

Magali Talandier and Pierre Veltz

Urban Ecology and the Economy



Interview de MAGALI TALANDIER, Interview with MAGALI TALANDIER, economist, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Grenoble-Alps, and **PIERRE VELTZ,** economist, winner of the «Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme» for urban planning in 2017, former director of the administration of «Grand Paris» (Greater Paris) and former Chairman of the Paris-Saclay Development Agency (EPA Paris-Saclay).

By Ariella Masboungi, winner of the «Grand Prix de l'Urbanisme» in 2016

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI: Magali Talandier and Pierre Veltz, you are trained economists, active in research and directly involved in urban development issues. Our hypothesis is that ecology is a matter of economics. Could you elaborate on this idea and explain the role of the urban environment as a meeting point for ecology and economy?

PIERRE VELTZ : The ecological challenge is enormous and multifaceted (climate, biodiversity). Cities and territories hold an important part of the answer, for a number of reasons. First, the actual experience of the populations living in specific territories is fundamental in setting them in motion. For example, the pollution that is becoming unbearable in Chinese cities, or the floods and fires that are ravaging America, are powerful drivers for China and the United States to strive for the major ecological objectives that are vital for the planet. This real-life experience brings home the reality of the territory and the ecological challenge. The second aspect is that cities, as institutions, have an advantage over national governments in that they allow for a systemic approach. Ecological problems are closely interconnected, and this is perceived much more clearly at the local level. The national or international levels, with their compartmentalized approaches, do not have the capacity to resolve the underlying issues. Still, although cities are indeed pivotal players, they do not hold all the answers. We are connected to one another by considerable interdependencies: we must welcome the return to the local dimension, but also guard against excessive «localism.»

MAGALI TALANDIER: You are asking two questions in one, and what's interesting is that they're being asked together. There is one question about cities -- how can the city address ecological issues? And there is another question about how to reconcile ecology and economy. Clearly, today, it's difficult to grasp both of these notions together, not only in abstract, schematic terms, but also in real terms. Every approach and initiative that focuses on ecological transition must also take economic issues into account, whereas policies intended to stimulate economic growth tend to reduce environmental issues to a minimum. That's why I'm convinced that one of the challenges facing us today is to successfully combine the ecological and economic transitions in a spirit of solidarity. That's where the challenge lies: addressing these two aspects of the problem together implies that we must provide answers to social issues, an area in which, as Pierre just said, cities have a major role to play. Their role is fundamental because if the transition is not based on solidarity, if it fails to include a social component, it will not be accepted. As a result, we would be heading towards a society of conflict, incapable of understanding the changes that we need to make. Thus, underlying this dialectic, which could be viewed as a debate for academics or experts, the stakes for our society are very high indeed.



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Interview (suite)



ARIELLA MASBOUNGI: In these anxiety-filled times, economics, ecology, and solidarity are often seen as somehow mutually exclusive, whereas in fact they must be combined in order to convey a message of hope. Do you have any promising scenarios and reasons for hope? All the more so because those with a role to play in the city expect you to provide guidance, if not instructions, but at least advice.

PIERRE VELTZ: I am not satisfied with the idea of «green growth» or the idea of «degrowth.» The concept of «greening» the economy and cities, as they currently exist, working from existing activities and structures, by making them more eco-friendly, simply won't suffice! We need to invent trajectories whereby ecological issues are integrated into innovative and positive development projects. Ecology is often characterized by the «minus» sign: we need to consume less meat, buy less clothing... But we need an ecology that is positively reintegrated into the economy. To do this, we must reconsider the very foundations of our economies, i.e. the major sectors in which we intend to develop. One essential path is what I call a «human-centric» economy, in which areas such as health, well-being, mobility and quality food (all of which are profoundly urban in their concrete reality) become the essential economic drivers of society. If we want to reconsider the link between ecology and economy, we ought to strengthen these people-centered sectors, which also implies an economy of links and territories.

MAGALI TALANDIER: I personally see many reasons to be hopeful - whether they outnumber the reasons to be uneasy, I do not know - but we should focus on the promising signs. I do have a chance to work with stakeholders and I see some extremely stimulating and innovative citizen and alternative initiatives. There are also policy initiatives by various authorities. But most importantly, I see that there are entrepreneurs who are also trying to make a difference! These economic players, who are socially innovative and who build their business models around values other than those traditionally associated with the private sector, are, in my view, particularly worth reaching out to. We need to overcome the barriers between different worlds, get away from preconceived ideas, and move beyond approaches that are conflictual and divisive. Urban versus rural, metropolis versus the rest of the world, economy versus ecology, and so on. Instead, let's look for the pivotal players, the places that are meaningful, and try to focus on the people who can overcome these sterile oppositions. In the area of economic action, many business leaders - and sometimes even large corporations - are transforming governance models and production processes. Sometimes these actors set up networks in order to make their voices heard and facilitate the dissemination of their values. So why shouldn't cities and territories be the relays for those kinds of structures, like the network of regional start-ups, to mention just one example? There are already a number of networks in place to help cities and authorities change their economic models in order to address environmental issues more effectively. I'm thinking of the Fab City network or the network of cities in transition. So, it's not just a matter of hope for the future; there are also concrete actions and structures that already exist that we can build upon.

ARIELLA MASBOUNGI: Thank you both for these valuable messages of hope for urban planners. They show how important it is to transcend differences and work hand in hand.



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