

Book Review

United Nations E-Government Survey 2018: Gearing E-Government to Support Transformation Towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies

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*United Nations E-Government Survey 2018: Gearing E-Government to Support Transformation
Towards Sustainable and Resilient Societies*

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The 2018 UN E-Government Survey is the 10th in the series that started in 2001. This survey is produced every two years by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, covers e-government development in the 193 UN members states, which gives it the distinctive characteristic of being the only truly global overview on e-government development. As the previous reports (see, for instance, book review published in IJEPR, Vol. 6.1, 2017), this one provides an analysis of the progress in the use of e-government since 2016 in the different regions of the world and in various policy sectors. A new feature of the 2018 survey is the inclusion of an analysis of local e-government development in 40 cities across the world (7 cities in Africa, 6 in Americas, 13 in Asia, 12 in Europe, and 2 in Oceania). It is, therefore, as all the other similar reports before, an excellent background for the analysis of recent developments in the field of urban e-planning and for that reason a mandatory reference for all those working in this field.

The 2018 UN Survey on E-Government comprises eight chapters and an extensive annex, this one constituted by a methodological section and by a very useful data base on different aspects of e-government. The title of each chapter is explicit about the content and taken together show clearly the rationale of this study: 1 - Mobilizing e-government to build resilient societies: preconditions and enabling environment; 2 - E-government for leaving no one behind; 3 - E-resilience through e-government: global and regional perspectives; 4 - Building the resilience of e-government; 5 - Global trends in e-government; 6 - Regional development and country groupings performance; 7 - Improve cities resilience and sustainability through e-government assessment, and 8 - Fast evolving technologies in e-government: Government Platforms, Artificial Intelligence and People. All along

the eight chapters, the study presented reveals the consolidation of previously identified trends and highlight the most important changes. These trends and changes point for a rapid and widespread dissemination of those basic conditions, infrastructural and human, that make possible urban e-planning. If until recently these basic conditions were only present in the most developed countries they are now current or normal in a growing number of countries, and no longer only in developed countries as before. In addition to this, the report compiles and offers ample evidence on how recent worldwide developments in e-government has the potential to support the implementation of the aims of the 2030 Agenda, findings that also support the idea that urban e-planning has the potential to positively contribute to build sustainable and resilient cities and other forms of human settlements.

Among other important findings, it is worth mentioning the fact that now almost 2/3 of the UN member states have a high-level EGDI, well above the world average, while the proportion of countries with low EGDI was reduced by half, thus confirming past findings that indicated a sustained trend towards an ever increasing high performing e-government. Also important to note is the fact that European countries continue to lead e-government development globally, confirming the common perception that it is also here that urban e-planning is more advanced and generalized. On the contrary, African countries continue to be in the lower levels, confronted with numerous difficulties, which also affect the development of urban e-planning. America, Asia and Oceania share a similar position in the middle of this ranking, with numerous countries in these regional groups well above the world EGDI average. This confirms once again the existence of correlation between the country income level and its position in the EGDI ranking, although, as shown in previous reports, in each of these groups there are however marked geographical disparities, with some countries scoring high in the EGDI (US and Canada; Australia and New Zealand) while others have much lower scores. Important to note is also the fact that within this overall increase in e-government performance, the development of online services, namely on public services provision online, with all countries in the world now with a national portal and 2/3 or more with at least one transational public service online, is perhaps the most impressive change registered by this survey, when compared with the previous periods. These changes are also good news for the development and expansion of urban e-planning in all regions of the world and no longer only in developed countries.

Apart these more general trends towards an increasingly highly performing e-government, the 2018 survey reveals other shifts, again geographically and socially uneven. For instance, the provision of online services to the most vulnerable social groups is a new trend that marks the development of e-government in this period, although with important differences among countries, as expected. The use of mobile Apps is another strong trend that this survey reveals, or confirms, which will have profound impact in the way urban e-planning is conducted, in particular in the way citizens can engage themselves in the different stages of the planning process. The survey shows that governments in all regions of the world are using digital technologies to better respond to the new challenges, using GIS, open data and technologies such as artificial intelligence, which are also increasingly present in the field of urban e-planning.

But the 2018 Survey also points out the key challenges that this digital revolution is confronting all sectors of activity, including all spheres of government and public administration, namely urban e-planning, by creating both new opportunities and new risks for future governance of cities and other human settlements. Among other newly emerging technologies, the report highlights the increasing proliferation of big data, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), data science, blockchain, and robotics. Urban e-Planning, as part of the digital revolution in both central and local government, is experiencing significant changes in the way citizens live and on how they interact and engage with public administration and public service. However, as this report once again shows, the digital revolution is geographically uneven, with less developed countries and regions of the world lying well behind the new technological frontier. This is particularly so in the case of the African countries.

Another lesson that should be retained from the 2018 Survey is the need to consider carefully the risks associated with the new emerging technologies referred before, which can be potentially

disruptive for the public sector and for urban e-planning specifically. Left alone and without proper scrutiny its widespread use can be harmful for the most vulnerable populations, may reinforce inequalities, social and geographical, deepening the already existent digital divides, affect social cohesion, the economy and jobs, and raise new and so far unsuspected privacy and cyber security issues. All these are also present in the field of urban e-planning, requiring therefore staff trained and adequate resources to deal with these challenges.

Finally, the 2018 report points out very clearly numerous ways e-government can contribute to build resilient societies, and how it can advance the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals. Although not referred explicitly, these are also ways through which urban e-planning can contribute to build resilient cities and other types of human settlements. As in previous UN Surveys on E-Government, but now perhaps more emphatically, the evidence offered along the three hundred pages of the report suggests that e-government, and by association also urban e-planning, gets better public services, favours citizen engagement in public policy, increases transparency and improves accountability in both local and central governments.

For all these reasons, this 10th study conducted by the UN on e-government development worldwide is mandatory reading for students, researchers, planners and policy makers working in the broad field of urban e-planning.

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