From the specificity of urban risks to the challenges of urban governance in Latin-American cities

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Metropolitan governance concerns rise in Latin America following a period of decentralization, promotion of democracy in most countries of the region, and promotion of local powers from the 1970. I will use governance as an analytical category, and not a normative one. As for me, it corresponds to the process of decision-making, and the implementation and assessment of action in a context of emerging "voices", emerging actors in the local stage.

At the same time, risk concerns have been emerging from the late 1970 and are now faced at a local scale. Using a broad definition, risk is a combination between hazards and vulnerability. I will be more precise by adopting a constructivist approach later. I assume it is embedded within the socio-spatial system. Risks are consistent with urbanization and metropolization processes.

- In my first part, I will put forward 4 main links between urbanization and construction of risks I could figure out in my PhD work in Caracas.

- Second, going ahead with such a co-construction, I will wonder about the importance of urban management regarding the social and spatial distribution of conditions of risks. Following the case of Recife, I will address the dilemma global city Vs sustainable city.

- Third, urban governance is challenging the way urban societies are facing risks. It is challenging the copping capacity – institutionally; but also the construction of risks, it means the way risk conditions are distributed socially and spatially. Finally, I will develop the political and democratic challenges of urban governance regarding risk issues by putting forward its connections with environmental justice.

I'll be pretty quick on the 2 first parts so I can develop the third one.

I. The specificity of urban risks. The case of Caracas.

I assume urban risks are not just risks that exist in or concern urban spaces. I will point out 4 kinds of relations between urbanization and construction of risk to highlight the specificity of urban risks:

- As for hazard, it can be endogenous, related with the growing complexity of the city and the different scales involved, or related with the kind of urban management. We can refer to contamination; to heat urban island… Here is an example of the collapse

of a highway bridge in 2006. It is the only main connection between the capital and the coast.

- In an urban context, the biophysical vulnerability is hugely increased. The concentration and interrelation of people or goods are increasingly exposed to any damages.

- The social vulnerability of urban society is ambiguous (Warner, 2007). On the one hand, it can be worse than in other contexts, because of the fragmentation of risk management due to decentralization. On the other hand, it can be better, thanks to the proximity of rescue units. By the way, marginalized groups, by coping with appalling daily life conditions can develop better resilience capacities to any disruption.
By itself, social vulnerability in urban context is a critical field of research.

- Metropolization is increasing the economic and political importance of big cities in a globalized economy. It makes metropolises more vulnerable to global economic fluctuations (like Caracas as regards oil prices, for instance). Symbolically the big city crystallizes socio-political protests. Being the "capital city", Caracas is the place to demonstrate and of course to give a putsch.

My statements match with the model of social construction of risk of García Acosta. She states that such a construction is based on conditions of vulnerability on the one hand (combined with hazards, it defines a kind of objective reality) and perceptions and representations of risks on the other hand (what is socially considered as a risk? Starting from which threshold? Why these sectors, and not these ones, in spite of the same objective conditions of risks?). It is a construction, both material and intangible.
It appears that representations of risk do not match necessarily with the distribution of hazards and vulnerability (territories of urban insecurity are a good example). My hypothesis to explain such discrepancies states that representations, and broadly territorialization, of risks are based on other resources than hazards and vulnerability, like socio-spatial order[1], relations of power, political or economic interests, cultural values, social status issues…

But let's put on a side this question for latter, and let's have a look on urban management and governance in Recife.

II.   Between global and sustainable priorities: which consequences regarding urban risks? The case of Recife.

In the specific context of the 1980 and the 1990 in Latin America and ending the dictatorship in Brazil, political forces at local scale are yearning for democratic practices.

The region is famous because of its experience regarding leftist resistance to the authoritarian regime from the 1970. This is the place where liberation theology was developed, and Pernambouc is the state where President Lula was born. The state and the city knew a large and participative government during the first 2 years between the end of the dictatorship (1986) and the new constitution leading to new elections (1988).

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[1] It refers to the organization and relations between actors and groups of actors localized in and through space.

By the 1990's, 3 main contextual drivers contribute to the competition between strategic and participative planning. Such a dilemma questioned the recognition of "new voices" and new actors in local governments:

- The deepening of metropolization in Recife (the growing importance to be part of the global economy). Recife applied to host a franchise of Guggenheim museum.

- The circulation of ideas in urban planning ("strategic" planning, inspired form Barcelona's model has been very successful in Latin-America). This conception aimed to turn Recife into an attractive city for any kind of investments (real estate, computing and software manufacturing, tourism…). Low income people evicted from the centre have to build precarious settlements in surrounding hills, very susceptible to landslides during rainfall period.

- The necessity for politicians to build alliances with real estate promoters and entrepreneurship leads to fluctuating urban policies, regardless political parties. This point undermines the "horizontality" between actors – and "new actors".

By the way, global and sustainable views are not exactly corresponding to right and left wings on the local political stage. In spite of the participative commitments of the PT candidate to the town house, in the early 2000, the "sustainable" and leftist statements have to be ignored in order to complete a second period. A political alliance with real estate promoters was necessary. Housing claims of the Poors in the centre were no longer faced or addressed by PT local powers. The social construction of urban risks was still working at full blast under the second PT period. There were no specific considerations about environmental, social, cultural… stressors leading to risk situations in Recife.

It's easy to point out examples of local participation and emerging new voices in urban decision-making and / or its failure. But current evolutions in Latin-American metropolises might show that governance could be a way to tackle some of the mechanisms of urban risks construction, as an objective reality and as a socio-spatial representation. Especially as for traditionally marginalized people. But in which way?

III. Urban governance: what is the good way for enlarged local participation to improve risk management in big cities?

Urban risks can be also considered as a matter of control, or even democracy. Who is deciding what is at risk, the way risks are faced, the institutions involved in risk management, at different territorial levels? Who is making decision between different urban priorities, like re-election, global attractiveness, equity, environmental concerns…?

Governance matters are among the core concerns of urban risk management. As for now, I will focus on two aspects of urban governance regarding risks:
- The level where and the way political decisions are made, and I will concentrate on
- The ability to include new actors and new interests on local decision-making processes.

- As for the first aspect, the results of decentralization and promotion of local powers and institutions are ambiguous regarding risk management. 3 examples:

* Decentralization in Ecuador has been an opportunity for city mayors and its council to take responsibility for risk management and apply efficient plans in Quito for instance when national responses were not necessarily accurate.

* Fragmentation of public powers in Caracas in the early 1990's corresponded to a multiplication of institutions in charge with risks in *municipios*, local levels. It led to increase problems of risk management and coordination between fragmented civil protection units over the metropolitan area.

* Instrumentalization in growing local powers in Recife is obvious. Decentralization brought local politicians to consider newly possible associations with private actors in urban management as an instrument for re-electing, and not mainly as a way to manage public affairs in a sustainable perspective.

At last, the results depend on the very different ways governance is implemented. But there is no risk management without completing urban management and planning.

- But let's focus on the ability for new actors to emerge, as new "voices" within decision-making. A lot of different experiences of participation in LA cities can be observed. Let's think about communal councils in Caracas. They are widely driven by central powers, but they can be also an independent place to claim, away from central controls. Neighbourhood comities in México were drawn to improve local representation and participation, but citizens just knew one electoral process for almost a decade. Participatory budgeting in Brazil is a pioneer initiative, but in most places, it is just concerning a very small part of the city budget.

To my mind, such a "reformulation of the relationship between – new – actors" as governance principles say, might **potentially** improve urban and risk management by addressing critical issues, which are risk determinants. I would like to highlight 4 of them:

- **Information** and **consciousness** of risk exposure, prevention initiatives and training. The local scale is important to spread information about local conditions, particularly for newly arrived immigrants.
  In Caracas, many inhabitants are associated with the police to keep watch on their neighbourhoods; or with civil protection to give early warning in case of debris-flows. It is an important way to gear public policies regarding risk.

- Beyond the execution, urban governance must be a way to share **knowledge** on a bottom-up basis but also to catch inhabitants' **needs** and **priorities**.
  In the western *barrios* in Caracas, in spite of being the first victims of urban insecurity, the main threats for these inhabitants in 2005 were landslides and debris-flows, then flooding, earthquake and insecurity. Paying attention to local priorities thanks to governance mechanisms is critical to improve an efficient risk management, dealing with local concerns.

Again, telling what is "at risk" and what "is not" is a question of power and social status. Inequalities are pre-existing to exposure and to the ability to participate. I am referring to socio-economical inequalities, but also symbolical inequalities, domination issues (See Nancy Fraser and Honneth). Urban risk, as it is territorialized, refers to embedded aspects of human systems. It is also a matter of social and cultural recognition. Representations of urban risk are oriented by the socio-spatial order of the urban context. By enhancing the recognition of emerging voices locally, urban governance might tackle symbolic marginalization and stigmatization which are important territories of risk drivers.

- Governance must be a way to **question unequal social status** in decision-making processes.
  Being part of a workshop regarding water resources is not guarantying your participation with an equal "voice" on this stage. In governance mechanisms, the horizontality between actors is just **supposed**. It should be effective by including new interests, new needs, and new voices. But it is often a "slanting horizontality" which does not question the way society is dealing with risks.

- At last, by including new actors and new local interests, urban governance initiatives must address **scale issues**. Risk management at a metropolitan scale is not the sum of local initiatives. There is neither efficient participation nor inclusion at a local scale without metropolitan coordination.
  Communal councils in Caracas are unable to guide urban development, and I am not even talking about metropolitan risk management. We loop the loop with the first statement about metropolitan institutions.

[To conclude] Promotion of participation, of civil society, of new actors, and NGOs is not an end but a mean, and it is not a guarantee of massive inclusion of different social sectors. It remains a gap to bridge.

The rising of civil society in Venezuela starting in the late 1970 did not address social issues. Mobilized people were just asking for democratization and environmental consciousness. What Susann Cutter calls the *White-upper class environmentalist rhetoric* excluded most of socio-economical and "social status" issues. "Civil society" does not necessarily aim to reduce inequalities and promote equal access to decision-making. Participation and governance are not magic wands like it is stated in some (dominant?) discourses.

So away from any normative definitions, and in addition with necessary improvements of vulnerability conditions, risk governance must address social justice and democratic concerns regarding urban environment and its management. As for me, non-material aspects of social construction of risks (related with social status, domination, subaltern positions...), are under-estimated. My current research is trying to give a framework to these issues regarding urban risk assessment, through what I am calling "territorialization of risks", from the perspective of a geographer.

It takes into account the 2 aspects of social construction of risks: conditions of vulnerability (combined with hazards, sometimes man-made hazards or partly man-made hazards) on the one hand, and power of representations and social status issues in the socio-spatial reconstruction of risks and its performative dimension on the other hand.