

Optimism in a time of covid



The pandemic is speeding up social change, says Claudia López, mayor of Bogotá

THE BEGINNING of 2020 looked like the beginning of a great dream for me. After years of struggling, Bogotá gave me the opportunity to be the first woman, the first LGBT person and the first to come from a humble background, outside the elite class, to become mayor of Colombia's capital. I took office and proposed a new social and environmental contract for Bogotá, in which tackling inequality, the climate crisis and the gendered dimension of poverty would become real priorities.

In the following months Bogotá became the stage for public protests. Young people and the middle class took to the streets to express their discontent with the lack of opportunities and the risk of losing modest achievements in social mobility. On January 1st we thought our greatest challenge would be governing in the midst of such discontent while staying true to the platform on which we were elected. But covid-19 came to impose a new order.

Governance became about managing the pandemic. Other gaps became even more visible. The digital gap, for example, where 40% of students in public schools did not have a computer or an internet connection. Or the gender gap, where thousands of women who had managed to free themselves from unpaid care work were forced to stay at home and care for others. In addition to the health consequences of the disease, the worst part of the pandemic has been the social and economic setback, perhaps of a decade, for young people and women, two groups that I proudly represent. It seemed that the pandemic had come to make achieving the new social and environmental contract we proposed in the campaign even more difficult.

We had to take new actions every day. Health had to be managed, deaths prevented, income protected and hunger avoided at all costs. We had to modify government programmes. For example, we went from giving cash transfers to 20,000 households at the beginning of the year to giving a basic income and food aid to 712,000 households in a matter of seven months. We managed to provide internet connections and tablet computers to 124,000 students. We convinced university and higher-education institutions to reduce costs, shorten programmes and make them more flexible so that more people could have a better chance to go back

to school, or to enroll for the first time. In short, the pandemic posed new challenges but it was also an opportunity to innovate and make transformative change happen.

The pandemic forced us to put into practice immediately the social and environmental contract we had outlined. It brought new ways of living, working, consuming and commuting—driving us towards a more sustainable city. As well as doubling ICU capacity, we also doubled the share of trips by bicycle in the city. We added 85kms of bike lanes to the existing 550km. We pedestrianised streets and improved public space so that restaurants, stores and artists could go back to work. We now have the lowest levels of air pollution in years. An estimated 93% of Bogotá's people use face-masks and most still stay at home as much

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as possible, even out of lockdown.

Many of these improvements are here to stay. But just as the pandemic accelerated some things, it temporarily suspended others, such as the manifestation of social discontent. That pressure came back with the force of water that has been dammed. Young people, women and the dissatisfied returned to the streets with problems aggravated by the pandemic.

Eventually citizens will not only take to the streets but to the polls (Colombia's next elections are in 2022). And at the polls we will have to defeat another pandemic: that of populism, which will prey on people's frustration. An authoritarian populism of the left, which is capable of turning what we have built of democracy into ashes; and an authoritarian populism of the right, which is capable of abolishing the higher courts and banning public protests. We need to consolidate democratic change without falling into the hands of passing messiahs who undermine the very institutions that are capable of sustaining the changes we have fought for.

I have more pride and optimism than ever. I have seen the best sides of my city and its people. In 2021 and beyond, we will emerge as better human beings and citizens, and we will achieve something that has been elusive to our country, which we have always strived for: a democracy that delivers a more equal and peaceful society.