Will COVID-19 Spell the Death of Cities?

By Rasna Warah

"Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies. They are proximity, density, closeness. They enable us to work and play together, and their success depends on the demand for physical connection." – Edward Glaeser, *Triumph of the City* (2011)

In February this year, just before the coronavirus pandemic forced the Kenyan government to impose a partial lockdown in the country, I moved to Kenya's capital, Nairobi, a city with a population of 4.4 million, from Malindi, a small town along Kenya's coast with a population of just 120,000. I had been intending to move back home for several years but 2020 seemed an opportune time to do it. I had spent ten long years in Malindi and was ready to get back to the thick of things where the action was.

Now I know, for most people who live in Nairobi, the city is not "home" – the "true north" of most Nairobians, as Alexander Ikawah pointed out in a recent article, is their rural home, the place they identify most with. Ikawah says that Nairobi is just a place where "city villagers" work; where they have "houses", not "homes".

But I am not among these people. I was born in Nairobi, and so was my father and my grandfather. Kenyan Asians don't typically have a rural home (Asians in Kenya were not encouraged to settle in rural or agricultural land both before and after independence and so are concentrated mainly in urban areas). And even if they have an ancestral home in India or Pakistan, they don't tend to refer

to it as "home", nor does this ancestral home loom large in their imagination. In fact, many Kenyan Asians have never visited their "motherland".

I have lived in London in the UK and Boston in the USA, and have travelled to many, many, cities around the world – New York (my favourite city), Istanbul (a cultural delight where East meets West), Mogadishu (a wounded city with nice beaches), Kabul (wounded but with majestic snowy peak backdrops), Havana (a salsa-lover's dream, arguably the world's most egalitarian city), Paris (a romantic city with many bridges), Mumbai (a buzzing "maximum city" of people, people, and more people), Beijing (interesting but with high levels of air pollution), Cairo (history lives here), Florence (a beautiful outdoor museum), Johannesburg (a legacy of apartheid, not my favourite city), Dar es Salaam (a friendly coastal city with huge potential), to name a few – but for me, Nairobi is not only home, it is also the place where most of my memories reside.

I will not go into the details about my reasons for leaving Nairobi in the first place, but it had a lot to do with trying to regain some perspective on life after having led a busy treadmill-like work existence where career success depended so much on pleasing a boss and undermining colleagues to move up the career ladder. I was hoping that a break would allow me to do things I hadn't had time for before, like writing and spending more time with my husband. I dreamed of looking out of the window and seeing palm trees swaying in the wind, and breathing in the salty Indian Ocean breeze. Oh what bliss (and it was)...until I discovered that meaningful social interaction was much more important to me than the sounds and smells of nature. Voluntary self-isolation, I discovered, is neither natural nor healthy. Human beings are wired to be social animals – that is how they survived as a species.

While living in a small sleepy town where nothing much happens gave me the freedom to pursue writing (I ended up writing three books during my self-imposed "exile") and other interests, I had a gnawing sense that I was in danger of disconnecting and self-isolating myself from all that was meaningful in my life. I yearned for intellectual stimulation and missed cultural and literary events. I longed to go to the cinema and hang out with my family. My social interactions in Malindi were superficial; I was in danger of becoming like the many expatriate (mostly Italian and British) retirees in the town, whose lives revolve around bridge parties and afternoon siestas induced by copious amounts of wine.

The truth is, I was lonely. I had not found my "tribe" in Malindi.

Then COVID-19 happened. It is unfortunate that my return to Nairobi coincided with a dusk-to-dawn curfew and partial lockdown, so my intentions of absorbing myself into city life have once again have been put on hold. I am back to self-isolating again.

Cities are not the problem

The coronavirus pandemic has raised questions about whether cities will lose their allure, and whether people will look to leading simpler rural or small town lives. The fact that the virus emanated from the city of Wuhan in China and spread across the world through networks of cities and transport hubs is making people wonder whether we should be seeking more dispersed and less dense forms of settlement.

However, Tomasz Sudra, a former colleague who is now retired from the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), told me that it was unfair to blame cities for COVID-19 because the virus could have been contained early if the Chinese government had not decided to suppress "bad news".

"The medical doctor who blew the whistle on the virus and died from it was forced to confess that he was spreading false news and was arrested," he said. "The epidemic [in China] became a pandemic because the government suppressed the free flow of information."

Cities have not only been associated with the rapid spread of diseases, but environmental degradation as well. The concentration of human and industrial activity in cities and the over-reliance on motorised forms of transport have been blamed for the air pollution that characterises so many of the world's large cities. Images of smog-free cities as a result of lockdowns (especially in China, where air pollution levels are so excessive that city residents routinely wear face masks) have been circulating on social media. People are asking whether the climate crisis could be blamed on cities, and whether COVID-19 will force us to seek alternative lifestyles.

John Gray, writing in the 3 April 2020 issue of the *New Statesman*, says that the current crisis is a "turning point" in history. "The era of peak globalization is over. An economic system that relied on worldwide production and long supply chains is morphing into one that will be less interconnected. A way of life driven by unceasing mobility is shuddering to a stop. Our lives are going to be more physically constrained and more virtual than they were," he predicts.

Is the city – itself a product of globalisation and the movement of goods and people from one shore or trading route to another – losing its attraction? Will there be a return to the nostalgic longing for rural life popularised by people like Mahatma Gandhi, who said that "true India" could only be found in the country's villages? I don't think so. The world, including India, is more urban than it was in Gandhi's time. "True India" is no longer only in India's villages, but in its teeming cities and towns, which currently host 34 per cent of the country's population.

Just over a decade ago, there were more rural folk on this planet than city folk, but that changed around 2007 when the world's urban population equaled the world's rural population for the first time. Though some regions of the world, notably Europe, North America and Latin America, became predominantly urban much earlier (around the 1950s), the rapid urban growth rates in poorer parts of the world in the last fifty years have demonstrated that the pull of the city is stronger than ever. Cities must be offering something that villages don't, or can't.

I must confess that I have spent much of my professional life writing about what is wrong with cities and what can be done about it. At UN-Habitat, where I worked as an editor for more than a decade, the emphasis was on urban poverty and all its manifestations, including informal settlements (also known as slums). In 2006, UN-Habitat declared that one out of every three city dwellers lives in a slum, with sub-Saharan Africa having the largest proportion of its urban population living in slum conditions, with little or no access to water, sanitation, electricity and adequate housing. Asia hosted the largest number of slum dwellers, though some sub-regions in the continent were doing better than others. Slums, warned UN-Habitat, were threatening to become a "dominant and distinct type of settlement in cities of the developing world".

This grim assessment was followed by another one in 2008, when UN-Habitat sounded the alarm on rising inequalities in cities, and warned that economic and social inequalities in urban areas had the potential to destabilise countries and make them economically unsustainable. Highly unequal cities – where the rich lead vastly different lives from the poor – are breeding grounds for social unrest, and social unrest disrupts economic activities, went the argument. UN-Habitat stated that pro-poor and inclusive urban development could significantly decrease these inequalities and make cities more sustainable. While the UN agency acknowledged that energy consumption in cities was impacting negatively on the environment, it made a case for mitigating the impact of carbon emissions through solutions such as environmentally-friendly public transport and the use of green energy.

Cities are not the problem; how we plan them is the central issue, said the experts.

The benefits of city life

Throughout history, cities have a played a central role in creating and sustaining civilizations. Cities are not just places where economic activities are concentrated, they are also crucibles of innovation and culture. The rise and fall of cities has often been associated with the rise and fall of civilizations. Cities such as Rome and Athens had their "golden ages"; some survived a loss of status; others became relics.

In 2006, I was asked to write a short chapter on the benefits of urban living for UN-Habitat's 2006 *State of the World's Cities* report, which focused almost entirely on the gloomy topic of slums. The thinking was that there was a danger that in highlighting the problems in cities and slums, we might inadvertently throw the baby out with the bath water and that as the UN's "City Agency", it would be counterproductive to focus only on the negative aspects of urban life. In other words, by presenting cities as places where nasty things happen, we might actually be sending an anti-urban message to the general public and to policymakers.

Because cities were – and still are – viewed as the engines of economic development, and economic growth is generally credited for reducing poverty levels (though this has not been the case in some countries), I had to make an argument that made economic sense to governments and the public at large. So I argued that because so much economic activity in a country is concentrated in its cities, "cities make countries rich". I further pointed out that the concentration of populations and enterprises in urban areas greatly reduces the unit cost of piped water, sewerage systems, drains, roads, and other infrastructure. Therefore, the economies of scale that cities offer are not replicable in small, less dense human settlements. Building a hospital or a road in a town or village with a population of just 50,000 is far less efficient per capita than building a hospital or road in a large urban area that hosts a population of 5 million (regardless of the ethics of making such a choice).

The central argument was that rural people don't just up and move to a city; the main driver of rural-to-urban migration is economic opportunities and the chance to lead a better quality of life. In almost all countries, rural poverty levels are higher than urban poverty levels. (For instance, the poverty rate in rural Kenya is about 40 per cent, compared to around 28 per cent in peri-urban and urban areas.) Indeed, the data showed that despite the pathetic and hazardous living conditions in slums, people who lived in slums often viewed them as a "first step" out of rural poverty. As Edward Glaeser, a Professor of Economics at Harvard University, says in his book, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*, "Cities don't make people poor; they attract poor people. The flow of less advantaged people into cities from Rio to Rotterdam demonstrates urban strength, not weakness."

However, villages are not stagnant places either; some, like Mumbai, which was once a fishing village, grow to become megacities (defined as cities with populations of more than 10 million). Some cities, like Nairobi, were not even villages originally; Nairobi literally grew out of nothing except a railway depot built at the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century. The world's great cities did not only grow because they were centres of trade and commerce; they also grew because they were religious, political, administrative or cultural centres, and this is what drew – and continues to draw – people to them.

Many rural people move to cities because they believe that they and their families will have better access to health and education. Cities also offer women more opportunities for social and economic mobility. Unrestrained by discriminatory customs and traditions, urban women are more likely than their rural counterparts to have access to property and other assets. Child and maternal mortality

rates are also lower in cities, including in slums, compared to rural areas.

The downside is that city life exposes people to hazards such as indoor and outdoor air pollution, congestion, and crime, which significantly impacts the health and lives of urban dwellers. Cities can be incubators of disease, crime and other vices; but these disadvantages have never stopped cities from growing, even when plagues and other health hazards infest cities and kill populations. The 1665 Great Plague of London, for example, killed thousands, but did not diminish London's stature. COVID-19 has decimated populations in the city of New York – the city with the highest COVID-19-related death rate in the United States – but even images of mass graves of the disease's victims are unlikely to deter people from moving there.

Safety nets are also weaker in cities, which is one reason why so many people in the developing world (where there are few government-funded welfare systems) identify with their rural homes, where, as Ikawah points out, social capital obtained through filial ties is much stronger (though associational life in slums, through cooperatives and self-help groups, have helped reduce some of this deficit).

Cities have also been derided for promoting mindless consumerism. They have been accused of driving a type of capitalism that encourages people to go on endless shopping expeditions to buy things they might never use or need. Large shopping malls – a distinct feature of modern cities – are filled with products that keep the wheels of capitalism moving. Alain Kamal Martial Henry [predicts](#) that the coronavirus will overthrow this "Western bourgeois model" imposed by capitalism. And this may lead to the eventual demise of cities and urban living.

The problem that has no name

I asked Daniel Biau, a former colleague who served as the Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat from 1998 to 2005, whether we could from henceforth witness a decline in urban growth levels, and whether people will now seek to move out of large cities to places that are less dense and concentrated.

Biau was not convinced that the coronavirus pandemic will change the way people view cities. "As usual, a few journalists will write about risky cities but their alarming views will be completely ignored by ordinary people who know very well that cities are, above all, places of job opportunities, social interactions, education and cultural development," he said.

He predicts that in the digital age, it is likely that small and medium-sized cities will grow faster than big metropolises because teleworking will become the norm. "Already in France 40 per cent of the working population is currently teleworking," he said.

"History has shown that some cities could shrink due to economic or environmental reasons. But cities have never disappeared due to health reasons. This is why the UN should provide guidelines for the promotion of safer and healthier cities as part of the wider sustainable cities development paradigm," added Biau in an email exchange.

Cities will exist – and continue to grow – because of human beings' need for social interaction, physical contact and collaboration. As Glaeser points out in his book, "The strength that comes from human collaboration is the central truth behind civilization's success and the primary reason why cities exist. We should eschew the simplistic view that better long-distance communication will reduce our desire and need to be near one another. Above all, we must free ourselves from the tendency to see cities as their buildings, and remember that the real city is made of flesh, not concrete."

However, despite their density and diversity, cities can also be lonely places. The "little town blues" that I talked about earlier are also experienced in large cities. People living in high-rise apartment blocks in big cities or in suburbs on the periphery of cities often report not knowing their neighbours and lacking a sense of "community".

Some believe that rapid suburbanisation since the 1950s, especially in the United States, led to increasing disillusionment among married women, whose isolated lives in well-planned (but boring) suburbs led them to question patriarchial norms and the virtues of being stay-at-home wives and mothers. This angst (described by Betty Friedan as "the problem that has no name" in her book, *The Feminine Mystique)* sowed the seeds of the American women's movement in the 1960s and '70s, and led many women to seek careers outside the home.

Some cities are better at fostering human interaction than others through carefully planned urban designs, and more people-friendly infrastructure, such as parks and other public spaces, including pedestrian-only streets. Recently, after a wave of rape cases in India, urban planners have also been thinking about how cities can be made more woman-friendly, with more street lighting and more gender-sensitive public transport. The designers of these cities understand one basic fact: cities are not about buildings and infrastructure; they are about people and communities.

The COVID-19 lockdowns have demonstrated how abnormal and disturbing self-isolation and social distancing can be. The pandemic has underscored the fact that human beings have an inherent need to interact with other human beings, even if it is at a cursory level. This physical connection with a diverse range of people from different backgrounds is what makes cities attractive, and is the reason why the city – in all its beauty and ugliness – is one of humanity's greatest achievements.