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Short Communication

Guide of strategies for urban regeneration: A design-support tool for the Spanish context

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies reveal physical, economical, and socio-technical barriers when measuring performance of sustainable urban ration projects with existing assessment tools. This reality, enlarged in the Spanish context, has revealed the need of a friendly-user and holistic tool that can assist the agents involved in the decision-making process of urban regeneration projects.

This paper presents the Guide of strategies for urban regeneration; a design-support tool developed by demand of the Government of the Valencian Community (Spain). Along this paper we describe how the Guide has been designed by integrating: in first place measures of exiting urban assessment tools, secondly lesson learned coming from the application of urban assessment tools to selected and rewarded urban best practices at European level, and thirdly the opinion of regional decision-makers and urban experts. As a result, this Guide offers strategies and recommendations on a self-questioning format that makes easy its implementation by any urban planner regardless of its expertise on the topic. It is based on an open-source philosophy with a nonprofit orientation, using transparent and easy-to-understand technical criteria. It can be applied to any kind of urban fabric and proposes equal representation of the thematic categories needed to be considered during an urban regeneration project design.

1. Introduction

Urban regeneration has become a priority for many European City's governments due to recent European Union recommendations and regulations.[1] The 2008 US subprime mortgage crisis, the lower birth rate tendency, and a nether internal immigration rate scenario from rural to urban areas[2] (Eurostat, 2014a,b,c) (UN, 2014), has opened a new period of shrinkage and stabilization of existing urban areas in European cities (Grobmann et al., 2013). Limiting the growth of urban areas and reducing land occupation, phenomenon defined as urban sprawl by the European Environmental Agency (EEA, 2006), becomes a priority for future urban policies, attempting to avoid current and past urbanization mistakes that caused instability and inefficiency (Parkinson, 2005), especially in areas with a great real estate pressure as are Spanish cities[3] (IGN, 2007). However, even if promoting urban regeneration instead of new developments is considered a strategy to encourage sustainability itself, the real challenge is to agree on a tool that improves economical, physical, social, and environmental quality of an area that has been subjected to changes (Roberts and Sykes, 2000).

Sustainable urban regeneration currently receives widespread and generally enthusiastic endorsement, yet concerns are emerging regarding recent expressions of the concept – urban best practices[4] and urban assessment tools[5] – that they may be actually not representing all local realities. Urban best practices are most often perceived as a powerful heuristic tool for the dissemination of sustainable urban regeneration projects. The unquestioned compliance with practices labeled as 'best', obscures the

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[1] Urban Mobility Action Plan (European Comission, 2011); Toledo Statement document (Toledo: 18º. Informal meeting of Ministers of Urban Development, 2010).

[2] According to Eurostat, the fertility rate in Europe varies between 1.3 and 1.6 children per women, while the immigration from rural to urban areas will be no significant as reveals the UN study of urban trends by world regions.

[3] According to the Spanish National Institute of Cartography, the urbanization increase of coastal areas has been around 20% during the period 1987–2000.

[4] Urban best practices are urban examples that show how the urban regeneration processes cannot be standardized, and evidence the needed to review existing urban assessment tools that promote a very rigid city model. This concept was established by UN-Habitat with the support of the UNESCO in the nineties.

[5] Sustainability urban assessment tools are urban decision-making tools that act as drivers by recognizing excellence through their rating systems, based mainly in indicator and index benchmarks.

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processes of typification that enables it – that is to say, the cultural struggles, tensions, conflicts, collaborations, alliances and personal/professional justifications that prefigure it. On the other side, even if there is a long tradition in the management of economic development indicators, and in measuring the environmental impact of cities on the life quality of their inhabitants (Happio, 2012), some urban assessment tools present limitations and weak points. Urban assessment tools mean guidelines and methods that seek to improve sustainable urban performance, looking up for sustainability in the built environment; guiding and helping designers, engineers, architects, urban planners, and politicians to develop sustainable urban regeneration projects, or defining principles/indicators that should be addressed for cities and neighborhoods (Castanheira and Bragança, 2014). However, as Sharifi and Murayama show in their analysis and comparison of different urban assessment tools at neighborhood scale – *Neighborhood Sustainability Assessment* (*NSA*) *tools*[6] – it is common that some thematic categories are weighed higher based on their performance against the specified benchmarks or accepted norms, becoming the process of criteria selection and weighting assignment often subjective and not valid for every location. Furthermore, *NSA tools* are not doing well in guaranteeing an acceptable level of performance (Sharifi and Murayama, 2013; Luederitz et al., 2013), by comparing so many different reallities that are not always comparable. However, its formation and acceptance are seldom questioned.

Hence, how to act to promote sustainable urban regeneration projects? In the Spanish context, several policy papers, guidelines and urban assessment tools emerged after 2008,[7] some of them designed for specific locations and municipalities.[8] In the Valencian Community, only the White Book on Sustainable Building of the Valencian Community drew some recommendations on land policies (IVE, 2009), but no specific assessment process for urban regeneration projects was defined. On 2013 the Government asked for a specific method to promote sustainable urban regeneration projects at a neighborhood scale. The outcome is the *Guide of strategies for urban regeneration* (IVE, 2015),[9] a new design-support tool for the Valencian Community that: (1) covers the thematic gaps identified in urban assessment tools but relevant for the urban best practices analysis; (2) overcomes physical, economical and socio-technical barriers identified by regional decision-makers and urban experts when implementing existing urban assessment tools. Before writing the Guide, 8 urban assessment tools for cities located in developed western countries were reviewed, from which 373 indicators were extracted and applied to 16 European best practices. In parallel we run interviews to decision-makers and urban experts from 19 regional municipalities. The Guide pretends to overcome the main inconsistencies identified along this methodology, and is presented in the results of this paper.

2. Methods

2.1. What is missing? Identifying thematic gaps in existing urban assessment tools

Despite the consensus between scholars, researchers and city planners on the role that sustainability urban assessment tools play to monitor city performance, there is a practical difficulty in working with a large number of indexes and indicators; that makes it tough to identify the thematic categories and design strategies behind them. Given this reality, a previous thematic analysis[10] was done, identifying how the main thematic categories[11] were valued in a selection of existing urban evaluation tools, through the weigh and representation of its indexes and indicators.

To achieve this goal, we needed to establish a common thematic categorization to place the indexes and indicators coming form the selected tools. Recent literature offers really different thematic categories when measuring urban performance. For instance, while Gonzalo, Bovea, and Ruá proposes 14 different categories: “site and soil”, “urban morphology”, “mobility and transport”, “nature and diversity”, “building and housing”, “energy”, “water”, “materials”, “waste”, “pollution”, “social aspect”, “economic aspects”, “management and institutions” and “innovation”, focusing in environmental aspects (Gonzalo et al., 2015), Wang, establishes 7 categories: “environmental/ecological”, “social”, “economic”, “political/legal”, “utilities/accessibility (locational)”, “cultural/historic”, and “physical”, much more focused on political and social aspects (Wang et al., 2014). According to the Spanish reality, and trying to tackle with the local barriers, the following 7 themes were finally proposed, as proposed by the Spanish Association of Municipalities and Provinces, (FEMP, 2009): “land use”, “public space-urban shape”, “social cohesion”, “mobility”, “metabolism”, “economic aspects” and “process method”.

Once the thematic categories were identified, 129 national and international tools were listed, and the ones quantifiable, relevant, available, and replicable at the Spanish context were selected. After this filtering process 14 tools satisfied all four points, avoiding national and international versions of the same tool. The second filter was on precision and specificity; easy interpretation; accessibility and data management; relevance; solvency and utility of the system, resulting on 8 tools that positively answered these requirements. Finally, these were the 8 selected:

- ECOCITY project. “Indicators of urban quality”. (Ph. Graffron, G. Huismans y F. Skala as team coordinators of the ECOCITY project which brought together 31 entities into collaboration. Spanish part by consultant firm GEA21) (2002) (Graffron et al., 2005, 2008).
- INDI-RU 2005. “Evaluation model of urban projects”. (Catherine Charlot-Valdieu, La CALADE – Conseil et Recherche en Développement Durable- y Philippe Outrequin, SUDEN). France (2005) (Charlot-Valdieu and Outrequin, 2005).
- White Book of Sustainable Urban Planning. (ETSAM, Polytechnic University of Madrid), Spain (2010).
- Municipal Indicators Systems. Barcelona, (Network of Cities and Towns toward Sustainability), Spain (2000).

[6] Neighborhood sustainability assessment tools have become widespread since the turn of 21st Century and many communities, mainly in the developed world, are utilizing these tools to measure their success in approaching sustainable development goals at neighborhood scale.

[7] Urban policies changed after in parallel than the economical crisis emerged, as displays the following documents: Methodological Guide for Evaluation and Certification of the Quality and Sustainability of Urban Environments (AACSMU, 2012), The Spanish White Paper on Sustainable Urban Planning (LB, 2010), Municipal Sustainable Indicator Systems (SMIS, 2010), or Indicators and Constrain System for Large and Medium Cities (CGYM, 2010).

[8] E.g. Special Plan for Environmental Sustainability Indicators for the Urban Development of Seville (SEV, 2007), the Municipal Indicator System for Barcelona Provincial Council (BC, 2009), or the Sustainability Indicators for Bilbao (BIL, 2008).

[9] The Guide is available online: http://www.sballiance.org/es/our-work/news/guide-of-strategies-for-urban-regeneration/.

[10] Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes examining, and recording patterns or “themes within data.

[11] The thematic categories are the key topics that configure the design of the Guide. Themes are patterns across data sets defined by existing urban assessment tools, and become the categories for the best practices analysis as will be explained in next section.