Privatization of urban public spaces and its impact on sustainable cities and social inclusion

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Abstract

The privatization of urban public spaces (UPS) raises questions about the sustainability of urban settings and the impact that privatization has on social inclusion and access to urban land and well developed public spaces. This paper reports and discusses findings from a critical review of local and international literature on the privatization of UPS. Although cities partner with the private sector in the planning, development, maintenance and management of UPS in attempt to build socially cohesive, environmentally friendly, and economically competitive cities, the review findings reveal that privatization is associated with the decreasing 'publicness' of UPS and shortcomings in the fulfilment of social and political responsibilities. Some of these shortcomings are the result of cities using privatization as a vehicle for economic development and financial revenue and not necessarily incorporating all sustainability attributes in terms of city planning and development. This paper argues that local authorities, city planning decision makers and the interests they are pursuing, influence the sustainable and socially cohesive design of cities.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on privatization of UPS and the impact that privatization has on social inclusion and sustainable spatial settings in urban areas. Privatisation of UPS is conducted through the formation of public-private partnerships (PPPs). These partnerships are a global phenomenon and with reference to UPS the model on which they are based is often termed a business improvement districts (BID) model. More often some cities with inadequate financial capacity to attract and maintain investments and tourists would partner with the private sector in the planning, development, and maintenance of UPS (Fredua, 2017). This is supposedly meant to build socially cohesive, environmentally friendly, and economically competitive cities as these attributes have become key essentials for sustainability. However, the criteria or strategic position for these cities in initiating such partnerships would not necessarily incorporate all sustainability attributes in terms of city planning and development. Some of them would focus more on economic development and

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financial revenue (Wang, 2018), leading to environmentally and socially unfavourable outcomes.

Land resource allocation in planning is associated with institutional arrangements (Wang, 2018). In other words, each and every development taking place in any city has to be approved by local government which must also take responsibility for it. However, the BID model that cities use has been strongly criticised for weakening the publicness of UPS. It has been argued that it restricts social interaction, constrains individual liberties, and excludes undesirable populations (Fredua, 2017). Public exclusion, gentrification and redundancy of certain public authorities in service delivery are some of the concerns raised in the literature in regard to the sustainability and publicness of urban settings. This paper reports and discusses findings from a critical review of local and international literature on the privatization of UPS. It begins by briefly explaining public-private partnerships in the form of UPS development, management and maintenance and the different forms of these partnerships, placing them within the context of UPS. It explores the impact of UPS privatization on social inclusion and sustainability. The paper aim to offer new insights into the UPS conundrum.

2. Research Methods

This paper is an outcome of a critical review of literature exploring both national and international perspectives on the subject. The objective of this paper is to investigate the impact that the privatization of urban public spaces has on the attainment of inclusive and sustainable urban settings. In order to achieve this objective, a detailed review of the related literature was conducted. The authors believe that as much as BID's or PPPs are advantageous to some degree, certain elements of sustainability aren't incorporated in these initiatives especially taking into consideration the public opinion thus creating a discourse in the public realm. Literature spanning almost a decade from 2010 to 2019 was included in the study.

Review materials were sought from electronic data bases and search engines including Google, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Complete, Scopus, University of Johannesburg library and Research Gate. The key words and phrases as listed in the abstract were used and various sources such as journals, conference proceedings, books, theses and dissertations were reviewed based on their relevance to the topic and currency. The study is conducted within the qualitative research paradigm. Data was analysed and synthesised through a comparison of deferent scholarly view points from deferent fields of study in attempt to elicit criticisms and gaps in the implementation of public-private partnerships for the planning, development, and management of urban public spaces.

3. Literature Review

Urban public space literature is indicative of deferent alternative forms of public space management and ownership. Most of these forms are based (De Magalhaes, 2017) on transfer and contracting-out of managerial responsibilities from the public hand to organisations outside the public sector. Whether these forms are in the shape of (De Magalhaes, 2017) Business Improvement Districts, Town Centre Management schemes, land development

trusts, community asset transfers or the contracting-out of managerial tasks to private companies or voluntary sector organisations under a variety of arrangements. The question of whether privatization of UPS does integrate the urban poor or not is fundamental for the purpose on this study.

3.1 Placing PPPs in the context of UPS

With the underlying pressure that cities find themselves in due to globalization, they attempt to bid for the highest order in terms of attracting and maintaining both national and international investments and tourists. In so doing, it becomes imperative for them to build socially cohesive, environmentally friendly, and economically competitive cities as these attributes have become key essentials for sustainability. However, not every city has the adequate financial capacity (Fredua, 2017) to undertake and achieve such goals. Some cities will resort to the formation of public-private partnerships (PPPs), what Eick (2012) often refer to as 'urban entrepreneurialism'. Cities partner with the private sector in the planning, development, maintenance, and management of public spaces (i.e. parks, streets, inner city precinct, etc.).

Public-Private partnership is defined as 'any arrangement between government and the private sector in which partially or traditionally public activities are performed by the private sector' (Forrer et al, 2010). This is a very broad definition that accommodates a variety of arrangements, from contracting out to the use of vouchers. To try and narrow this definition down to urban infrastructure, Brinkerhoff (2011) defines PPPs as 'a form of structured cooperation between public and private partners in the planning, construction and / or exploitation of infrastructural facilities in which they share or reallocate risks, costs, benefits, resources and responsibilities'. These can further be defined as space management models (Abhilash, 2016) used to integrate the existing isolated hybrid spaces in to the city fabric, and to create new integrated system of public space network.

PPPs have long been advocated and analysed as organisational solutions to pressing societal problems that call for the comparative advantages of government, business, and civil society. Often these partnerships are initiated and accelerated (Forrer et al, 2010; Hui, 2010; smith, 2018; De Magalhaes, 2017; Peyroux, 2012; Gomes, 2019) due to government experiencing fiscal deficit and look for alternative ways to finance and deliver government services. However, it can be argued that governments often embark upon such arrangements without significant and genuine engagement with communities, citizens and users who will ultimately benefit from the facilities or services being delivered (Hui, 2010). By so doing, governments are creating spaces that are often referred to as 'white elephants'. Meaning spaces that the community don't see value in or are not conducive to the society leading to underutilization or redundancy. It is believed that community engagement is key in the development and management of UPS.

3.2 Forms of PPPs in the context of UPS

Among a number of public-private partnerships as mentioned above, Business Improvement Districts is one form of PPPs (Peyroux, 2012) and privately owned public space

(POPS) is another (Cao, 2017). The former focuses more on governance arrangements regarding security and policing and social control (Peyroux, 2012), while the latter focuses more on development and regulation (Zamanifard, 2018), ownership and management (Cao, 2017) of UPS. Because the space is owned and managed by private owners, it is termed privately owned public space (POPS). This paper explores how advancements in these partnerships impact the city spatial form in relation to sustainability and inclusivity.

3.2.1 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) Model

In many countries across the world (Peyroux, 2012; De Magalhaes, 2017; Smith, 2018) BIDs are seen as a new model of sub-municipal governance to secure private capital to improve the attractiveness of UPS. Originating from North America and has spread to other countries including South Africa, this model is often based on PPPs what Peyroux (2012) often refers to as a model of self-taxing districts. Existing literature reveals that in relation to the BIDs model, particular attention has been paid to two factors such as 1) governance arrangements regarding security and policing and 2) social control particularly in terms of exclusion and discrimination (Peyroux, 2012). The prime objective of this model according to Peyroux as much as it has largely been criticised by a number of researchers, is strengthening global competitiveness of the city. In contrast, other scholars are of the view that existing institutions such as local authorities lose their significance when such model is implemented. They have a view that societal or economic processes are more easily achieved through BIDs than traditional public governance. Some of the local government strategic responsibilities such as land use planning BIDs also intervene (Peyroux, 2012; De Magalhaes, 2017).

Smith (2018) in his study for commercialization of public spaces describes BIDs as a radical way of governing UPS and emphasize that this model is applied to gentrify these spaces and reclaim them from undesirable users. However, he also encapsulates an opposing position taking from his study that focuses on urban public parks that, using parks for events helps cities to promote attractive images to external audiences, but this is not always compatible with everyday uses. Of the same opinion is Marquardt (2012) who suggests that studies on gentrification has documented the often profound changes for local neighbourhoods resulting from the reorientation of buyers, developers and city planning. BIDs contribute to the production of space in a wider sense, shaping the public imaginary of urban neighbourhoods (Marquardt, 2012).

In this instance public exclusion, gentrification, redundancy of certain public authorities in service delivery are but a few of the outstanding factors negatively affecting sustainability and the publicness in urban settings. In contrast, contracted-out management of UPS (De Magalhaes, 2017) might not necessarily affect publicness negatively. Contracting-out management of UPS requires carefully designed accountability mechanisms and clear decisions by all key stakeholders, including local authorities, about whose aspirations will be privileged and how other aspirations should be protected.

3.2.2 Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)

The current neoliberalization of cities has made UPS increasingly commodified and privatised (Cao, 2017; Nemeth, 2011). In developed countries, cities that are both sites and objects of capital accumulation increasingly use market mechanisms and relies on PPPs to offer publicly accessible spaces. These cities partner with private property developers to develop and managed public spaces. This is done through the use of zoning concessions, where private property developers are encouraged by local government to offer more public space on the ground level of their high-rise developments in exchange with bonus space or exceed height or bulk limits of their developments. The space is owned and managed privately but for public use, therefore for this reason it is termed privately owned public space (POPS). This is a confused term meant to describe a confused arrangement of operations. It leaves ample ambiguities in its regulation and management.

Its public accessibility and usability (Cao, 2017) depend on evolving policies, maintenance and management by private property owners, and the public's perception and uses. POPS or so-called bonus space is a type of public space by mutual beneficial collaboration between the public and private sectors (Yoon, 2016). UPS advocates have questioned whether the trade-off between these two parties is equitable. Many authors perceive POPS to be diminishing the 'publicness' of UPS by restricting social interaction, constraining individual liberties, and excluding undesirable populations (Nemeth, 2011). it can be argued that the use of POPS leads to increased control over use, behaviour (use of surveillance and policing techniques) and access to UPS.

3.3 Privatization of UPS and its effects

Fundamentally, to privatise means (Chiodelli, 2015) literally to transfer ownership and control from public to private hands. Is that the case with UPS, if so can they serve the purpose to which they were intended for? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to address. The debate on public space that emerged in the 1990s is structured around 'narratives of loss' claiming the 'end of UPS' (Gomes, 2019; De Magalhaes, 2017; Smith, 2018). The end of UPS in South Africa and in many other developing countries across the world raises concerns in a number of researchers. Cao (2017) postulates that genuine UPS not only diminishes gradually but also falls prey to sensitive surveillance and control. Privatization of UPS allows the private actor to exercise dominion over the spatial jurisdiction and employ restrictive and prohibitive measures to limit other public space users from access (Fredua, 2017, Abhilash, 2016). With that in mind, it can be argued that privatization decreases the 'publicness of UPS' and can be associated with shortcomings in the fulfilment of their social and political responsibility.

Gomes (2019) is of the view that privatization of UPS implies an effort of replacing pre-existing practices and users (i.e. local authority's responsibilities), apparently reflecting patterns of exclusion and displacement. Gated and exclusive communities are a very good example of exclusion and displacement (also known as gentrification), fuelled by security concerns (Smith, 2018). Although it can be argued that UPS remain largely the property of the state. Privatization is not the result of a coherent political strategy for UPS, rather, it is the result of opportunistic tactics from both the municipality and the private actor. Privatization

(Gomes, 2019) becomes more likely as the encroachment of private interests in UPS increases. With regards to party interests, Tang (2018) posit that privatization is a key idea of neoliberalism, which also advocates individualism. Both these parties that enter into a contract have their own interests they are pursuing which in most cases disregards that public interest. In contrast, Abhilash (2016) believes that the development of active UPS is possible through the management model such as POPS through PPPs.

4. Findings

In this section a thorough comparison of deferent scholarly view points from deferent fields of study in attempt to elicit criticisms and gaps in the implementation of public-private partnerships for the planning, development, and management of urban public spaces was conducted. Based on the review of the related literature conducted in the sections above and for the reason that UPS literature is indicative of deferent alternative forms of UPS management and ownership. The study evidence that most of these forms are based on transfer and contracting-out of managerial responsibilities from the public hand to organizations outside the public sector. Whether these forms are in the shape of BIDs, Town Centre Management schemes, land development trusts, community asset transfers or the contracting-out of managerial tasks to private companies or voluntary sector organizations under a variety of arrangements. One important finding is that privatization of UPS does not integrate the urban poor. Another interesting finding is that some of UPS advocates refer to these forms of partnerships as urban entrepreneurialism. It can be argued that these forms of partnerships are created in order that cities share or reallocate risks, costs, benefits, resources and responsibilities with the private sector. However, this does not necessarily benefit the communities and users.

It is interesting to note that some authors perceive that oftentimes PPPs are initiated and accelerated due to government experiencing fiscal deficit and look for alternative ways to finance and deliver government services. However, in so doing, governments often embark on such partnerships without significant and genuine understanding of public participation. Thus creating spaces that excludes the poor or at worse creating spaces that the community does not see value in them or are not conducive for the society leading to underutilization or redundancy. In this instance public exclusion, gentrification, redundancy of certain public authorities in service delivery are but a few of the outstanding factors negatively affecting sustainability and the publicness in urban settings. Another significant finding is that some authors do not really perceive PPPs as a challenge, rather an opportunity. Literature revealed that contracting-out management of UPS requires carefully designed accountability mechanisms and clear decisions about whose aspirations will be privileged and how other aspirations should be protected by all key stakeholders, including local authorities.

It is also very interesting to note that a large number of authors have identified the negative impact that privatisation of UPS has on city sustainability and social inclusion. PPPs are for the benefit of only the two parties involved (governments or the private sector) excluding the beneficiaries or users. This exclusion then results into compromised publicness, accessibility and usability of these spaces.

5. Sustainability and Social Implications

"Urban space production in private regimes is considered profit-driven and often geared towards exclusionary spaces that are oriented towards specific use and users. The urban spaces that are produced are spaces of order and control, of aesthetic homogeneity and uniformity. They form enclaves of predictability and serve as places of retreat for wealthy people who want to avoid encounters with differences" Devereux, 2017

Looking at UPS as an inherently social concept, we can draw attention to how UPS is always negotiated, defined, and redefined by different scholars. Beyond the physical reality of UPS lies an inherently social nature that influences people's actions and relationships they have or might have towards one another. UPS as a social concept allows us to examine these sustainability and social implications. As people move in space every day, space tend to influence and direct their movement, behaviour, and even their way of thinking. The frequency of spatial restrictions that are found in UPS and their effect on society leads to social divide and social behaviour. Local authorities, city planning decision makers and the interests they are pursuing, influence the sustainable and socially cohesive design of cities. Also how UPS are managed and regulated is key, not who manages and regulates them.

If marginalised groups seem to be less welcome to certain public spaces than others, social cohesion would remain a 'pie in the sky'. Public spaces should be equally accessible to everyone, regardless of their social status, purchasing power, age, gender or abilities. By regulating behaviour in UPS, spatial segregation undermines people's right to move freely in cities. It regulates not only certain types of activities or behaviour, but also general social behaviour by directing people's movements and influencing their ways of behaving and thinking. For this reason, urban public spaces will not serve the purpose to which they were intended for.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has highlighted privatization of urban public spaces and the impact that privatisation has on social inclusion and sustainable spatial setting of urban areas. The study identified that privatisation of UPS is done mainly through public-private partnerships. These partnerships would be in the form of business improvement districts or privately owned public spaces. The BID model focuses more on governance arrangements regarding security and policing and social control, while the POPS focuses more on development and regulation, ownership and management of UPS. These two commercialization / privatization model are arguably focused more in pursuit of individual interests of the parties involved resulting in the exclusion of the users or inhabitants.

Results indicate that advancements in these partnerships impact the city spatial form in relation to sustainability and inclusivity. Public exclusion, gentrification, redundancy of certain public authorities in service delivery are but a few of the outstanding factors negatively affecting sustainability and the publicness of UPS in the urban setting. The study further reveals that the introduction of these commercialization models has done nothing but

increased control over use, behaviour (use of surveillance and policing techniques) and access to UPS.

6.1 Recommendations

Public participation for UPS transformation: Local authorities should develop neighbourhood level and city wide public participation programmes aimed at rejuvenating UPS. Local authorities should make resources available for the two levels of public participation. Firstly, at neighbourhood level, a detailed stakeholder analysis should be undertaken prior public participation processes so that all interest and vulnerable have adequate representation and voice. Secondly, public participation should be sensitive to local languages and availability of elderly people including requirements of those living with disabilities.

Business operating models for UPS: While it is recognised that local authorities face deficit challenges to manage and maintain UPS in order to provide basic services, the complete commercialization or privatization of UPS is not the only solution. This is particularly true for developing countries with high levels of inequality and urban fragmentation. For local authorities to realise the combined outcomes of UPS, self-reliance and social cohesion hybrid business operating models should be explored. These may include cooperatives, partnerships with schools of Built Environment and Real Estates in university towns, partnerships with institutions that advance public interest such as Non-Governmental Organisations, Churches and development finance institutions instead of private individuals and companies who exist for personal gain as a business motive.

Social development performance indicators for PPPs: In instances where local authorities have already entered into long-term agreements with private organisations for the management and maintenance of UPS, the contracts should be reviewed to incorporate social development performance indicators. These indicators may include practical measures to increase access to vulnerable and historically disadvantaged groups in society; shareholding and company board management with intention to increase publicness of UPS entities.

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