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# Application of the “Urban Governance Index” to water service provisions: Between rhetoric and reality



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## ABSTRACT

When appraising urban governance practices for better service provisions in the Global South, a gap generally emerges between the rhetoric and the reality. Practice-based local governance processes to produce improved urban services are mainly informal and often diverge from the official governance prescriptions and mechanisms for service delivery within the institutional sphere. Here we present the results of an exploration into the complex and uncertain domain of urban governance assessments, focussing on sustainable water supplies for the benefit of the urban poor. By adapting the UN-Habitat Urban Governance Index, we look into the dual dimension of governance to appreciate its formal architecture at the municipal level as well as the nature of informal and locally-specific governance arrangements aimed at improving access to basic services. Water service co-production strategies between public institutions and organised groups of citizens in Venezuela provide an excellent case by which to appraise the two distinct facets of urban governance. We illustrate the limitations of official governance assessment tools in appreciating the extent and vibrancy of local practices and agreements for improved services, and the discrepancies between the normative prescriptions and the governance arrangements on the ground.

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## 1. Introduction

Urban governance has always been a multifaceted and ill-defined concept (Burgess, Carmona, & Kolstee, 1997; Halfani, McCarney, & Rodriguez, 1995; Jessop, 2002; Maloutas & Malouta, 2004; Miegville, Ramirez, Ricard, Ropert, & Wagner, 2003; Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Paproski, 1993). But when employed in the Global South, the fuzziness of the urban governance concept is amplified by its two-fold nature. Urban governance obviously presents a formal, institutional, theoretical, and normative aspect, broadly analysed and debated by the international community, and unfailingly included in donors' development agendas (Hydén & Samuel, 2011; Kaufmann, Léautier, & Mastruzzi, 2004; UNDP, 2007; UN-HABITAT, 2004a; Wilde, Shipra, Laberge, & Moretto, 2009). However, it also displays a more informal, local, community-based characteristic, which describes how governance works in practice, beyond top-down and external development policies and strategies (Amis et al., 2001; Batley & Moran, 2004; Booth, 2011; Moretto, 2007; Swingedouw, 2005).

If we look, in particular, to urban governance for improved service provisions, this dual nature is evident. From one side, the concept concerns the sphere of the (new) public management of resources, including the state architecture needed to organise urban service provision and the contractual and/or semi-contractual relationships amongst the stakeholders entering into the urban delivery process (Bakker, 2010; Batley & Larbi, 2004; Burgess et al., 1997; Nickson & Franceys, 2003; Stren, 2012). On the other hand, it also relates to the sphere of the unofficial and unorthodox arrangements that are increasingly being developed at the local level in response to state and market failures in service delivery (Allen, Davila, & Hofman, 2006; Batley & McLoughlin, 2010; Booth, 2011; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Harpham & Boateng, 1997; Joshi & Moore, 2004; Olivier de Sardan, 2009; Wild, Chambers, King, & Harris, 2012).

When urban governance for better provisions is appraised, therefore, a gap can occur between different approaches to assessment. As a result, both of these perspectives (formal governance prescriptions and mechanisms or practice-based, informal, local governance agreements and processes) need to be recognised, distinguished, understood and correctly evaluated. They also need to be compared, and mutually verified and integrated, as they both

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have the same goal: to improve urban living conditions. Here we question whether an urban governance assessment tool able to jointly grasp these two dimensions exists. This is done by systematically overviewing existing governance assessments with respect to their capacity to 1) address cities and, 2) consider the informal and unorthodox side of governance arrangements, with respect to water services in particular, as one of the most important basic services. The UN-Habitat Urban Governance Index is then adapted to the specific case of water service provisions and applied to service co-production in Venezuela. We finally discuss the applicability of this Index, policy implications, and inputs for future research.

## 2. Urban governance assessments

Looking at the huge number of governance indicators and indexes that exists we can easily see that the task of measuring and assessing governance encounters a critical lack of consensus. A quick look into the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Global Programme on Democratic Governance Assessments shows that there is no agreement on a single tool or instrument to assess governance. For instance, the UNDP (2007, Wilde et al., 2009) presents in excess of 50 different tools for assessing governance, and these tools are extremely varied. First of all, not only are the actors using governance indicators extremely diverse, including governments, development agencies, NGOs, the media, academic institutions and the private sector (UNDP, 2007), but the users are also varied, as assessment tools are employed to inform citizens on public programmes, to conduct academic research, or to monitor and evaluate governance programmes and projects.

Secondly, parts of these assessments are focused on the country level, and are mainly based on statistics and objective measures that include, from time to time, international comparisons of state performance. We can find, for instance, the *Country Policy and Institutional Assessment and Governance Matters V*, both developed by the World Bank, or the *World Governance Assessment* by the Overseas Development Institute. But we can also find tools focused on some specific aspects of governance, such as the *Bribe Payers Index* or the *Corruption Perception Index*, both produced by Transparency International, or the *Press Freedom Index* proposed by Reporters without Borders. On the contrary, another subset of these tools is applied to the local level of governance relationships: they usually assess one of the four broad focus areas of governance in a local context (Wilde et al., 2009): representation by local governance (such as the *Local Governance Barometer* by Impact Alliance), decentralisation processes (the *Desde lo local* in Mexico, for instance), local democracy (ex., the International IDEA *Local Democracy Assessment Guide*), and local government (such as the “MIDAMOS” assessment; Wilde et al. (2009) provide many additional examples). These tools usually mix quantitative and qualitative data, often including non-representative sampling and subjective measures such as perception-based evidence collected through surveys and focus groups.

Thirdly, concerning geographical coverage, there exist governance assessments that can be applied either worldwide or in some specific regions and countries. Examples of the former are the *Human Rights Indicators*, developed by the Danish Centre for Human Rights and the *Local Integrity Initiative* by Global Integrity. In the latter category, which is much more ample, there are tools like the *Good Governance for Local Development – GOFORGOLD Index* to be used in Afghanistan, the *Afrobarometer* for Africa, the UNDP *Methodological Guidelines for Local Governance*, developed for Latin America, and the UNDP *Urban Governance Initiative*, to be applied in Asia. However, very few of the assessments addressing a more local setting explicitly take into account the urban dimension of governance: in essence, they do not make any particular distinctions

amongst the urban, rural or peri-urban contexts, while proposing a measurement tool for a generic “local government”.

Despite the massive production of governance assessment tools, instruments, indicators, and indexes, a measure of urban governance, broadly applicable and also open to local governance arrangements, seems uncommon. Stewart (2006) – while suggesting that the lack of effort directed towards addressing good governance at the urban level rested perhaps on the difficulties related to the data collection process – pointed out two ambitious attempts made at the international level to cope with this shortcoming: the World Bank database concerning globalisation, city governance and city performance (Kaufmann et al., 2004) and the UN-Habitat Urban Governance Index (UN-HABITAT, 2004a).<sup>1</sup>

The World Bank database aims at exploring whether globalisation matters for sound urban governance and, in turn, whether globalisation and sound urban governance positively affect city performance. This database has been developed covering 412 cities worldwide and relying on 35 variables and indicators belonging to other existing databases.<sup>2</sup> To measure city governance, determinants were selected that reveal a positive link between urban governance and the performance of global cities (Kaufmann et al., 2004). This reflects the precise objective of the Bank’s database, which is to “investigate empirically what determines the staying power of cities of their performance on a global scale, and whether governance has anything to do it” (Kaufmann et al., 2004: 4). On the other hand, the Urban Governance Index (UGI) has been developed “in order to enable cities to objectively measure the quality of local governance” (Narang, 2005a, 2005b: 1) through a core set of 18 indicators or 25 short-listed indicators, organised in 4 core principles: effectiveness, equity, participation and accountability (UN-HABITAT, 2004c). The objectives of the UGI are two-fold: at a global level it aims “to demonstrate the importance of good urban governance in achieving broad development objectives [while at the local level] the index is expected to catalyse local action to improve the quality of urban governance by developing indicators that respond directly to their unique contexts and needs” (UN-HABITAT, 2004b: 11).

Contrary to the World Bank database, selection of the UGI indicators is carried out according to a number of criteria that are also supposed to include informal and unorthodox local governance arrangements, regardless of their relationships with other more market-related global processes, reflecting the differing views on urban governance between the World Bank and the United Nations (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). The UN-Habitat definition of urban governance, in fact, stresses how this concept “includes formal institutions as well as informal arrangements and the social capital of citizens [while claiming that] through good urban governance, citizens are provided with the platform which will allow them to use their talents to the full to improve their social and economic conditions” (UN-HABITAT, 2002: 14). This emphasis on the informality of arrangements and relationships seems to fit comfortably into the variety of urban governance systems based on informal agreements – between formal institutions and practice-rooted community activities – to organise access to basic services. However, if the idea of urban governance upon which the UGI is built appears to be addressing the two facets of this notion, is this Index able to provide a measurement of these two dimensions, and in an integrated way?

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that these efforts were undertaken by two leading international aid organisations, coherent with the dominant role that the donor community has occupied in the governance field since the 1990s (Hydén & Samuel, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The data sources of the World Bank database rely on the UN observatory, EOS database, Taylor database, and KLM database. For further details, see Kaufmann et al., 2004.

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