan Africa will double by 2050. By the century's end, according to UN estimates, the population of sub-Saharan Africa will have tripled, reaching 3.8 billion (UNDESA 2022). The falling of the birth rate in industrialized countries observed in recent years is greater than in other contexts and will extend to other economies, with a further aging of the population and reduction of the active workforce (Baeumler et al. 2020).

Migration Flows

Although not directly caused by population and birth rate increases, the demographic distribution in the various areas of the globe is conditioned by the economic migratory

flows of the past decades, which have increased in recent years due to climate change impacts (floods, drought, sea level increase, etc.), war and conflicts, and the deportation of ethnic or religious minorities. Since the last century, with its various industrial revolutions, there has been a constant migration from rural and marginal to urban areas, and these flows have grown exponentially in recent decades. Migrations cause significant structural changes to the population, and the main international flows, contrary to what is believed, do not take place only toward industrialized countries. In fact, overall, South–South migration flows make up 38 percent of the total, while those between the South and the North’s industrialized countries represent just 34 percent (UNHCR 2022). We must also add the recent sea and land migrations to the EU and those from the Central American countries to the US, most of which are in response to the industrialized economies’ demand for workers or to flight from conflict areas (Harris and Forhad 2021). According to UNHCR estimates, within the next thirty years at least 216 million people will abandon their places of birth or residence, driven mostly by the impacts of climate change. In sub-Saharan Africa about 86 million people are migrating, representing 4.2 percent of the total population; forty-nine million are expected in East Asia and the Pacific, forty million in South Asia, and lower numbers in North Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and some areas of Eastern Europe (UNHCR 2022). To these flows must be added the millions of internal migrants in China responding to the work needs and opportunities in eastern urban destinations (Chan 2021). Already in 2011, the migrating population in China reached 260 million. In the next decades, nearly 310 million more people are expected to migrate from rural to urban areas. But according to UNDP China (2013: 78), the government has since then not focused on human urban circumstances, but mainly “on economic growth, with little attention to resource conservation, environmental protection and social development, and there are no incentives for sustainable planning and development.” This question is also discussed in Working Paper 14 of the International Association on Social Quality (IASQ 2015).

Metropolitan Impacts

The recent migrations are mainly toward metropolises from rural and marginal areas, and have grown exponentially in recent decades, such that the urbanized population has increased and is forecast by the UN to reach over 70 percent of the total by 2050 (UN-HABITAT 2021). These urban agglomerations have become the hubs of economic development and innovation, contributing to entire regional and national economies. Already, 757 million people live in the one hundred largest agglomerations and make up 11 percent of the world population. Most of these metropolises are in the emerging countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and those with more than ten million people will increase from 33 percent in 2018 to 43 percent in 2030 (UN-HABITAT 2021a). These urban agglomerations are home to the largest informal settlements, in which a significant share of the urban population lives in

completely inadequate conditions. The growth of informal settlements, slums, and poor neighborhoods is a global phenomenon that accompanies the growth of the urban population everywhere, and it is estimated that the proportion of the urban population living in slums worldwide is 24 percent, translating to over one billion slum dwellers, as reported by the UN (UNSD 2015). In Africa there are already about 297 million urbanized people, representing 38 percent of the total population; it is estimated that by 2030 this will reach more than 50 percent and, according to data (Baeumler et al. 2020), this continent is projected to have the fastest growth rate in the world. By 2050, Africa's cities will be home to an additional 950 million people. In Asia similar phenomena can be seen: in India, 13.8 million urban families live in slums, which means about one hundred million people, about 9 percent of the total population, according to local authorities (DPIIT n.d.). A similar situation occurs in Latin America, where the urbanized population should increase by up to 83 percent by 2030; currently, in a trend exacerbated by COVID-19, 113 million people, almost 25 percent of Latin Americans, live in slums or precarious settlements (De Marcos 2021).

The 2019 UN Global Sustainable Development Report with reference to Agenda 2030 pays attention to the prospects of urban development, stating regarding "Future city growth" that

By 2030, the world is projected to have 43 megacities. Nine of the 10 new megacities that will be added between now and then will be in the developing countries ... However, the majority of urban dwellers of the future will not live in mega-cities but rather in secondary cities and other areas ... nearly half of the world's urban dwellers still reside in secondary cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants. (UNDESA 2019)

Therefore, it is possible to enhance the role of smaller cities as drivers of a territorial rebalancing, as is analyzed and confirmed by several initiatives oriented in this direction, like those ongoing in Latin American countries (CAF 2019).

Connectivity-Economy-Agriculture

Physical and Virtual Connectivity

In the most recent documents and studies relating to connectivity, no explicit reference is made to urban settlements, localized along the various tracks, which are instead complementary elements to the infrastructure networks of terrestrial connectivity. Connectivity is always mentioned to mean transport networks, energy, and data transmission, leaving aside any reference to urban settlements and still lacking legal and administrative tools specifically oriented to the integration between infrastructures and urban settlements. In various EU documents, the interconnections between large-scale infrastructures and the urban level are frequently mentioned; however, an equal

and complementary importance between mobility networks and urban settlements is not recognized. The strategic infrastructures are fundamental elements of growth and represent the opportunity to develop a new integral vision in their identification, design, and implementation. Several transport and economic corridors, some planned and others in advanced development, are being implemented in Eurasia, Africa, Latin America, and emerging countries, oriented mainly to the transport of goods and data transmission. These infrastructure corridors must instead be accompanied by the re-balancing between urban and rural areas, and the integrating of urban settlements and services, production activities, agriculture, and tourism; this should become the backbone of territorial development as a tool to mitigate negative environmental and social impacts (Motta 2020). As an example, this approach was recently applied by the Indian governments for the “Delhi–Mumbai Corridor,” which foresees the creation of eight new smart cities over 1,500 km, with a proactive strategy for economic growth aimed at improving a poorly developed rural region. Virtual connections, which render much physical movement no longer necessary, are modifying the entire schemes of daily life, and these changes are destined to remain. Health and economic motivations, together with the demand for greater housing accommodation and more green spaces, meeting places, accessible services, and so on, are pushing, all over the world, increasing numbers of “urbanites” to leave big cities and look for new settlement alternatives.

Circular and Informal Economies

The transition to a circular economy initiated in many countries and foreseen in current EU strategies, together with the development of decarbonization and a green economy as climate change mitigation tools, represent further factors for a renewed development model. The circular economy will bring many activities back to the local or regional level, for example all the reuse and repair activities that will have to be developed locally and organized in small enterprises distributed throughout territories (EU 2020). This represents another important element for a paradigm shift in the urban settlement model, with the upgrading of villages and minor centers and the spread of services for monitoring and maintenance of countless products, with impacts on logistical networks and distribution (McKinsey n.d.). Reuse and recycling will also make a valid contribution to environmental protection, reducing waste and abandoned matter, which is harmful for general health and an obstacle to the potential attractiveness of tourism; the latter is considered among the main development drivers related to the green economy by many international institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the relevant role that the informal economy sector represents in urban agglomerations in emerging countries, as a “natural” and “indispensable” share of urban economy, culture, and governance (OECD 2020). COVID-19 pushed informal actors to renew their methods of trading and modify their livelihood activities, creating cross-sector societal networks that enhanced social

cohesion. The emerging informal market also catalyzed spin-off activities that linked the values of this sector with the public, distributing agencies, production companies, and government authorities. A recent survey in Ghana's main cities, which can be considered as representing quite a common situation, has provided evidence and arguments highlighting the informal sector as an integral part of urban welfare, cultural, economic, and political spheres that cannot be overlooked. It has also highlighted the flexibility of the sector in its unique abilities to quickly adapt to rapidly changing circumstances (Owusu-Sekyere et al. 2022). The Western consumerist economic model, exported or imposed globally, is not the only one that can respond to new needs and demands, and the informal sector must be included in local strategies and programs.

Agricultural Innovation

Thanks to the new technologies applied in different sectors of production, control, and marketing, agriculture and related activities are also gradually changing, making traditional activities less physically tiring. The use of improved seeds, regulated irrigation, drones for monitoring crops, new, automated machinery and instruments, and subsidized collection and packaging processes are some of the elements in this direction, to which should be added new distribution and logistics methods. In recent years we have witnessed a progressive return of young people to the countryside, a trend that began after the economic crisis of 2008, and is now increased by the pandemic emergency. This phenomenon of returning to and permanently residing in the original family home is contributing to the reactivation of services and commercial activities in towns and villages. It is important to develop adequate measures to support rural populations and provide them with health and social services, as a recent report states: "The vast majority of the rural poor are not covered by health insurance or income protections, such as paid sick leave or unemployment benefits, and they will likely face food and nutrition insecurity. [In] social protection and COVID-19 response in rural areas only 45 percent of the global population was effectively covered by at least one social benefit" (FAO 2020). The pandemic has also highlighted a renewed attention to purchasing at 0 km to meet quotas of local food products. Therefore, it is credible to hypothesize a process of recovery of the entire agricultural sector, especially in those areas with strong traditions and particular forms of production, facilitated by the arrival of new operators and renewed methods of agricultural work. Many of the strenuous daily activities once required may now be carried out at a distance and no longer require the stressful work rhythms of the past.

Palliative Urban Models

In order to overcome some of the negative aspects of urban agglomerations, in recent years a great emphasis has been placed on so-called “smart cities,” and more recently on “compact cities” or “fifteen-minute cities.” All of these are still based on the assumption that concentration is the basis for improved job opportunities, know-how, commercial exchanges, technological progress, and so on. Many proposals are put forward in the name of sustainability with elements such as reduced mobility, lower land occupation, more compact energy networks, and so on seen as highly positive, leaving out the negative impacts already present such as pollution, use of water and nonrenewable energy resources, and daily commuting flows. But the most relevant negative aspect is the reduction of values like social cohesion, a sense of belonging to a community, and community well-being, values that decrease in proportion to the increasing size of an urban agglomeration.

Smart Cities

Today, metropolises and megacities are considered the hubs for a renewed form of globalization, the core of international mobility (whether of goods, people, finance, or knowledge), and the showcase of postindustrial globalization. But they are also sources of pollution and CO₂ emissions, the sites of a societal fabric torn apart by socioeconomic inequalities and ghettos, stressful places for the more affluent and hyperactive, and places of violence for the less privileged. The global phenomenon of smart cities is a huge and buoyant market. The current paradigm that views “smart cities” as the solution for the next stage of future development has to be reviewed to avoid inequalities between concentrated urban areas and surrounding neglected territories. Smart cities are promoted as a stepping stone toward economic growth, but this declared objective, which is based merely on existing economic strategies instead of creating new ones, “should be [oriented to] regenerating degraded urban areas, rather than developing new cities” (Angelidou 2014: 54). This is especially relevant to those “smart cities” created from scratch, promoted in several industrialized and emerging countries as the fastest tool to create, via a top-down strategy, ultra-modern economic hubs, attracting both working people and investments and companies.

Compact and Walking Cities

More recently, the concept of “compact cities” has been developed, in which “urban densification” is the solution to the problems of large and widely spread metropolises. This scheme involves building residential typologies, offices, and services to be much more compact and greater in height. It is oriented mainly to obtaining an overall economic advantage, and only in part assumes the concepts of Le Corbusier regarding

“vertical cities” dating back many decades. The societal and interpersonal aspects of urban crowding must also be taken into consideration: the dehumanization of neighborhoods, gentrification, the vulnerability of networks, and so on (OECD 2012). Another concept developed is that of the “fifteen-minute city,” for instance in the proposal for Paris of recreating integrated and autonomously sustainable urban areas, such as municipalities, *arrondissements*, *contrade*, and *barríos*, where in theory everything can be reached via walking, including workplaces, services, and shops, and with a different criterion for the organization of services, based no longer on concentration and quantity of users but on the time it takes to reach them (Moreno 2019). The real applicability of this concept is doubtful, because even if it appears feasible in terms of already existing services and destinations, it is not the same in the many peripheral districts that still lack nearby services, these instead being accessible only if there are efficient urban transport networks. However, the “fifteen-minute city,” if successfully applied, could contribute to the mitigation of climate change, reducing commuting and superfluous mobility flows with benefits to the environment.

Gentrification

Among the negative impacts of uncontrolled urbanization, especially in the great metropolises and historic cities, is the progressive process of gentrification whereby entire neighborhoods, once popular, become inhabited by an upper-middle class, with a consequent modification of their original features. This is a complex physical, socio-political, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and socioecological phenomenon (on these distinctions in SQT and the SQA, see Heyets et al. 2022), by which a city district, generally a central area, once settled by the working and low-income classes, turns into a residential area for the richest category. Zones that previously housed poorer inhabitants and urban immigrants are becoming occupied by new residents or tourists, and the previous residents are driven to the city’s peripheral districts, which are often degraded. The growing demand by higher-income citizens for residences in specific attraction areas, used as secondary houses and for tourist accommodation, is modifying the areas’ original characteristics, with profound modifications to the entirety of local heritage, not only tangible but also intangible. The replacement of the original composition of inhabitants profoundly changes the appearance and lifestyle of the gentrified areas. It also involves a substantial change in the traditional commercial and entrepreneurial activities, which are replaced by tertiary facilities, mostly oriented to tourist activities. A significant aspect of gentrification is the changing of existing residential properties and rents, motivated by supposed faster earnings from tourist facilities (Atkinson 2002). This replacement process causes the rapid expulsion of the most vulnerable classes toward marginal peri-urban areas or precarious settlements, increasing the gap between the various areas of the urban residential pattern and the socioeconomic differences among residents, and thus decreasing the levels of social cohesion and collective well-being.

Densification

Densification is theorized through a “mixed use” of buildings, residential complexes, and districts for different purposes, such as: housing, offices, laboratories, shops, leisure, education, and health. To concentrate higher populations in the same space by replacing individual housing typologies with larger residential complexes has been considered an absolute need for decades. This concept in recent years has been promoted as offering ecological advantages such as: less atmospheric pollution due to reduced mobility needs, lower commuting flows, reduction of infrastructure networks, reduced land use by buildings, and more green areas. To these are added others factors that are more difficult to assess, such as higher societal security, lower crime rates, controllable community formation, and greater vitality. But the examples tested successfully over the long term are few; in fact, the first experimental “new towns” developed in England and Scandinavia in the previous century have demonstrated over time evident limitations in becoming real autonomous and attractive locations, due to a sectoral approach and a failure to take into account intangible societal aspects. In theory, this urban development model presented positive aspects at the time, such as the reuse of abandoned industrial “brownfields,” the rationalization of mobility, and greater accessibility of green areas and services (Teller 2021). The vaunted reductions of land, service, and network costs, however, are not enough to balance the high use of energy and natural resources and the heat, pollution, and waste problems thanks to which all urban areas, compact or not, are responsible globally for climate change.

Mega-Urban Initiatives

Unfortunately, to this day projects of reckless and invasive urban agglomerations that are harmful to human well-being have been proposed and developed. An example is the NEOM Initiative, presented in August 2022, which is part of the Saudi Vision 2030 program and already has financial resources secured (Government of Saudi Arabia 2022). Among the urban proposals are the Line, a linear city 170 km long and 200 m wide, for over nine million inhabitants (Government of Saudi Arabia n.d. a); Trojena, a futuristic and highly exclusive winter resort in the mountains of Saudi Arabia (when globally, natural glaciers are disappearing) (Government of Saudi Arabia n.d. b); and Oxagon, the largest floating urban structure in the world, which is to have a logistics hub and port of 48 km² with ninety thousand inhabitants (Government of Saudi Arabia n.d. c) (and meanwhile, entire coastal cities are sinking!). These are just some examples of many similar mega-urban projects, which are developed with criteria and concepts that share little with real sustainability. Public authorities, private interests, and companies are carrying out various urban mega-projects, some already in the development phase. Among them, just to name a few, are BiodiverCity in Malaysia; Chengdu Future City in China; Net City in China; Akon City in Senegal; Telosa in the USA; Woven City in Japan; and Floating City in the Maldives. But such

projects are not developed only by private interests and investors; various others are being promoted or have already been implemented by public authorities themselves, which are supposed to follow strategies and models that are environmentally attentive. These include:

- New Administrative Capital, Egypt—part of a larger initiative for Egypt’s 2030 Vision (El Sakty 2021).
- Amaravati, India—the new administrative capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh in southeastern India (APCRDA 2019).
- Nusantara, Indonesia—a new capital to be built on the island of Borneo (IKN 2022).

All of these are interventions that involve enormous financial resources, not only private but also directly from the public authorities of these developing countries—funding that instead could be engaged in more feasible recovery projects of marginalized sectors in existing urban agglomerations.

Resettlement Hypothesis

Renewed Settlement Approach

The traditional urban development schemes since the advent of the various industrial revolutions have gradually changed, with a progressive depopulation of rural and marginal areas, a phenomenon increased over the past decades. There is no doubt that with the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire global scenario has profoundly changed in all sectors. The emergency slowed down world economic development at the levels of a few years ago, although a recovery process started in the past year. To this should be added the impacts of the ongoing war in Ukraine, which is already having repercussions on many sectors and countries, not only in Europe, as the food shortage in Africa and the Middle East shows. The entire geopolitical framework is in evolution, questioning the global balance of the past decades, which has been supported by rules that are now superseded, and similarly the Western development model, exported and imposed around the world and based mainly on profit and consumerism. The international institutions established at the end of the Second World War, and their principles and management mechanisms, have been revealed as insufficient to respond adequately to pandemic and climatic emergencies. It is necessary to review the current model of the human settlement, and to think no longer of immediate solutions such as “smart cities,” but move to a “smart territories” development scheme, within which towns and rural settlements form an interconnected network with similar standards as large metropolitan areas (Motta 2020). The aim is to mitigate the migration flows toward huge urban agglomerations and consequently stabilize the numbers of their

inhabitants, favoring better long-term planning. Balanced urban–rural development will produce reciprocal advantages with positive impacts on climate change, through the reuse of marginal territories, renewed agricultural areas, and permanent monitoring by a dispersed population.

Smart Territories

The concept of “smart territories,” similar to that of “smart cities,” can be applied on a territorial scale, obviously adapted to each different context, by equipping territories with implementation and management methods that will have to overcome the scale of the single municipality. Such programs must be supported by national and regional incentives for strengthening the ability of the territories to work together, through agreements between urban and rural areas. The costs of adequately equipping the territories can be optimized thanks to larger-scale economies, and in the general balance, in addition to direct benefits, indirect ones on environment, heritage, public health, social cohesion, and sustainable development must be taken into account. The transition to a green economy, decarbonization, and a circular economy are all tools for mitigating climate change and represent further factors that will help enable a renewed model. However, adequate laws and regulations are still missing at national and local levels, and this represents a serious obstacle to territorial development; see the recent study by Tim Cadman and Robert Hales (2022) in the context of COP26. Some global companies were born in minor centers, such as Zara (Inditex n.d.), or even in marginal mountain territories, like Luxottica (n.d.). There are also examples of advanced research developed in minor laboratories, such as the BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19 (BioNTech 2022). This confirms that it is no longer essential to have large productive conglomerates concentrated in large urban areas, but possible to create and develop small and medium-sized companies in diffuse territorial areas. In this way, it is possible to reduce the current imbalances between urban and rural areas and advance toward a real ecological transition.

Re-Ruralization

An important tool for rebalancing rural–urban inequalities is the repopulating of local communities in a sustainable manner. There are many examples that have innovatively gone beyond the search for dynamism in tourism and agriculture, under different names such as “neo-ruralization,” “smart villages,” or “re-ruralization.” Based on supply and demand market drivers, these approaches attract new inhabitants, promote revitalization, and, to make it possible in the short term, offer incentives that make relocation possible, either by demonstrating local job opportunities to meet unsatisfied demand, or broader opportunities opened by new technologies, something possible in urban agglomerations or smaller communities. In fact, in this way local economies, and not just rural ones, are sustained by an increase of permanent residents and the

related need for services and commerce; on the other hand, these new settlers can find job opportunities and develop businesses for the community beyond traditional agricultural activities. Thus, re-ruralization aims to revitalize local communities that have lost population and grow them again (ES-VICIS n.d.), meeting the demand of urban inhabitants who want to settle in smaller communities due to the specific opportunities of each place, creating a reciprocal positive effect. The success of these initiatives is the result of a multisectoral vision and an integrated approach to the opportunities and needs of each site, taking into account not only the socioeconomic but also socioenvironmental and sociocultural values, implementing return migration flows from congested metropolises, and responding to an increased interest and demand from potential new inhabitants. The main objectives are:

- To generate awareness and work out sustainable solutions for population balance (number and distribution) and to foster cooperation across sectors;
- To generate tools to enhance the business opportunities in towns and rural villages, facilitating the establishment of new families and entrepreneurial activities;
- To train local communities that face difficulty in their economic and social growth, building their capacity to self-manage their sustainable development.

Projects in this direction, such as the “Welcome to My Village” program (ES-VICIS 2021), which evaluate the specific opportunities of each place in terms of jobs, activities, and services, and support resettlement, are successfully being developed in various countries with the support of public authorities, local administration, NGOs, and citizens, and can be applied in similar contexts elsewhere in their main elements.

Comprehensive Approach

Paradigm Review

It is essential to remove most of the paradigms of urban development that have been dominant in recent decades, to substantially review current urban development principles, and to reduce the gap between urban and rural areas. Despite the negative impacts highlighted concerning the concentration of inhabitants in large urban agglomerations following the COVID-19 pandemic, almost nothing has been done or proposed as an alternative. It is repeated, as a mantra, that future human development will take place in cities, enumerating only the advantages, and neglecting the impacts and imbalances generated within and around large urban areas from the societal and environmental points of view. There is now the opportunity for a profound review of overall human settlement schemes in favor of a more balanced territorial distribution, through the reuse of vast agricultural and marginal areas and the revitalization of minor centers and rural villages, and with a new approach made possible by tech-

nological advances. It is possible to reverse depopulation of such areas with a growing number of inhabitants who are ready to resettle in towns and minor centers. Undoubtedly, this paradigm change will require huge investments, not all of which are exactly quantifiable “a priori,” but whose advantages, including even immaterial and long-term ones, are certainly greater for individuals’ and local communities’ well-being.

Social Quality, Urban Issues, and the Heuristic Meaning of the SQ Configuration of Three Frameworks

Our central thesis is that the complex issues of urbanization and urban–rural relationships are currently approached with diverging scientific points of departure and related methodologies. Currently missing is a shared consensus about adequate ontological principles underlying starting assumptions and the epistemological principles derived from them concerning the application of related methodologies. This century, this theme has been highlighted in Working Paper 12 of the IASQ (2013), which discusses research carried out in sixty cities in Europe underlining a lack of consensus on the meaning of sustainable urban development and the methodological framework that should be applied to reach it (Van Dijken et al. 2008). Often, the actors in urban development search for a compromise between (unsubstantiated) “sustainable infrastructures” and (unsubstantiated) “sustainable societies.” But tensions arise because infrastructural projects are designed logically (and thus solely) to meet technical environmental protection and resource efficiency criteria, without sufficiently taking into account the societal criteria related to a theoretically grounded concept of sustainability. In other words: $0 \times 0 = 0$. This was a main point of Working Paper 11 (IASQ 2012). According to a UN expert group, in a largely urbanized world, the global economy’s production and consumption systems will depend on the urban infrastructures of the big cities to distribute the main resource flows (energy, water, sanitation, solid waste, mobility, and food). How urban infrastructures are configured in fact determines how these resources are deployed, used, and reused. However, the infrastructures of many large urban areas, mainly in developing countries, are totally inadequate, or, as is the case in industrialized countries, are inappropriately configured from a sustainable resource use perspective (UN 2011).

Obtaining public support and legitimacy for public policy poses a considerable challenge to the effective implementation of initiatives developed in the name of sustainability. It suggests the need for careful attention to the issue of user needs and behavior in the design of sustainable projects, and the consideration of incentives and policies to elicit a positive public response and commitment to policy targets, as highlighted in Working Paper 6 (IASQ 2010). A major problem is the reduction of the idea of sustainability to environmental issues only (the *eco-centric* approach), separated from a wider vision of sustainability as caused by complexities of human actions (the *anthropocentric* approach). An example of this was presented in a 2012 PWC study on how to pave the way for sustainable cities with livable opportunities. The study shows

that some leading cities (in terms of opportunity) represent “economic ecosystem[s] in [their] own right, built around mutually supportive economic and social strengths as well as an intertwined fabric of jobs” (PWC 2012: 1). This study is of interest because it may clarify the advantages of SQT and the SQA. In fact, in this PWC study, no attention is dedicated to the complex interrelationships of the main dimensions of societal life. Furthermore, arguments for “sustainable opportunities” are absent because no theoretically sound concept of sustainability is presented. What the concept of livability, as a basis for sustainable, livable circumstances, means is conspicuous by its absence. Therefore, a substantiated comparison of these leading cities is lacking, and such studies confuse the discourse on sustainable urban development. For this comparison, the study deploys empirical and rather eclectic monitoring devices instead of theoretically grounded indicators, as is elaborated in Working Paper 12 (IASQ 2013).

From the IASQ working papers referenced above it may become clear that attention to urban issues from the perspective of SQT and the SQA started tentatively at the beginning of the 2010s, with social quality-oriented projects in the neighborhood of Laak in The Hague (EFSQ 2015). This delivered opportunities to collaborate in the EU–China Environmental Governance program, oriented to public participation in environmental governance of the city of Jiaxing, and to paving the way for its applicability to all big cities of Zhejiang Province. This collaboration aimed at a comparison of the nature of public participation in Jiaxing and The Hague. The outcomes were published in Working Paper 14 (IASQ 2015). The underlying argument of the EU–China Governance program was that protection of the socioenvironmental and ecological dimension of cities and metropolises is key to their sustainable urban development. This supposition did not seem to have permeated five years later into COP26 (2021) or COP27 (2022). As well as this program, the work in the neighborhood of Laak paved the way for exploring the reciprocity of this dimension with the sociopolitical and legal, the socioeconomic and financial, and the sociocultural and welfare dimensions. This exploration was taken on board by the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2015, promoting research by EU scholars exploring the daily urban circumstances of the prewar scenario in Ukraine on the basis of SQT and the SQA (Heyets et al. 2022). Central was the effort of designing a “procedural framework” for analyzing the reciprocity of processes in and between the four dimensions. The first outcomes of this research were published in Working Paper 17 (IASQ 2019). As was empirically demonstrated in this research, resulting in the procedural framework, the reciprocal interferences within and between these four dimensions are also decisive for the nature of urban circumstances in Ukraine (Novakova 2017). This “procedural framework” was connected with the “analytical framework,” which is oriented to changes of the conditional and constitutional factors of daily circumstances. This is called the “social quality architecture,” and is based in turn on the “conceptual framework” of social quality, itself an outcome of theorizing “the social” and the way in which both sets of factors are derived from this conceptualization (van der Maesen and Walker 2012). This has recently resulted in the so-called “configuration of frameworks,” explained

in the editorial of the double themed issue of the *IJSQ* on the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the articles in this issue about Brazil, South Africa, India, Pakistan, and other countries, the interrelatedness of all three frameworks is tentatively deployed. This also resulted in our understanding the consequences of contemporary forms of “necropolitics” during this pandemic era (Nijhuis and van der Maesen. 2021: xviii).

In contrast to contemporary approaches to change or renewal of the built environment, on the basis of the configuration of the three frameworks, physical aspects are no longer disconnected from most nonphysical aspects. It should be added that it is precisely these nonphysical aspects, as expressions of the four dimensions, that determine the nature of the change and renewal of the built environment. In the neoliberal era a specific interpretation of socioeconomic and financial principles has been and remains dominant, and causes a structural negation—thanks to the dominant sociopolitical ideology of neoliberalism—of processes and meanings of the socio-cultural and welfare and the socioenvironmental and ecological dimensions (Heyets et al. 2022). This neoliberal negation influences so-called modern approaches to physical aspects of the built environment, resulting in megalomaniac new urban projects like the abovementioned ones in Saudi Arabia, India, and South America, which should be seen as disastrous in terms of all contemporary climate challenges. At this stage, no other theory or approach—for instance, human development, quality of life, social capital, social harmony, happiness of life, social security, or social development—is oriented to the connection and underlying principles articulated in the configuration of the three frameworks of social quality. They all remain intrinsically unclear about these principles, which refer to ontological and epistemological ground-patterns of thought (Westbroek et al. 2020). Thanks to the outcomes of this double themed issue, the application of this configuration can be improved, deepened, and sharpened in explorations of contemporary urban and rural processes, also from the perspective of human challenges regarding climate change, reduction of biodiversity, pollution, and existing and especially new forms of pandemics.

Final Remarks

The sudden spread, due to the ongoing pandemic emergency, of new customs such as home-working, e-learning, telemedicine, and online shopping has accelerated exponentially processes that were expected to unfold in a longer term, and these changes profoundly affect the entire pattern of daily life for each of us, and are bound to become definitive. COVID-19 has shown how vulnerable metropolitan agglomerations are to contagion. Health considerations, and the need for larger housing, more green spaces, accessible meeting places, and so on, are pushing increasing numbers of “city dwellers” to move away from large urban centers all over the world. The possibility of residing anywhere thanks to technological advances represents a unique

opportunity for a revival of towns and villages as renewed locations of human aggregation, offering better conditional and constitutional possibilities for adequate and acceptable daily life circumstances. Given everything summarized above, there are many elements that prompt us to face the near future with a different approach, revising many of the urban paradigms and schemes that have so far been considered natural in most of the world, and they are even more disruptive if evaluated overall. New orientations for acceptable development in many sectors have been discussed, ones that are more responsive to updated scenarios, more attentive to climate change, renewable energies, demographic evolution, and green and circular economies, in a perspective that places collective well-being center-stage rather than being based only in productive and economic terms. Hence also the need and support for a renewed approach to global socioeconomic development of production, logistical, and service activities, and of human settlements, to reduce the current imbalances between urban and rural areas and proceed toward a real ecological transition. As previously noted, these renewal processes have begun in a slow but sustained manner, and the recent impacts of climate change, the pandemic, and now war are accelerating their practical application. They have been implemented by several agencies and organizations, and, as an example, the European Union has revised its general programming and implementation strategies for the coming years with various innovative tools. Undoubtedly, the driving element of this change is represented by new technologies, whose spread in many sectors has accelerated due to the pandemic, modifying substantial aspects of daily life through communication technologies such as e-learning, home-working, remote medicine, shopping and services online, and many others. By now, big companies, goods producers, service providers, and public administrations have started a profound renewal of their workings, a change that is now destined to stay. And equally significant changes are taking place in sectors linked to various territories and their natural resources, such as agriculture, forestry, fishing, and agro-food, where technological innovation with specific applications enables a reduction of physically strenuous work. Another impact of the pandemic has been on tourism, whose mass and low-cost variants have been significantly reduced, enhancing alternative forms of tourism that are more environmentally compatible and oriented to benefiting local communities. The dominant socioeconomic orientation, based on obsolete assumptions, is no longer capable of responding to new societal needs and future challenges expressed by diverse local contexts and cultures. These global challenges, which are not highlighted or discussed enough, are of an epochal nature. Among the main paradigms to review is certainly that of the future development of the metropolises in which most of the world's population already lives, and which have proved more vulnerable to pandemics and other emergencies due to the hyper-concentration of inhabitants, the reduction of social cohesion, and other negative impacts—despite the repeated, mantra-like, optimistic statements in favor of urbanization. To conclude, to deal with current and future emergencies, a different vision must be adopted, aimed at collective well-being and sustainable global development, to gradually reduce the existing

territorial inequalities and imbalances between urban and rural areas. The assumptions and the paradigm itself of the Charter of Athens (1933) are now obsolete, and we now have the opportunity to start a profound review, applying the principles of SQT and the SQA, of current urbanization processes, which are determined by purely economic interests and conditioned by speculative assumptions, without any respect for the environment and society. Our main objectives are to achieve the well-being and social cohesion of citizens, reduce the territorial gap between urban and rural areas, and at the same time better safeguard both tangible and intangible heritage and the natural environment.

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