

Editorial introduction to special issue on geographies of governance

Cultural Practices, Civic Engagement and Forms of Organisation: International, transnational and multi-level aspects of local governance

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For the second year running we are privileged to be able to include in this issue of *People, Place and Policy* a small selection of papers presented to the 2019 Annual Conference of the International Geographical Union's Commission on the Geography of Governance. This was hosted by the Geography Section of the Faculty of Sciences and Technology at the University of Cape Verde in September of that year, and was held on campus in the capital Cidade de Praia. Convened under the theme 'Local and Urban Governance: trends, challenges and innovations in a globalizing world', the aim of the conference was to explore and to discuss the changes, challenges and innovations confronting local and urban governance worldwide in the context of the new global agendas through the presentation and debate of state-of-the-art research in different regions of the world. The event marked the 35th anniversary of the Commission and was its first Annual Conference to be held in an African country. Sessions were organised along two parallel tracks, the first focusing broadly on new trends, innovations and future challenges in the field of local and urban governance from across the globe, and the second exploring issues around the same theme associated with African countries.

The conference was attended by over 80 delegates drawn from around 20 different countries, with the majority from Europe but over a quarter representing various African nations. There was one plenary and 14 panel sessions (split equally between the two tracks), at which 55 papers were presented. In terms of topics covered the range was wide, including in no particular order: decolonisation and dispute resolution in land management; power relations in local economic development; working across inter-regional boundaries and policy silos; the administrative autonomy of holy cities; city governance and disease outbreaks; urban platforms and smart forms of governance; participatory governance and environmental conservation; issues of efficiency and democracy in municipal amalgamation; the challenges of place leadership and the circular economy for urban governance; climate change and green urban governance; and expanding cities, urban public transport and local budgetary limitations.

Clearly it is not possible to reflect the full scope of the topics and perspectives covered in the conference given that just three of the papers are included here. Nor would the disparate nature of the subject matter addressed in these three papers – respectively the management of social welfare for undocumented Mexican migrants in Los Angeles and in their communities of origin; the protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage under international regimes (with particular reference to Cape Verde); and the extent of public participation in the preparation of Open Governance Plans in various parts of the world – seem disposed to the extraction of shared themes or lessons. Yet each in its own way incorporates an international dimension, ranging from participation in transnational informal networks through accreditation by UNESCO heritage programmes to comparative assessment of governance planning processes between places inhabiting very different political and governance contexts. Moreover, 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 by Sascha Krannich concerns the ways in which undocumented migrants to California from the south-western Mexican state of Oaxaca have adapted the collective methods of mutual aid and support known as *usos y costumbres* to their new situation. This has been geared not only to fit their status as an unofficial diaspora, but also as a means of maintaining and extending social and economic connections with their communities of origin. The latter has had the explicit aim of improving conditions and facilities in those localities so that it extends far beyond the conventional channel of migrant monetary remittances, important though these still are for individual families (see, for example, Cohen, 2010). At this point it is helpful to add some further geographical context regarding Oaxaca. It remains one of the poorest and least economically developed states in the Mexican Federation, and consequently out-migration has been a key feature of its demography for the past 40 years or more. At the same time the state is still home to more indigenous people than anywhere else in the country. Its diversity is underlined by the existence of at least 16 recognised ethno-linguistic groups, whose survival is principally a product of the indented ruggedness of the landscape. On the one hand this gave rise to a patchwork of isolated and fairly self-contained rural communities, whilst at the same time rendering micro-scale colonial administration difficult, if not impossible (Eisenstadt, 2007). Therefore, these communities had to develop their own forms of self-governance, much of it based on pre-existing practices, with the result that "a substantial portion of the indigenous sociopolitical organisation survived the conquest years" (Chance, 1986: 180).

The central thread of this organisation is the aforementioned *usos y costumbres*. Literal translations of the term include 'customs and practices' and 'habits and traditions', but even combining these four words together would do scant justice to the depth and complexity that characterise this set of practices. Here the author wisely sticks with the original Spanish language formulation. Equally it would be wrong to ascribe any rigidity to this mode of organising. Indeed, its adaptability is not just a matter of necessity that was forced upon migrants to the USA by their unofficial status, but has been evident in contemporary Mexico as well. Thus, three-quarters of the municipalities in Oaxaca have adopted *usos y costumbres* as a basis for selecting local representatives, through processes "ranging from inclusionary community assemblies to exclusionary council of elders meetings" (Eisenstadt, 2007: 53). While this has not been without its disputes and conflicts, it reflects the pivotal role that the approach retains in a majority of these communities. Rooted in ancestral history, its persistence no doubt also reflects the respect and reverence that Mexicans in general and indigenous people in particular have for their forebears. At the same time, the benefits are strikingly contemporary too, with other research revealing that in Oaxacan communities "the allocation of local public

goods is more effective and equitable in *usos y costumbres* municipalities (than in those governed by political parties through elections" (Magaloni et al., 2019: 1843).

In the USA the fragile 'outsider' position of undocumented migrants and their consequent exclusion from any form of official support brought into sharp relief the importance of sustaining collective provision of mutual aid. This has been crucial not only in maintaining their identity both as individuals and as a group, but also in retaining the social solidarity characteristic of their home towns and villages. In effect it represents an extension of the governance form of their communities of origin, a dimension further underlined by migrants' continued contribution to the improvement of the latter. In this sense, migration is less an individualistic escape to a better life; rather it becomes a transnational community practice, benefiting not just the individuals and families making the journey or their extended kin, but all those living in the communities of origin too. Moreover, the communal benefits are not confined merely to sharing a portion of any monetary resources that migrants accrue, but also rest upon the wider knowledge, skills and experience that they acquire through the process. Utilising all these resources as assets for collective gain in both communities means that welfare and improvement are founded on a transnational form of 'common wealth' that demands a political reconsideration of the significance of modern migration. Indeed, given that it is estimated that around half of all countries in the world have such 'dual governance' setups (Holzinger et al., 2016), these informal forms of transnational migration networking for the common good may be more widespread than is realised. In turn this uncovers the limitations of binary conceptual models such as the 'shadow state' (Wolch, 1990), and points to the need for wider application of governance spectrums of the type formulated by environmental policy scholars (for example, Hysing, 2009; Arnouts et al., 2011; Driessen et al., 2012).

The theme of involving citizens in policy-making is a central strand of the second paper too, albeit in a very different setting. Based on doctoral research undertaken by Maria Isabel Lemos, it examines the political dynamics and governance processes associated with securing official recognition of practices that can be defined as 'intangible cultural heritage' (ICH). While arriving at this point involves a complex interplay between international, national and local scales that must vary according to context, the analysis presented in the article successfully explores these issues by means of a single country case study, namely the Cape Verde Islands. The presentation follows the sequence of steps involved in enabling the Cape Verdean government first to gain access to the internationally recognised system of protection for items of historic and cultural heritage under the aegis of UNESCO, and then to marshal a convincing case for inclusion of distinctive features of life in the archipelago under this banner. The latter entails the often uneasy interplay between what the author describes as the 'rigid guidelines' of the international system, the political imperative for the national government to gain the cachet of UNESCO endorsement and the interests of those directly involved at the local level.

Although the author's focus is on the identification of a range of socio-cultural practices as an accepted part of island heritage, this does not mean that the classification of material artefacts in the same vein has been neglected in Cape Verde. Thus, the country contains one 'World Heritage Site' (Cidade Velha, or the 'old city', the original capital, designated in 2009), with eight other places appearing on the 'indicative list' (UNESCO, 2022). However, this achievement appears to have been relatively uncontroversial compared to the process of agreeing, defining and codifying items as 'intangible cultural heritage'. This has had to navigate the choppy waters of inter-island rivalries and variations. As such it offers much more fertile ground for an examination of how these processes have played out, and of the varied discussions, negotiations and compromises that have been required for the system of multi-level governance to work

(Smith, 2007). Given the centrality of the socio-cultural practices in question to people's lives, the inclusion of their voices in the 'heritagization' process is essential, and Lemos brings this clearly to the fore. Her analysis illustrates that participants may well be keen to have measures in place to safeguard their practices, but as far as possible they want it to be done on their own terms. This has especially been the case where initiatives have emerged at the behest of the 'tradition bearers' themselves, albeit assisted in many cases by encouragement from NGOs. Awareness of the commercial as well as the symbolic value of indigenous cultural practices may have been self-generated or externally promoted (or a combination of both), but either way the result surely confers a degree of empowerment to the communities involved.

Of course, to qualify for state support and funding (ultimately from international sources) the objects of ICH must be framed in a way that fits the authorised categories and criteria as laid down in the international guidelines. In certain cases the difficulty of doing so appears to have combined with resistance to centralised control to culminate in the abandonment of a number of projects, especially on the smaller islands. Whether this will have an adverse effect on these socio-cultural traditions remains to be seen; indeed they may very well carry on as normal, with those involved content that they have avoided becoming a spectacle for visitors rather than a celebration of the regular cycle of their lives. In effect similar questions face those traditions that have been accepted into the system, although the author makes clear that at the time of the research the issue of exactly how such heritage protection and safeguarding was to be implemented had only just been broached.

A central aspect of this is whether the written codification required for safeguarding recognition has an impact upon what are essentially oral traditions (Boswell, 2011). This gives all of them a dynamic, living dimension, something that is clearly manifest in something like the vernacular language through the addition of new words and phrases but is likely to be present in more subtle ways in all the other forms too. The dangers of ossification and loss of authenticity are already apparent in certain pursuits such as the *batuku* musical genre. For those that are recognised this would seem to call for a combination of flexible interpretation of the inventory descriptions and a strong element of community control, alongside the development of immersive methods for sharing the traditions with visitors (Dogan and Kan, 2020; Leow and Ch'ng, 2021). As acknowledged in the article this stage of the process remains fluid and evolving, and it may be some time before clear patterns emerge. At that point there will certainly be a case for follow-on research to complement this study, and the results will be awaited with eager anticipation.

The third paper by Murray Chatwin and Mary Francoli also features citizen involvement in governance and policy making, but in a very different manner. It examines the extent to which key components of open governance, namely transparency, accountability and civic participation, are evident within the second pilot round of local action plans produced under the umbrella of the Open Governance Programme (OGP). This originated as an offshoot of deliberations between a handful of interested national representatives at a United Nations General Assembly meeting in 2011, with the express aim of breaking down the barriers between governments and the governed. Despite this genesis and the initial restriction of membership to nation states the organisation has remained independent from other formal institutional structures. This neutrality doubtless allowed it to spread its wings to encompass local and regional governments from 2015 onwards, a move also prompted by the recognition of the greater proximity of official bodies at these scales to the citizenry, and hence the stronger the opportunity for its members to participate in governance processes. The main OGP vehicle for developing open governance at the sub-national level has been the piloting of local

governance action plans by a selection of member authorities. In 2018 involvement in the programme was opened up to any local or regional member wishing to take part.

The analysis presented in the article is based on a detailed examination of the content of 15 of the 20 pilot action plans. This is achieved through coded document analysis on the one hand and application of the four steps of the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach on the other. This revealed that progress against the aforementioned key components of open governance was inconsistent, with good examples in some places and a lack of evidence in others. Overall the verdict is that the plans represent a move in the right direction, but there is still some distance to traverse before any of the jurisdictions involved could be claimed as being fully fledged practitioners of open governance. Given their underlying ethos it is perhaps not surprising that civic participation emerges as the most prominent aspect of the plans reviewed. Nor does this appear to be merely lip service, with a majority based on a process of co-production and most seeking to take this forward into other areas of public service provision. Conversely, accountability and transparency both received less attention, at least in their own terms, especially with regard to governance processes and influence over decision making. That said, all the plans identified improvements in the range, quality and regularity of information made available to inhabitants as essential, and contained proposals through which that could happen. Reaching that stage would in turn improve accountability and transparency, of course. At the same time the identification of problems and issues facing local populations and their framing as the basis for devising acceptable solutions was much less in evidence, and even where it was addressed the extent to which this had come about through participation and co-creation was by no means clear.

Thus, there seems to be a clear danger with respect to the plans examined that the collaboration involved in their production has been something of an end in itself, rather than a means to improve the quality and acceptability of policy measures and of public service provision. Of course, this is a well-recognised and long-standing problem (Damer and Hague, 1971; Quick and Bryson, 2022). Indeed, the acid test for the plans will be the extent to which they influence more collective approaches to local decision making over a longer period. It will be instructive to see whether the consultative mechanisms used to inform the plans are taken forward into governance processes more generally, or whether these ambitious plans are simply left to gather dust. The latter would certainly be a missed opportunity, especially in view of the variety of issues revealed and actions proposed in the different plans and the associated avoidance of the 'one size fits all' trap. However, the absence of commitments to any detailed monitoring and evaluation also revealed by Chatwin and Francoli's analysis perhaps acts as a warning flag on the impact of the plans. Alternatively, there may be other moves happening which are not captured in the plan texts and which might render these reservations baseless. The authors freely admit this limitation, with their approach acting as a good starting point in revealing key issues, gaps and constraints, and only by implication suggesting that further research will be required to assess how matters pan out in the future.

In sum, in spite of their thematic diversity the papers in this special issue highlight some of the common recent trends in the broad field of local and urban governance. One of these is the increasing importance of multi-level governance and the challenges it can pose in particular localities, as the Cape Verde case-study shows. Another theme is the continuing 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. A number of linked features clearly emerge from the empirical material presented in the three articles on this score. Firstly, citizen participation is likely to be boosted if it involves 'hands-on' contributions of a practical nature and not just attendance at a 'talking shop'; secondly, an additional boost will emerge from raised awareness that

these contributions have a high value in social, economic and symbolic terms for both participants and their wider communities, even at a transnational scale; and thirdly, such active involvement will be embedded further where it is articulated through self-governing structures, as with the Oaxacan migrants in California. Here the protagonists admittedly had the advantage of pre-existing approaches and a need to ignore the national and local state apparatus in their new home, but adapting it to their new conditions is an impressive feat. However, for those trying to set up this mode of organisation from scratch the escape from official hierarchical power is easier said than done. It certainly remains a moot point whether open governance approaches can ever foster such types of action, rather than some form of state/civil society partnership. Of course, the latter can be productive and positive in terms of both process and outcome, but this requires shared goals and skilful management. As with all aspects of governance this will vary according to context and circumstances, over both space and time, a feature that the three articles have each in their own way managed to capture. In all these senses, these contributions to this special issue add both new empirical information and fresh critical insights to the field of local and urban governance.

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