



# Smart Urban Intermediaries

Connecting people.  
Changing communities.

## Urban and network governance

Working Paper

01-11-2018



## About the project

Smart Urban Intermediaries (SmartUrbI) is a collaborative research programme (2017-2019) co-led by Tilburg University, University of Edinburgh, University of Birmingham and Roskilde University. It is funded by JPI Urban Europe (P/693443) through NWO, Innovation Fund Denmark, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ES/R002991/1).

SmartUrbI works with a wide range of public, third and community sector partners across the four countries. The purpose is to improve understanding and support for people who make a difference in urban neighbourhood (aka 'smart urban intermediaries'). The project entails collaboration across 'local labs' in Birmingham, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Glasgow. The labs are sites for co-inquiry between researchers and practitioners exploring barriers and enablers to smart urban development and social innovation. The project will also entail study visits to Portugal and Poland, and a final conference in Denmark in September 2019.

## About this working paper

This working paper was co-written by the SmartUrbI team to inform the development of the research, and it's part of a series of papers that reflect on-going thinking rather than final project findings. Questions or comments can be sent to: [smarturbi@gmail.com](mailto:smarturbi@gmail.com)

## About the research team

For more information about the project please see our website, where you can also subscribe to the newsletter: <http://smart-urban-intermediaries.com/>. Follow us on Twitter: @Smart\_Urb\_I



# Urban and network governance

## *Working Paper*

### Rationale

In this paper we reflect and address how literature on urban and network governance could be informative. Importantly, this Working Paper is somewhat different than others since it is mainly a paper that covers the debates in the literature. Based on the literature review constructed before, it builds in some stepping-stones to create critical awareness, conceptual distance and reflection for our research.

### Topic Overview

In general, governance theorists identified networks as a positive response to challenges of a 'hampered' governmental system and limited steering capacities, heralding them as the 'new ingredient' in the 'mix' with markets and hierarchies (Lowndes, 2001, p. 1962). As collaborative structures proliferated, network governance was perceived as the most effective way of organizing collective action. As Isett et al. (2011) commented: *"Networks provide flexible structures that are inclusive, information rich, and outside the scope of direct bureaucratic control. These structures allow public agencies to manage public problems by leveraging expertise held outside its scope of authority"* (Isett et al., 2011: 159). Therefore, the concept of networks became emblematic of a wider family of concepts concerned with the rise of network *governance*, into 'post-traditional' public administration and neo-institutionalism (Eikenberry, 2009; Lowndes, 2001). These approaches share a common concern with process, fluidity, openness and uncertainty. As suggested (Isett et al., 2011), the 'purported flexibility of network governance appeals to new forms of policy and resource coordination, accountability and the revitalisation of democratic systems' (Stoker, 2004) and it answers the problem of 'democratic anchorage' in a decentered polity that escapes state control (Sorensen and Torfing, 2008). As such, the concept of *networks has become an influential device to understand steering in public decision-making*. There are generally three ways in which 'networks' are used in PA literature (Isett et al., 2011):

- 1) Networks as metaphor or organizing concept: a powerful concept to understand what is going on in social contexts (see also the 'differentiated polity' as a narrative (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010);
- 2) Networks as methods and methodological paradigm (of social network analysis) (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2003);
- 3) Networks as utilitarian tool or as an approach to get something done and understand public service provision (Isett and Provan, 2005; Huang and Provan, 2007)

While there is also criticism since network governance can be 'inefficient, inequitable and unethical' (Taylor and Hoggett, 1994: 138), networks: "*represent an attractive alternative to the command and contract modes of coordination because they fit with increasingly fragmented societies and provide more flexible and fluid coordination*" (Davies and Spicer, 2015, 227). As such, most studies focus on the 'productive capacity' of governance networks, on the instrumental working arrangements that produces public goods and services to get things done (Hendriks, 2014).

Some criticized that governance as a concept is not just a *sole descriptive* account but also holds *prescriptive* and normative assumptions (Davies, 2011). Starting from the early conceptualisation, governance has been depicted as an answer to a fragmented and complex modern society which was diagnosed as being 'far less controllable than in previous periods', resulting in a fundamental rethinking of a 'floundered' government (Peters, 2001). But this 'undoubted' shift from government to governance was not just a descriptive depiction or neutral empirical observation. Guided by assumptions that government was more fragmented, fractured and decentralised 'than before' and that fragmentation is a bad characteristic of a state, scholars searched for solutions to overcome such fragmentation. This resulted in the 'shift' to governance as a prescriptive and thus normative recommendation to 'fix' governmental steering capacities and public service delivery in an effective manner.

But the concept of governance, as applied by Rhodes, remains too narrow and needs to be equipped with tools from political economy in order to be able to 'incorporate important aspects of interests, power and conflict' (Kjaer, 2011: 101). Moreover, it raised criticism about its democratic ethos since the concept of governance seems to assume *democratic* forms of government and steering. As such, the initial theoretically descriptive term of governance is therefore sometimes front-loaded by political prescriptions on *democratic* steering. It seems to serve a 'democratisation of democracy' and a 'sacralisation of consensus' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xv). It seems understood from the extent that governance networks should 'serve the purpose of strengthening the connection between the two legs of liberal democracies: representative government and a self-governing civil society' which calls for "a specific kind of regulation that does not disrupt the self-regulating capacity of horizontal patterns of interaction" (Sorensen, 2016: 423). But this can be debated since it holds quite strong assumptions about democracy as a self-regulating steering capacity of civil society. Because, while the narrative of network governance seems appealing, a range of empirical studies (Lawless, 2004; Davies, 2007; Addicott et al, 2007; Guarneros, 2008; Davies and Pill, 2012) demonstrated some disconnection between rhetoric and reality. As such, several studies showed that governance networks do not always manage this self-steering in practice, either 'because of conflict' or because it fails to recruit 'the right' actors (Sorensen and Torfing, 2007). Others have shown that networks generate distrust and undermine trust, stabilize the existing power hierarchies and produces stable

orientations on consensus-based procedures (Davies and Spicer, 2015). As such, it shows that networks are sometimes a form of window-dressing, designed to make collaboration more legitimate, attractive and democratic (Davies and Spicer, 2015).

Next to this, the literature on participatory governance amends a view of the state by showing that the state from time to time opens up its activities to non-state actors, carrying out its functions in partnership with local communities (Fung & Wright 2003; Iskander, 2005). It is a discourse about a 'hampered' governmental system, characterized by *limited* steering capacities, in which the *old* model of public administration had *floundered*. It is a well-accepted narrative in which the state reinvents itself and gives the impression of being under construction to be more adaptive, isomorphic and flexible to current society in an almost mimetic fashion. But, as stated by Du Gay (2003: 673):

*"This epochal schema in which 'bureaucracy' or 'administration' is reduced to a simple and abstract set of negativities contrasted with an equally simple and abstracted, but positively coded, set of 'entrepreneurial' principles, systematically evacuates the field of public administration of its characteristic content. How could anyone be for bureaucracy if it is defined simply as a dysfunctional, outdated and inefficient form of organization? Who could not be supportive of a form of organization that shares none of those deficiencies and guarantees a better future? However, when attention is focused on the specific purposes of public administration and its particular political and constitutional embeddedness, the generalized articulation of bureaucracy with the outmoded and dysfunctional is less obvious and the generalized superiority of 'entrepreneurial principles' much more problematic"* (Du Gay, 2003: 673)<sup>1</sup>

As such, and mentioned before, 'governance' became the answer to 'fragmented' and 'fractured' state-centred steering. Fuelled by notions of integration, state steering should no longer be a central top-down and hierarchical, but instead a more decentred, horizontal partner in public-private relationships (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). And by this focus on integration, to create a more horizontal and in-betweenness of state management, the focus shifted towards the ones personalizing this shift, such as 'community leaders', 'competent 'boundary spanners', 'everyday makers', 'deliberative practitioners', 'social entrepreneurs', 'everyday fixers', 'civic entrepreneurs' and 'hero-innovators'. Here is the explicit relationship with our project.

Because when it comes to local or urban governance, the shift towards governance has often been associated in Western Europe with a trend toward the establishment of stronger local leaders (Borraz and John, 2004; Genieys, Ballart and Valariea, 2004; Purdue, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2008; Alonso and Mendieta, 2010). Thus, not coincidentally, strong formal and informal local leadership came on the agenda, emerging from the governance debate, as the

most logical answer to a fragmented picture of governance and society (Steyvers et al., 2008). This fragmented character of contemporary local governance is indicated as a call for plural forms of leadership (Borraz and John, 2004), which could bring it all together (Genieys, Ballart and Valariea, 2004).

In this body of knowledge, it is sometimes acknowledged that leadership is not vested into one sole actor, but that we should think of leadership cycles (Vincent and Crothers, 1996; 1998; Purdue, 2005). Actors within such governance networks hold exclusive powers and powerful positions (Pieters and Pierre, 1998) and are assumed to have a strong say in the collective definition of policy objectives. Such local leaders are perceived as *synthesizers* or *brokers* providing vision and empowering collectivities to act (Steyvers et al., 2008; see also: Barrett, 2004). This central attention to these 'fixers' seem to be caused by the emergence of this governance paradigm. These 'fixers' became the lynchpin and answer for bottom up integration, creating inclusivity, horizontal connectivity and being the engineers in fixing brokenness (Feldman & Khademian, 2007). But, as Du Gay significantly formulates above, that shift from government to governance based on a dysfunctional narrative, can be considered 'epochal' and studies of any kind of governance should not uncritically adopt the superiority of entrepreneurial principles.

## Bibliography

Munro, Roberts and Skelcher (2008) partnership governance
Pierre (1999) Models of urban governance
Jones, Hesterly, Borgatti (1997) a general theory of network governance
Bryson, Sancino, Benington and Sorensen (2016) towards a multi-actor theory
Sorensen and Torfing (2016) co-initiation of collaborative innovation in urban spaces
Sorensen (2017) political innovations
Hendriks (2009) deliberative governance
Voorberg, Tummers and Bekkers (2015) systematic review of co-creation and co-production
Brenner (1999) globalisation as reterritorialisation: the re-scaling of urban governance in the EU
Fung and Wright (x) Deepening democracy
Peters & Pierre (2012)
Kjaer, A (2011). Governance
Ansell & Torfing (2016) Handbook on governance theories
Purdue, 2005
James Austin Howard Stevenson Jane Wei-Skillern
Genieys, W., Ballart, X., & Valarié, P. (2004). From 'great' leaders to building networks: The emergence of a new urban leadership in Southern Europe?. <i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i> , 28(1), 183-199.
Blanco, I., Lowndes, V., & Pratchett, L. (2011). Policy networks and governance networks: Towards greater conceptual clarity. <i>Political Studies Review</i> , 9(3), 297-308.
Blanco, I. (2013). Analysing urban governance networks: bringing regime theory back in. <i>Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy</i> , 31(2), 276-291.
Coaffee, J., & Healey, P. (2003). 'My voice: My place': Tracking transformations in urban governance. <i>Urban studies</i> , 40(10), 1979-1999.
Bogason P, Musso J A, 2006, "The democratic prospects of network governance" <i>The American Review of Public Administration</i> 36 3–18
Davies J S, Pill M, 2012, "Hollowing out neighbourhood governance? Re-scaling revitalization in Baltimore and Bristol" <i>Urban Studies</i> 49 2199–2217

Stoker G, 2011, "Was local governance such a good idea? A global comparative perspective" <i>Public Administration</i> <b>89</b> 15–31
Stoker G, 1998, "Governance as theory: five propositions" <i>International Social Science Journal</i> <b>155</b> 17–28
Du Gay P, 2003, "The tyranny of the epochal: change, epochalism and organizational reform" <i>Organization</i> <b>10</b> 663–684
Sørensen E, Torfing J, 2009, "Making governance networks effective and democratic through metagovernance" <i>Public Administration</i> <b>87</b> 234–258
Pedersen A, Sehested K, Sørensen E, 2011, "Emerging theoretical understandings of pluricentric coordination in public governance" <i>American Review of Public Administration</i> <b>41</b> 375–394
Isett K R, Mergel I A, LeRoux K, Mischen P A, Rethemeyer K, 2011, "Networks in public administration scholarship: understanding where we are and where we need to go" <i>Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory</i>
Marsh D, 2011, "The new orthodoxy: the differentiated polity model" <i>Public Administration</i>
Jones C, Hesterly W S, Borgatti S P, 1997, "A general theory of network governance: exchange conditions and social mechanisms" <i>The Academy of Management Review</i> <b>22</b> 911–945
Lawless P, 2004, "Locating and explaining area-based urban initiatives: new deal for communities in England" <i>Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy</i> <b>22</b> 383–399

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> This involves a double movement of 'responsibilization and autonomization'. Embedded in contemporary programs and strategies for the reformulation of social governance is a particular ethic of personhood, which actively stresses autonomy, responsibility and the freedom and obligation of individuals to make choices for themselves, can be seen as an attempts to 're-invent' that same institution (Du Gay, 2003)



Project no. 693443

Project no. ES/R002991/1



UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

