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themes and future priorities**

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New Urban Governance:

A review of current themes and future priorities

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Abstract

This review paper explores some of the key concepts, trends and approaches in contemporary urban governance research. Based on a horizon scan of recent literature and a survey of local government officials it provides a big picture on the topic and identifies areas for future research. Bridging the gap between the scholarly research focus and the perceptions and requirements of city administrators represents a major challenge for the field. Furthermore, because global and comparative research on urban governance is confronted with an absence of systematically collected, comparable data, the paper argues that future efforts will require experimenting with methodologies that can generate new empirical insights.

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Introduction

Approaches to urban governance are changing rapidly as cities struggle to adapt to the challenges of the 21st century. Climate change, migration, security, and a more fragile global economy are all driving urban change at a time when national governments continue to hesitate with a full commitment to cities and urban development (Frug & Barron, 2008). In many jurisdictions, financial transfers from national to sub-national governments have mostly been stable or even slightly increasing (in absolute terms) over the years but these transfers are often not proportionate to increasing responsibilities and challenges that cities have to meet (United Cities and Local Governments, 2016). Resources rarely come with augmented authority for cities, meaning that even where cities are secure in budgetary terms they often have little autonomy for developing policy responses to meet these new and intractable challenges.

In fact, the issue of available budgets *versus* the array and scope of responsibilities undertaken by cities is just part of the story. The political and fiscal empowerment and autonomy of city institutions (Travers, 2015), the coordination of strategies and interventions at the subnational level (Arreortua, 2016; Rode, 2018), and the steady supply of skills necessary to deal with the complexities of urban governance (Muñoz, Amador, Llamas, Hernandez, & Sancho, 2017) are all examples of gateways through which national governments can boost or curtail their commitment to cities. It has also been argued that these urban governance constraints, in some contexts, may lead to exploitation and corruption (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Transparency International, 2015).

Urban governance is an appealing concept because local governments – which can be briefly described as public bureaucracies and their political masters – do not exist in a vacuum. City

administrations negotiate their way through the policy process while being subject to, just to name a few: the influence of other levels of government, the need to steer or coordinate with other authorities, lobbying pressures, and democratic concerns (Stone, 1989 and 1993; Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). Governance is also useful as an analytical lens because it does not require *a priori* assumptions about the roles of the various actors regarding goal setting, steering and implementation (Pierre, 2014). It rather emphasises the relationships and interactions between these actors as well as the conditions and rules that frame those relationships and interactions.

Despite its tactical usefulness as a concept, the theories and academic studies on urban governance to date have not yet established a mature and consolidated field of study (Pierre, 2005 and 2014; Davies, 2014; Lucas, 2017). To some extent, this may be due to the transformations that occurred in the decades since the most prominent theories of urban governance were developed and the most involved empirical studies were conducted (e.g. Dahl, 1961; Galaskiewicz, 1985; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Orum, 1995; McQuarrie & Marwell, 2009).¹ As a consequence of these conceptual and explanatory struggles, urban governance research has been dominated by case studies or by theoretical claims with little empirical support. Certainly, well-designed and particularly longitudinal case studies make a significant contribution to the field. But as recently put by Lucas (2017, p. 82), there is “a growing chorus of urban politics scholars who have advocated a move away from single-case studies of particular cities and toward a more comparative approach to urban politics, policy, and governance.” The shifts “from government to governance” and

¹ It should also be noted that the bulk of theoretical development has relied heavily on North American and European cases (e.g. Stoker, 1998 and 2011; Brenner, 1999; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Fontan, Hamel, Morin & Shragge, 2008; Frug & Barron, 2008).

“managerialism to entrepreneurialism,” for example, have been pitched as a clear trend in the way cities are run for quite some time now (Harvey, 1989; Stone, 1989; Pierre, 2011; Koch, 2013). This is often understood as a process where the power or relevance of (local) government civil servants and elected politicians decreased relative to private actors like philanthropies, business associations, management consultants, and NGOs. But did it really change that radically? Given the available evidence, can one be certain that local governments retreated or were pushed to a role of mere “network coordinators” (Stoker, 2011) at a global scale? Or did the current discourse accept these claims based on cases that overemphasized national or even sub-national institutional changes?

Still, collecting systematic data on urban governance in order to understand broad trends at a global scale is extraordinarily difficult. However desirable such knowledge is, given the importance of cities for meeting contemporary challenges, the field is somewhat doomed to feeling its way. New methodologies are needed, but more than this the identification of key sites of conflict and change and a greater emphasis on the Global South are necessary.

In both academic and public arenas, the dominating narrative of governance seems to evolve around political issues of unequal power, democratisation, representation and public participation. Issues linked to (multilevel) institutions of governance and state reform – and how these impact on the pursuit of wider societal goals – seem to have less traction, particularly in public discourse. This could be due to the sheer complexity of these issues, and/or the lack of suitable evidence to develop effective political narratives.

Given these practical, research and data challenges, this review paper aims to identify key areas of concern for future research on urban governance. To accomplish this, we start with a

systematic review of the literature on urban governance “challenges” and a survey of city governments (LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2016). Following these exercises and the overarching interest in empirical insights into urban governance, we then derive “current” and “emerging” themes. We then provide a review of the latest research within this broader discussion and call for more in-depth analysis in the future.

Disconnect between urban governance research and practice

Contemporary urban governance research is characterised by a considerable disconnection from actual concerns of urban managers, practitioners, and leaders. Using a dataset of 408 publications (308 journal articles, 41 conference papers, 37 book chapters and 22 books) assembled through the search engines of two indexing services – Elsevier’s Scopus and Thompson Reuters’ Web of Science – we identify key areas of concern for scholars researching urban governance. Several filtering techniques (automatic – e.g. using “urban + govern* + challeng*” as search terms – and manual – e.g. reading of the title, then the abstracts or introductions) were employed to achieve this final set of relevant references. The governance challenges addressed in each publication were recorded using more than 100 basic categories (which were sketched out qualitatively while reading the titles and abstracts/introductions of the entries). The publication dates ranged from 1980 (one publication) to 2015 (32 publications) although more than 50% of the sources in the dataset were published in the 2011-2015 period. Any publication could refer to any number of the listed challenge categories and, on average, each publication addresses eight governance challenges. The 20 “most discussed” urban governance challenges in the academic literature arising from this systematic review are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The most studied governance challenge, by far, is citizen participation. It is directly addressed in more than a third of the publications included in the analysis. Other categories closely related to this topic that also receive a high number of mentions include the engagement of civil society organisations with decision-making and the lack of local governments' political engagement with the electorate. Taken together, issues around participation, democracy, and engagement are taken up in nearly two-thirds of the articles included in our analysis. The second most prominent area of concern is institutional shortcomings and capacity concerns. Other significant issues are privatization, efficiency and adaptability.

Perhaps the strong bias towards issues of citizen participation identified here is a direct result of the search strategy. While citizen participation is undoubtedly a topic of growing importance (Reese, 2014), journals in the field of urban studies (and beyond) are covering many different topics, including the more administrative and institutional issues which are relevant to urban governance research and practice. It might be the case that this is not done under the headline of "urban governance." While different search terms would likely render different results, it is still illuminating to grasp what sort of scholarly research is directly linked to urban governance challenges and the overwhelming dominance of the question of participation within it. It is possible that certain disciplinary silos are preventing a big picture overview on urban governance and its development as a consolidated field of inquiry (Sapotichne, Jones & Wolfe, 2007).

This focus on participatory governance is not specific to scholarly literature. It is mirrored in the grey literature and as part of most international policy and development initiatives. For example, it has been prominent as part of the preparatory processes for Habitat III – as a

content analysis of the six “issue papers” and 10 “policy papers” would certainly show² – and the final Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All (United Nations, 2017).

But to what degree does the scholarly and developmental focus represent the real-world concerns of city administrators and managers? The results of the Urban Governance Survey developed by LSE Cities, UN Habitat, and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) seem to suggest very little (LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2016). This survey was first launched in the summer of 2014 (data collection from July to September) and 78 cities completed it with their self-reported insights during this first round. The second round included 51 additional cities, with data collected in the summer of 2016 (from July to September, in the run-up to Habitat III), amounting to 127 participating city governments from 53 countries and all continents. The survey was disseminated through the networks of the project partners (most notably, the UCLG membership). After receiving an expression of interest, the research team would confirm that the individual was a city representative (i.e. he/she worked in the respective local government) and e-mail him/her a web link to the online survey. Both the questionnaire and the online platform reporting the results were available in English, Spanish and French.

The survey considered a range of governance issues, including political power, budget and financing, multi-level governance, participation and accountability, strategic planning and institutional change. For our current purposes, one question is particularly relevant: “To what extent are the following issues challenges to governing your city?” The respondents were

² The documentation of the preparatory process of Habitat III can be retrieved through

<https://habitat3.org/preparatory-process>

then asked to rate from 1 (not relevant) to 5 (highly relevant) a list of 20 different issues. The results analysed here come from a sample of 56 city governments assembled by considering the universe of cities that responded to this question and imposing a maximum of two cities for the same country (to avoid country bias). The selection criterion for countries with more than two entries was city population (i.e. the sample includes the most populous cities in the universe of respondents). The sample includes data from all continents and 45 countries, with stronger representation of cities from Europe (38%) and the Americas (29%). Regarding the extent of responsibility of the respondents, most (about 67%) were department directors, heads, coordinators or other top management positions. There was not a clear overrepresentation of specific departments (therefore disciplines) in the sample, though about a third of these top managers were from either the Planning (likely due to the substantive content of the bulk of the questionnaire) or International Relations departments (likely due to the dissemination through the UCLG network). Other representatives included middle management and municipal public servants (about 27%) and Mayors or Councillors (6%). The average tenure on the job of the respondents was 8.6 years. However, it should be noted that it is unlikely that a single individual would have the expertise to fill out the whole questionnaire. We expect that many of the persons responsible for submitting the responses consulted with the relevant individuals in local government. Despite the usual limitations of this type of data source (susceptibility to respondent's own perceptions, non-random selection, reliability issues of self-reported data, etc.) this survey is aimed at understanding the concern of city managers and was designed with an awareness that academic work in the area might not be reflecting those concerns particularly well. It also represents one of the very few global efforts tackling the scarcity of urban governance data for empirical and comparative research in this field.

The most often cited challenge was “insufficient public budgets,” identified as an issue by city representatives in 50% of the cities in the sample. This was followed by politicisation of local issues, the complexity of managing contemporary urban issues, and maladapted or outdated policy silos. 36% of cities stated that inflexible bureaucracies and rigid rules are major factors constraining cities’ governance realities, and 30% singled out lack of municipal autonomy (in relation to other tiers of government), overlapping responsibilities (unclear jurisdictions) and vertical coordination issues (working across levels of governance) as significant challenges to effective urban governance. According to these city officials, participatory governance issues such as “limited access of citizens to policy-making” and the lack of citizens’ “interest” or “trust” in government appear to be less problematic. Given the size of the sample, we cannot make strong assertions regarding differences between world regions or cities of different types. Still, governance challenges do seem to vary slightly from region to region. All listed challenges seem to be more widespread in cities from the Global South. In Africa, overlapping responsibilities top the ranking along with the politicisation of local issues whereas, in India, the major challenge is the (horizontal) coordination of policy sectors. In Latin America, where the array of mechanisms to influence policies available to citizens seems to be comparatively higher (LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2016), the lack of interest of citizens on local issues is singled out as the most recurring problem. The full ranking of challenges for the global sample is shown in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Of course, these concerns reflect the interests as well as the experiences of urban managers. Nonetheless, the disconnect between the issues prioritized by urban managers versus scholars should at least give us pause. Considering how much hope is being placed on the capacity

and competence of cities to lead in the “transformational” efforts towards a more sustainable global development, the level of mismatch between academic input and real-world needs should be of concern (Parnell, 2016b). The fact that the level of “participation” is generally equated to the “fairness” of policy outcomes is all the more worrisome. Currently, there are only a handful of studies that adopt a critical approach to public participation and challenge the view that it represents a panacea for structural inequalities (Lee, McQuarrie & Walker, 2015). Participation and engagement are not prominent concerns of academics only; activists and academics have often emphasized the importance of community voice and decentralisation in the name of greater democracy. But how does this square with cities increasingly having to manage systems or complex international issues that are not necessarily amenable to popular input? While government should clearly reflect the priorities and interests of citizens, which can be effectively accommodated by innovations like participatory governance, managing climate change or transport often requires decades of commitment and investment by city leaders (Sennett, 2014). It is also not clear that cities can manage these issues without significant investments from national and transnational scales of government.

Indeed, as the world becomes increasingly urban, the challenges of urban governance have become a central consideration as part of global development efforts (Parnell, 2016a). In addition to the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015b), adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, includes for the first time a dedicated section on urban development – the so-called Urban Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11). The COP21 conference in Paris in December 2015 (United Nations, 2015a), which led to the signing of the Paris Agreement on climate change, also received considerable support through city-level commitments on climate action.

But despite this growing interest and ambition, the field of urban governance is still confronted with a lack of empirical evidence on the institutional arrangements that are helping cities adapt to the complexities of social, environmental and technological change. The ever-increasing deployment of sensors in urban environments that came along with the ubiquity of the smartphone and the advent of big data, machine learning and “smart cities” (Kitchin, 2016; Greenfield, 2017; Meijer & Thaens, 2018) supplies us with much more data on service provision and usage – or on how cities are managed. But this sort of data is still telling us very little about (1) the politics of decision-making, (2) the outcomes of particular institutional settings, (3) the workings of multiscalar regimes and, paradoxically, (4) the new power structures arising from these technological developments – or on how cities are governed. Still, there is research that addresses these issues. And thus, in the following four sections, we review the literature on current and emerging themes and challenges to urban governance research and practice that warrant further empirical investigation and evidence. Rather than stemming from the systematic review of the literature discussed above, the themes discussed in depth in these sections engage with the top challenges shown in Table 2 (where the last theme, on innovations and technology, cuts across all those challenges).³

Given the breadth, complexity and multi-disciplinarity of urban governance scholarship, we acknowledge that, to some extent, the selection of topics addressed in these sections may be subjective and contestable. Other authors from other disciplinary backgrounds could have

³ For example, “Insufficient public budgets” relates to the issues discussed in “Recalibrating multilevel governance and city diplomacy,” “Politicisation of local issues” relates to the issues discussed in “Softening the edges between politics and technocracy,” and “Interdependence of policy issues” relates to the issues addressed in “Linking institutional arrangements to policy outcomes.”

chosen to highlight different themes, questions, methods and avenues for future research. In addition to the input received by practitioners (through the survey), our choices arise from our own reading of the extant literature. They represent the areas for which new methodologies and enhanced empirical findings would contribute to a deeper understanding of institutional evolution and administrative reforms in cities in the 21st century.

Current themes and challenges to urban governance research and practice

The well-documented transitions “from managerialism to entrepreneurialism” and “from government to governance” brought about deregulation, increased flexibility of planning and the greater involvement of the private sector, but also decreasing interest in developing the public sector and ensuring socioeconomic equality (Harvey, 1989; Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998; Greiving and Kemper 1999; Imbroscio, 2003; Heere, 2004; Blumenthal & Bröchler, 2006). All along these processes, which took many shapes and forms around the globe, there were also calls for a move from an “active” to an “enabling” state (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1996) with the aim of removing barriers to the market, increasing plurality and citizen involvement in governance (Röber & Schröter, 2002; Evans, Joas, Sundback & Theobald, 2006).

Taken together, these shifts have led to more networked forms of governance (Powell 1990; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2016), expanding the number and diversity of actors involved in an increasingly nonlinear policy-making process that challenges hierarchical integration (Greiving & Kemper, 1999; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). New public management reforms, quasi-market mechanisms and the proliferation of public agencies have added to this challenge (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005; Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow & Tinkler, 2006; Catney, Dixon & Henneberry, 2008). Furthermore, the

ongoing privatisation of urban services, infrastructure delivery and operation (Thornley, 1996; Cowell & Martin, 2003; Harvey, 2005 and 2007) constrained accountability and strategic visioning and increased the complexity of governing cities. Finally, bridging geographic scales is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly as a result of urban expansion and in cases where administrative boundaries are unable to catch up and match the functional integration of metropolitan regions (Shaw & Sykes, 2005; Angel, Parent & Civco, 2012; Ahrend, Gamper & Schumann, 2014; Angel, 2017; Eklund, 2018).

If, on the one hand, many researchers dwell on city governance and institutional change without extensive empirical backing, on the other hand, there are others who focus on data leaving the politics aside. The strand of literature that engages with new data – *for* governance rather than *on* governance – typically hosts research that proposes to design and deploy models for “knowing and governing cities” (Kitchin, Lauriault & McArdle, 2015, p. 6). In some cases, the idea is endorsing “evidence-based” policy-making as opposed to the sole reliance on political rhetoric (Moreno Pires, Magee & Holden, 2017; da Cruz, in press). However, the frustration with “inefficient,” “unfair” and/or sometimes “irrational” politics lead many to go as far as suggesting replacing traditional democratic processes with expert-driven technocratic governance or incentive-based interventions into people’s preferences (Lowe, 2013). In a context of extreme and growing inequality such approaches are at least problematic if not likely to fail.

Evidently, indicator, benchmarking, dashboard and data visualisation initiatives are politically-infused, even if this is unacknowledged or the projects are naïvely conceived (Kitchin, Lauriault & McArdle, 2015). Empirical research on urban governance may therefore have to embrace the “political” and attempt to map and scrutinise different

institutional arrangements, formalise the complex multi-scalar relationships between actors, engage with political management and nudging of stakeholders, and critically analyse governance and policy innovations.

Softening the edges between politics and technocracy

The challenges cited by practitioners and academics (see previous section) can be broadly divided into issues of democracy, legitimacy, and inclusion, on one hand, and administration, technical management, and innovation on the other. On the “administrative side,” urban policy and decision-making is shaped by the (in)flexibility of rules, procedures and organisational models, by the availability of resources (e.g. finance, skills and knowledge), by the complexity of the issues at hand (including their volatility and interdependency), and by the coordination of the different actors involved (horizontal and vertical coordination, “underlap” and “overlap” problems – see Lodge & Wegrich, 2014; Wegrich & Štimac, 2014). On the “democracy side,” there are the issues of decentralisation and autonomy (what responsibilities over what policy areas at what governance level?), political cycles and campaigning (e.g. populism and short-termism), integrity (e.g. control of corruption), representation, inclusion, citizenship, and trust in government.

Since successful governance depends on sound legal frameworks, multi-scalar institutional relationships, and innovative policies (McGuirk, 2003; Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Frug, 2014; Pierre, 2014; Hajdarowicz, in press), urban governance scholars and practitioners will have to engage with issues from both “sides” – i.e. they will have to deal with both the political and the technocratic facets of urban governance. However, most applied research and concrete reforms on the ground adopt either one or the other as the focus or entry point to address the struggles and intricacies of urban and metropolitan systems. In a nutshell, this results in an

emphasis on the organisational/technocratic solutions to specific problems *or* on the locus of political power.

An example of technocratic approaches to urban governance is the process of municipal amalgamation.⁴ Although ultimately the decision is “political,” in these processes the administrative boundaries are removed and the number of municipalities (i.e. local governments) is reduced to take advantage of technically-defined, and often highly contentious, economies of scale. There are several dissonant accounts regarding the success of these reforms, e.g. in Denmark (Blom-Hansen, 2010), Israel (Reingewertz, 2012), and Australia (Drew & Dollery, 2014) and – particularly important for the accord between politics and technocracy being discussed here – there is some evidence of detrimental effects for political efficacy (Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011). Other noteworthy cases concern technical (“rational,” “apolitical”) tools to guide public investment decisions (Chen & Jim, 2008; De Lara, de Palma, Kilani & Piperno, 2013) and the goodness-of-fit of the array of organisational models available to local governments to deliver essential infrastructure services – ranging from in-house production to full divestiture, with a particular emphasis in corporatisation and public-private partnerships (da Cruz and Marques, 2012).

Within the urban politics scholarship, a fair amount of attention has been devoted to issues of devolution (Allen & Cochrane, 2007), leadership (Teles, 2014), form of government (Bae & Feiock, 2013) accountability (Gordon, 2016), and legitimacy and representation (Davies &

⁴ In theory, amalgamation is not necessarily a technocratic topic. The guiding reason behind the process could also be a matter of allowing for stronger local governments and improving the quality of democracy. However, empirical evidence shows that amalgamation often turns out to be the result of a technocratic approach that focuses on economic efficiency and cost savings (Tavares, 2018).

Imbroscio, 2009). The narratives about the changing cast of private and public actors (Pierre, 2011) have inspired moves towards “social investments” that promote further democratisation, participation, and cooperation between government, voluntary sector and the business community – see, for example, the recommendations of the Commission for a Socially Sustainable Malmö (Stigendal & Östergren, 2013, p. 6) to “reduce the differences in living conditions and make societal systems more equitable.” These and other dimensions of governance – such as “at large elections *versus* district elections, the power of the mayor *versus* the power of the city council, enabling long-term decision-making when local officials come and go every four years” (Frug, 2014, p. 3) – will certainly continue to be important lines of enquiry.

Cases of research and policies that harmoniously address both worlds are uncommon (though see Weir, 1995 and 1999; Marwell, 2007). Pieterse (2017) bucks that trend with a discussion of how the South African constitutional and legal provisions – that provide for strong, autonomous and integrated metropolitan governments – enabled the City of Johannesburg to use transport planning and infrastructure investments to confront spatial inequalities resulting from decades of oppressive racial government. This public transit-oriented developmental initiative represents an instructive case study from the Global South, showing how the vision and plans for social and spatial transformations in the Johannesburg metropolitan area brought together politics and evidentiary analysis.

Linking institutional arrangements to policy outcomes

New institutional economics and agency theory have shed light on many issues such as vertical integration, incentive mechanisms and even the interactions between the institutional environment and organisational models. The recognition of the hybridisation and

juxtaposition of hierarchies and markets led theorists from many disciplines to refer to the concept of “governance structures” (Menard, 1996). Sociological institutionalism has emphasised the informal and cultural dimensions of organizations and their environments and theorised the processes through which institutions impact on symbolic systems, relationships, and practical routines (McQuarrie & Marwell, 2009). However, the spectrum of institutional arrangements and policy outcomes is so incredibly broad that what we currently know about the links between these depends on what question(s) we ask.

Regardless, institutional design, mutability, and adaptability are central issues for urban governance. Institutions are often intractable and conservative, but they are also necessary for the coordination of people and resources. It is certainly true that calls for improving institutional arrangements tend to be commonly associated with addressing policy problems: “After all, if political institutions emerge as a historical product of particular struggles, it is only natural that these institutions are designed to help resolve precisely those conflicts” (Hajer, 2003, p. 177). Yet, this assumes that we can assess institutional performance in relation to policy outcomes. And while considerable work has been done on the effects of institutional arrangements on political and social outcomes scholars have also stressed the limitations of institutional determinism (Radaelli, Dente & Dossi, 2012). There are numerous problems with measuring policy outcomes. Above all, linking institutions and policy outcomes has been challenged by the long causal chain, long time lags and a large number of interfering variables that exist between the two (Pierson, 2000, Radaelli, Dente & Dossi, 2012).

Although examples of urban research that scrutinise the links between institutional arrangements and policy outcomes (whilst embedding the issue in a discussion of

governance) are not widespread, there are a few exceptions.⁵ For example, Rode (2017) discusses the institutional changes that enabled the integration of urban planning and transport policies in London and Berlin. This research shows that the hierarchy-network duality is inadequate to account for institutional change in cities. The successful integration of urban form and transport seems to require top-down hierarchical organization *and* new forms of metagovernance that ensure the buy-in of more loosely and self-organized networks of actors. While network arrangements without hierarchy lead to ineffectual policy implementation, coercive decision-making hinders the development of a sense of common purpose and understanding, trust, and a range of other social conditions necessary for integration. To further complicate the matter, the extent to which planning and policy integration requires centralization (at any given level of governance) may ultimately depend on the policy sectors in question (spatial and transport planning, for example, seems to demand greater autonomy for the metropolitan level).

In the radically different case of Shenzhen – the first “special economic zone” in China and currently its first low-carbon “ecocity” – successive urban plans have been important governing instruments in providing a roadmap for the city’s socioeconomic and spatial transformation (Ng, 2017). In this city, an understanding of the historical developments – where the initial control of land clusters by state-owned enterprises was followed by the remunicipalisation of spatial planning and development, which was then followed by the liberalisation of nationalised “collectively owned” land and the creation of various

⁵ There are, however, countless examples of research that explores the outcomes – mostly in terms of “cost” or “economic efficiency” – of different institutional arrangements on service delivery (usually without a profound engagement with the politics involved, in its broadest sense). For a review of this strand of literature see, for example, Bel, Fageda & Warner (2010).

mechanisms and regulations – is key to uncover path dependencies and contemplate future policies. While industrial Chinese cities face unparalleled pollution challenges, Shenzhen's low-carbon urbanism has been mainly driven by land shortages which, in turn, stemmed from central government tax, economic, and administrative reforms.

How the institutions of governance are designed within a city make certain kinds of political interests and choices easier to adopt than others (Pierre, 2011). But being at the centre of a feedback loop – institutions “somehow” influence policy outcomes that may “somehow” lead to institutional reform – and contingent on so many aspects, such as the policy sectors in question, how should political leaders engage with their design? For now, the answer seems to be continuing to explore the links between institutional arrangements and policy outcomes in real cities and metropolitan areas (e.g. see Collin & Robertson, 2005). For example, on the tensions between administrative borders and functional territories, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015) suggests a series of guidelines for effective reforms based on evidence suggesting that “metropolitan governance may not be the only solution, but certainly a critical part of the solution to improve growth and well-being” (p. 11). Currently, institutions dedicated to some sort of metropolitan governance are common, but only rarely have strong powers.

Emerging themes and challenges to urban governance research and practice

Against a background of limited authority/capacity and higher stakes/expectations, many cities innovate to meet the challenges. Yet our understanding and theories of urban governance are still mostly shaped by work that was done in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Peterson, 1981; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Stone, 1989). This work paved the

way for comparative research (Denters & Mossberger, 2006) and helped in reorienting the debate about power and in facilitating the analysis of urban politics beyond the formal institutions of government in North American cities and beyond (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001). But it was also a source of some “theoretical confusion” (Mossberger & Stoker, 2001, p. 810) and too “self-contained” (Sapotichne, Jones & Wolfe, 2007, p. 77), when there would certainly be benefits to a multidisciplinary research programme. In the meantime, much has changed. Currently, cities are making use of contemporary technological developments to become “smarter” (Kitchin, 2016). They are utilizing more participatory forms of governance (Jun, 2013; McQuarrie, 2013). Bureaucracies and technocracies are becoming more relational in order to maintain their legitimacy (da Cruz, McQuarrie & Rode, 2018). And city governments have developed international associations and networks to disseminate innovations and develop ideas (Tavares, 2016).

Innovation in urban policy and governance is often constrained by the need for active support from politicians, business leaders, and civil servants which means that cities are regularly limited by the ideology and policy preferences of people who may lack democratic legitimacy. Indeed, governance today mobilizes an array of actors beyond government, including philanthropies, business associations, professional consultants, banks, citizen organizations, planners, and media outlets. The Urban Governance Survey (LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2016) shows that cities have developed an incredible array of institutional mixes to both manage challenges and deal with their national governments, but multi-scalar relationships are decisive.

Other work in this field endeavours to develop a depoliticized “science of cities.” Although this branch of urban science mostly seeks to unearth universal principles that guide the

interplay among space, and sociotechnical and socioeconomic dynamics and relations (Bettencourt & West, 2010; Bettencourt, 2013), some of this work is more propositional and with direct relevance to urban governance research (Batty, 2013). In reality, from models that are capable of showing cities as they really are, it is only a short leap to models for better “city-making.” The advent of “big data,” sophisticated agent-based modelling, advances in nudge theory and other developments are all impending on urban planning and management. Still, it appears likely that institutional arrangements, the political management of different stakeholders, and policy innovation will continue to be critical. The most promising developments are in the area of actual practice, rather than transformative theoretical paradigms (Stone, 2017).

Recalibrating multilevel governance and city diplomacy

Although cities are rather older political entities when compared to nation-states – and despite the occasional enthusiasm for their capacity to respond to transnational problems (see e.g. Barber, 2013) – it is fair to consider that, to a large extent, the future of urban development is highly dependent on decisions made at the national or state level. The NUA, for instance, was negotiated and adopted by nation-states and, ultimately, it is going to be implemented or dismissed by nation-states. It is certainly essential that cities upgrade their institutional capacities but, perhaps even more crucially, nation-states need to develop national urban policies that allow local governments to fulfil their crucial roles. Effective moves towards empowering city or metropolitan governments to establish a transition to a more sustainable society are rare. Most countries both in the Global North and South do not seem to welcome these reforms.

The case of India, where the lack of autonomy and authority is restricting the ability of cities to deal with the swift urban growth, is a prime example (arguably, as is the U.S., Frug & Barron, 2008). In India there is a palpable “anti-urban” bias in the federal political system where state governments yield a disproportionate amount of power (Ahluwalia, 2017). Despite an (ineffectual) constitutional amendment that instructed state governments to transfer a set of specified functions to local governments, the only way out of this governance gridlock seems to be establishing a direct link between the federal Government of India and local governments, bypassing – or at least bridging – state governments. This strategy has been pursued through a series of new “national missions” that envisage reforms and strengthening capacity for planning and management at the local level. However, although strategic leadership by the Government of India is welcome, state governments will continue to be the main actors in crafting a multilevel governance system where city governments can assume the responsibilities assigned to them by the constitution (Gore & Gopakumar, 2015; Ahluwalia, 2017).

Europe is a fertile ground to study multilevel governance and city diplomacy because of the distinctiveness of the European Union (EU) as a transnational scale of governance that nonetheless possesses considerable authority. Indeed, in the EU, intergovernmental relations are becoming more negotiated, cities and regions are expected to be more self-reliant, and top-down hierarchical control is giving way to a division of labour between cities, regions, and central government (Pierre, 2017). The tensions between cities’ competences and resources and the variegated institutional shortcoming of central governments have led EU bodies and subnational structures to engage each other directly.⁶ In addition to (and, often,

⁶ For example, many EU programs in the area of sustainability and climate change target cities and regions more than the member state national governments (Mocca, 2017).

because of) EU-sponsored projects and initiatives, cities are increasingly participating in international networks. This multilevel governance framework and inter-city networking have created an arena that is both competitive (e.g. access to EU funds) and collaborative (e.g. access to other cities' know-how).

Engaging in multilevel governance and cross-border networks entails costs (Mocca, 2017). To gain reputation as a knowledgeable and credible network partner cities need to invest – some European cities, for instance, open European Offices in Brussels to monitor EU programmes and initiatives (Pierre, 2017). Surely, there are political and electoral benefits to be captured from serious commitment to some of the issues sponsored by the EU (environmental protection being a major theme). However, the trade-offs are also expected to be positive from a financial point of view.

In the same way, establishing transnational networks around areas such as climate change, education, healthcare, or transport can lead to substantial savings if the acquired knowledge helps to make better decisions (e.g. regarding costly infrastructure investments). Tavares (2016) found around 120 networks of cities around the world which led the author to posit that subnational activism in the international arena is growing at a rate that far exceeds that of sovereign states. Frustration with national, federal or state inertia is possibly expanding the type and nature of multi-scalar relationships relevant to urban governance. Although local decision-makers would welcome roadmaps on when and how to engage in city diplomacy (Acuto, Morissette & Tsouros, 2016), the field is still facing the aforementioned methods and data challenges. The way “glurbanisation” works from both below and above, across borders and at different scale remains fairly unexplained (Matusitz, 2010).

Questioning innovations and technology

The now much less prominent (Osborne, 2006) New Public Management approach to administration endorsed specialisation, competition and the deployment of incentives as the drivers of institutional and public sector reform. These ideas are still influential in many parts of the world, including at the level of city governments. However, as argued by Dunleavy, Margets, Bastow & Tinkler (2006), they lost momentum and their effects are being actively reversed in many jurisdictions. Still, the scenario foreseen by these authors, corresponding to “a potential transition to a more genuinely integrated, agile, and holistic government” (p. 489) centred in information technologies – the so-called “Digital Era Governance” turn – has not been fully realised.

Undoubtedly, city governments and agencies have been modernising. Many public sector organisations – such as Transport for London and the New York Police Department – have been leading in the wide-ranging implementation of technological advancements to improve their day-to-day operations and are increasingly considering ways of tapping into the potential of using sensors, big data and real-time information. Sometimes, the use of new (or not so new) technologies in cities and by cities lead to new governance processes and structures (like the deployment of “city labs,” Meijer & Thaens, 2018). In addition, the deployment of these networked technologies raise new problems to local governments related to cybersecurity (Macmanus, Caruson & Mcphee, 2013). In fact, new digital technology is changing the way city governments operate and how they relate to society (Ash, Kitchin & Leszczynski, 2016; De Vries, Bekkers & Tummars, 2016; Kitchin, 2016). “Civic technology,” for example, is a burgeoning field of research and practice (Kontokosta, 2016). And the German “energy transition” is a concrete case of socio-technological change which tends to overwhelm existing institutional arrangements at all levels of governance.

Advances in technology, the cost reduction of specialised hardware, and the open source and open data movements are redrafting the rules of the game for public services, community engagement and urban entrepreneurship (Meijer & Thaens, 2018). However, our understanding of the implications of these changes is still meagre. Although pressures are being placed on local governments around the world, most of these “smart” technologies are not subjected to research not to mention more propositional perspectives on how to improve the relevant capacities. The performance of public services, democracy and citizenship mediated by digital technologies has not been empirically analysed. Preconceived ideas about how urban institutions should embrace technological change often turn out to be naïve or even ignorant when confronted with the actual realities of urban governance in cities around the world, the inner workings of the networked objects, services and spaces, and how they might impact on politics (Greenfield, 2017). In fact, the literature offers very little on the political implications of urban and digital governance innovations. Most empirical studies on public sector innovations focus their attention on whether the operational goals set by those who endorsed the digital innovations were achieved or not.

Urban governance innovations can also occur without such a direct link to technological change. Or they may use digital information and communication technologies as an element of a narrative that envisages more extensive institutional and societal changes. In Rio de Janeiro, one Mayor was able to establish an unprecedented climate of political consensus by creating an image of leader that adopts an apolitical “what-works” approach to urban governance (Paschoal & Wegrich, 2017). In this global city, governance innovations – namely, the Rio Operations Centre (Centro de Operação Rio), the Unified Service Hotline (Rio 1746) and the Social Participation Laboratory (Lab.Rio, the Rio de Janeiro “city lab”) –

were used as a means to set out a particular vision for the city, with impacts on the social dynamics and even the very physical form of the metropolis and design of the built environment (Ivester, 2017). These innovations fitted nicely within the broader strategy of the mayor's "rational" governing style and use of managerial tools and were instrumental to strengthen his control over the city's governance.

Indeed, urban governance and policy innovations go far beyond the possibilities created through technological change. They may lie in new ways of funding infrastructure, capturing land values or even in the changing profiles and/or career trajectories targeted by local governments for top-level management positions. Many of the current reform ideas where digital technologies play a major role are being regarded as a "rediscovery of technocracy" (Esmark, 2017). And although most societal problems will not have a technology fix, the ubiquity of digital devices and the transformative power of the Information Age inevitably place technology at the core of new urban governance – and they open the prospect of new forms of power, as well as liberation, that need new tools for management and regulation. One should expect and welcome the continuation and enhancement of discussions between technology enthusiasts (e.g. that claim that data-driven policing was responsible for a considerable drop in urban crime) and critics (e.g. that point out the dangers of algorithm-driven racial profiling and reinforcement of inequalities).

Cities have complicated elements, which can be designed and controlled (say traffic management). But cities are also embedded by complex human systems and complex problems have no single or optimal solutions. Any technological apparatuses developed for cities need to embrace this complexity and be designed to produce suitable "enabling environments" instead of univocal solutions (Mitleton-Kelly, 2015). Complexity is inherent

to democracy, and one of the features that attracts people to live in cities. The development of citizen-centric digital governance tools (United Nations, 2017) needs to take this into account, as well as to be forthright regarding their direct and indirect impacts in the way cities are governed while ensuring democratic value systems are going to be protected.

Conclusion

We need to enhance our understanding of urban governance and, before that is possible, we need to generate new data on how cities are governed. The absence of data to support more robust assertions about the way governance works in cities – and of suitable methods to gather these data – is a key limitation of this field. However, gathering and analysing data on contemporary urban governance is complicated by the variety of cultural and legal contexts that cities operate in and by accessing information on actual governance practices.

Furthermore, the broad scope of the topic and the ambiguous definitions of both “governance” and “city” limit operationalisation and comparative analysis. Although there are many case studies of cities, policies, and governance innovations (e.g. Häikiö, 2007, Gilbert, 2015), it has been challenging to depart from those to a unifying theory of urban governance. The absence of systematically collected comparable data and the limitations of the governance concept itself have been limiting the possibilities of empirical research (Reese, 2014).

Much hope is placed in the capacity of cities to respond to key global challenges and their competence to lead transformations towards a more sustainable model of development. Cities are often test beds for innovative, risky or controversial approaches to social or environmental problems. Being leaner – and less able to tap into traditional sources of public revenue – local governments are frequently keen to experiment with new ways of governing,

planning, generating income (or reducing spending), and managing public assets and services. However, it is far from clear that cities are at the optimal scale or have the right attributes to deal with many of these pervading challenges and conducting the necessary reforms. It might be the case that the hope placed on cities is more due to disappointment with nation-states and their poor or sluggish response than to the real capacity of cities to take on these responsibilities. It is also unclear how far urban governance innovations – i.e. innovations of the institutional mode of interaction between actors in the urban context – can address the capacity limitations and ever more complex challenges that cities have to deal with.

We need governance solutions that are inclusive but that nonetheless meet the technical challenges of the 21st century. All of this will have to be accomplished in a context where globalisation (Brenner, 1999; Servon & Pink, 2015), increasing inequalities (Lee, McQuarrie & Walker, 2015; Mcdaniel, 2016), climate change (Kwon, Jang & Feiock, 2014; United Nations, 2015a) and rapid technological development (Macmanus, Caruson & Mcphee, 2013; Greenfield, 2017) are key disrupting forces. But before attempting to deal with all these hugely complex dilemmas, we first need to understand how urban governance works and how much it is dependent on context.

Although the actual governance challenges on the ground may vary across world regions or cities of different types, these geographical differences are not as profound as for substantive policy challenges (overpopulation, air pollution, aging or shrinking populations, etc.). The little evidence we have seems to show an apparent lack of clear regional trends regarding most urban governance features (LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG, 2016). Issues of authority, capacity to coordinate institutional relations, among many other governance

questions impact on all jurisdictions irrespective of their economic status or geographical locations. International research initiatives addressing different aspects of organisation of authority, responsibility and citizenship help illustrate the dearth of geographical patterns of urban governance – see, for example, the recent evidence from Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the US on issues of metropolitan governance and citizenship (Kübler, 2018; Lackowska & Mikula, 2018; Lidström, 2018; Lidström & Schaap, 2018; Owens & Sumner, 2018; Vallbé, Magre & Tomàs, 2018; Walter-Rogg, 2018). Still, how exactly, to what extent, and what are the key drivers or determinants involved in perceived differences is still largely unknown. “National champion” cities seem to have more ability to be “sovereign” and hold the authority to design their own institutional environments and attract more resources. But this may have an adverse effect on second tier cities from the same national polity. In federal systems it may be harder for cities to achieve this status. But this may produce a more diverse urban ecology. In any case, more research on these issues is needed.

Recent international developments, such as the UK referendum vote to leave the EU or the U.S. elections, prompted many analysts to come to grips with the effects of inequalities and globalisation. Many believe that, although in many cases responsible for the upsurge in inequality, cities can be part of the solution. Similarly, the world is observing rising greenhouse emissions as a result an overall increase in welfare and human development that comes with urbanisation. But cities have better environmental efficiency *per capita* due to economies of agglomeration. The pursuit of more sustainable and just (Feinstein, 2010) cities may well be the answer to many of these issues. But the attainment will hinge on getting urban governance right.

As demonstrated by the wide array of issues touched upon in this review paper, engaging with modern-day urban governance study and practice will require an interdisciplinary – and, we argue, mostly empirical – research agenda and insights deriving from different methodological approaches and diverse global contexts. By presenting a set of articles that explore the relationships between institutional settings, national urban policies and city-specific reforms and changes whilst also offering perspectives on current urban governance challenges and future opportunities in Brazil, China, Europe, India and South Africa, this special issue lays a foundation for that agenda.

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Table 1. Top 20 urban governance challenges in the reviewed literature.

Ranking	Urban governance challenge category	Number of publications
1	Citizen participation (individual citizens) in decision-making	147 (36%)
2	Current institutional shortcomings (not fit for purpose, obsolete)	80 (20%)
3	Government capability (general)	73 (18%)
4	Civil society organisation engagement with decision-making	62 (15%)
5	Working across government tiers (vertical coordination)	60 (15%)
6	Jurisdictional boundaries	59 (14%)
7	Private sector involvement in governance	56 (14%)
8	Institutional fragmentation	54 (13%)
9	Governance restructuring/reform	48 (12%)
10	Public budget constraints	48 (12%)
11	Political engagement with electorate	45 (11%)
12	Cooperative/partnership governance	45 (11%)
13	Government's access to skills & knowledge	45 (11%)
14	Adapting governance structures to changing circumstances	44 (11%)
15	Private sector delivery of public services	43 (11%)
16	Government efficiency	42 (10%)
17	Implementation of policy	42 (10%)
18	Government management capability	41 (10%)
19	Information/skills deficit for engagement with citizens	40 (10%)
20	Government's strategic management/vision	39 (10%)

Table 2. Cities that answered “very relevant” or “highly relevant” to the question “to what extent are the following issues challenges to governing your city?” Data from LSE Cities, UN-Habitat & UCLG (2016).

Ranking	Urban governance challenge category	Number of cities
1	Insufficient public budgets	28 (50%)
2	Politicisation of local issues	21 (38%)
3	Interdependence of policy issues	21 (38%)
4	Inflexible bureaucracies / rigid rules	20 (36%)
5	Lack of municipal autonomy	17 (30%)
6	Overlapping responsibilities	17 (30%)
7	Working across different tiers of government	17 (30%)
8	Access to useful information	16 (29%)
9	Lack of respect for laws and regulations	15 (27%)
10	Lack of capacity to enforce laws and regulations	15 (27%)
11	Lack of skills in local government	14 (25%)
12	Uncertainty of funding	14 (25%)
13	Risks of corruption	13 (23%)
14	Limited scope of responsibilities	13 (23%)
15	Coordination of different sectors / departments	13 (23%)
16	Limited access of citizens to policy-making	11 (20%)
17	Lack of interest of citizens on local issues	11 (20%)
18	Lack of trust in local government	10 (18%)
19	Lack of political stability	8 (14%)
20	Underrepresentation of vulnerable groups	6 (11%)