



Global urban policy and the geopolitics of urban data

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Urban knowledge
Urban policy
Habitat III
Geopolitics
Network analysis

ABSTRACT

Cities have gained prominence in global sustainability discourses. The United Nations ‘2030 Agenda’ highlights in at least four key agreements the need to engage local stakeholders as key partners for the implementation of global policy objectives. As a result, the rise of a ‘cities agenda’ has led not only to an increased role for cities in global politics but also to a reshaping of the knowledge-base underpinning international agreements and their implementation. This paper argues that the contemporary willingness to move beyond the “territorial trap” of modern geopolitics, by emphasizing cities’ agency in global affairs and by calling for the production of globally comparable urban data, induces a process of reframing and rescaling existing understandings of the global. In that sense, the question of urban knowledge production – especially that of urban data creation – is an essentially geopolitical one. However, insights from critical geopolitics have been rarely used in current debates on global urban policy and urban data politics. This work, we posit, can inform current academic and policy discussions, as it invites us to explore three interrelated questions: how is the urban being written into contemporary global politics? What type of ‘urban’ issues are made salient/invisible in that process? Which geopolitical actors are currently dominating the production of urban knowledge globally? This paper offers to start addressing those themes, through the study of 28 global urban databases, digging into the technical as well as human components of those. In doing so, we offer a preliminary assessment of techno-political apparatus that underpins the construction of a global ‘urban gaze’ which in turn shapes - as much as it is maintained by - global urban policy frameworks and hegemonic forms of knowledge production.

Introduction

Cities have gained prominence in contemporary global sustainability discourses. Numerous United Nations processes and events, city-led activities and initiatives from the private and civil society sectors emphasise their importance as sites of opportunities and solutions to global challenges. The United Nations ‘2030 Agenda’ (Parnell, 2016) highlights in at least four key agreements the need to engage local stakeholders as key partners for the implementation of global commitments: the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR, 2015), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA, 2015), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (2015), and the New Urban Agenda (NUA, 2016) (Birch, 2018; Klaus, 2018). The adoption of an “urban” Sustainable Development Goal (SDG11) on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities has “framed the city in a discourse of urban opportunity for addressing a range of global problems” (Barnett & Bridge, 2016). These UN frames have emerged in a landscape where cities themselves have been progressively active in claiming a stake in international affairs

(Curtis, 2016), with growing numbers of formalized city networks now advocating an urban presence across a vast variety of policy domains (Acuto and Rayner, 2016). Building on this recognition, cities have often been portrayed as better suited and more agile than states in addressing global sustainability concerns (Johnson, 2018; Acuto, 2013). Yet, despite sweeping statements by the international community about the value of cities in achieving sustainability objectives (Bloomberg, 2015), many questions still stand about what it means, in practice, to link international policy with urban issues (Acuto, Parnell & Seto, 2018; Revi, 2017). Policy and academic observers have been discussing how local governments themselves would participate in the implementation of global commitments, pointing out their involvement would necessarily require adequate and localized data and monitoring systems (McPhearson et al., 2016). This, they argue, would imply going beyond state-centric reporting and data collection frameworks much of the UN system is currently predicated upon (Robin, Steenmans & Acuto, 2017; Barnett & Parnell, 2016; Simon et al., 2016) to ensure it includes city-level information (Birch, 2018; Acuto, Robin & Lane, 2018).

By emphasizing the importance of producing local and city-level

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information, those conversations have also highlighted data creation as a prerequisite to the active participation of local governments in the geopolitics of global sustainability (Dellas, Carius, Beisheim, Parnell, & Messner, 2018). As a result, the rise of the ‘cities agenda’ has led not only to an increased role for cities in global politics, but also to a re-shaping of the knowledge-base underpinning global commitments and their implementation. Therefore, the repeated scholarly and policy warnings about the current lack of urban data also raise fundamental questions about what it means to ‘call’ the urban into global politics, in particular through knowledge production. Authors such as Barnett and Bridge (2016, p. 1187) have indicated that “*what is required is a form of analysis oriented not by a concern with how to define ‘the urban’, but rather by an interest in understanding how and why making sense of urban issues becomes salient in the first place.*” Along with this, there is in our view a need to understand the process through which specific ways of making sense of urban issues in turn reinforce hegemonic ways of seeing the city, and how this shapes global urban politics. As already demonstrated by others (Rokem & Boano, 2017), critical geopolitics offers a fertile ground to start unpacking such questions. This is an area that has long attended to the politics of knowledge, for instance demonstrating how geographical sciences and technologies of knowing have supported particular geopolitical discourses or interventions throughout history (Ó Tuathail, 1996). The contemporary willingness to move beyond the “territorial trap” of modern geopolitics (Agnew, 2003), by emphasizing city agency in global affairs (Oosterlynck, Beeckmans, Bassens, & Segaert, 2018), and by calling for the production of globally comparable urban data, invites a new process of reframing and rescaling our understanding of the global. In that sense, the question of urban knowledge production – especially that of urban data creation – is, we argue, an essentially geopolitical question. Yet, insights from critical geopolitics have been rarely (if at all) used in current debates on global urban policy and urban data politics. This work, we posit, can enrich current academic and policy discussions, as it invites us to explore three interrelated questions: how is the urban being written into contemporary global politics? What types of ‘urban’ issues are made salient/invisible in that process? Which geopolitical actors are dominating the production of urban knowledge globally?

In addressing these themes, this paper seeks to unpack how power operates and manifests in the current global urban knowledge landscape, and how it shapes the ways in which urban issues are framed – and acted upon – in global urban policy. In doing so, our investigation explores the geopolitics of urban data more specifically, although we contend that knowledge production goes beyond the generation of standardized data. This focus is justified by the emphasis in global (as well as local) policy and academic discourses on the need to address current ‘urban data gaps’ and to generate comparable urban information. In what follows, we first ground our work into scholarly research from critical urban data studies and critical geopolitics to argue that writing cities into global politics implies paying attention to the technological and socio-spatial architecture that underpins this process. Second, we introduce our methodological approach to the analysis of 28 global urban databases. Third, we dig into the technical as well as human components of global urban datasets to unveil the geopolitics of urban data. In doing so, we seek to decipher the power structures that support the construction of a contemporary global ‘urban gaze’ which in turn shapes – as much as it is maintained by – global urban policy and hegemonic forms of global urban knowledge production. Fourth, we discuss how our findings advance a research agenda on the geopolitics of urban knowledge, one that takes issue with the ways in which the global urban is being written and narrated through contemporary urban data production processes. Finally, we discuss the policy implications of the current urban momentum in global politics and the resulting call for an urban data revolution.

The ‘urban gaze’ in global politics

Despite the role cities are expected to play in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, several authors have stressed that local governments come ill-prepared to keep up with the policy demands they are facing. Indeed, the need for policy relevant knowledge at the local level and the lack of integrated and readily available data about urban conditions across multiple sectors have been highlighted numerous times (e.g. Parnell, 2016, 2018; Birch, 2016; Acuto, 2018). For instance, the UN’s Cape Town Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data (UN Statistical Commission, 2017) explicitly urged national governments to improve their data capacity and production at every government level – including city-level data – to track and monitor progress towards the implementation of these global development agendas. In early 2017, more than 200 city leaders signed the Dubai Declaration emphasizing the importance of “*city data as the universal language*” (Bosworth, 2017). Simultaneously, the recent years have been marked by the emergence of a wide range of initiatives aiming to produce knowledge about cities, and led by various academic, private and non-for-profit actors (e.g. Acuto, Robin et al., 2018; Acuto, 2018; Bai, Elmqvist, Frantzeskaki, & McPhearson, 2017). In particular, some institutions have embarked on the generation of globally comparable urban data – be that to support national and local governments reporting on their efforts towards meeting the SDGs (e.g. Caprotti et al., 2017; OECD, 2018), or to address (local) policy and business demands for city benchmarking and indexes (e.g. Holden, 2006; Kitchin, Lauriault & McArdle, 2015), or to increase the visibility of urban governments themselves on the global scene (e.g. Bhada & Hoorweg, 2009). This claim to a geopolitical role for the ‘urban’ – however poorly defined – has also been increasingly sponsored by the private and philanthropic sector, with major initiatives such as the C40 Climate Leadership Group and the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities leading to the production of globally comparable urban information across a variety of policy domains (e.g. Spaans & Waterhout, 2017). In many data scarce contexts, global urban data platforms, for instance the ones sponsored by UN-Habitat, have become a reservoir of expertise for local governments and local actors. Equally, media groups (e.g. the Economist Intelligence Unit) and private companies (e.g. McKinsey) are regularly producing global indexes and city rankings. Yet, the term ‘data’ itself is value-laden: the production of ‘urban data’ or ‘urban analytics’ solutions, often presented as a panacea in entrepreneurial ‘smart cities’ discourses, has coalesced interests from the private sector and governments worldwide but has also been heavily criticised for what it leaves out (i.e. everyday experience of the city) (McFarlane & Söderström, 2017), the types of interests it serves (Neirotti, De Marco, Cagliano, Mangano, & Scorrano, 2014; Söderström, Paasche, & Klausner, 2014; Townsend, 2013; Vanolo, 2014) and the issues it raises in relation to privacy and surveillance (Kitchin, Coletta, & McArdle, 2017; 2015; Schindler & Marvin, 2018). Similarly, the focus on the production of large scale, standardized, comparable quantitative urban data for the monitoring of the NUA and SDG11 have dominated global conversations with few critical insights about who produces that information, its selective effects in terms of what types of urban realities are made visible through knowledge production, and how such knowledge can be used, and by whom (Robinson and Parnell, 2017). This is not to undermine the value of creating collective standards for data production, as comparison beyond national borders can also help localities design better policies through mutual learning (Keiner & Kim, 2007). However, the limitations of standardized and commensurable urban metrics also need to be accounted for, and the process of inclusion/exclusion that underpin their production needs to be acknowledged. Authors like Robinson and Parnell (2017, p. 15) usefully remind us that the NUA and SDG agenda require:

“first to harness and synthesize knowledge; second to acknowledge the limits of commensurability in assembling data on different processes; and third to protect against geographical exclusion in the

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