

Editorial - Instruments, Resources and Collective Action: Introduction to Special Section on Geographies of Local Governance

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Editorial

Instruments, Resources and Collective Action: Introduction to Special Section on Geographies of Local Governance

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We are pleased to include in this issue of *People Place and Policy* a small selection of papers presented to the 2018 annual conference of the International Geographical Union's Commission on the Geography of Governance. This was hosted by the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning at the University of Lisbon, Portugal in September of that year, and was convened under the theme 'Fifty Years of Local Governance 1980-2030'. As the title suggests the conference aims were twofold: for researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds firstly to revisit our understanding of the determinants, processes and outcomes of the changes that have occurred in the field of local governance over the last four decades; and secondly to explore current and emerging trends in this field. For the latter the wider context was set by important new global initiatives, namely the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (and its 17 official goals) that came into force in January 2016 (United Nations, 2015); the New Urban Agenda agreed at the Habitat III Conference in October 2016 (United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), 2017); and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change adopted in December 2015 (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015).

The conference was attended by 79 delegates drawn from around 30 different countries, including 13 outside Europe, half of which could be classed as being in the 'Global South'. There was one plenary and 16 panel sessions at which a total of 71 papers were presented. In focus the range was wide, including in no particular order: inter-municipal and cross-border cooperation; public participation and citizen engagement; multi-level and multi-scale governance; local government reform and its impacts; competition and investment in local economic development; stimulation and regulation of urban regeneration; public/private partnerships in urban development; the management of immigration; nature conservation and protection; urban flood regulation; transnational networks for climate change mitigation; community governance of informal urbanism; environmental and economic sustainability in agricultural and rural development; and the promotion of sustainable tourism.

The three papers in this section all emanated principally from the second broad conference track around recent experiences and current trends. This track was designed to provide an opportunity for contributors to present, discuss, exchange and debate recent findings on the determinants, processes and outcomes of past, current and

emerging trends in the field of local governance, irrespective of disciplinary background, theoretical perspective or methodological approach. Clearly it is not possible to reflect the full scope of the topics and perspectives covered in the conference given the small number of papers included here. Nor would the disparate nature of the topics addressed in the three papers – respectively gentrification and city centre redevelopment; historic neighbourhood conservation and rejuvenation and the tourist ‘blitz’; and resilience in metropolitan fringe agriculture – seem disposed to the extraction of shared themes or lessons. Nevertheless, when viewed through the wide-angle lens of governance the commonalities and contrasts of the three papers are thrown into sharper relief, and as such they can act as a prism that reflects some of the key general strands of discussion and debate at the conference.

The first paper in the special section concerns city centre redevelopment and regeneration in Poznań, Poland from the early 2000s onwards. The experience highlights both positive and negative aspects of local governance, particularly around the scope for, yet at the same time limitations to interventions aimed at upgrading rundown and blighted areas. As an urban renewal pioneer within Poland the city displayed considerable initiative in launching local action to address decline in its central zone, especially given the lack of a guiding framework and financial support from national level. However, limited powers and resources meant heavy reliance on investment by private developers and subsequently an associated escalation in property and rental values. As seen elsewhere the result has been classic gentrification: attraction of more affluent residents, a modicum of short-let accommodation for the tourist market and the displacement of longer established low income and marginalised residents. Without its own money to invest and lacking other potential levers such as land and property ownership, the city found there was little it could do to alleviate the situation. In many ways this appeared to reflect the dominant political ethos of encouraging and enabling private business investment in addressing the physical impacts of social and economic decline. Thus, the specific national legislation on urban regeneration put in place in 2016 provided no solution to the dilemma of gentrification and displacement. Moreover, the lack of capacity and organisation amongst the disparate marginalised population in the city centre meant that there was no community-based pressure to meet its needs as part of the regeneration process. That said, a cautious note of optimism was struck by the property developer interviewee who clearly recognised the nature and scale of the issue, indicating that there might be scope for some form of public-private collaboration to find ways of providing alternative forms of housing.

Several of these themes reverberate in the second paper, albeit in a very different setting, namely two historic towns in southern Italy. One initial impression that stands out is the extent to which governance and policy, as in other walks of life, are subject to fashions that come and go. Thus, in the post-war striving for better conditions for all in the late 1940s and 1950s the underground rock dwellings in Matera were seen as unfit for human habitation and all the residents were rehoused in a newer part of town; nowadays, however, such dwellings (suitably renovated) are seen as an asset and extremely desirable by those who can afford to live in them. More importantly, the comparison in the paper between Matera and Gravina underlines some key considerations for local governance in terms of managing changes to urban structure. One is that the influence that municipal land and property ownership might bring is not always exploited in a proactive way, perhaps due to concerns that restrictions on use or attempts at revenue sharing will deter the private investment without which renewal and rehabilitation would not occur. Another is that as in Gravina specific local application of a relevant legislative policy framework can serve not just as a regulatory tool to ensure a diversity of end users and beneficiaries, but also as a vehicle for community engagement and involvement across a much broader swathe of an urban area than merely the directly affected neighbourhood. The reverse side of this coin is that absence

of such a guiding framework can mean a lack of control over the nature and purpose of property refurbishment, with the attendant prospect in historic towns of fostering a mass short-stay tourist economy that risks ruining the very environment that makes the place attractive, not to mention the adverse impact on local residents' access to housing and everyday services. Of course, Matera is not alone in facing this challenge, but at least here its concentration in a specific part of the urban core means that despite the 'retrofit' nature of any countermeasures the situation may be more manageable than with its more distributed incidence in large cities such as Barcelona.

The third and final paper switches focus from the urban to the rural, in this case examining farmers' resilience in the face of land development pressures and changes to food produce markets and networks in the metropolitan fringe of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although the context is very different to those in the first two papers, there are some broad strands that resonate with the urban renewal and regeneration issues that they address. For example, interventions that are predicated on supporting individual and organisational inter-relationships are likely to be most effective in promoting welfare and prosperity. In other words, economic resilience is primarily rooted in social relations and collective action. Such community-based organisations may take many forms, but one of their key roles is to disseminate new knowledge and practices that can assist individuals, families and smaller organisations in continuing to thrive. In the Rio metropolitan fringe, the collective producer networks also provide a link to wider or alternative opportunities (especially markets for members' produce), in turn affording them enhanced local presence and access to further openings. There would appear to be considerable scope here for this model to be adapted with appropriate supporting infrastructure to other domains, such as the labour or property markets.

In sum, in its thematic diversity this collection of three papers highlights some of the common trends we have been witnessing in recent decades in the broad field of local and urban governance. One is the increasing importance of multi-level governance and the differences it can make in particular localities, as the Italian case-study presented here shows. The existence of a regional tier plan conditioned the way the lower tier of administration handled the issue at stake, with more or less autonomy, direction and capacity. That said, much depends on the instruments and resources made available for positive intervention at local level: hence the national provisions in Poland appear to be relatively unambitious in terms of addressing the unequal impacts of regeneration. The associated themes of communication, liaison and enabling between different levels of administration are recurrent in both governance literature and practice, yet will surely continue to underpin future research. Another feature worthy of further examination is the increasing importance of citizen engagement, as well as that of other stakeholders, in local governance processes, and the potential issues that may arise if it is not handled well. The three case studies each show this clearly. A third trend, also present in these papers, is the importance of ideology in the way institutions govern cities and surrounding areas with different results. They all point out limits and the negative impacts that resulted from the policy options followed in the cases and periods examined. In that sense, these three papers add both new empirical information and new critical insights to the field of local and urban governance.

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