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Urban Stud 2000; 37; 845
DOI: 10.1080/00420980050011118

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New Challenges for Urban Governance

Ade Kearns and Ronan Paddison

[Paper received in final form, February 2000]

Why do we talk about ‘urban governance’ these days, much more than we discuss urban management? In his account of the cultural development of the English language, Raymond Williams describes how the word ‘management’ was extended in the 16th century from its original Italian meaning of ‘to handle and train men’ (or in its first guise, horses) to ‘a general sense of taking control, taking charge, directing’ (Williams, 1983, p. 190). It is this sense of the term management that has been lost in the urban context. In their institutionalist review of the contemporary urban challenge, Healey et al. state that

urban management cannot be understood these days in terms of ‘top down’ or ‘command and control’ models of governance (Healey et al., 1995, p. 18).

Something has changed and city governments are no longer able, or not as able as they thought they were previously, to direct events.

We can identify several ways in which the urban context has changed to challenge urban management and has helped to give rise to urban governance. The most momentous shift has been towards economic globalisation involving mobile capital investments, the emergence of world-wide economic sectors, international institutions and the emergence of global spectacle. For urban governments, this has meant a loss of control over urban economies, and new activities and responses. Several distinct changes pertaining to urban governance can be identified. First, interurban competition has become fiercer, with cities trying hard to ‘sell’ themselves for a number of investment and other reasons in what has been termed ‘place wars’ (Haider, 1992). Short and Kim (1999, p. 118) describe this as “the transformation in urban governance from the welfare-state model towards the economic development model”. In an increasingly competitive world, city governments, both elected members and officials, have had to become more entrepreneurial, a role which potentially conflicts with local welfarism.

Secondly, and as part of this competition, homogenising global culture is accompanied by simultaneous attempts to develop a city’s local, distinctive culture to attract business investment. Culture itself has been increasingly commodified in an attempt to attract tourism and inward investment. Thirdly, cities have viewed national governments as less able to help them and less relevant to their fortunes, reflecting Ohmae’s (1995) account of changing urban–regional interrelationships in a global world. Thus, cities have attempted to ‘delink’ or ‘decouple’ themselves from their national economies, sometimes outperforming the national state (Lever, 1997). Lastly, in the light of and as part of the other changes, cities have orientated themselves...
more towards the international arena through cross-border co-operation (sometimes with supranational institutions) and trans-frontier networking (Church and Reid, 1996).

At the same time as globalisation impinges upon cities, other changes in the political, social and spatial spheres either involve, or have implications for, the role and activities of urban governments. The universalistic welfare state has been successively eroded by neo-liberal reforms so that entitlements are less widely available and the benefits and services provided less adequate and less all-embracing in their coverage. Urban infrastructure provision is also less universal and less standardised; nowhere is this more evident than in the case of urban utilities and telematics, which combine shifts in the private, public and global spheres to affect fundamentally production and consumption in cities (Graham and Marvin, 1995).

Although local variation in benefits, services and amenities is often decried as inequitable, it is increasingly the case that as long as minimum standards are protected, variation and innovation in what is provided by the local state are generally encouraged. Political decentralisation has been championed on the need to be responsive to local needs and to differences in political demand-making between localities, outcomes which have fostered variation and innovation. These trends have been reinforced by recent changes in the political domain such as state fragmentation and agency proliferation, often as a response by local arenas to address simultaneously the agendas of competitiveness and social cohesion; the move to involve first the private sector and then more recently the voluntary and community sectors, in governing activities and decisions; and the late 1990s expansion of area-based policy initiatives which seek to make welfare benefit provision an integral part of urban regeneration programmes. Although responsibility for public service provision is more devolved than before, the preferred distribution of responsibilities for the regulation of public provision seems to be more open to debate and further resolution.

Governing cities has also been made more difficult by the growing complexity of social life. The connection between people and places is more diffuse than in past periods (Healey, 1997) so that the city can be seen as “a locus of overlapping webs of relations on diverse spatial scales” (Healey et al., 1995, p. 4). Again, reflecting the perceived loss of governance control, it is argued that public policies can be no more than experiments inserted into the ‘relational ensemble’ of the city. There is more social differentiation within the city, and new lifestyles are being tried and adopted: people live in different ways; travel in different directions; shop at different times (see Healey, 1997). Governing the shared space of the city when old conformities and certainties about lifestyles are gone is challenging.

These elements of social diversity and active differentiation have spatial consequences in at least two ways. First, differentiation is accompanied by socio-spatial polarisation and exclusion. There is a sense that the celebrated city of difference, shared space and social interaction (Wirth, 1938) has given way to cities of indifference and intolerance containing spaces of exclusion (McDowell, 1999). Across a range of European cities, processes of social exclusion have produced concentrations of excluded people in particular neighbourhoods (see Madanipour et al., 1998); there is an “inherent and re-emerging spatiality” to social exclusion (Madanipour, 1998, p. 79). The governance response to these circumstances must include new combinations of people-based and place-based policies (Madanipour et al., 1998).

The second spatial imprint of socio-economic change is seen in the emergence of new urban spatial forms. In Britain, this is taking the form of inner- and middle-ring thinning out, suburban and small town cramming, and creeping urbanisation of the countryside at the same time as urban extensions, urban corridors and ‘edge city’ formations emerge. The search for suburban lifestyles, new spaces of consumption and hi-tech business parks in high-quality environmental settings has elicited governance
responses which are contradictory. The pro-
growth and environmental sustainability
agendas are inadequately balanced, with
stronger urban containment of housing devel-
opments than of non-residential land uses so
that city structures could be turned inside-out
(Bramley et al., 1999). In the US, the debate
is about suburban sprawl versus ‘smart
growth’ (Danielsen et al., 1999).

These changes in our cities can be de-
picted as the triumph of chaos and disorder.
The ordered city has degenerated into a
“morass of fragmenting and recombinin
g relations” (Healey et al., 1995, p. 6); rather
than a cohesive urban economy and society,
we have the city of ‘bits and pieces’ (Amin
and Thrift, 1995). But whether this means
that cities are ‘unruly’ and thus impermeable
to the forces of governance is debatable, for
urban complexity (like other complexities) is
subject to human intervention. For Mooney
et al. (1999), the governance response to the
city depends upon what one’s notion of the
‘good city’ is, how the unevenness and open-
ness of the city are to be negotiated, and how
conflict is to be managed and regulated. This
requires an understanding that cities com-
prise different forms of order which clash,
and that power relations exist and are por-
trayed in urban environments and spatial re-
lations which reflect and produce those
underlying social relations.

Thus, urban governance is not an attempt
to regain control so much as an attempt to
manage and regulate difference and to be
creative in urban arenas which are them-
selves experiencing considerable change.
Most of the changes which have been de-
scribed in negative terms also have positive
possibilities. For example, institutional frag-
mentation can produce innovatory processes;
and economic uncertainties can result in the
assertion and utilisation of local culture(s),
values and images. In explaining the logic of
governance as a co-ordination mechanism,
Jessop (1998, pp. 32–33) highlights its ‘evol-
utionary advantage’ with respect to the re-
ative capacity to innovate and learn in a
changing environment, especially in situa-
tions of complex reciprocal interdependence
among operationally autonomous organisa-
tions with shared interests.

Whilst acknowledging that ‘governance’
mechanisms have always existed, and in this
sense ‘governance’ is nothing new (as argued
by Imrie and Raco, 1999), Jessop nonethe-
less argues that the pre-eminent mode and
manner of governing have changed from
those of hierarchies and bureaucracy to self-
organising networks or ‘heterarchy’. He
gives prominence in explaining this phenom-
enon to macro-social changes, most notably
the intensification of societal complexity and
growing interdependencies in and across eco-
nomics and politics which accompany
globalisation/regionalisation. These changes
mean that new economic and social condi-
tions and new problems have arisen which
cannot be managed or resolved through state-
planning or market means. At the same time,
capital accumulation and competitiveness
have come to depend not only upon
efficiency of production but increasingly
upon added value obtained from extra-
economic institutions and relations: part-
nerships and heterarchy have become more im-
portant. Interorganisational negotiations
occur because firms want to have political
influence and to achieve a better overall
functioning of the urban and economic sys-
tem, and the local state wants to influence
firms and to achieve better overall economic
performance.

Stoker (1995, 1996) takes this line of argu-
ment further in stating that ‘governance’
refers to governing with permeable
boundaries between organisations in the pub-
lic and private sectors. This recognises their
interdependence, but also involves a blurring
or sharing of responsibilities between such
organisations not only for economic but also
for social issues. Governance is about the
capacity to get things done in the face of
complexity, conflict and social change: or-
ganisations, notably but not only urban gov-
ernments, empower themselves by blending
their resources, skills and purposes with oth-
ers. The capacity to get things done no longer
lies (if it ever did) with government power
and authority in one place.
In examining urban governance at this time, we hope to illuminate and illustrate three aspects of the present and emerging situation. First, urban governance is a multi-level activity. As Healey et al. (1995) explain, like people, urban governments exist within webs of relations involving higher tiers of government which seek to shape what they do. As we shall see, urban governments also have relations with lower levels of governance at the locality and neighbourhood levels. Although these are often fostered by urban governments, if they have been established and function successfully, urban governments should feel the force of that social capital which they have been helping to generate within local communities, in the form of new demands for services, resources and opportunities.

We have already noted that one response to the forces of globalisation has been the formation of new supranational institutions of governance. Urban governments both seek relations with such institutions to form new alliances of co-operation, and are the subject of regulations and expectations from such bodies. In such arrangements, the urban system which is being governed may shift from the national to the international. After several decades, for example, the European Union is beginning to develop urban policies for regeneration and spatial development to try to shape the form of the European urban system, seeking to foster competitiveness against other international trading federations and to spread opportunities and support to growing and transforming urban arenas in Europe.

Within nation-states and beyond them, cities are discovering the virtues of the city-region as a space in which collaboration rather than competition can provide development advantages. But socio-spatial segregation and administrative reforms which have fragmented these city-regional spaces mean that achieving the ‘desired’ collaboration is proving difficult in regions in many nations. The difficulty for urban governance today is that no one spatial scale is predominant as the scale at which economic and social problems can be solved (Collinge, 1996). Rather, there is a proliferation of scales, related in tangled hierarchies rather than simply nested, with different temporalities as well as spatialities (Jessop, 1998, p. 40).

We are, for example, only beginning to appreciate how urban networks between cities operate in terms of communication flows, trading and productive links, and innovation potential (Cooke et al., 1999). In the absence of sufficient knowledge, there is a danger that policy-makers assume that one model provides a sufficient solution to the spatial organisation of activity, most recently economic cluster theory (Bennett et al., 1999; Gordon and McCann, 2000; Simmie and Sennett, 1999). It is probably true to say that, in the current circumstances of multilevel governance and overlapping networks, our understanding of how the urban system operates is inadequate for governance to be effective.

Our second theme is that for governance itself, political and administrative processes—or how things are decided and implemented—are almost as important as what is done. There are several reasons for this. Efficiency and effectiveness in the use of resources still matter. The original sense of the word manage (‘menager’) involving the careful use of (household) resources is still relevant. The legitimacy of urban governments rests to a large extent on their judicious and efficient use of tax-payers’ resources; without this element of competence in the citizens’ eyes they would not survive. Hence the British government’s ‘Best Value’ agenda for regimes of continual improvement in local government services. Of course, added value from public expenditure, à la governance, is one way of meeting this expectation.

Urban governments are themselves embedded in societies and the values and expectations of those societies impinge upon urban governments, affecting what they must do and how they must do it. A second reason why the processes of urban governance matter is because governments talk the language
of social inclusion. This is one of the themes of the present era, and the way collective affairs are run is part-and-parcel of this agenda. As Levitas explains:

Social and political inclusion are doubly connected: political inclusiveness may be expected to deliver greater social inclusion; and among the aspects of social life in which participation is sought is the political process itself (Levitas, 1998, p. 173).

In the British case, the Blair government has committed itself to govern inclusively and most of its early references to inclusion were political rather than economic or social. Through devolution and widespread processes of consultation, government would be open and accountable and excluded groups would gain a voice (see Levitas, 1998, p. 174).

Thus, the quality of urban governance in terms of effective administration and open and accountable politics has been given greater emphasis in the past few years. This has two further objectives. First, to produce effective and responsive decision-making in the context of rapidly changing circumstances—experiments with elected mayors and cabinet systems of government are aimed at this sort of outcome (Hambleton, 1999). Secondly, raising the quality of local democracy is yet another way in which a city, or cities within a particular state, can seek to gain an edge and add value to their activities; it boosts their international credentials as desirable and decent places in which to live, work and invest. The move to reinstate local democracy in London is bowing to several pressures: to the need further to enhance its global/competitive position; to provide strategic oversight of the development of the capital; to meet local political aspirations; and, to fulfill the Labour government’s commitment to the modernisation of local government.

Lastly, urban governance seeks new ways to be creative, to build strengths and to access and utilise resources. This is particularly true at the scale of the locality and neighbourhood. Here we find attempts to identify and utilise local knowledge, to build local institutional capacity and to develop social capital, all as means by which local problems can be resolved, local needs can be met and social inclusion through creative employment can be achieved with minimal state intervention. It is said that the open and multiplex city provides more opportunities for creative economic enterprises, often founded on cultural interchange (to which one should add class interchange) supported by family, community and heterarchical means (Amin and Graham, 1997). But we do not always check that the necessary conditions are in place to underpin such developments; that citizens want the type of involvements that governments offer (or impose upon) them; and that the local democracy, public service improvement and local social-and-economic development agendas are compatible with each other.

If, as Amin and Graham (1997) argue, the essence of urbanity is the combination of intense face-to-face interactions within urban space with mediated flows of communication and data over longer distances, the problem in many localities within cities is that neither of these things is present to a great degree. The challenge facing urban governance is to achieve the material and psycho-social security and empowerment of citizens to such a degree that self-generating and self-perpetuating social and economic solutions are forthcoming: too often, the reality of local empowering institutions and programmes fails to match the rhetoric. Returning for a moment to the issue of multilevel governance, these often-disappointing outcomes are a reflection of the fact that local governance activity can mask the insufficiency of national social and political policies to assist citizens. The city is not always the arena in which solutions can be found—although it is most often the arena in which they ought to be implemented.

References


