

ESTAÇÃO DE PESQUISA URBANA M'BOI

SÉRIE DOCUMENTOS DE TRABALHO

WORKING PAPERS, Nº 16, OUTUBRO/ 2017

# Invisible cities and micro- vulnerabilities: the rocky road to democratic governance

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Outubro de 2017



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### **Abstract**

Urban issues are often at the forefront of the social science debate on democracy and governance. Despite all the complexity, contradictions and tensions that are present in the intersecting and hybrid arena of community, economic and political affairs, the tendency in the literature has been to emphasize the more positive and optimistic possibilities of discursive collective life. Taking as an empirical starting point – that is as beginning and not example – an “invisible city” within the mega city of São Paulo, Brazil, this paper seeks to show how in certain circumstances, the connectivity implies in the discursive democracy approach can fall apart, with significant consequences for urban vulnerability.

Key Words: Discursive democracy; urban vulnerability; invisible cities; territorial connectivity

### **Resumo**

As questões urbanas estão frequentemente na vanguarda do debate das ciências sociais sobre democracia e governança. Apesar de toda a complexidade, das contradições e das tensões que estão presentes na interdependente e híbrida arena de assuntos comunitários, econômicos e políticos, a tendência na literatura tem sido enfatizar as possibilidades mais positivas e otimistas no discurso da vida coletiva. Tendo como ponto de partida empírico - que é um começo, e não, exemplo - uma "cidade invisível" dentro da mega cidade de São Paulo, este trabalho procura mostrar como, em certas circunstâncias, a conectividade implicada na abordagem da democracia discursiva pode se despedaçar, com consequências significativas para a vulnerabilidade urbana.

Palavras-Chave: Democracia discursiva; Vulnerabilidade urbana; Cidades invisíveis; Conectividade territorial

Las cuestiones urbanas están a menudo en la vanguardia del debate de las ciencias sociales sobre la democracia y la gobernanza. A pesar de toda la complejidad, contradicciones y tensiones que se presentan en la intersección y el híbrido ámbito de los asuntos comunitarios, económicos y políticos, la tendencia en la literatura ha sido enfatizar las posibilidades más positivas y optimistas de la vida colectiva discursiva. Tomando como punto de partida empírico - como principio y no como ejemplo- una "ciudad invisible" dentro de la mega ciudad de São Paulo, Brasil, este trabajo busca mostrar cómo en ciertas circunstancias la implicada conectividad en el enfoque de la democracia discursiva pueden demorarse, con importantes consecuencias para la vulnerabilidad urbana.

Palabras Clave: Democracia discursiva; Vulnerabilidad urbana; Ciudades invisibles; Conectividad territorial

## **1. Introduction**

As Sergio Boisier, former director of regional policy and planning for CEPAL observed in a recent text on local development in a global era (2005): all development is local because it has to happen somewhere. Governments may develop programs that affect a wide range of issues and territories, but their results do not happen in a place called “everywhere”; they will always be applied “ by someone somewhere”. For example, an increase or change in patterns of consumption does not happen in a place called “everywhere” but in thousands of small places

where habits, supply and demand change with the horizons of everyday activity for all sorts of reasons.

Yet despite a vast and profound literature on the human and social geography of place (Cresswell, 2004; Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011) most of those involved in formulating government action assume that the variety of “somewhere” can be accommodated by the flexibility of “everywhere”. The tension between the two was set out by Friend (1977) who pointed to the differences in positioning: from the point of view of the major representative, for example mayor, and that from the point of view of the citizen in the day to day. For the former, concerned with the implementation of programs and policies, the different services are like the different parts of a fan, each of which spreads out towards different groups or populations. When the members of the executive (ministers, secretaries, program managers) gather together, concern is with the coherence of these different activities as part of a government platform or action agenda; the “government policy space”.

For the citizen in the day to day, the situation is the reverse. Her or his social reality is made up of very concrete questions and issues linked to different demands and rights. A single mother with a young baby who needs to work; an elderly person who needs to move around; a youngster looking for books that aren't in her school library. Their day to day (their “socio-technical life space”) in relation to state action is made up of bits of different questions and social and material solutions, which are treated and delivered by different bits of the various organizations whose actions fan outwards toward everyday life. The executive or cabinet or policy committee are concerned with “implementation”; the citizen, family, friends and

neighbors are concerned with where things are, how to get to them and how to build the bits together. Friedmann (1992), used a similar approach in referring to those aspects of the day to day that are key to social power and the important role played by state agencies in helping or hindering their acquisition: financial resources; social networks; appropriate information; surplus time over subsistence requirements; instruments of work or livelihood; social organization; knowledge and skills; and a defensible life space.

When the variety of “somewhere” is limited and the mismatch between the general and the specific can be adjusted in one way or another through resources, opportunities or innovations, the principle of adaptation in implementation tends to hold good (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Barrett, 2004; Bardach, 1977). It may not be logically valid – for it can fall into the trap of becoming a category mistake (Ryle, 1949) - yet it is this principle which tend to hold center stage in much of the discussion on urban affairs.

Our paper is concerned with settings in which the specifics of the somewhere are densely distributed in highly complex ways and where the principle of “adaptation in implementation” breaks down and problems become, as Rittel and Webber had earlier alerted (1973) very wicked indeed.

Our concern is with the megacities: those 31 cities in the world with over 10 million inhabitants of which 24 are located in the global south and with another 10 on the way over the next 15 years (UN: The World’s Cities in 2016). We take the example of the municipality of São Paulo, a 11 million plus mega city in its own right, and show how the phenomenon of invisible cities –

those places that may have services but are without “state” – is key to rethinking urban vulnerability in the day to day.

We did not set out to study invisible cities or wicked problems, nor is this a normative argument. Like many researchers in Latin America we were aware of areas in which communities basically get on by themselves, often rural but also urban as in the case of Villa El Salvador in Lima Peru which began as land invasion in 1971. We were aware of much of the discussion about high-density urban areas, including favela communities, and their often-tense relations with the state but again this were not our focus. On the contrary we set out to study some different aspects of day to day urban vulnerability and together with colleagues from other São Paulo Universities had the idea of carrying out our different studies in the same territorial area and, in doing so, look for ways in which our resources could be combined and results be more useful to those directly involved in local affairs. This very simple starting point of linking research, public service and a more equitable use of university resources is one that colleagues in urban affairs are assuming in various parts of the world. It has echoes of urban outreach, of field stations (Sommer, 1990) and of community based action research – to name but a few traditions – but is perhaps better located within the current discussion of the civic university (see Goddard, 2009).

This approach to urban research – different studies taking place in the same territory – helped us to open up some of the questions posed by the tensions between Friend’s two positions. On the one hand, we were looking at different areas of government action, where those involved take the implementation route through the “government policy space”. The studies were on people living in areas of risk; relations between government and civil society in service provision;

youth and culture; and inter-agency coordination. But at the same time, being in similar places, comparing data and information, we became more aware of the specificities of the day to day and the tensions and conflicts present between Friend's different positions. Neighborhood residents and local activists that we talked to about one thing would also talk about other parts of their day to day and their communities. Street level service workers were also part of the story (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Mosheno, 2000), as people who walk and talk the interfaces, but what about the other side of the street, where people are trying to make ends meet. Were the different position merely perspectives or, are they performatively, parts of different discursive and ontological communities (Mol, 1999).

The structure of the paper is a consequence of our attempts to move beyond the “adaptation in implementation” principle, where seeing like a state (Scott, 1998) is very present, and start from the territory of the specifics. As a result, it is descriptive and territorially grounded, which can be seen as limiting in scope; yet at the same time it suggests ways of rethinking the urban that may be useful elsewhere.

The paper is structured in five parts, including this introduction and a conclusion. The second part briefly describes the municipality of São Paulo and its peripheral south zone as well as the research team's early contacts with the region and introduces the notion of “invisible cities” (inspired by the author Italo Calvino) as a way of pointing to the underlying complexity of the area. The third part develops this further through our attempts to understand what lay behind the commonly used expression in forums and meetings of an “absent state” and suggests the

importance of a broader approach to vulnerability that moves beyond its personal, social and material dimensions, to include institutional and political aspects.

The fourth part returns to the discussion of “wicked problems”, currently being re-assumed in a variety of ways and poses the question of public administration and city management in cities in which wicked problems are the common feature of public affairs. The conclusion follows the opening line of local development and shows how de-centered alternatives to the “adaptation through implementation” principle may offer a route for effective democratic development.

## **2. São Paulo and its south zones**

In 2015, the population of São Paulo was estimated at 11,504,120 inhabitants, more than that of countries such as Hungary, Portugal, Greece or Belgium. The comparisons become even more significant when the remaining thirty-eight municipalities of the metropolitan area are added in and the population soars to some 22 million. Together these occupy a large water basin some 800 meters (2,500 feet) above sea level, which, even though it is only 55km from the port of Santos on the coast, flows inland to form the Parana River and reach the sea in Argentina. Most big cities of the world can be found near the sea end of their rivers or at least considerably downstream, São Paulo sits on top of its catchment area and despite the photographs which suggest a flat maze of high rise buildings, it is in fact a city full of hills and valleys, with innumerable streams and rivers, many of which are hidden under major roads or areas of self-built housing, only to quickly appear in the semi-tropical storms.

Brazil is a federal democracy which, since 1988, considers states and municipalities as independent constitutional members. All can be involved in service provision and program design, with in many cases the Federal Government assuming the financing of major and, as a result, Brazil's cooperative federalism is a highly heterogeneous affair.

As there is no formal “government” and, indeed, very little “governance” at the metropolitan level in the country [\_\_\_\_\_] our jurisdictional focus is the municipality of São Paulo. Municipal administration is highly centralized, with a four-year term elected mayor and a separately elected municipal chamber of 55 *vereadores* on citywide lists. Individual municipal secretaries are organized territorially in different ways and the only general sub-jurisdictional arrangement is the 32 Regional Prefectures, whose heads are chosen by the Mayor. Theoretically responsible for territorial coordination, they have very small budgets and their main task is local infrastructure maintenance. Attempts at creating some form of local representation have not proved very effective; community leaders have learned that the route is to go to city hall.

If they were to become municipalities in their own right, São Paulo's regional prefectures would be amongst the most populous municipalities in the country and would have their full “kit” of constitutional institutions. Parelheiros, the smallest and most rural with a population of 153,372 would still be the 189<sup>th</sup> largest in the country (out of 5,561) and the individual populations of the first three (Campo Limpo 659,911; Capela do Socorro 599,683 and M'Boi Mirim 595,811 all of which are part of the extended south zone) are greater than that of eight State capitals which will host an additional “kit” of State institutions.

The south zone of São Paulo can be divided into three areas: the first is what those in the more wealthier central regions call the *zona sul* which starts at the Paulista Avenue and goes out past

the Ibirapueira park and the well urbanized upper middle class houses and flats toward the regional airport at Congonhas. The second starts at the airport, passes the center of the Regional Prefecture of Santo Amaro and goes on to the Pinheiros River. As it crosses the river it materializes expressions that are often heard when discussing the differences in distribution and quality of public services and the way the police act: this side of the bridge; the other side of the bridge. This is where the third zone begins and goes on, and on, down both sides of the Guarapiranga Water Reservoir. On the right hand side, looking from São Paulo city hall towards the south, is M'Boi Mirim and Campo Limpo and on the left, Capela do Socorro and Parelheiros. Until 1937, both the second and third areas were all part of what used to be the municipality of Santo Amaro, with small farms that supplied São Paulo with agricultural produce, weekend houses and a few recreational clubs around the reservoir.

For the planners in the city hall, this third zone is part of the periphery of São Paulo; an expression that is used to talk about the outer zone of the city, towards its limits with adjoining municipalities. But it is also an expression that positions people as being unskilled and semi-skilled working class – which in Brazil is often synonymous with having low incomes – with substandard housing, not very good education, somewhat socially excluded and often being problematic. If the visitor to São Paulo were to talk to most people in the first of the areas about the third, the impression would be that yes there are people out there, but there are not that many and that is the periphery of the town and its not safe to go there. Even the web site of the Municipal Government will say on the page introducing the regional prefectures: “few people know, but São Paulo has 31 small ‘municipalities’ distributed throughout the city” (the commas around municipalities are from the original text).

The districts of Jardim Ângela and Jardim São Luís form one of these small “municipalities”: the regional prefecture of M’Boi Mirim. Together they have nearly 600,000 inhabitants, which would make M’Boi Mirim one of the thirty largest municipalities in Brazil. M’Boi Mirim has a population of 45,769 in the 0-4 years group, a key focus of current municipal attention on early education and day care, 108,400 in the 15-24 years range (a major concern for occupational training) and 40,964 over sixties (a part of Brazilian society which until very recently has been “off the radar” of public affairs). Just these three together would represent major challenges to some of the world’s best local government social and urban planners – here they are just another part of M’Boi Mirim which is in turn just another part of São Paulo.

With Santo Amaro already a district of São Paulo, the space along the Pinheiros River was key for industrial expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. Nearly all the bicycles made in Brazil came out of the Monark and Caloi factories and a number of the auto parts firms that would supply the newly arrived motor car assembly plants in the ABC region were also based there. The Pharmaceutical Industry set up camp in Santo Amaro along with other household names in electrical goods. The factories needed staff and were prepared to pay, but not prepared to provide housing and people started arriving arrived from the surrounding States as well as the northeast of the country. The result was a process of formal and semi formal divisions of the individual smallholdings surrounding the Guarapiranga into small (5mts x 20mts) lots on which people started to build their homes: “the first thing we did was to dig a well, then we built a room, then another room; there was no electricity and no sewage; one family helped another”. The “we” may be family members, but later included artisans and building workers from the

communities themselves. As one architect put it in conversation, “we have to be honest and admit that “self-building” does not mean bad building, it just means that it wasn’t designed by an architect or supervised by an engineer”. This self-help and self-building process has been studied by a number of scholars (for example Holston, 1991, 2008; Lara, 2012) and echoes similar processes elsewhere in Latin America (see Ward et al., 2014).

The landscape of Jardim Ângela and its co-district Jardim Luis is highly undulated and today it is marked by high-density housing that seems to occupy all available possibilities – and impossibilities – of location. Despite the heavy subtropical rainfall in summer months, there are no sloped roofs. The tops are flat and unfinished and are very key parts of the property: either for holding social gatherings or for building more rooms and at times to sell to others; (social) space is indeed a (social) product.

Self-building did not stop at housing. These were areas of the outskirts of São Paulo that were largely ignored by the municipal government and those present had to fend for themselves. Brazil has a large catholic population and many of those arriving were used to the church playing an important role in the social life of the community. They built their own places for worship that in turn strengthened the communities and were key elements in the São Paulo Catholic Church’s 1970’s option for liberation theology. With municipal government absent, social mobilization, through the ecclesiastical base communities and also the trade unions was the route to providing basic services and pressure for place based public investment: water, electricity, sewage, schools, health, transport amongst others were many of the themes that people recall.

Little by little the state and its organizations began arriving but the communities in their different ways had already been active and alongside mobilizing also went the provision of community services. A recent document (2013) published by the Municipal Secretary for Social Assistance and Development (SMADS) analyzing the different regions of São Paulo states that in the region of M'Boi Mirim, some 36% of the population can be classified as being in high and very high vulnerability, which rises to 50% in Jardim Ângela. The description continues with an appraisal of social services:

“In relation to the network of social services, the area ... has 79 different service units capable of attending together 16,610 clients and is the most well equipped of the southern zone 1. Of these units the Municipality directly runs three (2 CRAS and 1 CREAS). Amongst the services that are contracted, the major part is focused on children and adolescents...”

The three units that are run directly by the municipality are the coordinating or reference centers for social welfare. The remainder – seventy-six – are run by other organizations in the region many of them faith based; that were there long before the arrival of the new social welfare system.

### **3. Invisible cities and institutional vulnerability**

Numbers and documents are important, but social researchers also need to talk to people and we needed to get to the other side of the street. From previous contacts in the region it seemed to make sense to talk with one of the faith-based social organizations, linked to the Santos Mártires

Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> in Jardim Ângela. The Santos Mártires Society was set up in 1988 following the formation of the parish in 1987, to respond to an urgent need for a variety of very basic social services.

The Church and the Society are hosts to a number of important social forums that gather together activists and representatives of different public organizations, service providers and universities concerned with social change. The most well known of these is the Forum in Defense of Life (*Forum em Defesa da Vida*), which has been meeting on the first Friday of every month since it was created in February 1997. At the time there had been a radical increase in violence in the region and Jardim Ângela had been declared the most violent place in the world (UN May 1996). The Forum serves as a horizontal gathering point to talk about social issues in the region and connects many key local actors with other institutional representatives.

In the early days of the different studies we frequently heard from people about how the region was ignored by city hall and how the “State” was absent. We heard this in conversations and found it circulating in dissertations and papers written by residents, newspaper articles and the like. Here is an example from a text written by somebody who has been active in the region for over fifteen years:

M'Boi Mirim is a region marked by social inequality. It is an area of high vulnerability in which the absence of the public authority and the high number of inhabitants contribute to produce multiple forms of social exclusion. In the historical absence of the State, people, groups and communities with their different forms of organization have gathered themselves together to survive and provide for their collective life.

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<sup>1</sup> Church of the Martyr Saints. For more details see [www.santosmartires.org.br](http://www.santosmartires.org.br).

The first reaction to the expression of the absence of government was to look for the information on service provision in the area and the result gave a very different picture. There was information available, but it was not in the same place. Brazil's transparency laws require municipal web sites to provide information and São Paulo, like other large cities does its best. But in 2013 there was no common municipal map on the web site and each secretary or agency had its own way of listing services, usually just a page of addresses. We ended up building our own base map of the M'Boi region by cutting and pasting together a street guide and taking the 60x90 cm result to the local photo-copy shop.

There have been a number of key volumes produced in São Paulo about the conditions of its population which have picked up parts of the same theme, for example the pioneering study, *City in Pieces*, by Sposati, (2002). The Municipal Planning Secretariat, the Housing Secretary and the State agency EMPLASA also produce very useful documents. Their maps, in general have – by the requirements of academic publications – to be fitted in to a standard printed page or at the most A4. Placing the complexity of São Paulo onto a printed page leads to a maze of dots that have only a generalized relationship to territory and, at the best, provide broad tendencies.

The do-it-yourself map shows an area of approximately 10 km by 16 kilometers, with very clear and key landmarks (the rivers, the roads, the reservoir, the parks). At the equivalent of US\$ 8 a copy, we had something that could be drawn on and that could be stuck with tape on a wall.

People could gather around and stick different colored circles and squares, develop different symbols for what went where and trace how people went from A to B.

We started with the regional prefecture, which was almost outside the region, then as well as noting the various boundaries with neighboring regional prefectures and adjoining municipalities, looked at the areas that had already been identified as being at risk of land slippage and flooding. On top of this went some of key parts of the public institutional ecology: bus terminals, police stations (three), fire stations (none), registrar's offices and the State government's citizen information offices (one). What that showed was how much the few general public institutions were dislocated in relationship to both the population and the areas of greater vulnerability (people do not live in at risk areas by choice).

Further maps were made of each service area (primary and secondary education, health, welfare, culture) and new questions arose. Firstly, contrary to the impression given by the absent State comments, there were a sizeable number of public sector actors with a territorial base, especially when adding together the different schools, the health services and the social services. There was a tendency for more services in the north of the region, which followed the time cycle of land occupation. The further south, the less services there were – but they were still there. The problems emerged when considering their relations to the places in which they were located and how they were located. In education, with crèches, infant schools, primary and secondary schools spread quite widely around M'Boi Mirim, they were often different to spot, with high walls closed off from the street with a narrow entrance gate. There were only three schools in the whole area of M'Boi that were conceived and designed as open spaces with weekend

activities, libraries and cultural events. The different levels of schooling were linked institutionally to different jurisdictional levels. Day care centers had, until some ten years ago, been part of the municipal social services and most of them had begun as social programs linked to faith based organizations. They were now contracted services of the municipal education department. The State of São Paulo is a major provider of education services but a transition is in place for primary schooling up to middle school to be transferred to the municipalities. There were, primary schools that are municipal; primary, middle and secondary schools that are state run, some of which are separate and some co-located in the same building. Municipal coordination takes place with one map, and the State coordination has another. Their offices are in different parts of town. A very simple indicator of the difficulty this creates is the constant questioning by mothers to social activists: why do they have to go to different places to try and get their children registered or get on a bus to take their child to a day care center when there is another one within walking distance?

The municipal social services department map and web site shows three entry points but does not show the over 70 services that are spread across the territory and receive financial support to provide key social and welfare services. Many of these, like the day care centers, were there before the local state arrived and are considered by the department as contracted out services. Due to recent changes they are not allowed to act as referral points and have to send people looking for support to one of the three coordinating centers that are located in the top half of the map.

Health, coordinated under the Unified Health System (SUS) has a broad network with some 32 health centers spread territorially, slightly more in the north and center than in the south. There are two public hospitals that try to cover nearly a million people in two regional prefectures and there are serious logistical problems with exams and mobility of key health personnel, many of which have to move in and out of the region daily.

Public transport is under strain with two main roads trying to cope with the demand of buses and a population many of which have to leave the region in the early morning to work and return at night. Young people going to university have to fit in part time study with work; an 18-hour day with many hours in the bus is not unusual. Everything goes in and out along the roads that are also the places where a few banks, correspondence banking points and the larger commerce is located. With more attention being paid to journey in and out, the smaller routes that are key for internal mobility are few and far between. Internal mobility is a growing issue.

Any photographic camera lens will have a focal plane that can be adjusted either automatically or manually and, depending on where the focus is, the rest will fade away. This very simple and mechanistic image may not be elegant but helps to describe what came out when we started to take the maps around, stick them on walls and hold discussions. From area to area of the public arena, the different agencies will “see like a State” but each in their own way. As we move around the different maps from the point of view of the service providers it was as if we were moving to different places and not the same place. A constant comment was that the different services “don’t talk to each other”. The community based health centers need to talk to the schools but are not welcomed. There are municipal and State schools as well as many private

primary schools but again they are hidden behind walls and again don't talk to each other. The contracted out social services staff need to talk to schools and health centers about difficult cases but moving around is very complicated and everybody is “very busy” and the pressures are great.

Some of the service workers are concerned with the articulation and linkage of actions, but others are required to concentrate on the task at hand. The teams from the basic health service must report on and link potential patients with the next tier of services, or organize for them to do their exams; the center for technical education is concerned with its classes, students and teachers. As Mead observed (1932: 346): “The limitation of social organization is found in the inability of individuals to place themselves in the perspectives of others, to take their points of view”.

The idea of institutional vulnerability has many roots but an important contribution was the Mann, Tarantola and Netter report (1992) on vulnerability to AIDS in its different aspects and amongst these they introduced the idea of program vulnerability, to refer to the difficulties of government in maintaining their activities and guarantee services.

If we think about vulnerability not only from a social and material standpoint, but also from the standpoint of the absence of effective networks that bring public services together in ways that provide broader institutional support, then the comments made about the absence of the “State” become clearer. There are services but if the different institutional actors – of which there are many – do not connect each with the other in their work, what is left is an assortment of randomly distributed fragments amongst which citizens must search to find the connections that

matter. For those facing social vulnerability, problems of material vulnerability only serve to make matters worse: being without adequate housing, or having no alternative to occupying a high-risk area, can greatly reduce capacity to face social demands. Institutional vulnerability, then, refers to the frailty of a variety of public actors, both those directly involved in providing and coordinating services and those responsible for the institutional oversight that guarantees the links in this network of networks that holds together the institutionality of everyday life. When this falls apart, there can be serious limits to the capacity of communities to assume the challenge; for the lack of connectivity is itself a powerful and disruptive action. As a community leader way out on the southern edge of the municipality said: “If public authorities won’t do their part, the tendency is to loose hope”.

But connecting is not just at the mid range level of interagency working, it is also about the way people respond in the day to day. Here are two examples:

“Is this where there is a service that helps adolescents? He is timid, doesn’t know what he wants in life, he is turned in on himself... where can I go? (Young woman, 30-35 years with a baby on her hips who came through the door of one of the church based services in the region. In accordance with the protocol established by the municipal social services, she should be told to go to the “local” social services reference center which is about 30 - 40 minutes away by bus). It is lunchtime, nobody from the service team is around but the church admin worker asks her where she lives and tries to find at least some kind of contact that she can connect with. (Observation from a field notebook).

In summertime a sequence of days or weeks with above normal precipitation can place moderately stable houses in unstable conditions amidst signs of slippage. In one of these

periods, a local activist, who had been helping a family whose small hillside house was under threat of slippage sent in a phone message to one of the risk researchers:

Hi.. we have just arrived at the sub prefecture where we spoke with M (one of the staff advisors) who sent us to speak with C who said we should go to talk with G from the inspectors office who took us personally to speak with Mr. B who called R who really wasn't very interested and asked us to enter with a new request for help because he didn't have the authority to receive ours..... we went back to talk to C who said we should talk to Mr. JP of the civil defense team who sent us to talk to Mr N (the coordinator) who immediately spoke with S (geologist and technical member of the team) who said yes she would go and see what was happening.....(phone message transcribed into a field notebook).

The civil defense coordinator has a small team with one technician (S) two drivers and a 24x7 emergency switchboard and monitoring assistant. At the time the coordinator was dealing with 22 other demands for help and support from water deluged residents over the whole region and was no doubt remembering how the year before they had had to persuade over 200 families to leave their homes in the early morning because a whole hillside was threatening to slide, but, like the church administrative worker, he stopped to listen.

#### **4. From wicked problems to wicked cities**

Rittel and Webber's (1973) idea of "wicked problems" helps to understand the issues facing a urban complex like São Paulo with its "invisible cities". The invisible cities of the public safety issue, of people living at risk, of a lack of institutional connectivity are not easy to domesticate. Raadschelders follows a similar line: "natural scientists can reduce a natural phenomenon to a definable and separable problem so that "it" can be analyzed. Social scientists and policy makers

do not have this luxury of reductive simplification” (Raadschelders, 2011, p. 919). For the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC, 2007): “Linear thinking is inadequate to encompass such interactivity and uncertainty. The shortcomings of a linear approach are also due to the social complexity of wicked problems.” (APSC, 2007, p. 11)

Van Bueren, Klijn and Koppenjan (2003) provide support for our observations in pointing not only to the cognitive uncertainty of problems, but to their strategic and institutional uncertainties. By strategic they refer to the involvement of many actors each of which has their own strategy to address the issue at hand whereas the institutional uncertainties refer to the fact that decisions are taken in different places, in different policy arenas in which different networks are present in what becomes a highly fragmented arena.

Not all problems are wicked and not all arenas are highly fragmented, but as the overview of the M'Boi experience shows, there is some cause to doubt the general optimism showed by the those who follow the principle of accommodation through implementation or who assume that hybrid forums can move forward through discursive comprehension. There are many instances in which the misfits between the generals and specifics can work themselves out; but what happens when they can't? To follow the adage from the accountability arena: who guards the guardians? What happens when institutional vulnerability is high and the capacity of social life to hold the ends together is stretched beyond limits? It is here perhaps that the question of political vulnerability should enter the debate, especially in what Young (2000) has called decentered and contested democracies.

Fortunately, the number of scholars taking the issue of “wicked problems” seriously is rising and in different fields. For example: original peoples, land degradation (APSC, 2007); the impacts of

the Zinc Industry ( van Bueren, Klijn and Koppenjan, 2003); and climate change which Lazarus (2009) has called a “super wicked problem”.

Big city administration is a highly complex task yet the classic approach by public administrators tends to follow the simplification and reductionist line in order to place problems within specialized settings of knowledge production (Brugué et al, 2011). The result is an overload of administrative capacities, an increase in administrative pressure, poorly performing agencies and an increase in public dissatisfaction. In developing countries like Brazil this is doubly, so because as services begin to appear so demand also rises. The work of what we are starting to call the M'Boi Urban Field Station – as a means of drawing attention to territorial based issues – is just beginning to get beyond the first layers of urban vulnerability, but its results are showing the complexity of the challenge faced by the mayor and his or her staff. Perhaps it is time to begin to talk about “wicked cities” whose inequalities are extensive and which have serious structural, contextual and administrative challenges. That require new mechanisms for dialogue between a broad range of institutional and non-institutional actors, alternative bases of knowledge and alternative starting points, for the existing bases of dialogue and of positioning seem to be part of the problem.

## **5. Conclusion: seeking democratic alternatives for wicked city administration**

A search for local based alternatives by “specifics” is not new. Indeed it is a common thread in much of the work that has focused innovation and local development; where the common

answer to “why did you do this” is some variant on “we had a problem that nobody knew how to solve so we set out to solve it” (\_\_\_\_\_).

Discussing local development in Spain, Vázquez Barquero (1993) has commented that with the absence of traditional large factories that stimulate local development of municipalities, the alternative was to avoid external solutions and seek specific paths that were different from place to place. The results may have had similar features – productive restructuring, increase in employment, improvements in the quality of life – but the processes were different.

Albuquerque (1997) follows a similar line and considers that whilst it is possible to point to some common themes, such as strengthening existing knowledge and skills, building networks, strengthening institutionalities amongst others, the search for solutions starts from the different territories themselves. Confirmation for this view comes from the work of Pike et al (2006), who show that the simple reproduction of innovative experiences in different contexts (much loved by International Agencies) has generated very little effective change. On the contrary, more effective have been approaches that have concentrated on the engagement of local stakeholders in discussing autonomous approaches to territorially based sustainable development.

Each locality is specific, with its history, institutions and other characteristics that shape economic and social activity. For Pike et al. (op cit), these specificities are materially and symbolically key to local and regional development, indeed they argue there is no: “one-size-fits-all” and nobody starts with a “clean sheet of paper”. The principles and values that

permeate local development are historically and geographically unequal and it is necessary to ask “development for whom”?

If in local development the question “for whom” is key, it is doubly the case in the debates over cities and public action. Developing the idea of “Sharing Cities”, McLaren and Agyeman (2015) show how some cities are confronting the so called “sharing economy” (for example Airbnb in San Francisco and Barcelona) and replacing it with very different shared patterns of political social and cultural life. In both cities, local governments moved to create new regulations or apply fines for the avoidance of tourist taxes, in ways that initiated a new round of discussions about “whose development”.

The case of Barcelona is especially interesting, more so given its centrality in much of the discussion about city management. Following the successful 2015 campaign of Ada Colau, the city's first female mayor, the Barcelona in Common platform is seeking to “win back the city” through rethinking the notion of commons (Rendueles and Subirats, 2016; Blanco and Gomà, 2016). The program not only includes the question of tourism, but also other very basic issues that are key to common pool collective life; for example taking over the control of water, creating a municipal funeral service, social inclusion, housing supply and networks of production and distribution of basic food supplies. Subirats (2016) has referred to these as *microsoberanias* (micro sovereignties).

Important for our discussion is that whilst general rules, incentives and disincentives are discussed generally at the municipal level, it is at the level of the local districts that the new

administration is trying to stimulate a rethinking of the city. Neighborhoods that were previously considered as degraded areas or as territories of social exclusion (Blanco and Subirats, 2008) are being shown to be much more active than was imagined and bottom-up district-neighborhood plans are being developed on the principle that situations of inequality should be treated positively unequally, with a greater share of resources. Already by April 2017, three regions of the city have developed their alternative plans (*Pla de Barris*) through participative and innovative approaches to thinking how to recover and increase local economies, improve the quality of life of neighborhoods and support practices of social innovation and co-production of public actions. If Barcelona, a city famed for its city-wide planning and renewal since the Olympic Games is capable of turning its model upside down and favoring the specifics as a starting point, perhaps the ideas discussed in this paper are not too far fetched. Can São Paulo and the various civil society groups and forums that still insist in starting from the general learn to start from the outside, from the other side of the street?

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