

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# The International Geographical Union 'Commission on Geography of Governance' - Annual Conference Lisbon, Portugal - April 9-10, 2015

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The Conference on 'Local Government and Urban Governance: Citizen Responsive Innovations in Europe and in Africa', organized by the International Geographical Union Commission on Geography of Governance and the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, was held in Lisbon, on 9 and 10 April 2015, with the aim to explore recent developments in local government and urban governance in Europe and in Africa, the challenges and opportunities confronting local government, and the recent reforms and institutional experiments on both continents, with few papers covering also other regions of the world<sup>1</sup>. The program was structured in 2 plenary sessions and 12 parallel panels. In total were presented and discussed, in the 14 working sessions, 67 papers, involving 114 authors from 25 countries (Algeria, Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Egypt, Finland, Germany, France, Hungary,

Israel, Italy, Kenya, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States of America), some of them present for the first time in an event organized by the IGU Commission on Geography of Governance. Each session had two or three discussants that helped in the livable and stimulating discussions in each panel and plenary. The program was structured in three main themes.

The first theme was focused on 'Local Government and Urban Governance in Europe: the impact of austerity, recent reforms and the role of local government in an "EU Urban Agenda"'. Papers presented under this theme confirmed that local self-government across Europe has been unevenly affected by the 2008 global economic and financial crisis and as a consequence of that has been subjected to a highly diverse

set of institutional changes and innovations. If in some cases local self-government has been deeply affected by financial restrictions in other cases the crisis has been less determinant in the structural reforms implemented in the cases examined. Besides the 2008 economic and financial crisis, emerge as factors responsible for the changes in local governance in Europe, in recent decades, the impact of EU policies and programs and the transition to democracy, which in some Southern European countries occurred in the 1970's and in Eastern Europe in the early 1990's. In fact, a group of papers illustrate well the two processes responsible for the most important changes experienced by local self-government in Europe in the last half century, the transition to democracy in Southern Europe in the late 1970's and in Eastern Europe in the early 1990's, as well as the impacts of the 2008 global economic and financial crisis in the restructuration of local self-government systems. It was the case of some of the papers focused on local government in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Russia. A second group of papers under this theme was focused directly or indirectly on EU Policies and on the emerging European Urban Agenda and its actual and potential impact on Local Governance, as well as on policies and standards for good governance set up by European institutions which had clear impacts on urban governance across European countries in recent decades. It is the case of those papers that examined European Union urban programs, urban agenda, the Europe 2020 governance framework, and the influence of the Council of Europe as well. A third group of papers dealt with citizen participation in Local Government in Europe, the determinants of electoral participation in local elections and the engagement of citizens in participatory planning in urban regeneration initiatives.

The second theme was focused on 'Local Government and Urban Governance in Africa: democratic decentralization, good governance and the role of local government in the Post-2015 Agenda'. Papers submitted under this theme explored four main issues in local government

and urban governance in Africa: decentralization and planning law reform; the governing of urban informality and the emergence of new planning paradigms; citizen participation in urban planning; and the new challenges confronting local governance in the continent. The Conference provided an opportunity to explore and compare different local government cultures and different models of urban governance in the continent, discussing innovative approaches in critical areas of local governance. Several papers dealt with local government reform and with the reform of planning laws in the post-colonial period, in some cases following recent constitutional reforms, with issues of transparency and corruption being raised in some of the papers presented. A second group of papers discussed the governing of urban informality and the adoption of new planning paradigms, and as some of them showed, current planning practices in Africa are still affected, in different degrees and modes, by the legacy of the colonial planning culture, although new influences have been also present in recent decades. Among new urban planning approaches examined is important to mention the urban projects associated with the construction of new satellite towns, the construction of new capitals, or the emergence of new approaches to urban heritage in sub-Saharan Africa and in North Africa as well. Citizen participation in urban governance and in urban planning in Africa was explored in several papers presented in the conference, being increasingly seen as an important condition for more inclusive urban governance in African countries. Finally this theme included also papers focused on a diversity of challenges confronting local governance in Africa, as was the case of the increasing importance of middle classes, the transformation of a previously privileged neighborhood in the post-apartheid period, or the role of private corporations in public-private partnerships and the impact they can have in the entire local and regional governance systems in Africa.

Finally, in the third theme on 'The use of ICT to expand the role of citizens in Urban Governance: national cases and international

comparisons', the theme more directly connected to the 'International Journal of E-Planning Research' (IJEPR), the conference discussed different approaches, methods, and tools that have been employed to inform, engage and increase citizen participation in local government policy-making, in particular in the field of urban planning. Among other issues, these papers addressed the development of a GIS method for consultation in the planning of outdoor environments, the progresses made in online communication facilities for urban planning in municipalities in Poland and in Germany, the move from intelligent to smart cities, citizen participation in smart city projects, the use of information and communication technologies in citizen reporting approaches, the role of citizens in the surveillance of public protests in the urban space, and the development of urban hactivism as a model of governance with an human face. As anticipated, these papers showed that the adoption of these new ICT tools by local governments opened a whole range of new possibilities in the field of citizen participation

in urban governance, although a number of barriers still continue to halt the full potential of these technologies.

The planned publication of a selection of these papers in the 'International Journal of E-Planning Research' and in other publications, according to the theme, will certainly add new information and insights to the literature on local government in Europe and in Africa, and on the emerging issues, challenges and opportunities in the field of citizen e-participation, offering an informed and updated view of key challenges confronting the governance of cities in these two continents, and on the role information and communication technologies can play in the innovation of urban governance worldwide.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> - For the full program and abstracts see the Conference website: <https://sites.google.com/site/locgovgeo2015/home>