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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

TRANSLATING THE TRANSNATIONAL

A Tale of Three Cities and Their Quest for Urban Resilience

PhD Dissertation 2020

Anne Bach Nielsen

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University of Copenhagen
The Faculty of Social Science
Department of Political Science

Supervisor: Professor Jens Hoff
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PREFACE

It's early June back in 2016. I was working for the City of Copenhagen, where I had responsibility for some of the city's green growth initiatives. My days were filled with tasks related to the city's transnational engagements or 'city-to-city cooperations' as we used to call them. Together with some colleagues, I went to the Global Green Growth Forum (3GF) hosted by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I remember how I never fully understood the exact purpose of the summit but that representatives from various sectors working with green growth were gathered to push forward the 'green agenda'. The mayor of Copenhagen participated in a special panel on the role of cities in green transitions.

I had given input to the mayor's speech. As I recall, the speech was mostly covering the usual topics: how Copenhagen is the most climate ambitious capital of the world with a 2025 target for zero-emissions, how the city successfully cooperates with the private sector to enhance liveability for its citizens, how the Copenhagen harbour is clean enough for you to take a swim, and how our incinerators are both CO2-neutral and designed with a ski-slope on top for people to enjoy in their leisure time. Initiatives and projects which I was very proud to be assisting.

Following all the presentations from the participating mayors in the panel, the mayor of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, got up from his chair and asked for the microphone. He was sitting among the audience listening to all this talk about clean harbours and new bicycle paths. He then asked the panel how he could possibly apply all these initiatives in a city like his. He continued with a story about a neighbourhood in Dhaka, which the local government is unable to enter because a local gang controls it. And that he finds it difficult to see the true potential of city-to-city cooperation when he is fighting crime and poverty, and his peers in Copenhagen are establishing new bicycle paths. What had hitherto been obvious to me – cities cooperate to exchange knowledge, to learn from each other, to enhance capacities, and to brand themselves – was fundamentally questioned by the mayor from Dhaka. What particularly stuck with me was this discrepancy between Copenhagen's and Dhaka's sense-making of their participation in city-to-city cooperation. Right there, at the 3GF summit, I decided that I needed to solve this puzzle of how cities partake in transnational cooperation. Six months later, I started my PhD at the University of Copenhagen. This dissertation is the result.

I. CITIES, TRANSNATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND RESILIENCE

INTRODUCTION

> "While nations talk, cities act" (Bloomberg 2013)

This is how the former mayor of New York City, businessman, philanthropist, Michael Bloomberg, in a tweet from 2013 describes the capacity of cities to engage with larger global questions. This dissertation is about that action. To me, Bloomberg's quote is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, it has come to symbolise the potential role of urban actors in global governance. It speaks to the importance of the city as an organising principle for our society that increasingly shapes our lives as more and more people move into cities. Second, it speaks to the clear perception that cities can create action on matters where nation states are in a political impasse. Cities are heralded as global solution-providers at a time where nation-states are hesitant to respond on pressing matters. Consequently, it speaks directly to the potential authority and power of cities in our contemporary world to create sustainable changes that shape future directions.

At the time of my writing this dissertation, cities are home to more than half of the world's population (UN-Habitat 2017) and continue to draw people with promises of better livelihoods. Cities are social, cultural and economic hubs, as well as spaces for political leadership (Acuto 2013; Bouteligier 2012). Embodying this unique interface of being both space and actor creates unique conditions for acting on global problems related to the environment (Bouteligier 2012), to socio-ecological development (Pelling 2003) and economic globalisation (Sassen 1992). The potential lies in the capacity of local governments and their ability to create tangible responses by changing local planning processes, interfering and responding to everyday life isses of urban dwellers, and by mobilising people who live, work and use the city (Acuto 2013). Environmental, economic and social challenges should be understood in the context of day-to-day life and the actions that must be taken by those who contribute to and experience the consequences of inequality, poverty and environmental degradation.

While cities continue to go unnoticed on the main stage of global affairs (Acuto 2013), they are increasingly getting attention for their many attempts to fill the gaps left behind by nation-states

(Faundorfer 2016). Here, cities are part of a larger movement towards a decentralised and polycentric world (Scholte 2005), where global politics is approached as a multi-level challenge (Eckersley 2012; Scavenius and Rayner 2018). Consequently, new actors have emerged on the global stage together with new types of governance models. Particularly, *transnational* governance models are gaining grounds where cities cooperate without consulting the national government (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Niederhafner 2009; Andonova and Tuta 2014). As part of this trend, a large amount of *transnational municipal networks* (TMNs) have entered the global scene over the last two decades (Acuto and Rayner 2016).

A TMN is a transnational governance model where representatives from the local government, be it mayors, council members or administrative and technical staff, negotiate common frameworks and partake in collective action on behalf of their cities. Various forms of formal organisation units, such as a secretariat, a steering group or a board, are also common characteristic for most TMNs (Busch 2015; Funfgelt 2015). These networks have formed around specific issues and cross-border regions (Busch 2016) to respond to all sorts of challenges and changes. Estimates are that around 200 different TMNs are currently operating across different regions and thematic issues. Some networks cover very specific policy areas such as education or climate change; others are multi-purpose networks that address more than one single topic (Acuto and Rayner 2016, p. 1153).

Much of the existing literature on TMNs brings valuable insights to the phenomenon of cities in global governance, however, with an overwhelming focus on the composition, characterisation and offerings of the TMN platforms themselves. We know from this body of scholarship that TMNs are non-hierarchical, horizontal and voluntary to join (Kern and Bulkeley 2009), and that cities implement decisions reached through TMN platforms through self-governance (Funfgelt 2015; Kern and Bulkeley 2009). The possibility I am claiming here is that we may be missing something if we only think of cities' ability to 'act' in terms of the frameworks and activities offered at the network level. If instead we were to address transnational networking from a city perspective, we would gain new knowledge on how processes of TMN engagement materialise in policy and practice. This type of approach would not only create insight into the internal processes of 'acting' through transnational networks but also allow for new perspectives on TMNs and the role of cities in global governance. Consequently, this is a study of cities in global governance. Still, it is atypical in the sense that my goal is not to position cities in the greater realm of global politics or international relations. Neither is it to explain why cities take part in

such transnational endeavours or to measure the effects. Instead, this dissertation was from the very beginning guided by a curiosity to understand how cities engage in transnational municipal networks, and how this engagement manifests in local policy and practice. I explore this question in the specific context of a global TMN, 100 Resilient Cities, and investigate how three cities, Vejle, Chennai and Porto Alegre, translate 100RC policy ideas throughout the programme's existence from 2013-2019.

I have a particular focus on *resilience* throughout the dissertation and define it as a *policy idea* that promotes certain policy principles for action on global challenges (more on this below). The specific research aim is thus twofold. First, to understand the transnational governance model 100RC offers its city members. Second, to elucidate how cities implement policy ideas on urban resilience through engagement with this particular TMN. To further guide the answer to these questions and aims, I pose three sub-questions:

a. Which central policy ideas about resilient cities are promoted by 100RC?
b. How are cities translating these policy ideas into resilience policy and projects and with what implications for our understanding of transnational municipal governance?
c. How is transnational engagement practised by actors in Vejle, Chennai and Porto Alegre?

I understand the concept of *engagement* as a city's active involvement in a TMN. I specifically address implementation aspects of this engagement that play out in the nexus between transnational and urban arenas[1]. It is an implementation study in the sense that I trace how TMN policy ideas[2] are turned into local policy and practice. The first working question seeks to uncover the content of the policy ideas that cities subscribe to when they become members of 100RC. The second question addresses the core aspect of the research question, namely how cities engage with transnational governance through the implementation of particular ideas, and what these implementation processes tell us about the modus operandi of transnational networking. The third working question seeks to uncover the practices of TMN engagement that city actors perform to facilitate action on the ideas promoted by 100RC.

[1] To theorise the relationship between the city and the transnational level, I use the term 'arena' to distinguish between these two different settings for policy-making. This distinction is purely analytical but provides the necessary language to nuance the interaction between the city, the transnational governance platform provided by the TMN and the interaction between the two.
[2] A policy idea is simply understood asa prescription for policy principles. In Chapter V I conceptualise 'policy idea' further by building on Røvik's (2007; 2011) translation theory and my own empirical analysis.

The Empirical Setting: Vejle, Chennai and Porto Alegre

This research project was from the beginning an empirical endeavour. To honour this exploratory-inductive ideal, I started fieldwork shortly after I began my PhD. I set out in the autumn of 2016 to learn about how cities act on climate change through participation in transnational networks. I chose 100RC as the overall network because it was new at the time and gave me a chance to follow cities' engagement from the very beginning. 100RC also received a lot of attention because of its connection with the Rockefeller Foundation. Consequently, my hunch was that this was something new and interesting developing on the global scene. I also wanted to understand the global dimension of TMN engagement better. I knew from the literature on the topic that most perspectives had a Eurocentric or Western focus and that most of the case studies I came across were about 'the usual suspects' - the bigger global cities such as London, New York, Los Angeles and Paris. I wanted to include cities from the Global South and to explore cities located outside capital regions to get new perspectives. I brought this agenda with me from my time at the City of Copenhagen, where I had observed a similar pattern of interest in big and Western cities.

I chose the research sites in an attempt to take myself to a wide range of places. I hoped to follow transnational network processes that 'made little sense' to paraphrase the mayor of Dhaka that I introduced in the preface. I hoped to listen to various reasonings behind the engagement and to observe practices of engagement in order to understand how these cities were willingly adopting similar policy ideas. Vejle and Porto Alegre were both accepted to 100RC in 2013, while Chennai was accepted in 2014. All three cities had released resilience strategies just before or during my fieldwork, and thus provided the opportunity for me to explore how they implemented 100RC policy ideas. Consequently, I did not initially choose to study Vejle, Chennai and Porto Alegre for very specific reasons. I knew that I wanted to include the Global South dimension, that the cities had to be small or medium (or not a capital city), and that they had to be part of the 100RC programme. I was thus not looking for arguments about the right size of government or the organisation of the TMN membership within the city. These aspects only became important when I was in the field. Neither did I foresee a delay of the programme in Chennai or fully understand the consequences of a sudden change of local government before I was in Porto Alegre. As these contextual developments took place, I was already gathering material on the implementation processes. This is part and parcel of investigating a moving target.