BEYOND SANDY: HOW CLIMATE CHANGE HAS AFFECTED CITIES WORLDWIDE - II

Water shortages take their toll in other ways. A 2011 study by the Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security finds that climate change is a threat to food production in all tropical areas due to “shorter, hotter or drier growing seasons”. But the threat is not limited to countries near the equator, this year’s drought has also affected food supplies in the US, where rising food prices made finding food more difficult for the nation’s poor.

While the primary solutions to this most likely involve a reform of agricultural systems to implement anti-drought measures such as planting more resilient crops, there is plenty that can be done at the urban level as well. Urban farming, a trend that has been on the rise over the past decade, has many practical benefits for more efficient food production. It provides a practical use for compostable materials that would otherwise be shipped to landfills, and avoids transportation issues by producing food near where it will be consumed.

Examples of successful urban farms exist in Mumbai, as well as Beijing and Shenzhen, China, in addition to urban farming efforts in the US and Europe.

But this is only a small portion of the effects climate change has had on cities.

A global phenomenon, climate change affects each area differently, nevertheless there are few locations on the planet that have not been affected by it in some way. Cities are generally the areas where global warming causes the most acute damage, so naturally they have emerged as centres, politically as well as culturally, for helping to solve the problem. A large number of city governments worldwide have established programmes justified on the basis of global warming, or in some cases, created official offices or departments to prepare themselves for global warming.

The actions range from measures taken to fend off some of the direct results of global warming, as we have seen in the Maldives, or to prevent the emission of CO2 for the benefit of the world. In this second category, a number of new ideas have been tested out, from bicycle sharing to building code reform, solar initiatives, and carbon taxes, and even a few more wacky ideas like giant carbon-sucking fliters and plans to paint freeways white. While these programmes may have their hearts in the right place, they all run the risk of "greenwashing", giving citizens a warm fuzzy feeling of do-goodery while in actuality doing little to offset emissions or in some cases even being counterproductive.

Despite the fact that some civic projects have in fact been examples of greenwashing, there have also been programmes that truly are meaningful steps in reforming cities to emit less greenhouse gasses.

Witness the vast expansion of bicycle use in Europe, as well as China and even long time holdouts such as the United States. Global warming has also given impetus to the development of other less carbon intensive transportation forms, such as Bus Rapid Transit, which has seen developments in Colombia, Mexico, China, and Brazil, where it was created. Additionally, high speed rail has been proposed as a way to cut down on emissions from commercial air traffic.

Its development involves significant investment; nonetheless China has embarked on a massive nationwide rail project, and other such projects have been proposed in the western United States and Brazil. At the city level, high speed rail has been used a the basis for building centralised transit hubs that promote carbon-friendly transit use.

In addition, global climate change has helped to spur social movements that have changed the general outlook on urban structure. When Bogotá, Colombia, first began its “Ciclovia” programme, many found the concept of using streets as public space to be strange. But the programme caught on, partly due to peoples desires to fight global warming, and partly because of the innovative nature of the idea. The programme has since prompted similar programmes in many other cities around the world.

New York began its own Ciclovia spinnoff in 2008: “Summer Streets”, an initiative created to serve the dual purpose of promoting eco-friendly transportation options and creating an innovative and (dare we say) fun use of urban space that used to be the exclusive domain of vehicles. The city has been inspired by other cities around the world in other areas too, such as water use and urban farming. In a way, post-Sandy New York represents the essence of the challenges cities face from global warming, while at the same time representing the way forward for urban design and management in the face of climate change. New York, as we have seen, has suffered greatly as a result of climate change. Yet it remains resilient, true to its “fugghedaboudit” reputation. The massive flood damage has only intensified New Yorkers’ desire to continue implementing new strategies to combat climate change, which while not complete solutions, are steps forward.

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