Radical measures to tackle crowdedness

INTRODUCTION

Urban crowdedness has several dimensions, such as traffic, tourism, gentrification, rising housing prices, and simply a sense of crowdedness. As developments that increase crowdedness have accelerated in recent years, concerns gain ever more attention. Cities continue to explore more radical measures to tackle crowdedness.

KEY FACTS

- In any urban environment, the sense of crowdedness has a negative impact on our brain. Scientists have found that just being in an urban environment impairs our basic mental processes. After spending a few minutes on a crowded city street, the brain is less able to store things in memory, and suffers from reduced self-control.
- In some cities, concerns over crowdedness relate to traffic. Average travel times for a 5-mile car journey in central London have increased by almost 50% since 2012. In developing cities, traffic is even worse. In Mexico City, the average commute is 81 minutes.
- In other cities, mass tourism threatens to overcrowd the public space. Between 1990 and 2013, the annual number of tourists in Barcelona increased from 1.7 to 7.6 million. In 2015, Amsterdam attracted 17 million tourists. Gentrification, a process of neighborhood revival through an influx of wealthier residents, has become a symbol of large cities. Subsequently, rising housing prices contribute to the sense of a crowded city.

ANALYSIS

Cities have been disrupted by the growth of e-commerce, air travel, foreign property investment, rental platforms and the increased force of attraction of cities. The unstoppable growth of e-commerce has been cited as a major factor in London’s traffic woes. Increased air travel and the rise of the global middle class have triggered mass tourism explosions across the world, sometimes in obscure places linked to popular entertainment such as Game of Thrones (Iceland) or Frozen (Norway). Property investment across borders and the rise of Airbnb have contributed to mass tourism and the rise of housing prices and thus to gentrification. Finally, the increased force of attraction of cities, and the rise of the megacity, threatens urban space with increased traffic, tourism and an influx of wealthier residents. All of these processes have accelerated in recent years.

Urban solutions to crowdedness pertain to the various dimensions of crowdedness. All of these solutions range from simple to more radical measures. Simple solutions to excessive traffic include public transport investment, but also smart city systems, which have been mainly ineffective so far because they fail to move beyond mere monitoring of movements. Furthermore, simple solutions to mass tourism include raising tourism taxes and price discrimination between locals and tourists on popular locations (Barcelona). Lastly, a simple solution to rising housing prices as a result of gentrification is an increase of the tax on foreign property ownership (Vancouver). However, as underlying developments have accelerated, it seems that cities increasingly require more radical measures to tackle crowdedness. Concerning traffic, an example is Singapore’s electronic road pricing system, which will soon enable dynamic pricing according to time, distance and location. Concerning tourism, an example is Cinque Terre, which will reduce the amount of incoming tourists by 1 million and set a limit on 1.5 million tourists. Concerning gentrification, an example is Montreal’s measure to prohibit new restaurants within 25 meters of existing restaurants.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

- Companies that develop sophisticated technologies which themselves carry solutions to crowdedness. Although mere monitoring naturally remains ineffective as a solution to crowdedness, Singapore’s ERP system is an example of an effective smart city measure.
- E-commerce could benefit as consumers increasingly opt to shop online instead of in the crowded city center. In Amsterdam, shopping revenue no longer increases along with pedestrian traffic.
- Advanced VR telecommunication systems could become more appealing in the face of overcrowded cities.