

Book Review

Governing Urban Sustainability: Comparing Cities in the USA and Germany

Reviewed by Carlos Nunes Silva, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

Governing Urban Sustainability. Comparing Cities in the USA and Germany

Lisa Pettibone

© 2015 by Ashgate

214 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-4724-63166

Lisa Pettibone seeks to explore, in *Governing Urban Sustainability. Comparing Cities in the USA and Germany*, how six cities in the US and in Germany are trying to incorporate sustainability principles into the respective political decision-making processes. In other words, the aim of the book, as Lisa Pettibone refers, is to examine how these cities are achieving urban sustainability governance. For that, the author explored the role that strategic plans, sustainability indicators, and sustainability-minded groups played in urban sustainability governance in these cities. The author used a comparative case study analysis. The selection of these two countries was based on the several factors referred by the author (wealthy, high-consuming, similar problems, federal states, among other aspects), being selected three cities in each of those two countries for analysis and comparison: New York, Portland and Seattle, in the USA; Berlin, Hamburg and Heidelberg, in Germany. The theme, the approach, and the cases studied make this book an important reference for all those somehow engaged in urban governance, policy makers, planners, citizen groups, and other stakeholders in the urban field.

The book is structured into three parts and 9 chapters. The first part ('Defining urban sustainability') with three chapters offers an informed account and discussion of the concept of sustainability, its history, and the way it impacts on governance. Chapter 1 ('A new framework for urban sustainability governance') introduces the subject, the cases studied, the methodology, and the structure of the book. In the following chapter ('Sustainability in five principles'), Lisa Pettibone presents and discusses her definition of sustainability and its relevance for urban governance, considering five main principles: acknowledgment of limits, interest in long time frames, systems approach, deliberation, and reflexivity, concluding this first part in chapter 3 ('History of sustainability in the United States and Germany') with an overview of the sustainability debate at the international level, in the USA and in Germany.

The second part ('Urban sustainability governance in six US and German cities'), with four chapters, is the core part of the book in which the cases studies are examined and compared. In the first of these chapters ('The instruments of urban sustainability governance') discusses the nature, characteristics of strategic plans and sustainability indicators and the important role they

can play in the governance of urban sustainability, both instruments seen as capable to create a vision for policymaking, one that integrates diverse policy sectors, cutting across traditional policy compartments. The role these two kinds of policy instruments, as well as the role of what the author terms sustainability-minded groups, have been playing in each of these six cities is examined in the following chapters (I think chapter 4 should be included in the first part, which the author also seems to consider in page 16 and at the end of page 75). Chapter 5, 6 and 7 present the empirical findings for each of the instruments of urban sustainability governance considered by the author. In chapter 5 ('Creating a vision: strategic plans and urban sustainability'), Lisa Pettibone offers evidence on how these cities developed all sort of plans, including strategic plans, although she found that encouraging growth has been often more important in these plans than appears to be the expressed concerns with urban sustainability. In the following chapter ('Quantifying values with sustainability indicators'), the evidence provided highlights the importance of indicators for the governance of urban sustainability, and in the last one ('Building motivation: sustainability-minded groups') the author discusses how sustainability-minded groups advance sustainability in the city context.

The third part ('Realizing sustainability principles in urban sustainability governance') presents and discusses, in two chapters, the key findings and implications for urban sustainability governance. In the first of these two chapters ('Reconceptualizing Urban Sustainability Governance') Lisa Pettibone analyses the main empirical findings of this comparative analysis and relates these findings to the initial research questions. The book ends in chapter 9 ('Conclusions') with a summary of the main points and suggestions of areas for further research.

The role of information and communication technologies, although not being a main focus of analysis in the book, is certainly an important component in both strategic planning and in the construction, monitoring and evaluation of key sustainability indicators. The analysis and discussion offered in the book, namely regarding strategic planning and sustainability indicators, are surely important and useful for urban e-planning.

A number of insights gained in the research presented and discussed by Lisa Pettibone in this book should be highlight. First, there is an enormous variety of experiences regarding strategic plans, sustainability indicators and sustainability minded-groups in the six cities studied, with differences being more important among cities within each country than between the two countries. Plans and indicators seem to be more effective for sustainability promotion when there is motivation on the side of political leadership and technical staff, and plans seem to privilege growth by comparison to sustainability. The use of indicators also varies among these cities, making operational a strategic vision, in some cases, or used to measure performance in other cases, or both, for instance. It seems that the outcomes are fairly more positive in these cities when plans and indicators work together for urban sustainability. The existence of those sustainability minded-groups, acting as advocates of sustainability, seemed to have helped to translate sustainability principles into local urban policies in the cases studied. The five main principles appear to be considered and valued differently in the cities examined. For instance, as Lisa Pettibone refers, long-term thinking has been better incorporated into local urban policy processes than other principles. And while cities tried to incorporate elements of systems thinking, reflexivity, and deliberation into local decision-making processes, the evidence collected in the cases studied do suggest that much more work is still needed. Also important is the reflexion Lisa Pettibone offers in the last pages of the book regarding the need of further research, the implications of this debate on sustainability for science and the role academic institutions should play, namely also in articulation with sustainability minded-groups. For all these reasons, this well written and informative book should be recommended to all those interested and working in the field of urban (e-)planning and urban governance more generally.