



COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF POLITICAL AGENDAS

# Identifying Models of National Urban Agendas

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A View to the Global  
Transition

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*Edited by*  
Francesca Gelli · Matteo Basso

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## The Changing Geography: Critical Examples

The four case studies presented in the second part of the book—on the national urban agendas of Argentina, Brazil, India, and Canada—are critical examples (Flyvbjerg 2001) of the changing geography of urban agendas that since the 1980s emerged internationally.

A shifting focus to include Latin American, Asian, and North American experiences is due to several factors.

A first important point is the evolution of urbanization processes on a global scale; economic and demographic growth trends have significantly characterized these and other new regions of the world. They are among the largest countries in the world in terms of surface area: Canada is the second-largest country, Brazil the fifth, India the seventh, and Argentina the eighth. An exceptionally high percentage of their residents is recorded as urban population, since urban areas occupy a small part of the entire territory. This is extremely evident in Argentina, where 92% of the total population concentrates in urban areas, which represent 2% of land use. Or in Brazil and Canada, where 87% and 82% of residents belong to the urban population, and where urban areas represent 2% and 1% of land use, respectively. India has a different equilibrium, as only 35% of the population is urban, and urban areas represent 7% of land use. But India is the second country in the world in terms of population size, just after China; consequently, its cities are densely populated (World Data.info 2020).<sup>1</sup> As

<sup>1</sup><https://www.worlddata.info>.

UN-Habitat often recalls, one-third of the future global population growth will take place in this country, alongside China and Nigeria.

As Roy (2011) argues, the urbanization axis has shifted in recent years from the North to the South and from the West to the East. As commonly believed, however, while urban areas of the Global North are generally considered as “winning” city models on an international scale, those of the so-called Global South are often stigmatized as unliveable, chaotic, hyper-urbanized; unreasonable concentrations of urban “megalomaniacs”. Urbanization dynamics trigger new opportunities and problems, affecting urban and metropolitan areas differently. But this does not always go hand in hand with political awareness of the need for national policy frameworks which should consider urbanization as a field of public policies to be set in branches of the national government.

A second point relates to democratization issues in emerging countries. This aspect is particularly sensitive in cases of strong mobilizations which may lead to drastic changes in political regimes, such as in countries like Argentina and Brazil that have gone through a transition towards democracy. The right to land and housing, part of the urban reform, gained popular and institutional attention together with the issue of environmental protection: they became core matters of the national urban question. Reference is made to the 1980s, however the democratization issue is still topical in both countries. In later decades, at different stages, many positive achievements were definitely weakened, and government upheavals re-proposed a demand for effective democratic quality.

On the other hand, countries like India that were undergoing a phase of democratic consolidation faced much political turmoil and crisis that negatively affected the implementation of meaningful reforms, limiting, to a certain extent, the democratic quality of public investments. However, India's overall economic growth is remarkable, resulting in improved urban living conditions, despite significant contradictions. To give an example, life expectancy is about 10% lower than in Western developed countries. And, compared to Brazil and Argentina, India's corruption index is still quite high. In general, India today is the world's largest parliamentary democracy and has reversed its international position as an emerging country and market. In today's global scenario, it occupies a position of influence.

To summarize, in the first three cases of the book's second part, income disparities, social exclusion, and inequalities in the implementation of democratic rights have emerged as major issues that affect those living in

urbanized areas. Conditions of social injustice and limited access to common goods and to opportunities for full human development are associated not only to the undesired effects of growth but also to the impacts of global crises. They can also be attributed to the low responsiveness and accountability of policies decided by the political establishments, who often resisted change. The analysis highlights indeed the recurrent problem of elites who reject any innovation that may affect their *status quo* and question the privileges they acquired.

From this angle, charismatic leaders with foresight and capable of making a difference emerge in the three cases, offering meaningful stories in this regard. In periods of government stability under influential and innovative political leaders, an urban question is defined in terms of national political priority, calling for consequent solutions. In such circumstances, political agendas focus on urban-related problems experimenting with urban policy programmes. Moreover, they raise the question of how cities can become actors of urban change. The rise of cities as possible protagonists of a shift in the patterns of urban development relaunched further political dynamics, strengthening, on the one hand, the demand for decentralization and local autonomy and, on the other hand, the interest in international networking, within public-private alliances and the formation of new coalitions.

A third relevant point, therefore, has to do with the periods that follow dictatorial or highly controversial regimes. Aiming to gain wide recognition for the shift that has taken place in government and political orientation, strong leadership interprets the occasion to build a national urban agenda as a strategy to reposition the national government within the international marketplace.

To do so, mechanisms of policy transfer by voluntary imitation are sought. In the case of Argentina and India, pursuit of the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the New Urban Policy (NUA) of UN-Habitat have been explicitly followed, within a more general adherence to expert contributions. The elaboration process of urban agendas at the national level has seen the involvement of national intellectual elites, with the participation of think tanks, research centres specialized in urban policies, and universities. Participatory policy design approaches launched by the NUA—United Nations programme has been functional to the scope, although criticism for a technocratic orientation has been levelled. The support of external international bodies frequently brings standardization of urban agendas as regards to themes, in

adaptation to international formulations. Social inclusion and social innovation, sustainability, circular, green and smart growth, and climate change are among the primary objectives, together with balanced regional development and inclusive city development. The risk of such standardization is a loss of political content and the construction of urban agendas as layering policies.

In a consolidated democracy like Canada, the democratization issue has met the demand of local governments to improve federalism in intergovernmental relationships. Historically, more municipal autonomy was sought, as Provinces *de facto* maintain substantial decisional powers. A big issue that remains unresolved is the redistribution of competencies.

Fourth point: Argentina, Brazil, India, and Canada are examples of federal arrangements, with different cultural commitments to federalism. Today, most of the world's population lives within polities that are formally federal or utilize federal arrangements. Federal principles are concerned with the combination of self-rule and shared rule; in federal systems, basic policies are made and implemented through negotiations involving all government levels, to preserve the integrity of each part and foster a sense of belonging to a unity (Elazar 1991, p. XV). Federalism has emerged as a means of accommodating people's widespread desire to preserve legitimate internal diversities, revive the intimacy of small societies, and the growing necessity for larger combinations to mobilize the utilization of common resources better, also guaranteeing greater security (*ibidem*). A widespread prejudice is that federalist countries are not likely to have a national urban agenda, as decentralization and pluralism prevail according to principles of non-centralization of powers. However, the US case shows that this is possible and hoped for. Not only that, but the hypothesis is also that federalism has generative potential for urban policies. The proper functioning of a federalist system lies in the relations among levels of government, and as seen, this has proven to be a fundamental factor for the effectiveness of urban agendas and policies. The interpretation of the covenant (the *foedus*) is a key point, as it regulates the partnership, that is, the special kind of sharing agreed upon by the partners. The US federal polity is a particular type of arrangement, a federal-state-local, public-private partnership. Political culture is thus fundamental to federalism—in this case, US political culture is civic, republican, and participatory. The four countries presented herein have elaborated different political cultures throughout time—our case studies clearly illustrate the point.

Finally, the notion of developing countries that frames Argentina, Brazil, and India recalls us of a crucial aspect, which is not purely demographic as it has social and economic consequences that are pivotal for many of the governmental public policies: the population median age.

India (with 28.4 years), Argentina (31.5 years), and Brazil (33.5 years) are countries whose urban areas concentrate young populations, with a generally high life expectancy (above all with reference to Argentina and Brazil). Differences with Western Europe are clear: a comparison between the population pyramids shows that many nations are experiencing serious ageing trends (the median age is around 45–47 years) that are constrictive. Canada, with a median age of 41.1 years, is in between.

The second part of the book starts with Francesca Ferlicca and Fernando Murillo's contribution on the Argentinian case. Their in-depth analysis of the processes that led to the construction of a National Urban Policy (NUP) in Argentina focuses on the influence of UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda launched in 2016. Although the NUP resulted from a wide-ranging participatory policy-making process—involving consultants, steering committees, academia, and civil society—the experience did not generate effective changes in urban and territorial planning practices. The authors discuss the reasons behind this, highlighting the risks related to the local implementation, within specific socio-political contexts, of documents formulated by international experts.

Maurizio Pioletti and Veridiana Dalla Vecchia introduce the Brazilian experience, an important case to understand the wider significance and role of urban agendas. In this context, the design of the urban agenda has intertwined with the country's broader democratization process, which started at the end of the military dictatorship. In this perspective, the Brazilian experience highlights—at least until the end of Dilma's mandate—a broader process of politicization of planning practices which came to replace the technocratic approach of military dictatorship. This framework explicitly recognized the social and political role of the cities, strengthening participatory democracy, social justice, and equality, together with environmental protection. Concretely, it was translated into policy measures that tried to guarantee the right to the city, land, and housing. It is important to note, however, that changes in government (first with Temer's presidency, then Bolsonaro's) have led to a drastic re-orientation and change of policy objectives.

The Indian case is discussed in the chapter written by Daphné Reguiessé. Herein, the author offers a detailed reconstruction of the various national

city programmes and initiatives launched by the country's national government. The analysis also discusses the recent influence of supranational policy documents and organizations (UN's 2030 Agenda) in setting up the latest National Urban Policy Framework (2020): this document addresses the most important urbanization challenges in terms of provision of basic needs (infrastructures, housing, health, education, etc.). The author's contribution also illustrates how the idea and meaning of "city" have been reframed over time, alongside changes in political orientation and policy programmes.

The final case presented in the second part of the book, written by Elena Ostanel and Francesco Campagnari, introduces Canada. Acknowledging the presence, in this country, of an explicit urban agenda limited to certain periods of time (1968–1979; 2001–2006), the authors explain the reasons that have determined this situation. Indeed, while the federal government has established agencies and developed city programmes, their impacts have been (and continue to be) limited by provincial jurisdiction over municipal and urban affairs.

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