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A DRAFT FOR A TYPOLOGY OF URBAN OBSERVATORIES

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Summary

Urban observatories represent today a global phenomenon. In the last decades, public actors, universities and civil society actors have established hundreds of urban observatories all around the world. Some of these observatories actively contribute to the analysis of urban dynamics and affect urban policy making. However, urban observatories are still understudied; the scientific literature on urban observatories is rare and culturally fragmented. This article seeks to contribute to the development of a body of knowledge on urban observatories, by proposing a typology of urban observatories that stress the potential impacts and contributions of four different archetypes on urban and territorial planning and management.

Key words:

Urban observatories – typology – planning – participation – learning networks – empowerment

Résumé

Les observatoires urbains représentent aujourd'hui un phénomène mondial. Dans les dernières décennies, différents types d'acteurs – publics, associatifs et universitaires – ont mis en place des centaines d'observatoires urbains tout autour du monde. Certains de ces observatoires contribuent activement dans l'analyse des dynamiques urbaines et affectent les politiques urbaines. Toutefois, les observatoires urbains en tant qu'objet de recherche ne sont pas encore suffisamment étudiés. La littérature scientifique sur les observatoires urbains est rare et culturellement fragmentée. Cet article vise à contribuer au développement d'un corpus scientifique sur les observatoires urbain. Il propose une typologie des observatoires urbains qui met en valeur les apports potentiels des expériences de différents modèles d'observatoires urbains sur la planification et la gestion urbaines et territoriales.

Mots-clés :

Observatoires urbains – typologie – planification – participation – réseaux d'apprentissage – empowerment

A draft for a typology of urban observatories

I. Urban observatories a new object of study

The word “observatory” is used to indicate a wide variety of different structures. These structures may differ in their scale, mode of operation, objects of interest and outputs. However, they’re all similar in one central thing defining their mode of operation: observation.

Observation is what observatories do. They report on certain subjects, issues or themes. This activity is not new, governmental offices have been doing census and statistics for decades – if not centuries in some cases. However, in the last two decades, organizations with the name observatory are booming everywhere. Ministries, local governments, special agencies, universities everywhere around the world are developing their observatories.

With the change in paradigm from government to governance, and mainly the advent of the “good governance” ethos, the question of monitoring and continuous evaluation has gained large credibility and became a central part of policy conception and action implementation. Observatories are seen as a key element in this process mainly in upgrading the capacity of the institutions in developing and delivering their policies.

Apart from this performance logic, the word “observatory” is also appropriated by many research centers, focusing on an issue or territory. They sometimes rename their centers accordingly. Manifestly, the word observatory, by stressing a focalization and a “grounded” knowledge – built on observation – on a certain issue, underlines an attractive scientific legitimacy.

Although observation have developed in a near science with a heavy corpus of monitoring methodologies and techniques, and despite the fact that urban observatories have become a global phenomenon, observatories in general and urban observatories in particular are understudied. International scientific documentation on urban observatories is rare and culturally fragmented. It is mainly composed of case studies produced by those promoting or managing these observatories.

What this article is suggesting is a draft for a typology of urban observatories. This typology aims at exploring the potentialities and limitations of

different observatories archetypes. It aims also at questioning the added value of these observatories as planning and management tools.

II. Looking for a methodology

Typologies, epistemologically, are drawn from comprehensive comparative approaches. They try to synthesize knowledge on a certain object by taking in consideration its diversity. They’re also built on comparison as a way of understanding the causality lying behind of this diversity. That’s why they are usually presented in the shape of tables where on one direction we have the different archetypes and on the other the explanatory variables.

In our case we’re facing major challenges in building such a typology. One could argue that the cultural fragmentation of the documentation on urban observatories raises the question of the validity of any comprehensive view we might propose on urban observatories. We here say in our defense that we recognize this limitation, however, we believe that the documentation in our hands, without being prolific and comprehensive of the whole urban observatory phenomenon is diverse enough to encompass the major experiences. In fact, we build on available documentation describing – and sometimes analyzing – experiences of urban observatories in France, United States of America, Latin America, the Middle East, and the UN Global Urban Observatory program.

Another limitation is the fact that this documentation focuses on very different issues from conceptual to practical, and is written sometimes in descriptive, and other times in normative or analytic tenses. Urban observatory represents also very different realities in the described cases. Making sense of this diverse and majorly non-scientific literature and identifying explanatory variables is not an easy task.

Getting back to the objective of the exercise is an excellent way to push forward and make sense of this complex literature. As we said, we’re building a typology that will help us identify the potentialities and limitations of different types of urban observatories as an urban or territorial planning and management tool. Here we can identify three entry points that seem of interest in this perspective: the capacity of urban observatories to improve urban action by providing valuable data, their capacity to improve cooperation among the actors of a certain urban governance and their capacity to empower local actors to defend their rights and interests. The consulted documentation does not directly deal with these issues. However, it deals with several themes that can shed light on these issues. These themes are what we may call here explanatory variables.

1. Monitoring and learning

On a conceptual level observation is directly linked to two other activities: evaluation and learning. The duality between performance evaluation through monitoring and knowledge building by creating learning networks marks deeply the observation tradition. These two tracks represent two autonomous objectives and can be followed independently: we can monitor without building a learning-network as we can build a learning-network without displaying monitoring structures. However, these two tracks are usually intertwined in different ways. The weight of each of them in the activity of a certain observatory could represent an important explanatory variable.

In fact, the more an urban observatory is a monitoring and evaluation structure the more it tries to give itself a scientific legitimacy by using technology and relying on expertise in defining indicators. The values of these indicators are then presented as objective reality, essential prerequisite to any action. The more an urban observatory is a learning-network the more it puts forward a democratic legitimacy where actors' dialogue and exchange of know-hows is seen as empowerment levers. Diversity in representations is presented as an enrichment of the reality, and actors' know-hows as a more practical and feasible alternative to expensive expertise.

2. Participation

Participation is a major recurrent theme in this documentation. It is presented by certain urban observatories as a central element for their functioning. However, it is not always the case, and when it is, the rationale behind it and its degree may vary a lot. For understanding this variation we believe that we should take in account the issue of scientific legitimacy of indicators – especially in the case of monitoring-oriented observatories – and that of resources.

Even though indicators are becoming more and more present in political debate they're far from automatically being accepted as a legitimate and objective representation of reality (Zittoun, 2009)¹. In democratic societies, indicators are often at the center of debates, recurrently challenged for presumed biases in their conception and in the definition of their thresholds. Therefore, some observatories by anticipation tend to make use of early participation to legitimize their approach or to validate their data.

Another aspect of the participation theme is the observatories' quest for wider resources. Observatories open up to certain actors working on the same issues in order to mobilize their resources in the observatories' operations. These actors may play different roles: gathering information, helping in the financing of the observatory, bringing in equipment...

3. Knowledge capitalization and urban observatories' professionalization

The development of urban observatories has led to the development of certain skills and know-hows that are consequential for urban and territorial planning and management. This professionalization of urban observatories has two main aspects: the development of indicators and participatory monitoring and evaluation.

Urban observatories are the place where the numerous indicators produced by research in several scientific disciplines are put to the test of relevance and feasibility. It is in the urban observatories that adaptations are made to comply with local contexts. It is also in the urban observatories that the concentration of data allows the identification of correlations and links between phenomena. This is especially the case with the urban observatories with what we call here a "technicist" tradition. These usually well-funded urban observatories rely on geographic information systems and other data processing and analysis systems. The consolidation of the strategic approach in planning has favored their development mainly on metropolitan level.

The participatory monitoring and evaluation approach developed in the last decade or so in rural development studies (Estrela & Gaventa, 1997; Guijt, 1999, 2008). In many aspects it is still experimental and linked to the here and there experiences of development agencies, mainly in the developing countries. However several documents have been produced showing a real capitalization

¹ Especially in issues of sustainable development policies of practical knowledge and techniques mainly aimed at getting local actors to work together in identifying their resources and the possible alternatives they're facing in order to anticipate crisis.

4. Urban observatories' sustainability

Some urban observatories last more than others. In fact, some do not survive the enthusiasm of their launching. The majority survives by settling for a role beyond their original expectations. In fact, for an urban observatory to maintain itself a number of factors should be secured. We believe that two of these factors are central: institutional sustainability and social sustainability.

Without proper organization, stable funding and capitalization of experiences it is quite difficult for an urban observatory to survive. These institutional issues are then paramount. However, other aspects like its appropriation by the local actors – mainly through participation –, its perceived legitimacy and its visibility are equally important factors of its sustainability.

III. Four archetypes of observatories

Based on our documentation review and previous research, we here present a certain typology of urban observatories where each archetype articulates differently these four different variables: The city-university partnership model, the public actor model, the global network model, the local initiative model.

	Explanatory variables				Potential implications on		
	Objectives	Participation	Professionalization	Sustainability	Improving urban action	Improving local actors cooperation	Local actors' empowerment
City-university partnership model (ex: Urban Observatories Programme, USA)	Learning oriented	Functional complementarity between city and university	No new professionals or professional expertise	Weak: different agendas	Important: mainly in term of long-term perspectives	Superficial: two different cultures	Absent since the civil society is absent from this model
Public actor model (ex: the FNAU's urban observatories, France; number of urban observatories in Latin America and the Middle East)	Initially Monitoring oriented	Weak, and aims mostly for validating established choices	Important: development of a professional body with a technicist orientation	Important institutional sustainability: enshrined in a stable public sector environment	Important: mainly in terms of diagnostic production	Important only between public actors	Absent since the civil society is only receptive in this model
Global network model (ex: UN-Habitat Global Urban Observatory)	Monitoring and learning at the same time	Important	More important on the level of a global level with a new network of professionals than on the local urban observatories' level	Mitigated institutional sustainability but overall important social sustainability	Weak: since it is concentrating on MDG monitoring	Important: the observatory is built as a network	Important in the theoretical model though not always in practice
Local initiative model	Initially learning oriented	Variable	Variable	Important institutional and social sustainability	Variable with a tendency for artisanal tools that can be recuperated in urban actions	Variable with a tendency for informal cooperation	Important: based on actors' appropriation of data and analyses

1. The city-university partnership model

This model emerges of one of the oldest urban observatory's experiences: the Urban Observatories Program.

In the United States, urban observatories are around for decades now. Williams (1972) explains that from the sixties the concept has known wide popularity and was then appropriated by cities and universities in the United States. It was seen as a way of introducing "objective" data in the political debate and urban politics. The data gathered by these observatories will guide in a way the urban policies and at the same time make these policies and their claims more accountable since this data will be assessing the urban situation "objectively".

The proliferation of urban observatories was boosted, in 1969, by the National League of Cities' Urban Observatories Program. This program aimed at encouraging the development of local university-city government networks for "bringing local research capabilities to bear in the search of solutions for local community problems" (Moskow, 1974). A lot of universities in different cities in the United States, sometimes in collaboration with city governments, started to set observatories - usually called centers - in different academic departments.

The choice of the department and the focus of the observatory is usually influenced by the main issues a city is facing: "The center of Miami, FL conducted research on hurricane research and post-natural disaster planning; the center of Buffalo, NY studied cross-border regions; the centers of California emphasized immigration and race issues; the centers located in large metropolitan areas focus on crime and urban poverty; the centers located in industrial and manufacturing hubs devote more resources to issues related to environmental and energy conservation" (Biderman, 2009).

At first, the outcomes of these experiences were very mitigated. The founding of urban observatories helped push research in the universities around subjects that were in the priorities of the city governments. However, the majority of the universities were already in this dynamic before the Urban Observatory Program, and the synergy to which the program was aiming between the partners didn't always went far. The impact of these observatories and their findings on local governments' agendas

was very limited. On the institutional level also the contribution of this program was relatively modest. It was - and still is in a lot of cases - difficult to differentiate in the way they operated, between these urban observatories and traditional university research centers.

In linking this model to our variables we could say that this model though being primarily a learning model, usually fails in becoming a learning-network. Knowledge production here is unidirectional; it is produced by the universities and passed to city government for decision-making. It is fair to say that these observatories serve as a legitimization tool for city officials whose policies however may well develop in different directions than the observatory recommendations. On another hand, this model does not bring the development of new professional skills; these observatories are still academic structures subject to the constraints of the traditions of the academic world. Finally, this model's sustainability potential is shaky. The cooperation between the city and the university is only based on a distribution of functional roles with no real synergy; which means that a partner may well look elsewhere to fulfill this role. This is the case with cities turning more and more to private expertise for consultancies, and with academic centers turning to other issues of research.

Consequently the impact of the development of the city-university partnership model and its possible contribution to urban and territorial planning and management, are quite weak. This model, by helping universities approach on a long-term systemic basis the local issues and problems, advances a valuable input to thinking urban issues and consequently urban action. However, the existence of two different cultures (the academic and the political) - or two "different creatures" as Irwin (1972) see it - with their different respective agendas and priorities, is the main weakness of this model and may well keep the cooperation between these actors on a formal level. Transcending this challenge needs time, good will and most importantly an effort to keep both sides interested. On another level, the absence of civil society actors in this partnership is far from being an empowering experience; in the best case scenario these excluded civil society actors will be passive receptors of expert analysis and discourse.

Clearly as the American experience shows this model is more likely to be a transitional one. In fact, in the United States with time, this type of urban observatories gained in experience and legitimacy. Today, some are important partners of local and national governmental institutions in the United States, as well as of civil society actors. Lots of these observatories are moving away from the “lone ranger” model of academic research and pushing towards more networked activity (Biderman, 2009). They’re moving towards what we call here the local initiative model.