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Smart City-Regional Governance for Sustainability – Experimental Smartness

RSAN Conference on 6-7 October in Dresden, Germany

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The adjective 'smart' has gained considerable prominence in the literature on, and practices of, urban and regional development all across the world. The planning concept of 'smart growth' first came up in the USA in the mid-1990s as one version of sustainable spatial development. Since the mid-2000s, of course, the promises of 'smart cities', which are usually related to the innovative deployment of new information and communication technologies, have emerged. The even more expansive term "smartness" is also now circulating, in part to capture the enormous variety of ways that different researchers in different disciplines in different countries imagine and study "smart" issues – but also to draw more attention to fundamental problems of governance in city regions. Yet what are the possibilities and limitations of *smartness*, particularly in regard to governing urban sustainability? That is the main question posed by the Regional Studies Research Network on Smart City-Regional Governance for Sustainability. The first international conference of the Network, also supported by the German Research Foundation, took place at the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development in Dresden, Germany in early October, 2016.

Four keynote speeches and sixteen paper presentations showed the thirty-three participants from ten countries – Canada, France, Germany, Iraq, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, the UK, and the USA – that 'smartness' is used today in ways that now go well beyond both smart growth and smart cities, respectively. For some, such expansion means that we should now entirely avoid using the language of smartness. For others, however, smartness invites scholars and practitioners to consider productively what is desirable with regard to city-regional governance. They highlight the considerable experimentation that is now occurring as local and national policy-makers, multi-national companies, academics and publishers all reflect on the specific purposes of the smartness concept in their diverse national, institutional and cultural contexts.

Presenters thus expressed different views regarding the relationship between smartness and sustainability. Some argued, for instance, that the recent dominance of smartness, and especially the smart city, actually erodes rather than advances the political pursuit of sustainability

because it is still too technocratic and the core purpose of the use of ICT is not really clear or compelling enough. Others argued, in contrast, that the attractiveness of the adjective 'smart' could help to support or even rescue important aspects of sustainable development in policy and planning by pragmatically 'wrestling' sustainability to the ground and in novel ways.

Throughout the conference, moreover, two big current political events were often frequently broached that, at first, might seem unrelated to smartness, sustainability and deliberative or communicative policy-making, but in fact are potentially far-reaching: the referendum on the exit of Britain from the EU and the US presidential elections.

In both cases, as we now know, a new kind of populist reaction to globalization played a significant role. Simple answers to complex problems reflected a still growing yet long- simmering distrust in the political establishment, experts and so called elites. This new populism ultimately may have major consequences for city-regional governance too, especially if it continues to spread across Europe and other major world regions. In particular, it could further diminish the necessary appetite for finding adequate solutions to multi-dimensional problems; within the city-regional environment especially rural areas, arguably more prone to populism, could reject enhanced cooperation with core cities who appear to vote differently on the societal model that should be supported.

The next conference of the RSA Research Network is going to take place on 21-22 September 2017 in Gdańsk, Poland.

More Informationen: http://rsan-smartgov-events.ioer.info/