

# Barcelona and the pandemic

## Planning recovery around the SDGs

**Strict travel restrictions and containment measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 damaged tourism-fueled economies like that of Barcelona. In working through the pandemic's impacts and planning for recovery, the city kept its economic as well as its social and environmental goals in mind.**

Supported by a healthy budget and the absence of debt, Barcelona was able to tap robust resources to decrease infections and support residents economically as unemployment rates soared.

The city's main priority was to help the healthcare system, by transforming existing spaces like sports centers and public buildings into hospitals and shelters. Outside of health-related issues, the city's projects around sustainability and the UN's 2030 Agenda initially took a back seat.

"We were thinking about the next 24 hours, not the next 10 years," said Miquel Rodriguez Planas, commissioner for the 2030 Agenda of the Barcelona City Council. "But once we got to a 'new normality,' we realized that the challenges we had with the pandemic, the need for a good health system, good education, less inequality, a more resilient economy, were already part of the 2030 Agenda. With the pandemic, we just believe more in the agenda."

### Diversifying the economy

One of the first lessons from the pandemic for Barcelona was the need to reduce its reliance on tourism. The collapse of tourism from the lockdowns hurt retailers in the city center,

which suddenly lost most of their customers. The city's post-pandemic objective is to make the economy more resilient, by diversifying into other areas, like education. With five top public universities and two top business schools, the city aims to develop a knowledge-based economy appealing to students and faculty from all over the world.

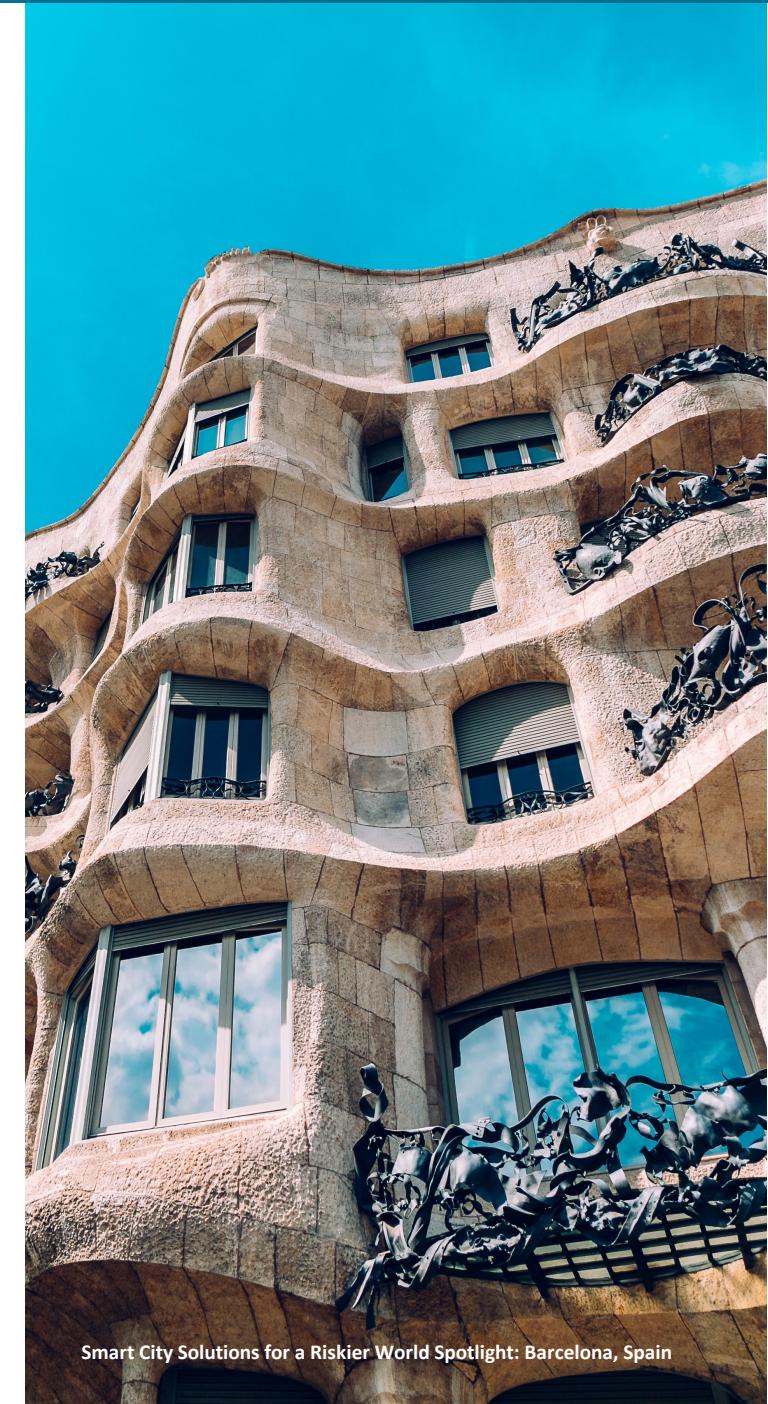
Barcelona also will focus on attracting more energy firms, pharmaceutical players, and other businesses to its Tech City, a non-profit organization that supports entrepreneurs, investors, incubators, government entities, and others working to build Barcelona into a major global tech hub.

"To survive, we need to diversify the economy and have a bold policy to build a talent-driven, knowledge economy. We have the assets, we just need to connect them with the research centers, the SMEs, and the private sector," said Rodriguez Planas.

To address rising unemployment among blue-collar workers from the hospitality and retail sectors, the city is investing in training programs. For instance, a public IT Academy currently teaches programming skills to over 300 students per year, a number the city hopes will go up to 3,000 per year.

**"If we want to have an economy based on innovation and added value, and to reduce inequalities, we need to provide new skills and opportunities to residents."**

**—Miquel Rodriguez Planas, Commissioner for 2030 Agenda, Barcelona City Council**



## Addressing the digital gap and sustainable energy

The pandemic highlighted inequalities in digital access. With the sudden jump in remote working and education, and the shift to digital for many public- and private-sector services, Barcelona had to assess and bridge gaps in digital connectivity.

The city conducted a citizen [survey](#) published in January 2021 which determined that 92% of residents had access to the Internet. While this is a relatively high level, it still left 8% of households disconnected, and 55% of these comprised people 74 years of age or older. The study also confirmed a sharp increase in technology use during the pandemic as workers and students went remote.

Armed with this data, the city launched initiatives to boost digital access, for instance by donating devices to families or deploying “digital agents”

to help residents use technology, particularly seniors. “To me, a smart city is a city that knows which challenges its citizens are facing and tries to solve them,” said Rodriguez Planas.

### Partnering for sustainable energy

In line with the SDGs, the city is also focusing on the environment. It has allocated €50 million for solar panel projects, working with private partners to install panels on the roofs of residential, industrial, and other buildings. The city will fund just 30% of the projects, with private companies investing the rest—highlighting its approach of working in partnership with the private sector as much as possible.

The city hopes to generate revenue from these initiatives and achieve a sizable return on its investments, helping to heal its budget.

“We don’t put technology at the top of our agenda. We focus more on public-private partnerships. To pursue the right policies, to speed up recovery, we need the private sector. Not only for resources, but also for the model or design of policies. Sometimes when the private sector helps design the policies, they bring the technology as well.”

—Miquel Rodriguez Planas, 2030 Agenda Commissioner, Barcelona City Council

### Barcelona’s biggest lessons from the pandemic

Timely access to data and advanced analytics is crucial for running today's city	Cities need to pay more attention to the health and well-being of all citizens	Our city needs to ensure that employees have the devices and digital access for working from home	Cities need to invest in upgrading core infrastructure
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### Technology solutions where Barcelona is making large investments



Data to redesign public welfare programs



Remote medicine & telehealth services



Online government benefits portal



Real-time air-quality information



Data on infectious & epidemic diseases

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