POST COVID-19 TERRITORIAL SCENARIOS

What could possibly go wrong after this pandemic health crisis?

THINK PIECE by Frank D’hondt, urban/territorial planner (Director Territorial Capital Institute and member of the International Society of City and Regional Planners)

A considerable part of humanity has been or still remains in physical lockdown within their houses, towns, cities and countries, with diverse interpretations of the guidance issued by the World Health Organisation. While we start to see a flattening of infection curves in the hardest hit continents and countries, it is to be hoped for that the least impacted areas will fend off the pandemic threat, as well that recovering territories will not relapse after easing and lifting quarantine restrictions.

As a citizen born in Europe’s current political epicentre (Belgium); and as a former employee of the Benelux Union - borderless long before Schengen - I could not imagine that 2020 would mark a return to hard national boundaries within Benelux and across the entire EU, due to a virus that doesn’t mind political borders. Yet, it happened overnight. As a current resident of the ancient city-state of Athens, I could not imagine losing my freedom of movement for work and leisure, due to a virus that doesn’t seem to spread that easily in this remote part of Europe. Yet it happened overnight - while I was facilitating a vision workshop in Banjul, The Gambia, aiming at a more healthy and prosperous future.

Luckily, our brain can escape any kind of lockdown. And a planners’ brain is not only wondering how this could happen and how we can get out of here; it’s merely thinking ‘what’s next’? Not only in terms of the immediate exit strategy to get back to ‘normal’; but also thinking on medium and longer terms about redefining and reshaping a possible ‘new normal’. This forward thinking is not unique to planners, but we, as territorial planners, should stand out to explore future scenario’s for place-based planning and managing the territories we colonize and impact – basically the entire planet.
The first table below is the result of my binary planners’ mind with a pessimistic left side and a more optimistic right lobe. It follows the 5 pillars of sustainable development as framed by the United Nations in an effort to render humanity and planet more sustainable by 2030 – see figure (source: UN).

However, the exploration of pessimistic and optimistic pathways is as much as possible centred around the notion of place-based development. The reason to start with the pessimistic column is that it’s more likely - in my opinion - that we, as a humanity, will resume as soon as possible ‘business as usual’, if not make things worse to compensate for the economic and financial losses caused by the pandemic crisis.
### Think Piece Post Covid-19 Territorial Scenario’s

#### Social
- Social inequality will further increase, spurred by ‘social distancing’ norms between those with/without access to advanced (private) health care and vaccination.
- If austerity is re-applied as part of the exit-strategy, similar to the post 2008 exit-strategy, millions of middle-class workers will be pushed into poverty and lose built-up pension rights.
- Real-estate profit-driven Gated Communities will spur further spatial segregation of people along income and ethnic/national lines, aggravating the conditions of people living in slums and slum-like housing complexes.
- Similar to post-9/11 measures, security-checks will be augmented by health-checks for travelling and immigration, causing even more stress and anxiety.
- Health-tracking and drone-surveillance will critically undermine privacy and freedom of movement and expression.
- Public spaces and parks could be auctioned off to the private sector under the disguise of ‘threatening public health’.
- Confined and socially distant private vehicular transport will discredit public transport by those whom can afford.
- Physical distancing, wearing masks and self-isolation of contaminated persons will remain compulsory until an effective vaccine is widespread available, resulting in social anxiety and mental health problems.
- As the coronavirus affects all income groups, the elitist classes will be willing to pay fairer taxes to fund ‘bigger governments’ and a universal health-care system with vaccination priority for the most vulnerable groups in society.
- The pandemic crisis raised global awareness about inter-connected health and environmental issues; enough to spur governments taking more rigorous action to invest in health and environment-responsive plans and projects.
- Housing and sanitation standards are readapted to be more pandemic resilient.
- More open spaces and parks are created in cities to compensate for dense living and working.
- With living and working becoming more intertwined, car-and public transport dependency decreases in favour of walking, cycling and other forms of micromobility.
- A global fund is established to address slums and refugee camps.

#### Environment
- C19 is only a temporary relief for the environment and its biosphere (land, sea and air).
- As witnessed in US, C19 will spur the ease or lifting of environmental regulations on polluting industries, further aggravating social inequalities.
- Agro-industrialisation will be infused with AI to reduce the need for (seasonal) cheap labour.
- Large retailers will resume individual packing of fresh products, further aggravating the waste-crisis.
- Civil Movements spur governments and corporations to adapt to post-oil Green and Circular economies.
- Environmental and food-quality regulation and inspection is exceeding by far pre-C19 levels.
- Local food production and consumption will become the new standard, including making space for urban farming.

#### Peace
- The global pandemic will morph into a (cold) war between nation-states in the race to develop nation-based resilience to this and potential new pandemic crises (incl. a vaccination race).
- C19 is only a brief pause before resuming the existing wars (by proxy) and starting new ones to control essential resources and supply chains.
- The military-industrial complex will gradually shift towards global defence against pandemic threats (the invisible enemy).
- C19 will spur politically negotiated solutions to existing and long-lasting military conflicts (e.g. Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen).
- C19 will bring conflicting countries around the negotiating table to find durable solutions for millions.
• A prolonged or recurring lockdown of poor communities will spark social unrest and mass-migration, aggravated by food and climate crises

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Partnerships</th>
<th>Multilateralism is dominating the international agenda and the United Nations is being restructured to reflect the post-corona regional balances</th>
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| • Institutions such as WHO and UN as a whole will erode and finally collapse | • EU and other regional unions are stronger than ever, including unitary territorial cohesion and health policies  
| • Nationalism will entirely overshadow multilateralism (e.g. resulting in a further disintegration of the EU) | • Cities and city-regions developed their own 'diplomacy' and established a consultative branch of the United Nations, paving the way for a future United Cities. |
| • Nationalism will result in gradual totalitarianism and setbacks on civil rights and freedom of expression |  |

The table above could be compared to a typical SWOT-analysis – in this case the threats and opportunities in respectively a pessimistic left side and an optimistic right side of the table. As I usually do with SWOT-exercises during visioning workshops in my professional conduct, these provide excellent stepping-stones to develop basic planning strategies and/or scenario’s, even in a data-poor environment. By combining internal strengths (of each place) and external opportunities (out of local control), we can develop the most optimistic if not offensive scenario. By combining internal place-based weaknesses with threats however, we have to brace ourselves for a more pessimistic if not survival scenario for quite a stretch of time ahead. In between those extremes there are two more likely scenario’s: by combining internal strengths and external threats, we can develop a defensive scenario; while a smart combination of weaknesses and opportunities will give way to a transformative scenario or strategy – often emerging as the preferred scenario, combined with the most plausible elements from the defensive and offensive scenario’s.

The second table below only illustrates the 4 possible future scenarios in a generic matter, thus not place-based - except for the planet as our collective home. In other words, to be meaningful, this approach needs to be adapted to place-specific and evidence-based conditions for specific wholesale settlements as villages, towns, cities and city-regions, or partial area-based components such as neighbourhoods, city-districts or river basins, just to name a few. Note that countries confined by their
national boundaries are not considered as functional place-based entities, since the rationale of these entities is more political than spatially functional.

### POST COVID-19 SCENARIO’S

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Offensive Scenario</th>
<th>Transformative Scenario</th>
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<td>In case effective vaccination can be developed and widely applied within the next 6-8 months, the markets will relatively quickly resume activities and bounce back to pre-C19 levels. ‘Big government’ investments in modernizations of social infrastructure, transport infrastructure, information technology and housing will spur economic growth far above pre-C19 rates. While a meaningful part of the investments is dedicated to Green/Circular Economy, the overall impact on environment and climate remains a source of continued concern that is hard to manage by weakened international institutions.</td>
<td>In case effective vaccination can be developed and applied within the next 12-18 months, a more incremental exit-strategy will allow time for a more incremental reform of economic, social and environmental standards and practices towards a more sustainable human and territorial development. This way, a more integrated response to multiple challenges can be planned through transformative steps and adaptations.</td>
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<td>Overall, this Offensive Scenario is characterised by:</td>
<td>Overall, this Transformative Scenario is characterised by:</td>
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<td>• Pro-active/Big Planning</td>
<td>• Proactive/Incremental Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• System-based Planning</td>
<td>• People-based Planning</td>
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<td>• Fast technocratic planning</td>
<td>• Strategic participatory planning</td>
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<th>Defensive Scenario</th>
<th>Survival Scenario</th>
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<td>In case C19 develops a recurring trend with highs and lows without effective treatment within foreseeable time, societies will use the low tides to build up the basic resilience for the high tides, both in terms of health and climate risks, with nevertheless a gradual drop in living standards for 2/3rd of humanity.</td>
<td>In case C19 spirals out with millions of casualties worldwide in both Global North and South, war-economies will remain in place for a much longer time and serious food-shortages and climate change threaten even larger portions of vulnerable communities. Humanity could enter an existential crisis within the next 2-5 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall, this Defensive Scenario is characterised by:</td>
<td>Overall, this Survival Scenario is characterised by:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reactive/Small Planning</td>
<td>• No Forward Planning</td>
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I do not advocate we single out the pandemic issue for future planning activities. On the contrary, the pandemic crisis-response should be merged and matched with the responses we need to other critical crises facing people and planet. Hence, the need to repeat and increase advocacy for integrated strategic bottom-up planning with top-down guidance and horizontal networking and knowledge sharing – ‘integrated’ in the sense of holistic wholesome planning of functional territorial entities such as city-regions and more dominantly rural and natural eco-systems.

As the name suggests, the preferred Transformative Scenario will be more evolutionary than revolutionary, but pushed by the shock-wave caused by the initial COVID-19 and pulled by the next pandemic on the rise (a second coronaviral wave and/or an entirely new one if we were to resume business as usual).
To conclude this think-piece, these are the 5 transformational incremental planning steps I would advocate to leverage the COVID-19 health crisis towards a better future – harnessing the old motto ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’:

1. **Quick scan and update** all existing international policy frameworks and national urban and territorial policies towards the transformative post-COVID-19 sustainable development strategy with new target cluster-indicators for restoring our biosphere, enabled by new economy and an open society. Concurrently, quick scan and update all existing and ‘under preparation’ territorial and urban plans with priority for integrated biosphere-responsive, health-based and people centred city-regional plans and implementation strategies.

2. **Scale and step up** efforts for post COVID-19 planning education, long-life (re-)learning and capacity development of urban and territorial planners, planning agencies, as well barefoot planners (community workers with little or no access to formal planning education).

3. **Improve and expand** the toolbox of in-person and web-based participatory planning to ensure an emancipatory bottom up planning process with residents and civilians as planning subjects and actors of a transformative strategy. This Interactive planning toolbox will also support the previous 3 steps.

4. **Further mainstream** community-based planning approaches (such as social placemaking and tactical urbanism) as critical to transformative planning and implementation, applied at street and neighbourhood level, revolving around the concept of accessible public commons, mixed-use balanced densities, meaningful public places and walkable complete street networks as semi-autarkic building units of polycentric city-regions, interconnected by high quality public transport systems.

5. Use all the above steps to **review and reform** mostly outdated planning systems (hinging on the interaction between regulatory planning instruments, planning/place-based legislation and financing), along a parallel process of devolution of planning powers from national/federal governmental levels to mail city-regional level and other subsidiary sub-national governance levels hinging on a transparent collaboration of government, civil society and production/financial entrepreneurs.

Learning from recent previous viral outbreaks and highly mediatized shockwaves in the aftermath of 9/11 Events and 2008 Crash, it remains rather idealistic to believe real change will happen during and after this pandemic health crisis, with only a tiny fraction of fatalities compared to e.g. the Spanish Flu in 1918-20, infecting up to 500 million people and killing up to 50 million. Yet, it’s up to visionary pragmatic planners to early detect cracks in unsustainable systems – caused by the pandemic shock – where we have the choice to either brush them away or sow the seeds of change for better worlds, big and small.

END - COMMENTS ARE MOST WELCOME!

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1 With my sincere thanks to [Cliff Hague](mailto:Cliff.Hague@territorialcapital.institute), first TCi partner, for critically reviewing the draft.