

Seth Schultz: There is no “silver bullet” for the climate change

[article by Alexandra Gouta, published in Politik on 14/09/2019, translated in English by Despoina Mantziari] © ΑΠΕ-ΜΠΕ ΑΕ. Τα πνευματικά δικαιώματα ανήκουν στο ΑΠΕ-ΜΠΕ ΑΕ.



The view that cities, more than central governments, can make a difference in tackling climate change on the planet, as they function - inter alia - as a "canary in the mine" are more directly related to Seth Schultz, founder and CEO of Urban Breakthroughs and special adviser to the international mayor Alliance Global Covenant of Mayors on Research & Innovation, said in an interview with ANA-MPA.

Seth Schultz headed the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Special Report's editorial team on the effects of global warming by 1.5 degrees Celsius ("Global Warming of 1.5 ° C").), and has held positions of responsibility at the Clinton Foundation, the US Green Buildings Council and the "C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group".

If you don't make cities part of the solution, you won't solve the problem

"In the next 15 years cities are estimated to represent 60% -70% of the world's population, consume 70% of electricity worldwide and emit approximately the same percentage of greenhouse gases. So, if

you don't make cities part of the solution, you won't solve the problem", Seth Schultz notes, adding: " In addition, it's very clear that cities have been far ahead of the race in the last 20 years. It is they who take action and that is because they are the great realists.

They are not just sitting around discussing what is going on and waiting, as they need to take immediate action on everyday problems (...) In addition, because they are the closest form of human governance, they are also the 'canary in the mine', the first to face them the three great trends of the century, urbanization, climate change, the fourth industrial revolution. Cities are at the forefront when talking about immigration or refugees because of war or terrorism or climate change.

It is those who first face disruptive technologies, such as self-driving cars, who are at the forefront of protecting people and infrastructure. If we look at where the impacts are, where the lessons are, where the action is, everything happens in the cities".

There is no 'silver bullet'

Seth Schulz clarifies, however, that he does not share the view that everything depends on cities, that cities are the "silver bullet" in tackling the "monster" of climate change. "There is no one solution to the problem (of climate change). Unfortunately, we have far exceeded this point. We need central government, we need the government, the regional government, the academic community and the private sector to work together", he says, adding that now the private sector also seems to be pushing through lobbying for positive changes in tackling climate change.

Why big business is now lobbying for measures to combat climate change

Until now, Seth Schulz notes, it has been lobbying and financial interests that have prevented national governments from becoming more adventurous in combating climate change. But that is gradually changing and - as he points out - it is exciting that it is changing.

"Now it's the big business CEOs who are lobbying, saying to governments 'we need a renewable energy target for this country' or 'we need a carbon tax' ... These are the companies that used to keep going the things behind, now turning around, because they realized that if all this was left unchecked, their supply chains would be affected, there would be an impact on consumers of their products, their stocks would sink, their companies could not stop there. So, in their own interest, they want to see a unified regulated market, whether they are active in the EU, Africa or Latin America. If countries do not agree to solve this and limit global warming, the fluctuations and risks that will arise in the market will become extremely difficult to manage. The insurance and reinsurance markets, the risk of portfolios, will all increase so much that they will break the roof. Businesses have realized this fundamentally and I hope they will help further encourage governments".

The measures we take to tackle climate change are not enough

According to Seth Schulz, neither the scale nor the pace of action taken to tackle climate change at national and international level is sufficient. "Measures are not enough and we see this emerging in multiple ways. Today there are three global trends. The first is urbanization. Roughly, about 1.2 million people move to cities every week. So cities are flooded and need to be developed and adapted at a pace that will enable them to manage the challenge (...) The second major trend is climate change.

All the research we do, all forecasting models, has underestimated the severity, impact and immediacy with which global warming affects the planet. And the third trend is the fourth industrial revolution and the rate at which technology is evolving and influencing. So we have these three major trends manifesting at the same time and cities are at the center of it. Never before in the history of mankind have we seen urbanization, climate change and technology advance so fast.

Nothing we have done has been sufficiently prepared to catch up and manage (climate change) in the current phase. So, a very simple answer is 'no'. Nothing is enough", he notes.

Increasingly cities will have to make less 'informed decisions'...

The scary thing, however, he notes, is that at an increasing rate today, the availability of the knowledge, information and data that cities need to tackle climate change, in the time and scale they require, is not sufficient. "Increasingly, cities will be forced to make less 'informed' and less strategic decisions, because we cannot provide them with information within the timeframe available to them to shape their policies, which are six to 18 months' estimates.

According to Seth Schulz, the private sector has a huge role to play, both in terms of financially supporting cities in actions to combat climate change, and in providing missing information.

"Leadership on the part of the business community is now critical. Businesses have the voice to be heard over the noise, their influence and power are important and, in many ways, are not "locked" in the same political negotiations with governments. (...) In terms of how we come up with solutions on the ground, their role is also great. Cities often lack the financial resources to do some of the things they need and this is true for most areas of the world. Most cities do not even have a credit rating that would allow them to borrow. Some national governments do not allow cities to borrow directly, they need to do so through the country's central bank. And some cities that can borrow have now borrowed at their limits and can no longer borrow. The private sector, with its funding, capital flows and investments, can play a critical role in closing this gap, for example, with more Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)", financial support.

... but businesses can provide cities with information and data

Regarding the provision of information by businesses in cities, he stresses: "There is a lot of knowledge in private companies. And that's true whether we're talking about Google, or an e-commerce business, an engineering firm, or Siemens or the Ford Motor Company. The intellectual property and experience of these companies is enormous. I believe that businesses should play a new important role by providing solutions that go beyond the typical way they deal with cities, which is the economic one. Often, businesses cannot give a city the information that will help it solve its problem because there is a conflict of interest. This is because if a company gives the city the information it needs, for example, how its proposal for a wastewater management plan should be drawn up (...) then the company is excluded from bidding (in the context of a competition). We need to come up with a very new, transparent and dynamic way of exporting information and intellectual property from businesses to solve immediate problems, without excluding companies from making a profit. There's nothing wrong with making a profit, provided you do things right and with a more holistic understanding of the costs that your business-specific climate may have".

Larger funds are now directed at infrastructure, but ... afraid of the wrong

The animating news, Seth Schulz notes, is that governments are beginning to look for ways to bring national or federal policies into line with those that exist locally. There is also mass recognition of the problem of lack of necessary infrastructure.

"When you face all this - urbanization, climate change, rapid technology development - you need more infrastructure, new roads, new buildings, more efficient buildings, new parks (...) Today you see national governments, central banks, international development banks, international development banks, organizations are more (than in the past) focused on solving this problem of infrastructure gaps. Huge amounts of money are heading in this direction.

But the fear is that if this is not done intelligently, if it is not co-created with cities, if it is done wrong, the result will be disastrous, because then we will spend double money and double time - and we do not have time. This process of co-creation is complicated and complex, but it becomes even more important given the amount of financial resources that need to be invested in cities in a short time".

Why central governments don't take more active action?

Some governments, both in developed and developing countries, appear reluctant or hesitant to apply what has been agreed internationally to prevent climate change, fearing a negative impact on national economies. How likely is this attitude to change soon? And under what conditions? was the next question to Seth Schulz.

"First, often federal governments are at odds with cities at the political level. Sometimes this is because in some of the larger cities of some countries, the mayor or governor is the next likely candidate for the country's presidency. As a result, there is a conflict of interest in supporting someone who can become your competitor. Secondly, (...) it is often difficult for national governments to invest in a city, as there is not always enough clarity and transparency (...) as to where the money went, how it was spent and what the results of the investment were.

So, it is often easier for a national government to keep (the money) under control (...) Giving money to the local government, which is in many ways an inadequate structure, is a challenge. Both have to be understood (...) You see, however, that governments are beginning to try different ways (...) Over the last 20 years, often on climate change issues, cities have gone beyond the "daily" issues. layout, "appeared more ambitious and bolder, took action. And this has helped partly to mobilize, inspire or even shame national governments on how far they can go (in tackling climate change) but also to encourage them to become more visionary and aggressive. "

Electric and standalone vehicles, lobbying and cost

Ask about the current debate about electric cars - that is, they are very expensive and that they can actually be polluting in mass circulation, as their fuel, electricity, is still primarily derived from it. from fossil fuels - Seth Schulz stresses that he considers the very basis of this discussion incorrect. "The rate at which we convert electricity into anything on the planet is exponential. So, discussing whether we should make cars electric, even though we've done everything, our cities and all our appliances (...), is a little weird, it makes no sense.

On the cost... "One reason why EV is so expensive has to do with the automotive lobbyists and the fossil fuel industry. We are of course also at the beginning of this technological development, so the costs are higher. But as we have seen from photovoltaics and computer chips, the cost of developing new technology is constantly decreasing. This will be the case with EVs as they are integrated into the electricity grid, which means they need to become smarter, more sustainable, more durable. I think EVs are going to go fast. If you look at the market penetration of EVs and the number of electric vehicles manufactured and sold, if you look at the number of big companies, like Volvo, that are committed to having fully electric vehicles by 2025, yes, that's the case".

According to him, instead of asking whether we should have an EV, we should ask a radically different question. What will we do in ten years from today with fossil fuel vehicles? How will people transition to new vehicles when there are not so many gas stations? "Think about it: EVs have one-tenth of the moving parts, which have a conventional vehicle, so they don't need the same maintenance. So, the purchase cost may be higher, but the overall maintenance cost is much, much lower, because the different components do not break down often. The market for vehicle insurance is also expected to change drastically, as they are not just electric, they are autonomous. So, in the event of a collision, we will have the following dialogue: 'My own car, your own car. I wasn't driving. You didn't drive. So, who was to blame? Was its software? Sue Google, sue the car industry?' " These are the questions we should be asking about vehicles today. "

The meeting with Seth Schulz took place on the occasion of his presence in Thessaloniki at the annual Living Labs international meeting called Open Living Lab Days (OLLDs).

Alexandra Gouta