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## **Making Sense of Leadership in Urban and Regional Development**

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## **Making Sense of Leadership in Urban and Regional Development**

### **Introduction**

At a time of radical transformation associated with globalisation, migration and the emergence of new game-changing, digitally-enabled models of business, science and technology it is understandable that people are looking for meaning and a sense of direction from political, business, public service and community leaders. However, academic research and popular accounts of formal leadership experiences point to the need for a significant re-think of the meaning(s), dynamics and drivers of leadership in sub-national development. Additionally, there is a need for a greater degree of critical reflection that can inform the way we research and teach about leadership and prepare people for leadership roles in cities and regions. Related to the growing interest in developing a more spatially-literate understanding of leadership, this special issue emerges from the collaborative learning we have been involved in over the past five years with many other Regional Studies Association (RSA) colleagues and as part of the RSA international research network on Leadership in Urban and Regional Development. We aim to stimulate refreshed reflection around the question of the contribution of leadership in city and regional development. The basic premise is that whilst there are many variables playing through explanations of the economic, social and ecological development of cities and regions, conceptually and empirically rigorous studies on leadership are still sparse, but much called for, as they would add complementary explanatory power.

At the most basic level, to study leadership in urban and regional development is to be interested in revealing the things that people actually do to influence other people in these very particular types of settings both formally and informally – both openly as well as opaquely – and how they go about doing what they do. It is also about revealing the types of social processes involved in ‘making things happen’ and in ‘getting things done’ (or not getting things done). Ultimately, the motivation is to better understand how and to what extent the places where we live, work and play are shaped by human relationships and interactions and, specifically, in what ways the meanings ascribed to concepts such as *leader*, *leading* and/or *leadership* can be used to explain how these places evolve.

### **Place leadership as a theme cutting across many debates in regional studies**

Leadership studies are only one form of ‘discovery research’ at the sub-national scale, but as RODRIGUEZ-POSE (2013) argues amongst others, more attention needs to be paid to the leadership question, as it has been a missing factor in the sub-national development puzzle.

Discussion of sub-national development leadership, however, needs to take note also of the wider framing context of current academic debates in regional studies (KOGLER, 2015). Over the past decade or two a number of areas of intellectual and policy inquiry have become deeply established within regional

studies, including amongst others evolutionary economic geography that has added to our understanding of how individual behaviour is framed and moulded by routines and prevailing institutions in an inherently uncertain economy (BOSCHMA and FRENKEN, 2006; MARTIN and SUNLEY, 2015; CASTALDI et al, 2015; BRESCHI and LENZI, 2015) but that has not integrated agency into its conceptual tool-kit. Moreover, studies focusing on knowledge, proximity and innovation have produced a great body of knowledge about the ways actors are connected to each other to generate, diffuse and valorise new knowledge (BOSCHMA, 2005; BROEKEL, 2015; BALLAND et al, 2015; LEVY and TALBOT, 2015; CREVOISIER, 2016; SORENSEN, 2016) but that have not traditionally paid much attention on who, how and why provides these systems, processes and relationships with future directions. Relatedly, universities as drivers of regional change have been studied extensively (ACOSTA et al, 2016) but only few contributions have scrutinised modes of leadership in this context (Goddard & Vallance, 2013; Goddard et al 2016).

Importantly, also the concept of resilience has started attracting increasing interest in studies and policy discourses around regional development, as it offers an analytical lens to integrate social, economic and ecological issues for investigation of how regions may cope with external stress by improving regional capacity to act (Bristow, 2010; MARTIN et al, 2016; COURVISANOS et al, 2016; DUBÉ and POLÈSE, 2015; SENSIER et al, 2016). Consequently, place leadership might serve well the emerging body of research on sustainable and resilient regions, as it might provide additional analytical leverage on one of the core questions of resilience: “what kind of regional capacity is needed to adapt to a changing environment, not like driftwood in a stream, but with purpose” (Sotarauta et al 2012). Of course, also the impact and implementation of EU cohesion policy is among the main research topics in regional studies (McCANN and VARGA, 2015; PARTRIDGE et al, 2015; RODRIGUEZ-POSE and GARCILAZO, 2015), and the concept of place leadership might serve well also this line of study in the efforts to make policy making more effective and serve better the observed social, ecological and economic needs of people.

Importantly, we believe that adding an examination of place leadership as a mode of reflexive agency in regional studies has the potential to contribute to each of the above mentioned fields of academic enquiry and to provide an additional ‘agential’ lens through which issues and relationships of structure and agency can be explored. In this way it might be possible to approach regions not only as socio-economic units but also as strategic units, as suggested by LAGENDIJK (2007). The application of place leadership perspectives, however, needs to be informed by a thorough theoretical exposition of the concept and its articulation within sub-national spaces (cities, regions and city-regions). Whilst there have been significant developments to date (see for example the discussion in SOTARAUTA, 2016) much remains to be elucidated.

### **Contemporary place leadership experiences explored**

The papers in this special issue explore the different potentialities of leadership, and also some of the constraining aspects. They address a number of contemporary sub-national leadership experiences in England, Australia, Finland, China, the Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, Denmark and Sweden. Each of the papers contributes to the debate emerging in regional studies about the value as well as the difficulties and limitations of studying leadership. More particularly, the question of the meaningfulness of the term ‘place leadership’ surfaces through the papers as they draw upon a range of theoretical perspectives and

this allows the special issue to raise the question of the place of sub-national leadership studies in relation to the wider theoretical constellations of regional studies, and related disciplines.

One of our main aims in assembling this special issue has been to incorporate more amply the question of local/regional agency into the debate about the future of cities and regions that has, on the one hand, tended to emphasize the significance of globalisation and other grand themes, and, on the other hand, the detailed workings, for example, of systems, governance and networks related aspects on topics including flexible production, industry clustering, smart specialisation, science, technology and innovation and so on. These are of course important topics, but in developing refreshed agency-oriented perspectives, we need to see regions also “as constructed, discursively and materially, through a myriad of processes, performing through their own logics, routines and practices, and manifesting their own momentum and temporarily stable outcomes” (LAGENDIJK, 2007). We would suggest that paying some attention to what can be labelled broadly as place leadership is one of the ways we might bring together both ‘structure’ and the ‘subject’.

This special issue investigates place leadership in its complexity, and thus it follows COLLINGE et al (2011) who make an explicit distinction between leadership *in* regions and cities, and the leadership of these settings. What is striking, however, is that, in the context of city and regional development practice, the concept of leadership is not readily exploited for analytical purposes (SYDOW et al, 2011; SOTARAUTA, 2016). Consequently, the primary question – in what ways does place leadership actually exist? – leads us to reach beyond the popular obsession with the idea of heroic leaders(ship) that emphasises the role of individuals, and their alleged heroic traits, in positions of formal institutional power and authority. We take pains instead to find ways to identify, analyse and explain the significance of other less visible and less loud ways of leading. As SOTARAUTA (2016) argues, in many sub-national settings, place leadership can be thought of as a more discrete form of agency that is shadowed and sometimes constrained, but not always dominated by, wider structures. Place leadership also at times may challenge wider contextual constraints and path dependency tendencies.

The seven papers that follow provide us with a nuanced set of conceptualizations in different contexts. In this issue, contributors use the concepts of regional leadership (RAAGMAA and KEERBERG, 2017; NORMANN et al, 2017), place-based leadership (BENTLEY et al, 2017; BENNEWORTH et al, 2017), and place leadership (SOTARAUTA and BEER, 2017; HU and HASSINK, 2017; NICHOLDS et al, 2017). A careful reading of the articles suggests that they contribute, firstly, to a growing body of leadership-related work in our field that embraces diversity in methods, theoretical foundations and engagement with theory, while maintaining an overlapping set of conceptualisations; secondly, the papers reveal place leadership as an identifiable form of leadership that takes us beyond the limitations of studies of single organisations, and; thirdly, the concept of place leadership appears to be scalable, as it allows identification and discussion about leadership experience across different territorial scales and geographies. The papers also give a sense of the many different types of place leadership experiences, across cities, regions, villages, and neighbourhoods, that encompass notions of (a) *location* (the fixed geographical coordinates of a precise physical location); (b) *locale* (the idea of place as constructed from a multiplicity of social relations); and (c) the *sense* of place (where there is evidence of subjective emotional attachments) (see further COLLINGE and GIBNEY, 2010). For leadership studies place clearly matters since place constitutes similar problems differently (GRINT, 2010).

## Why now?

It goes without saying that leadership is not an entirely new field of enquiry in cities and regions, and in many previous studies the significance of key actors and leadership has been raised (see for example, MOLOTCH, 1976; JUDD and PARKINSON, 1990; FLYVBJERG, 1998). However, for some reason, and for some time, the questions related to place leadership have escaped the broader attention of the regional studies community, why should we (re-)study leadership now? What has changed?

To date, and in many places, policy responses to the rapidly changing political, economic, social, technological and environmental conditions have been arguably more reactionary than proactive and are failing or proving inadequate. A fairly common popular reaction is to allege lack of local leadership or poor local leadership or to call for even 'more leadership'. There is now an urgent need to understand more in depth what place leadership is actually about in the contemporary sub-national development settings so as to provide policy makers and practitioners not only with better evidence-based guidance on what to do but also some guidance informed by good evidence on how to go about doing it, how to develop the abilities and capacities required for leading in both formal and informal complex networks. Second, and relatedly, some countries, regions and cities have introduced well-thought out change, adaptation and resilience related policies but continue to struggle with their implementation. There seems to be a growing understanding of the question not only being about the need to co-design 'better' policies, to ensure much wider participation and inclusion in policy process and the continuing integration of governance, but very much also about the most appropriate ways of leading in and across all of this activity. There are no easy answers to the place leadership question, but there is an increasingly visible mismatch between policy design and the knowledge, capacities and abilities needed to make policy work for people in the very challenging and gritty world of development practice.

Furthermore, third, the many actors engaged in city and regional development efforts are experiencing ever increasing complexity in their everyday work, which is overwhelming many of the earlier adopted sub-national policy measures and tools and this calls for a re-thinking of ways to mobilise and co-ordinate multi-vocal networks of interest. Modes of governance are in flux, and new more 'multi-everything' forms of more temporary participatory organisational working as well as more devolved policies and practices are emerging. The types of power and resources related issues that emerge in *human-human* interactions (let alone the darker aspects of bullying greed, self-aggrandisement, disguise and deception in leadership practice) are not easily overcome by the conventional transactional, or rules-based, managerial practices that still dominate the thinking and actions of too many sub-national policy makers and practitioners. There is an urgent need to learn how to lead for humane and transformative ethical outcomes in a more 'shared and interdependent' sub-national world.

As BEER and CLOWER (2014) maintain, the immediate analytical challenge in this line of study is to dig deep into the dispersed nature of place leadership, as it differs conceptually from leading in conventional bureaucratic settings such as in firms, public services or city administrations (see also COLLINGE et al, 2010: BEER, 2014). This special issue is based on a conviction that, in studies on local/regional development, there is a need to make some better sense of leadership that is characterized by (a) fragmented or shared actions, events and incidents amongst a whole series of organisations and/or several leaders rather than processes that simply flow 'top-down' from a controlling centre to acquiescent followers; (b) processes where not all leaders are formally recognized as such (and sometimes where

people with formal positions may exercise only little if no leadership at all) and; (c) multi-scalar, dynamic and interactive governance processes between national, local and regional government actors, firms, universities, research institutions, public and/or semi-public development agencies.

### **Who influences whom, how, for what purpose and in what kind of context – and with what outcomes?**

Reading across from GRINT (2010), place-based approach to studying leadership has emerged from the lived experience of attempts at integrating sub-national economic development and planning and reminds us that “the development of place is not the rolling-out of logical (technical) plans from the centre but the consequence of local agents (leaders) shaping the decisions and interpretations of what is, and is not, possible” (GRINT, 2010). Place leaders need to represent not only their organizations but their places more broadly, and ideally, distributed place leadership can become a shared development effort (SOTARUTA, 2005; KARLSEN and LARREA, 2012), even though it may often appear on the surface as fragmented and characterized by conflicts. It may also be difficult to define tightly the boundaries of place leadership, as circumstances and the nature of relational interdependencies change naturally over time and this then calls for different actors to take on the (formal) role of leading (NORMAN 2013).

The governance arrangements, and the roles ascribed to local/regional strategic agency, vary greatly between countries (SOTARUTA and BEER, 2017; BUDD and SANCINO, 2016; BENNEWORTH et al, 2017 and vis-a-vis RAAGMAA and KEERBERG, 2017). The formal roles underpinned by governance systems are important to acknowledge (CHARRON et al 2014), as they dictate to some extent what kind of resources, and what kind of (formal) legitimacy is given to local development work (AYRES and STAFFORD 2014), and thus also to place leaders (BENTLEY et al, 2017; HU and HASSINK, 2017; SOTARUTA and BEER, 2017). The papers below show that, in spite of clear differences in the governance systems and the manifestations of place leadership, there are similarities in leadership experiences between countries as place leadership is fundamentally about social interaction. In these respects, the differences between countries and different spatial scales may not be as great as we may like to think at the level of individual and group behaviours and actions, even though they clearly exist at governance level. Relatedly, one of the most crucial issues emerging from any study of leadership is the relationship between leaders and followers. In the context of place leadership this is an especially intriguing question – so exactly who are the leaders and followers and in different places and at different times?

The papers presented in this special issue do not represent the final word on place leadership as many important issues remain to be explored. It is noteworthy, for example, that issues of gender are prominent in the leadership literature but it remains a social dynamic largely unexplored in this field, despite a well-established concern with gender in regional research generally (see, for example, BARRIENTOS, 2014). More also could be done to understand how place leadership may reach beyond instrumentalist approaches and serve higher societal and ecological purposes. There is a need to understand better, for example, the relationship between place leadership and regional resilience (BRISTOW and HEALEY, 2014), entrepreneurship (FRITSCH and STOREY, 2014), migration (FRATESI and PERCOCO, 2014), and the role of leaders in responding to periods of recession and crisis (BAILEY and BERKLEY, 2014; BAILEY and DE PROPRIIS, 2014). Critically, there is a need to focus on place leadership and other dimensions of agency in

regions, including questions of scale (MEDINA and MOLINS, 2014; CAIRNEY, 2014) and the critical intersection between industry and territory (SMITH, 2013).

This special issue acknowledges that the role of place leadership in the making and shaping of cities and regions remains slippery and contested. Reflecting critically on how it is enacted allows us to investigate how and why some places are able to adapt to ever changing economic, social and environmental circumstances (GIBNEY, 2011). Beyond this, deeper critical appreciations of leadership will provide us with insights into the interplay between power, resources, institutions and policy – and with the aim of our scholarship being to shed light on the questions of why, and in whose interest, place leadership is enacted in different places and at different times. These very basic leadership questions will undoubtedly prompt a whole series of novel research questions in the next few years. The papers that follow take us a little further on the stimulating leadership learning journey.

Who influences whom, how, for what purpose and in what kind of context – and with what outcomes?

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