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SMART CITY-REGIONAL GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABILITY?

Yonn Dierwechter, Tassilo Herrschel and Gerd Lintz[1]

Abstract: The terminology of 'smartness' is pervasive. This includes the concepts of 'smart growth', which attempts to reconcile competing social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainability, and that of 'smart cities', which has connotations not only of ICT, but of learning, institutional innovation and governance. This essay introduces the concept of 'smart city-regional governance', explaining how notions of smartness can be extended to more explicitly deal with the governance process of finding balanced answers to multiple agendas, and to cover the regional scale in which cities operate. We are left with a broad approach to conceptualising and investigating issues of pressing concern for urban areas in a national and international context. The ideas in this piece are based on the forthcoming book, 'Smart transitions in city regionalism,' co-authored by Tassilo Herrschel and Yonn Dierwechter, and have been shaped by a recent conference organised by the Regional Studies Research Network on 'Smart City-Regional Governance for Sustainability'.

Keywords: smart city, city-region, regional development, regional governance.

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All things 'smart' are now all the rage (Araya, 2015). Largely because the term has attracted the recent attention of so many fields of scholarly and applied work – e.g. telecommunications, geography, architecture, marketing, etc. – many variations of it now vie for our attention (Albino, Berardi, & Dangelico, 2015). For some observers, such fragmentation means that we should simply abandon the adjective 'smart' altogether. If it's everything, it's nothing. We understand that critique, but still think there is considerable merit in advancing the notion of **smart city-**

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[1] Yonn Dierwechter is a Professor of Urban Studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Tassilo Herrschel is a Reader in Urban and Regional Development and Governance at the University of Westminster, London. Gerd Lintz is a Senior Researcher at the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER), Dresden.

regional governance, particularly when linked to the overarching and quite fundamental global-local project of **sustainability** (Herrschel, 2013).

The popular use of the term smart in direct relation to city and regional development (probably) first began with the US planning doctrine of **smart growth** in the 1990s (Dierwechter, 2017). While much of the rest of the world was busy implementing Local Agenda 21 after the Rio Earth Summit, smart growth emerged in spatial planning, transport, legal, and environmental circles to try to solve the conceptual (and political) problem of how to accelerate economic growth without ecological destruction and social inequality. Since that time, smart growth, in the USA and elsewhere (e.g. Song & Ding, 2009), has been an effort to move beyond the 'either/or' dichotomy of pro-growth versus anti-growth to suggest, albeit largely within the confines of weak ecological modernization theory, that growth is not inherently harmful. Instead, if the patterns of urban development – haphazard, auto-dependent, poorly integrated – can steadily change over time, then new growth will actually help to solve rather than create problems (Pollard, 2000). We can (and should) have urban growth, the original theory usually claims, but we should manage it in a 'smarter' way so that it is more compatible with global sustainability.

Importantly, smart growth includes a **regional dimension**. Municipal borders should not hamper the search for sustainable development. Rather, regional cooperation between large cities and their suburbs and smaller towns, especially around curbing suburban sprawl, promoting public transport alternatives, and facilitating quality urban infill and creative densification, requires effective joint thinking and new forms of decision-making and civic trust. This highlights the crucial challenge of how political and planning decisions are made at the regional scale or, as we prefer it, city-regional level, raising the key question of **governance**. Regions that really work, in other words, are regions that learn how to work together – a process anticipated by antecedent research on "learning regions," for example (Morgan, 1997), but that nonetheless remains significant with new technologies of collaboration and administration (Scholl & AlAwadhi, 2016).

The discourse of smartness expanded with the notion of the **smart city**, driven by the impacts of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Although 'hard' smartness based on ICT certainly has the potential to improve sustainability at the local level, the concept has been criticized as pushed by multi-national companies that dominate the ICT market, who neglect questions of democratic governance and, indeed, the essential task of pushing for sustainable development (Allwinkle and Cruickshank, 2011).

Opposing the dominance of 'hard' smartness, the idea of 'soft' smartness emphasizes people, learning, and institutional innovation in governance and policies (Albino et al., 2015). Not willing to leave the positively connoted idea of smartness to the often narrow ICT-oriented concept of smart city, the significance of governance and learning for sustainable development is highlighted. Given the general aim of keeping the whole picture, the idea of 'hard' and 'soft' smartness in regard to cities must also be seen in a city-regional context (Calzada, 2013).

All in all, it is possible to bring together and extend the original notions of 'smart growth' and 'smart cities' regarding the regional governance dimension. As an appropriate term for this we therefore suggest **smart city-regional governance**. This, in turn, leads to at least two questions. In a 'positive' way, we can ask what detailed ideas and practices related to smart city-regional governance are around? Normatively, we can also ask, which notion is most helpful in support of sustainable development, with its own multi-dimensional meanings around economic, social, and ecological development?

In our view, smart city-regional governance is about innovatively balancing a wide range of competing quests e.g. for urban international competitiveness, national economic development, societal and territorial cohesion as well as mitigating climate change. While sustainability is the guiding and overarching concept for this effort, the need for regional, tailor-made solutions for complex problems is the core concern.

Where does that leave us with the fuzzy meaning of smartness in governance? Governance, in its essence, is about collaboration, negotiation and deliberation among multiple actors, seeking to find mutually beneficial answers to complex problems (Herrschel & Dierwechter, 2015; Hudalah, Zulfahmi, & Firman, 2013; Tahvilzadeh, Montin, & Cullberg, 2015). While there is an inherent element of innovativeness and learning, 'smart' emphasises the delicate nature of finding balanced answers to multiple, possibly contradictory, interests and agendas and thus enhancing the nature of governance as a problem-solving, even experimenting, process of steering and reconciling diverse interests and developments.

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