

Resilient Cities

An Interview with Mauricio Rodas, Former Mayor, Quito, Ecuador

EDITORS' NOTE Mauricio Rodas has a JD from Universidad Católica de Quito. He also holds two master's degrees in government administration and political science from the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn). He started his professional career with the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in Santiago de Chile and Mexico City. Later he worked as a policy consultant for the Mexican government. In 2007, he founded and served as the Executive Director of Ethos Public Policy Lab, a think tank based in Mexico ranked among the most influential in Latin America by the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report.



Mauricio Rodas

In 2011, Rodas returned to Ecuador and founded SUMA, a national political party. In 2013, he ran for President of Ecuador; the following year he was elected Mayor of Quito (2014-2019). During his term, Rodas was the hosting Mayor of the UN's Conference on Urban Sustainable Development – Habitat III. He also had an active leadership role in the main city networks: two terms as world Co-President of UCLG, member of the global boards of C-40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, ICLEI and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy.

He is a Young Global Leader and member of the Global Future Council on Cities and

Urbanization of the World Economic Forum. In 2019, he was named one of the 100 World's Most Influential People on Climate Action by *Apolitical*. He also received UPenn's World Urban Leadership Award and is a Distinguished Fellow on Global Cities at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. In 2020, he was designated as Senior Fellow of the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center from the Atlantic Council.

Currently, he is a Visiting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's

Penn Institute for Urban Research, Perry World House and the Kleinman Center for Energy Policy, and he is promoting the "Cities Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Financing Initiative – C2IFI." C2IFI aims to develop a knowledge hub to consolidate information about financing opportunities for cities and to facilitate cities' officials access to these resources.

What attracted you to public service and serving as Mayor of Quito?

My passion for politics began at a very early age. As a child, I was deeply fascinated by the anecdotes from my father and maternal grandfather, both of whom were congressmen before I was born. My fascination with political discussions, the admiration of my ancestors' achievements in their years in politics, as well as realizing it could be a great path to solve

injustice in my country, made me decide to devote my life to politics and public service as I thought it was the most effective way to contribute to improve people's lives.

I became a lawyer and later on, I studied political science and public administration at the University of Pennsylvania, as I wanted to gain the knowledge and understanding of public service and the skills needed for it. I returned to Ecuador after living for several years in the U.S., Chile and Mexico, formed a new national political party, and ran for the Presidency in 2013 as an outsider candidate.

In 2014 I ran for Mayor of Quito, the capital, against the incumbent. For the first time, the political party of former President Correa, who stayed in power for ten years, lost an election, and that milestone was the beginning of the end of his authoritarian regime. My dream of serving the most in need became a reality. As Mayor, I was honored by the impact that can be generated by leading your city, being close to the people and focusing on what is really necessary to make your city more sustainable, resilient, inclusive and livable.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I aim to be a transformational leader by trying to convey my way of thinking and inspire my colleagues and constituents with my vision. For me, being an effective leader means having a passion for a cause that is bigger than yourself and being able to make the right decisions with courage and responsibility to deliver on the vision. Having values and living up to them in all tiers of your life and respecting other people's opinions are vital assets for an effective leader. I believe a leader should be humble and continue to always learn on their own and from others and, as important, be an effective communicator and an active listener.

How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience in addressing the crises facing the world?

Resilience is the ability of a system to continue operating after going through external shocks or disasters while continuously transforming and adapting to the new normal. This is achieved through comprehensive urban planning, evaluation, coordination among city agencies and the effective use of evidence-based data. The year 2020 is witnessing one of the worst pandemics the world has ever seen and

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COVID-19's adverse effects have resulted in a global crisis that has touched almost every aspect of human well-being. Mayors have demonstrated strong local leadership as well as synergies with national governments when analyzing and dealing with the outbreak and recovery phases. Since there is rising awareness of cities as key global players to tackle challenges such as climate change and migration, among other external shocks, it is crucial to enable them to have adequate mechanisms to develop and maintain appropriate resilient infrastructure and to increase resilience capabilities. It is fundamental to transform the international financial architecture that was designed for nations and not for cities, to enable cities to have direct access to the resources needed to build and implement resilience frameworks and address future external shocks.

What do you see as the contribution that Ecuador can make to build a more resilient world?

Quito was selected to be part of the 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) initiative. As a result, the city was able to review its strengths and vulnerabilities and assess its capacity to face these challenges by developing and implementing Quito's Resilience Strategy. Quito is prone to natural disasters, as volcanoes surround the city and our country lies in one of the world's mega faults. During my mayoral term, I built water pipeline suspension bridges over several rivers as a resilient measure in case of the imminent eruption of the Cotopaxi volcano for safeguarding the water supply and sanitation for the entire city. Additionally, I wanted to address the fact that 70 percent of the food we consume in the city came from other provinces and promoting the increase of urban gardens was part of the strategy for building food resilience in sustainable urban environments. At the beginning of my mayoral term, the city had 800 urban gardens, and when I left office, the number grew to 2,000. During our administration we built the first metro line in the country which will mobilize 400,000 people per day and cut CO2 emissions by 2.5 million tons in the next 30 years and will become an important resilience policy for the future.

Ecuador, like other developing countries, still needs to build resilience capacity. The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the country's systems and it is evident that it has not yet institutionalized resilience-building in their planning and operations.

What does resilience look like for the one billion migrants on the move in the world today?

Migrants predominantly settle in cities where their immediate needs have to be addressed and where essential services and urban infrastructure is provided. Resilience for migrants will be possible only when their physical health, psychosocial conditions, social interactions and economic circumstances allow them to be successfully integrated in the host nation. Strong social safety nets and sufficient and adequate resources are needed to address migrants' needs and to enable welcoming environments.

What is the role of resilient infrastructure in protecting and sustaining local livelihoods and economies?

Resilient infrastructure is not only a vital aspect for city planning, but also an engine for economic recovery. The COVID-19 crisis has triggered the creation of multibillion-dollar recovery packages from national governments and new lines of credit from different IFT's across the world. A consensus is growing to make these investments climate resilient. Since much of these resources should be disbursed to urban areas because of their relevance to meet with the Paris Agreement and other international agendas, this can become a historic turning point to foster the kind of infrastructure transformation cities and their communities need to cope with climate change and resilience building challenges.

There has been, internationally, a trend away from cross-border collaboration, a rise in nationalism, and a tendency for nations to

increasingly go it alone. What do you think this means for the future, particularly in the face of far-reaching crises like the pandemic and climate change?

That has not been the case with cities worldwide. City diplomacy has proved to be more practical than nation-states international relations, as political or ideological stances are absent from the discussions, and it is more agile and productive as it has been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cities have shown their collaborative power at an accelerated rate when sharing best practices, knowledge and data. Their innovation ideas have multiplied and solidarity among cities has flourished to every corner of the world through bilateral diplomacy and city networks.

Do you feel it is critical to have collaboration and strong global alliances in order to build a more resilient world?

Collaboration and global alliances are definitely determinant for achieving a resilient, equitable and sustainable future for vulnerable populations. There is a great opportunity and a growing trend for city collaboration and alliances as local actions and global cooperation among cities can be observed in the many city networks created to connect cities and regions. Additionally, cities are reactivating their international partnerships to deal with COVID-19's outbreak, immediate response and resilience framework development. This pandemic can be an opportunity to connect local priorities to global issues and to incorporate international lessons learned in city planning and day-to-day operations. ●

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