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‘Good’ Governance Principles in Spatial Planning at Local Scale

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Abstract

The development of countries, the economy of cities and how cities should be governed is a subject that has been studied by several organizations, in many countries, concerning different levels of public administration. Some of these studies have their focus on fields such as sustainability and environment, sensorial networks or spatial planning.

Therefore, this research is based on a literature review and it is focused on the significance of governance role at local scale, for the final decisions that will address the different spatial planning policies and city shapes as a competitive physical form, according to the strengths and weaknesses of a competitive process. It will analyse the good governance principles related on spatial planning actions, considering that Governmental and non-governmental organizations utilize knowledge to reinforce their own position of power, as one of the ways of improving competitiveness, helping to achieve more efficient level of governance, exploring the technology. It will conclude about the needs to identify processes used by local governance to facilitate the involvement of local community in spatial planning decision making, concerning their city or neighborhood.

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1. Introduction

The literature reveals that new models of governance are being studied increasing the public participation process, with more collaborative approaches, and providing better information and communication to the citizens, but at the same time creating more responsibilities in the decision making process [1]. Governance depends on the process of transmitting information through the communication technologies between authorities and citizens, in order to achieve

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a good standard which can mean information, democracy and transparency. Given that the world economy has become global, the spatial planning governance is now linked to world trends as never before. Western nation's local politics have gained in importance as a focus for proactive development strategies, based on changes in capital mobility and shifts in the technological and social organization of production. In today's global world, cities play a major role, competing with each other for reaching the top, being the innovation a central keyword in this arena. Many cities are performing spatial planning roles quite different from what they were just a short time ago with the growth of high-tech, including in the domains of ICT (information and communication technologies). Despite the ICT becoming permanent features of spatial planning, and increasingly also of governance at local scale, the implications for the public realm of the use of these technologies will therefore vary due to different contexts and countries. So, there are still challenges ahead in spatial planning domain [2], such as in the field of governance using new technologies.

2. Governance in Spatial Planning

2.1. 'Good' governance principles

The United Nations recognizes that good urban governance is characterized by the principles of “sustainability, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability, security, civic engagement and citizenship” [3] which are independent and mutually reinforcing, including the integration between local authorities and citizens. This corresponds to the execution of government actions, which depends on the “acts, rules, procedures, instruments of power and institutions by which the citizens (...) communicate with and exert control upon each other” [4].

The UN Inter-Agency reviewed these principles and recommended five goals for good governance i.e. good exercise of power which are [5]: effectiveness (including efficiency, subsidiarity and strategic vision); equity (including sustainability, gender equality and intergenerational equity); accountability (including transparency, rule of law and responsiveness); participation (including conflict resolution, human security) and environment safety. Therefore, the governance depends not only of the institutional decision-making but also of the relationship with social and economic mobilization i.e. the civil society [6]. Thus, various actors are interacting in local governance efficiency. In spatial planning, the relationship between the public sector and civil society is changing in a context of economic recession and public spending cuts. This scenario has brought about changes and consequently challenges to the local governance, which are not yet clearly identified, especially in countries where these difficulties are more experienced, such as in Portugal. In other countries there are experiences where, a strong input from private sector coordinating and implementing of a variety of initiatives, has become a feature in urban governance such as in the case of the UK [7], where the Local Government Act (2000) was a landmark in terms of local authority's responsibility involving other partners. This identification contributed to highlight some ways of improving the good local governance where the public realm can reinforce their authority, legitimacy and accountability in their dealings with citizens.

2.2. Relevance of governance at local scale

Many authors have spilled much ink, discussing the governance in spatial planning, which is broadly analysed at regional or metropolitan scales [8], albeit on the local scale there is still a lack of studies. Often the focus is placed on urban issues in general [9,10] and not just at local scale of spatial planning in particular, where there are some studies relating local institutions and governance [11].

Given that the tasks and responsibilities of local authorities in the spatial planning process have been increasing strongly, this is a crucial issue to study nowadays. On the one hand, the searching for more competitiveness and efficient governance is present at local authorities in their tasks in spatial planning, searching for indicators that could assess the development process and readjust the old ways to new developments, seeking bridges between governance and competitiveness. On the other hand, what should government, particularly locally, do when several groups want to use urban space in different ways is a familiar question on governance. However, many problems are still associated with practice, worsened in a situation of financial crisis and scarcity of resources. The result is fragmentation, democratic deficit results (representative and participative), absence of authority, legitimacy and accountability.

3. The Portuguese system: governance in a context of crises

The role of local governments in spatial planning is changing. Real world of urban politics involves many conflicting forces and levels and, in Portugal for example, the national government loses the ability to manage the increasingly complex global system and local authorities are becoming more important. At the same time the budget of local governments is shrinking. They are assuming new command functions over activities carried out by a combination of local government itself, private sector corporations and non-profit organizations.

In theory, considering the novel legislation, Portuguese local government should be increasingly bargaining with private corporations and neighbourhood groups in spatial planning activity. However, the question is how to do this well in a context of crises?

The decline of rental markets, degradation of old urban areas and the acceleration of construction in peripheral areas [12], the estimated 750 thousand of empty dwellings (Census 2011) or the size of areas for urbanization which is four times bigger than the needs, beyond a growing number of unemployed are urgent problems to solve locally. The result of these policies has been the lacks of urban continuity, segregation, fragmented and disperse urban development of the diffuse city. This difficult economic situation is translated into a shift in the contents of spatial planning policies at local scale and political regime will be more or less responsive depending on how actors seize and struggle over the opportunities.

The spatial planning system framework in Portugal, comprising national, regional and local as levels of governance, and given that the spatial planning governance happens locally, the role of local authorities is crucial. Recently the trend is to reduce the role of local government as a regulator in cities policies and strengthen its role as a contractor with privates, in a partnership spatial planning. Currently, planning instruments advocate that urban rehabilitation is mainly responsibility of private sector (including property owners or urban rehabilitation societies), with the public sector 'doing more with less'.

4. Challenges ahead in governance at local scale

In good governance at local scale some aspects should be considered [13]: there is the expectation that the tasks of local authorities in spatial planning will continue to increase, with or without the necessary budget from the side of public sector; local authority plays a distinctive role in initiation, coordination and creation of spatial planning instruments; roles and responsibilities of local authorities do not overlap with those nationally or regionally; legal, institutional and financial frameworks in spatial planning are set in such way that local real has room (competence, tools, prestige, experience and experts) for a better governance.

Governance means exchange of information and control in a process where the local government and population are transmitter and receiver of information. This exchange supports the communication and the control between local government producing information outputs and citizens interpreting inputs information. Nowadays, this process of exchange of information is supported by the use of technologies as a channel of communication. However, there is a need of using common languages between the local governments and the citizens in terms of spatial planning exchange information. Thus, there is the need to rethink the governance models understood as the collective action, integrating and adapting several groups and territorial interests, defending common strategies and goals [14]. It means the collective capacity of reinventing local governance, giving relevance to private and public actors, using new technologies, promoting synergies, territorial cohesion and consensus.

The success of governance will be based on the most appropriate configuration of all actors rather than the privileging of the role of local government. The requirements are [15]: capacity to speak on and for the community beyond the provided official services; to work as an authority on behalf of the community it serves; to build a responsive authority; to lay the basis for accountable authority by involving not only the public as customers but also as citizens. Governance means "the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the commons affairs of the city. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action can be taken; includes formal institutions, informal arrangements and the social capital of citizens" [16].

The tension between leadership and democracy is always implicit in the governance of the contemporary city and

there are creative pathways that local authorities may take to mobilise local community for collective action. In Europe, there is growing of contractual solutions between local government and private stakeholders to the detriment of the traditional role of public authorities as a regulator. However, it is soon to say that the role of local governments in spatial planning, just like in other fields of governance is shifting towards the coordination and fusion of public and private resources, but the first steps are being taken.

In the case of the UK the number of local political actors and non-elected authorities have increased and local political monopolies have been broken and nowadays are imposed high costs on policy errors, increase the speed at which policy problems need to be solved [17].

Given that in spatial planning for the same territory there are several tiers of authorities (education, health, transports, environment, housing and so on), the power of local authorities is more ambiguous and usually no single one can claim to represent the complex urban space in its totality. The challenge is to bring together a disparate set of potential participants.

5. Conclusion

Several authors have addressed that good governance principles are critical issues as the spatial planning has a permanent and continuous process of dealing with cities. In this process the public authorities have been assuming more and more responsibilities. However, the trend is towards less and less a public role has regulator and increasingly has contractual with privates.

The local planning actors are strongly called to work together as partners. Thus, some steps in this field should be done in order to propose ways for spatial planning actions at local scale. In a context of crises such as in Portugal there is a need to find results that could be a sort of guide for good governance locally, gained with the experience of others. The way includes the promotion of reforms and changes in spatial planning at local scale, leading to an optimal state of governance.

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