

# Challenges facing global cities in the 21st century

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The major cities of the world, and this includes Tokyo, must play a strategic role in addressing a whole range of urgent challenges.

Two major crises that immediately come to mind are the financial and economic collapse that was triggered last year, and climate change. Against this bleak landscape, winning or losing the Olympics should be seen as a minor event.

I would add a third crisis: inequality. The crisis of inequality has become acute, especially in global cities. Cities have always had inequality. But beginning in the 1980s, there has been a new kind of inequality, one more extreme and unsettling. A growing share of households and firms have seen their incomes and profits rise sharply, and a growing share of others have seen their incomes and profits fall.

Global cities are machines for producing wealth. But the same dynamics that produce wealth have also created these new inequalities.

In the 1980s, as Tokyo became a major global city, there was enormous growth. And even during the low-growth 1990s, construction continued unabated in some parts of the city—mostly in the form of luxury apartment buildings and shopping centers. Many areas of the city were razed and massive new luxury buildings replaced small houses and small shops.

This created many jobs and generated profits. But in this process, modern Tokyo saw its first homelessness explosion in the 1980s, a development that continued into the new millennium. Job insecurity rose, unemployment increased, and growing sectors of the middle class began

to get poorer. With it all, Tokyo's more regulated economy did much better than New York's or that of London, where hundreds of thousands of people became homeless.

The crisis faced by small shops and enterprises was acute as they could not compete with the new types of high-profit firms that multiplied in these global cities with far less regulation than Tokyo's.

Winning the right to host the 2016 Summer Olympics was not going to change this landscape for Tokyo. In fact, London is facing a budget crisis due to the costs of the Olympics.

In the case of London, the Olympics are also being used to regenerate a very degraded area close to the city center. Tokyo does not quite have such a vast degraded area close to its center. So this type of regeneration would not even have been a major advantage. Tokyo's metropolitan government has all along kept a far tighter oversight on the sprawling metropolis and continued to upgrade and maintain it in a far more systematic way than New York, and even London ever did.

In New York, developers for a very long time simply abandoned vast stretches of the city. Somebody should write a book and call it "New York City's Abandoned Spaces."

In this context, Rio de Janeiro can make much better use of the Olympics than Tokyo or Chicago. It can become an occasion to regenerate a good part of the city, to bring in better services to low-income areas. There is a lot of work to be done in Rio—in a way that does not hold true for Tokyo, or Chicago or Madrid.

What made the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympics such a great success—for many it is still the most impressive Olympics—was that the



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city's government under Mayor Pascual Maragall i Mira used the Games to rehabilitate the entire city.

It was a city that had lapsed into a sort of complete, though soft, decay and abandonment. Large sectors of the city were

affected.

If there is a major project that might make sense for Tokyo, it is the much-debated expansion of Haneda Airport. The key addition that this airport's redevelopment can make is that it has so much space available for airport-linked infrastructure—warehouses, assembly facilities and related activities, reflecting the new types of hubs that major airports are becoming.

The issue with Narita Airport is not so much its distance from central Tokyo as the fact that it cannot expand and develop all these other activities that make large airports a whole new type of economic space. And in this development of a vast area close to the city center lies the possibility of creating an eco-friendly airport hub.

But in the long run and in the big picture of history, cities like Tokyo, Paris, New York, London, Seoul, Shanghai and many others, which have undertaken so much regeneration and infrastructure development, now need to face the new types of challenges posed by climate change and the current financial/economic crisis.

A city like Rio can use the Olympics to carry out basic rehabilitation. Tokyo is well beyond that, as are all the cities I mentioned above, along with major ones in Europe,

Australia and Canada. The climate change crisis is going to hit all these cities hard. Greening our cities is essential to addressing the climate change crisis: Buildings are the main source of bad gases—and cities, by their very nature, have a lot of them.

This is a key project that a city like Tokyo ought to address. In this context, losing the right to host the Olympics is a minor glitch.

This also means that today's major global cities must meet the challenge of becoming part of an international governance system on environmental issues.

Many environmental challenges linked to climate change inevitably become acute and urgent in cities.

City governments have often had to act long before international treaties and national laws were passed. Just recall the air quality crisis in the 1970s that forced the Tokyo metropolitan government to act. The same happened in Los Angeles, which also had a terrible air quality due to car exhaust emissions. The major global cities in the world—and Tokyo is one of the most important ones—are gradually becoming a sort of politico-economic platform for the emerging multipolar world.

Climate change and the new multipolar world are far too important to leave simply to national governments. This is what cities need to work on, and this is what matters and is urgent today.

*The author is a professor of sociology at Columbia University. Several of her books have been translated into Japanese, most recently, "The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo" (Chikuma Shobo Publishing), and "Territory, Authority, Rights" (due out next year from Akashi Shoten).*