Book Review

United Nations E-Government Survey 2022 - The Future of Digital Government

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The *2022 UN E-Government Survey* is the 12th report published in the last two decades in this highly valuable biennial series on digital government development. The UN started this global overview in 2001, publishing every two years the state of e-government development in the 193 UN members states. This makes it the most important survey and benchmark reference in this field, comprising now a large body of in-depth data sets and analysis, which turns it mandatory reading for everyone working on Urban e-Planning. As the previous reports (see, for instance, the book reviews published in the *IJEPR*, Vol. 6.1, 2017 and in Vol. 8.3, 2019), this one provides an analysis of the progress in the use of e-government in the different regions of the world, ranks how countries perform in the delivery of digital services and on how they engage citizens online in public affairs, both at central and local government tiers. In doing so, it shows how this is changing the way citizens communicate and interact with government, and therefore also with the planning system, in particular in the most developed countries, a shift accelerated during the pandemic, with numerous new measures and tools implemented to address the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic (e.g., distance learning, remote work, telemedicine, online scheduling for medical tests, vaccination services, and so on). Issues of digital ethics, privacy, and cybersecurity, among other dimensions that emerge in the analysis, ought also to be seriously considered by those engaged in Urban e-Planning processes.

The 2022 UN Survey on E-Government comprises five chapters and, as usual, an extensive annex, this one constituted by a methodological section and by a valuable database on different aspects of digital government, at central but also at local and city government levels. As in previous reports, this Survey followed the methodology established in the beginning, which has been improved over the years, allowing nonetheless consistent comparisons of some of the key indicators along an already long period of two decades. The titles of the chapters give a clear picture of the rationale and content of this 2022 report: "1. Global Trends in E-Government;" "2. Regional E-Government Development and the Performance of Country Groupings;" "3. Local E-Government Development;" "4. Leaving no

one behind in the hybrid digital society;" "5. The Future of Digital Government: Trends, Insights and Conclusions." The first three chapters explore global, regional, and local e-government trends. The following one explores the challenges and opportunities related to the issue of leaving no one behind in the current and future hybrid digital society, highlighting among other aspects the importance of e-participation and open government data. The fifth and final chapter examines some of the trends and innovations that are expected to steer the future of digital government.

The 2022 report shows, by comparison with the previous ones, an overall increase in the E-Government Development Index (EGDI), from 0.5988 in 2020 to in 0.6102 in 2022, which in part is correlated with the improvements in telecommunications infrastructure and human capacity development. In total, around 69% of the UN member states are now in the high or very high EGDI level. The E-Government Development Index correlates positively with the e-Participation index. These are also good news for the development of Urban e-Planning worldwide.

The more advanced countries in the 2022 e-government ranking are Denmark, Finland, and the Republic of Korea. They are followed, for instance, by New Zealand, Sweden, Iceland, Australia, Estonia, the Netherlands, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. All of them part of the group of developed countries. On the contrary, the lowest EGDI rankings are found in less developed countries or emerging economies, in particular in Africa (50 out of the 54 countries in the continent, representing 95 per cent of Africa's population, have EGDI values below the global average) and Oceania (11 out of 12 SIDS in Oceania have EGDI values below the global average). A similar divide was found in what regards the response to Covid-19 pandemic, with around 90% of European countries offering a wide range of digital responses related to the pandemic compared to only 40% of countries in Africa.

Notwithstanding increases in online services for vulnerable citizens, the report provides evidence that deep digital divides tend to persist, not only between countries, but also within countries - urban-rural divides, gender divides, age divides, (dis)ability divides - being particularly so between Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the world. In addition to these two trends - increasing digitalization in government activities accompanied by deep digital divides - the report also points a third trend, the move towards hybridization. In other words, the evidence collected in this Survey suggests that the future will not be solely digital, as some thought, not long ago, but hybrid. Public workers will thus remain central in any government structure, and certainly also in urban planning administrative and technical structures.

The study presented in this report reveals the consolidation of previously identified trends and highlight the most important changes. Together these five chapters reveal that this digital transformation across all tiers of government has deeply changed public administration institutions, including city governments, and therefore also the conventional urban planning administration system. The growth trend was accelerated somehow by the challenges put forward by the pandemic, a move that seems will continue forcing changes in the way governments deliver public services, including planning and urban services.

If the first Surveys published in the first decade of this century showed the existence of basic conditions, for a proper e-government system, only in the most developed countries, they are now common in a large number of countries. The change is being so deep that the physical and digital administrative processes are becoming less and less separated, turning most government actions hybrid ones, including in the urban planning sector. This shift is making e-government invisible, in the sense that it is now increasingly embedded in a whole series of activities. The findings also suggest an increase in automated devices that provide services, at any time, in any place, although the evidence do suggest difference between sectors and among countries. However, issues related to access to the Internet, affordability, digital literacy, and other human centred abilities have been identified as factors affecting citizen engagement with the digitalization of government activities. Without properly addressing these weaknesses it will be difficult to overcome the persistent deep digital divides identified in this as well as in previous reports.

Following the introduction in the 2018 Survey of an analysis of local e-government development, focused then on 40 cities across the world (7 cities in Africa, 6 in Americas,13 in Asia,12 in Europe, and 2 in Oceania), the 2020 Survey covered 100 cities, and now the 2022 Survey analyses, in chapter 3, the progress of digital government in the most populous city in each country. This evidence on local digital government is a helpful framework for the analysis of recent developments in the field of Urban e-Planning. It shows that most cities have improved their 'Local Online Service Index' (LOSI) scores. LOSI value increased from 0.43 in 2020 to 0.51 in 2022, with the more populous cities tending to have a higher LOSI value, despite persisting the gap between city and national portals. The top 10 cities in 2022 are: Berlin, Madrid, Tallinn, Copenhagen, Dubai, Moscow, New York, Paris, Singapore, Shanghai. The divide between cities (the most populous in each country) is also profound and overlaps that found among countries. The 38 cities in the very high LOSI group, 20 are located in Europe, 10 in Asia, 6 in the Americas, and 2 in Oceania, and none in African countries.

Digitalization will certainly continue spreading through all spheres of society, but public administration, in all tiers of government, including Urban e-Planning, will be most probably predominantly hybrid. This trend towards digitalization and hybridization, being a positive move, should not be seen as an end in itself, but instead as part of a broader framework for sustainable development. In addition, this move continues to be unequal, when one compares countries, but also within each country, with the benefits not reaching everyone in the same way, leaving aside or behind, communities and vulnerable groups of citizens.

This pattern of digital and social inequality, at both national and local levels, has been further exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. This calls for policy measures aiming to leave no one offline, a challenge that some countries and cities will have difficulty to meet. This will also require, including in Urban e-Planning, the widespread use of open data and open source, consistent plans for digitalization of planning services, improved internet connectivity, and properly resourced administrative and technical services in all tiers of government. For all these reasons, the geography of Urban e-Planning will probably remain for the time being uneven, overlapping somehow the divides identified in the 2022 UN E-Government Survey.

In sum, for the ample empirical evidence that makes it the most complete global survey of e-government, and for the innovative insights provided, this report is mandatory reading for anyone working in the field of Digital Government, and in Urban e-Planning in particular. It is of interest for researchers and for students in subjects dealing with government, public administration, planning, among others.

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