Conceptualizing the Urban Commons

Asma Mehan¹ and Mahziar Mehan²
¹Senior Researcher, CITTA Research Institute, Faculty of Engineering (FEUP), University of Porto, Porto, Portugal
²School of Urban Planning, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

The concept of the commons was made widely known by the research of economist Elinor Ostrom (1990), allowing the “commoners” of that community the right to sustain themselves by grazing animals and collecting wood and wild food (Bingham-Hall 2016:2). This concept denotes the public land and natural resources – such as water and air – accessible to all members of society for development and survival, around which, historically, commoners organized themselves as self-governing collectives (Brears 2021). Referring to Lessig (2001) and the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner 1989), the commons is any collectively owned resource held in common use or possession to which anyone has access without obtaining permission of anyone else. Urban Commons “suggests a community of commoners that actively utilize and upkeep whatever is being commoned. In the new social definition, the term has taken on through grassroots projects and scholarly rethinking (…) common access has the potential to offer a richer form of interaction with the city than public ownership” (Bingham-hall, p.2). Huron defines urban commons as a way of “experiencing collective work, among strangers, to govern non-commodified resources in spaces saturated with people, conflicting uses, and capitalist investment” (2015: 977). This means that the urban commons conceptualization is a representation of resistance against the capitalist order and spatial commodification. The urban commons exist “as a dynamic and collective resource – a variegated form of social wealth – governed by emergent custom and constant negotiating, rebuffing, and evading the fixity of law” (Gidwani and Baviskar 2011: 42).

Urban Governance: Definition, Introduction, Theoretical Framework

The literature on State Theory and the transformation of state spatiality theory under contemporary capitalism has grown rapidly during the past three decades. In general, power and politics are central to the urban governance literature. The core of these analyses focuses upon the state policy and governance alignment that has occurred in recent decades. During the 1970s, the term “entrepreneurial urban governance” was introduced to promote economic development from below to respond to the contemporary challenges of urban industrial decline, inclusion and integration policies, and globalization (Harvey 1989). As of the
early 1980s, during the early stages of the institutionalization of neoliberal ideology intertwined with the fiscal crisis of the Keynesian welfare in the Global North, national states began promoting the economic rejuvenation within localized territorial competitiveness (Brenner and Theodore 2012). Such urban locational policies entailed a fundamental redefinition of the national state’s roles as an institutional mediator of uneven geographical mental redefinition and state territoriality (Brenner 1999). For Swyngedouw (2005), “Governance is an arrangement of governing beyond-the-state (but often with the explicit inclusion of parts of the state apparatus) organized as [apparently] horizontal associational networks of the private market, civil society (usually NGO) and state actors. In addition, governance often promises greater democracy and grassroots empowerment but also exhibits a series of contradictory tendencies” (Swyngedouw 2005, p. 1992).

In this way, governance brought a different set of actors to the scenario of social development implementation. The process involves collaboration between government institutions at all levels, NGOs, individual and private organizations, and the society as a whole (Florini and Pauli 2018) which brings more complexity when it comes to solving societal problems (Munaretto et al. 2014; Folke et al. 2010). In this way, urban governance needs to enrich the “soft infrastructures” which connects governance activity to its milieu and which relates a fine-grain understanding of the range and complexity of evolutions forming this milieu to a strategic understanding of the dynamics within the broader worlds in which the relations of urban area exist (Cars et al. 2002, p. 225).

In general, urban governance studies aim to unpack the strategies to frame the potential future urbanisms we might produce. As McCann (2017) puts it, “studies of urban governance have addressed the actors and interests that make urban policy decisions to define and enact what it means to be a citizen, and address existential challenges, including environmental crises” (McCann 2017, p. 314). Focusing on Neoliberal governmentality, Davoudi and Madanipour (2015) state that “the tension between the perceived moral and responsible individuals, communities and localities, and their identification as rational economic actors, whose decisions are solely motivated by the cost-benefit analysis of their self-interests, remains high; and finding ways of bridging the two remains a critical challenge” (Davoudi and Madanipour 2015, p. 98).
Concluding Notes: Governing the Urban Commons

Many scholars and activists see strengthening “the urban commons” as a crucial means of achieving more sustainable use of environmental resources and a more equitable future for humans and more than human habitats and settlements (Mehan 2021; Rahdari et al. 2019). Governing commons in an urban context could be about finding the right path to regulate something as dynamic, spontaneous, and agile as a community (URBACT 2021). Identifying commoning as the creation of formal rules and management systems or as social relations and existing informal norms (Bollier 2010:3), governance could be identified as a tool to identify and justify those relations (Mehan and Mostafavi 2022). Polycentric urban governance involves resource pooling and cooperation between five possible categories of actors – social innovators or the unorganized public, public authorities, businesses, civil society organizations, and knowledge institutions – the so-called “quintuple helix governance” approach (Iaione and Cannavo 2015). These co-governance arrangements have three main aims including the social innovation enhancement in urban welfare provision, prompting collaborative participatory economies as a driver of local sustainable development plans, and promoting the inclusive urban regeneration of run-sown residential neighborhoods. Public authorities play an essential enabling role in creating and sustaining the co-city. The ultimate goal is making a more just and democratic city, consistent with the Lefebvrian approach of the right to the town (Foster and Iaione 2016; Iaione 2017).

Cross-References

- Circular Economy and the Water-Food Nexus

References


URBACT. (2021, September 14). Governing commons, is it even possible?. https://urbact.eu/governing-the-commons-is-it-even-possible