

48 hours in Brazil: MPA students attend the GPPN Conference

On 4-5 December 2015, a group of LSE MPA students attended the annual **Global Public Policy Network Conference (GPPN)** in São Paulo, Brazil, hosted by Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV). It was the last weekend before the end of the Michaelmas Term. This meant we would spend a whirlwind 48 hours in Brazil only to return to London for a week of teaching before leaving for Christmas vacation. What made the conference worth the long trip?

Firstly, it was a learning opportunity. The GPPN is an academic conference that requires participants to write 7,000 word papers on their chosen subjects. If your submitted abstract was accepted, you were invited to present the paper during the conference. The main theme of the conference was “**public challenges facing global cities**” with three sub-themes:

- bringing IT into government
- improving metropolitan governance
- embracing immigration

My group chose to write about **bringing IT into government**, focusing on how data generated by citizens in their daily Internet usage can be used as evidence for cities to create more efficient and responsive policies. We heard from ten groups of presenters in the IT sub-theme, with subjects ranging from the use of big and open data by governments; the impact of social media in Chinese public affairs; and the development of the Aadhaar biometric identification system in India.



Secondly, to meet and network with people with similar interests. The GPPN is a network of policy schools including the **LSE Institute of Public Affairs**, the **School of International and Public Affairs** at Columbia University, the **School of Public Affairs at Sciences Po**, the **Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy** at the National University of Singapore, the **FGV-EAESP** in São Paulo, the **Graduate School of Public Policy (GraSPP)** at the University of Tokyo, and the **Hertie School of Governance**. The GPPN is explicitly a *student* conference, which made it an opportunity to meet colleagues from policy schools all over the world and to see which emerging policy questions other MPA students are considering in their work. We all already had an implicit shared “bond” through pursuing our MPA degrees. Moreover, because GPPN schools offer **Dual-Degrees**, many conference participants knew each other from having done their first year at a different school. Although GPPN schools are located in very different cities and do not **share**

the same “core” courses, the conference showed that MPA students do share some integral qualities: friendliness and an immediately willingness to launch into (intense) conversation about almost any policy topic!

Combined, the learning and social aspects of the conference helped to build rapport amongst an extremely diverse group of individuals. On the first day, the Deans of nearly all the GPPN schools presented a roundtable debate around the question of “**How to govern divided societies?**”

The topic especially resonated with LSE MPA students because our first assignment was to discuss the role of public policies in ameliorating and addressing social divisions. The debate incorporated themes which we as MPA students spend a considerable amount of thinking about:

- Should all public policies be neutral in the groups they target?
- Should government serve the population as one body, or as a set of distinct groups and categories?

These questions reaffirmed the motivations shared by the research interests of public policy students and deans alike, which reaffirmed a sense of an **international MPA community** working together and **learning from each other to better understand complex and important global issues**.



High-level policy questions, debates and presentations aside, during our 48 hours in Brazil we also witnessed some of the sights of São Paulo, outside of the FGV campus. With some fifty other conference-goers we set upon the Villa Madalena neighbourhood, known for its bars, nightlife, and ubiquitous graffiti, where we ordered shameless quantities of grilled meat at a churrascaria (Brazilian coal barbeque) along with many caipirinhas (Brazil’s national cocktail, made with cachaça). Before heading back to the airport, we made a stop at the Mercado Municipal de São Paulo –a huge covered market selling almost anything, with dazzlingly colourful stalls piled high with fruits we had never heard of previously. Then we got back on the plane, with the flight attendants who recognized us enquiring “short trip?”and arrived back in London on Monday.





So why was it worth taking a 12-hour flight to São Paulo for a two-day stay? The GPPN Conference was **informative** and **educational**: we explored and learned more about policy topics that we are not currently studying. It was **social**: we made new friends and got to know our current classmates better. It was **cultural**: for some of us, it was a first trip not just to Brazil but also to South America. And it was all a lot of fun. Looking forward to the next GPPN Conference in 2016!

February 26th, 2016 | [A student's perspective](#), [MPA blog posts](#), [MPA Programme](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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