



Towards urban governance: Twenty years of neighbourhood contracts in the Brussels-Capital Region



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ABSTRACT

At the end of the twentieth century, domestic resistance began to shape urban policy on urban governance, giving citizens new tools to decide about the development of their cities. In Brussels, one such tool is a system of neighbourhood contracts, which was introduced in 1994 after the creation of the Brussels-Capital Region in 1989. This paper describes the two decades of neighbourhood contracts and, despite some criticism, considers them to be an important instrument in governing Brussels. The article traces the evolution of neighbourhood contracts and discusses whether these contracts can be an adequate solution to the challenges facing the smallest region in Belgium.

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Introduction

Twenty-first century urban governance should not be limited to political institutions. Cities have become involved in multilevel relations, not only as an effect of globalisation and international rivalry, but also as a consequence of cooperation through nongovernmental and private organisations (Kübler & Pagano, 2012; Pierre & Peters, 2012). The public sector has gradually shifted part of its activities and tasks into diverse partnerships, thereby creating a framework within which the process of decision-making is shared between fragmented political and social environments. Some authors have pointed out that the change from government to governance has been described sceptically as the excavation of the state, and favourably as empowerment of the people (Evans, Joas, Sundback, & Theobald, 2007). There are both positive and negative aspects of urban governance. However, past authors have found that the results of urban governance vary within states as well as among states (Sellers, 2002).

In federal countries such as Belgium, the idea of urban governance is not new. These countries use principles of consensus democracy based on negotiations and the ability to compromise (Lefebvre, 2003; Lijphart, 2002, 2004; Wauters, 2013). In such a system, the capital city plays an integration role. The multiple role of Brussels developed due to two factors: (1) the Belgian federal structure enabled the concept of “city-region” (Etherington & Jones, 2009; Healey, 2009) to be centred in Brussels; and (2) European Union (EU) institutions and other international organisations were located in Brussels. The permanent presence of these

institutions raises the question of how urban policy based on the requirements of a global bureaucracy rather than on the common needs of local residents would transform the city and what form of governance can be applied there (Papadopoulos, 1996).

This paper focuses on one of the tools of Brussels' governance – neighbourhood contracts. The study is based upon a critical review of the academic and administrative documents concerning neighbourhood contracts. A review of policy assumptions and official reports of projects in Brussels' districts attempts to reconstruct the evolution of this mechanism and shows its impact on urban development. The paper assumes a secondary analysis, which makes use of data previously collected and provided by the Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region (IRISNET). The study's methodology is substantially qualitative. First, it focuses on a description of neighbourhood contracts emerging as a policy response to certain urban challenges during the last two decades. Second, it concerns an analysis of academic discourse, in order to show the problems associated with neighbourhood contracts.

The paper relies on a socio-political perspective and addresses the question of urban governance introduced in Brussels through different participatory instruments. A number of theoretical assumptions are discussed to point out challenges that Brussels is trying to solve by using this paradigm. The paper then discusses the scale to which neighbourhood contracts in Brussels have been broadened to encompass more than just separate projects. Next, the paper discusses the problems associated with the neighbourhood contracts. The evaluation of the impact of neighbourhood contracts in Brussels both clarifies the meanders of urban policy in one of the most important European cities, but also contributes to a wider debate on the future of urban development. Achieving

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an optimal model of urban governance in the specific conditions of each metropolis is a difficult process. It is interesting, therefore, to look at how the symbolic capital of the EU has dealt with this task and what other cities can learn from the experience of Brussels.

Challenges of urban governance in Brussels

Urban governance is a concept with a wide variety of definitions and is a central term to understand discussions surrounding the question of neighbourhood contracts in Brussels. [Stoker \(1998\)](#) emphasises that results of governance are not divergent from those of government. It is more a matter of different courses of action. The paper identifies three major assumptions of governance theory. These assumptions are:

- An emphasis on innovations in urban administration such as the larger involvement of local residents in the achievement of community targets, the upsurge of a number of governance networks and the role of effective urban leadership ([Haus & Klausen, 2011](#); [Jouve, 2008](#); [Kjaer, 2009](#); [Shove & Walker, 2010](#)).
- Alliances across governmental subjects tend to be less institutionalised and react more efficiently to public needs ([Pierre, 2014](#)).
- Good urban governance, understood in general as the self-steering of urban society in desired directions, can be a prerequisite for sustainable development ([Evans et al., 2007](#); [Voß, Bauknecht, & Kemp, 2006](#)). [Colantonio and Dixon \(2011\)](#) noted that participation in urban governance and involvement in public projects have been considered as basic components of social sustainability.

These elements reinforce in Brussels the trend to encourage stronger cooperation between local actors and they also enable the uncomplicated relocation of concepts and solutions from one level to another level of city governance.

We can classify at least four levels of governance in the Brussels region. These are: federal, regional, communities, and municipal. One could also add to this administrative ladder the highest – European, and the lowest – neighbourhood level. The key difference between districts and the other levels of Brussels' governance is the financial dependence of the first on subsidies from the municipal and regional authorities. Despite a lack of budget autonomy the notion of neighbourhood, which is generally defined as a communal and spatial unit within a city with substantial face-to-face interaction among citizens ([Forrest, 2008](#)), has become the focal point of study in the recent governance-oriented course of urban transformation. The question of Brussels' neighbourhoods should be understood in a wider geo-political context. The Brussels-Capital Region encompasses 19 municipalities. Each has its own communal bodies and sets its own local policy. Brussels is governed by the minister-president of the region and 19 mayors. The administrative division is complicated by the fact that municipalities are split up into six industrial districts, 18 green area districts, and 118 housing neighbourhoods of which one third are cross-municipal ([De Salle, 2013](#)).¹ In such circumstances, projects should be prioritized based on their ability to make neighbourhood dwellers responsible, informed, and active citizens. The more people-oriented neighbourhoods are, the more vitality they generate. Some studies

have maintained that the higher compactness and density of districts can lower fragmentation and enhance social integration ([Burton, 2000](#); [Talen, 1999](#)).

Even if urban governance is defined as a local matter of the Brussels-Capital Region, the European institutions have a major impact on Brussels because they formulate specific requests in certain districts of the city ([Calay & Magosse, 2008](#); [Romańczyk, 2012](#)). As a result, the European institutions contribute to the fragmentation and gentrification of Brussels' neighbourhoods ([Van Criekingen & Decroly, 2003](#)). The cooperation between the key international actors of Brussels' economy and the political elites has been frequently contested by social groups and urban associations like ARAU (*Atelier de Recherche et d'Actions Urbaines*), BRAL (*Brusselse Raad voor Leefmilieu*), and IEB (*Inter-Environnement Bruxelles*). These organisations, which were created in response to the haphazard redevelopment of Brussels during the 1960s and 1970s, have initiated proactive participation as a core of urban regeneration ([Moritz, 2011](#); [Schoonbrodt, 2007](#)). The resistance of local communities and their demands to transfer urban decisions to the lower, district level has caused an upsurge in the diversity of actors, influenced by transnational ideas of urban governance, deliberative democracy, sustainable development, participatory budgeting and empowerment of citizens by bottom-up initiatives ([Bacqué & Biewener, 2013](#); [Pinson, 2006](#); [Sintomer, Herzberg, Röcke, & Allegretti, 2012](#); [Vojnovic, 2014](#)). [Damay and Delmotte \(2010\)](#) address three of the above approaches, and argue that public participation is a concept which implies that all inhabitants should be involved in a wide range of public affairs, not just electoral activities. Deliberative democracy refers to open discussion thereby ensuring that the best choices are taken, while governance gives much more attention to the plethora of public actors, stakeholders, public-private partnerships and managing problems with little emphasis on the decisions taken by "ordinary citizens".

Since decision-making in Brussels has been redistributed across many actors ([Van Vynsberghe, 2013](#)), less or more formal instruments fostering public participation and urban governance are introduced. Apart from neighbourhood contracts, these are master plans (e.g., Botanique, European Quarter, Tour & Taxi), Local Agendas 21, town planning workshops, civic forums or diagnostic walks, during which people interested in new projects walk through their district together with experts, evaluate its strong and weak points, and then discuss and determine common needs ([Delmotte, Hubert, & Tulkens, 2009](#); [Genard, 2009](#)). It seems that the authorities of Brussels and local dwellers strive for these instruments, hoping they may help them to resolve the biggest problems, such as spatial fragmentation, lack of social housing, high unemployment (20.4% in 2012), urban sprawl and suburbanisation ([Observatoire bruxellois de l'Emploi, 2012](#)).

The suburbanisation of Brussels is certainly an interesting case, as it is much higher than in London, Paris or even Frankfurt ([Kesteloot, 2013](#)). Every day 55% of people working in Brussels, mostly in mono-functional administration areas of central neighbourhoods leave the city and come back to their houses in the suburbs ([Corijn & Vloeberghs, 2009](#); [Verhetsel & Vanelslander, 2010](#)). Additionally, in Brussels there are difficulties with improvement of "green legs", which means a sustainable public transport like RER (Regional Express Railway) critical to facilitating access from the suburbs to workplaces in the central districts. The lack of sustainable transport exists for a number of reasons. The main concerns related to public transit include ([Damay, 2014](#); [Frenay, 2009](#)):

- Wealthy Flemish municipalities adjacent to the Brussels region feel anxious about incorporation into the bilingual Brussels-Capital Region due to the potential inflow of poor, mostly French speaking immigrants, who live chiefly in the central neighbourhoods of Brussels.

¹ The Brussels region has an area of 161.4 km², and the average size of one district is about 1.1 km². In 2013, the average population density in Brussels was 7154 persons per km² ([Hermia, 2014](#)). However there were significant differences between municipalities and districts. In the most populous municipality, which is the city of Brussels (32.6 km²), the average population density was 5171 inhabitants per km², while in the smallest municipality Saint-Josse-ten Noode (1.1 km²) it was 24733 per km². In 2013, the most densely populated district Bosne (Saint-Gilles) had 38007 persons per km², and the lowest densely populated district Neerpede (Anderlecht) had only 277 inhabitants per km².

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