Book Review

United Nations E-Government Survey 2016:

E-Government in Support of Sustainable Development

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The United Nations adopted in 2015 the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' as well as other important international commitments with direct impacts on urban development policies. The implementation of 'The 2030 Agenda', focused on a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals and in 169 targets, requires specific institutional conditions and the use of new information and communication tools among other factors. E-government is seen as one of these critical tools. This role of a ubiquitous e-government in the promotion of sustainable development has been recognized by the United Nations on several occasions and on a myriad of policy documents. In this context, it is opportune the publication of this 2016 edition of the United Nations E-Government Survey, an inquiry made and published regularly since 2001 with the aim to measure the e-government effectiveness in the delivery of public services to citizens in various key public policy sectors, which is of interest for policy makers, researchers, civil society, private sector and other stakeholders in the field of public administration, and for all those working in the urban e-planning field I would add.

The 2016 survey identifies and highlights four main trends. First, an overall positive trend in the use of information and communication technologies in the public administration sector, which follows the positive development already seen in previous surveys. This is particularly so in the delivery of public services, increasingly designed to address individual needs, and in the efforts to engage citizens in the public decision-making process, in the majority of the 193 UN member countries covered by the survey. E-government has grown in the last decade and half and the number of countries with high Online Service Index increased from 2014 to 2016. Second, there is a trend for open government data. Actually, the survey points the fact that governments are opening up their data for public examination. This move towards free access to public data allows citizens, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to use it in a myriad of other activities, certainly also in urban planning related issues. The release of public data combined with the existent investigative capacities of Big Data analytics

opens an entire new area of possibilities for e-government, as the report suggests, and certainly also for urban e-planning in particular.

Third, the report provides evidence of an expanding e-participation culture, in different sectors of public administration, at all levels of government, thus confirming the evidence available in the literature on urban e-planning that points for an increasing role of e-participation in urban planning. The use of social media and other ICT-based participation tools to engage citizens in public decision-making processes is one of these trends identified in the e-participation field. Fourth, the 2016 survey reveals continuities in the disparities among countries and world regions, reflecting to some extent the level of economic and social development. If in 2014, for the first time, all governments of the UN 193 member countries had a presence in the Internet, there was then and continues to exist in 2016 huge differences in this respect among these countries. While developed countries are on the top of most of the rankings, namely European countries, the evidence provided suggests that developing countries are moving quickly on the ladder of e-government maturity, opening up good prospects for urban e-planning also in this group of less developed countries. Nonetheless, without addressing this digital divide among countries, and among citizens in each country, e-government will not fulfil the role it is expect to play in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is particularly so in the access to the Internet and in the use of mobile devices, which is not only dependent on technology but also on the social and economic inequalities that exist within the country and between citizens.

This overall picture on the development of e-government worldwide, in the last two years, offers good prospects for the development of urban e-planning worldwide in the near future, despite the continued digital divide, and sheds light on the strategies that shall be adopted in order to ensure access to urban e-planning by the poorest and most vulnerable citizens, thus fulfilling the principle that no one should be left behind, also in the field of urban governance and urban e-planning. The use of the Internet of Things is seen to have the potential to transform the way public policy, and urban planning specifically, is prepared, implemented and monitored, an aspect of the report that all those working in the field of urban e-planning should look at.

The 2016 Report is organized into five chapters and includes also several annexes with methodological notes and data and an extensive list of references that will certainly prove useful for readers of the IJEPR. The five chapters present the analysis of the data contained in the annexes. These analysis, rankings and comparisons are based on the E-Government Development Index, a composite Index that allows comparisons across the UN survey period (2001-2016). The first four chapters explore four key dimensions of the e-government contribution for sustainable development, which are also critical aspects for e-planning development: policy integration; policy transparency through pubic open data; citizen e-participation; and the bridging of the digital divide.

In Chapter 1 (E-government for policy integration) the report examines how e-government is making easier the integration of policy making and through that how it is helping to pursue sustainable development more effectively. The data and the new insights provided, and the lessons drawn from the successful cases will certainly be useful for those responsible and working in the design and maintenance of municipal or city e-planning portals, in particular if the aim is to integrate municipal services across the three dimensions of sustainable development, which is proving in practice to be a huge institutional and policy challenge. Also important are the questions raised in this chapter in relation to the need of appropriate legal frameworks, security systems, and the guarantee of the privacy and confidentiality of personal data. In the following chapter ('Transparency through open government data') the report explores the effect of open data policies in improving transparency in the public policy sector. It is assumed that sustainable development requires accountable and transparent public administration institutions and these can be improved by opening up government data. The survey shows that the availability and use of Open Government Data initiatives improved in recent years but still vary around the world, as does other dimensions of e-government. There is much to

be learnt, from the successful cases reported here (e.g., MapAfrica), by those responsible for urban planning in local or city governments.

This is followed in Chapter 3 (Engaging people through e-participation) by the analysis of progress made in the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in the several stages of the public policy making process and how it helps to promote more inclusive societies, a point that those in charge of urban e-planning departments are clearly aware, as the evidence available in the literature shows. The findings provided by this report, in the three level model of e-participation (e-information; e-consultation; e-decision-making) confirm improvements worldwide in this area but also differences among countries, as in other dimensions of e-government. Finally, in the fourth chapter ('Advancing online services and bridging divides') the report examines and discusses trends and practices that seem to help bridge the digital divide between countries and people, an important and essential dimension for the development and expansion of urban e-planning.

In the last chapter (World e-government rankings) the report presents and discusses the 2016 rankings based on this ninth UN survey. This is followed by the concluding point ('Conclusion') in which the main findings, insights and future prospects are presented and discussed. Among other positive trends identified in the 2016 survey it must be highlighted the consistent move towards the provision of integrated public services (e.g., one-stop platforms), an important condition also for urban e-planning at the municipal or city level, considering that the main sustainable development challenge is primarily a challenge of integration, and the efforts reported in the field of identity management, privacy and security of personal data.

Among the problems and challenges facing the development of e-government it should be noted the slow progress in the policy integration process that has been noted in several cases, the persistence of technical issues, already reported in previous surveys, namely issues associated with the interoperability of systems, within and across sectors, a facet that is certainly also present in the case of urban e-planning, where the integration of the economic, social and environmental sectors remains as difficult as before in conventional urban planning. In other words, besides the increasing use of information and communication technologies, innovation in public administration, at all levels, and in urban planning as well, requires changes in the organizational culture, and in the coordination, financing and accountability systems.

In sum, the most recent data available on e-government development, and by association also on e-planning, suggests that, despite an overall progress towards higher levels of e-government development, more efforts need to be made in order to promote an effective, accountable and transparent e-government. And similarly to what has been found for e-government, in this 2016 report, we should also expect that as e-planning expands, planning institutions will increasingly become more inclusive, transparent, and effective, if the increasing digital divide is properly addressed in all its multiple dimensions. And, as the report concludes for e-government in general, despite the importance of information and communication technologies, urban e-planning shall not be seen as being mainly or exclusively about web design, advanced computers and other sophisticated digital tools, since it is essentially a means for local or city governments to better serve people, namely the most vulnerable citizens.

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