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Planning for the Unknowable: impact of transport infrastructure and evidence-based spatial development policies

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C3 - Evaluation of territorial policies: instruments and methods

Résumé / Summary

At the core of the planning process lies the rationality and legitimacy of the plan (Kafkalas 2016). The paper addresses this issue by constructing a knowledge-based policy-relevance approach and testing its potential for assessing the impact of transport infrastructure change in the context of spatial development policies (Kafkalas and Pitsiava 2010, 2013). Theoretical models examining the impact of transport infrastructure upon regional economic performance are mostly based on autonomous sub-models using sets of ad-hoc assumptions and exogenous variables intuitively selected from the vast literature of transport geography and spatial development theory. As a result, our knowledge remains limited to an accumulation of elegant but fragmented and impressionistic insights unable to effectively bridge the gap between the analysis of the available data and the formulation of plans.

Planning refers by default to a future reality that is affected by factors some of which do not yet exist and therefore it is impossible either to predict the impact of alternative plans or to calculate the probabilities of different outcomes. Spatial development planning is used to deal with problems that are characterised as 'wicked' in the sense that they include dynamic parameters and value judgements which challenge the rationality and legitimacy of planning (Rittel and Webber 1973). Such problems generate risks depending on their scale which may lead to controversial and unexpected outcomes of the kind that Hall (1982) identified as 'Great Planning Disasters'. Examples are unforeseeable socio-cultural shifts such as technological breakthroughs, political change or evolution of knowledge. Thus, it becomes unavoidable for planning to learn how to accommodate the unexpected and how to contain failures and inexpediences.

In his seminal book 'Cities in Evolution', Geddes (1915) proposed a formal rational planning paradigm known as SAP: Survey-Analysis-Plan, which remained dominant for decades. However, the difficulties to implement these apparently simple steps led to an oversimplification that undermined its credibility. By the end of the 1960s its place was taken by the systems view of planning as presented by Mcloughlin (1969) and Chadwick (1971) according to which the analysis identifies the relationships between the elements of a spatial system while the plan should maintain its equilibrium. Due to practical and theoretical difficulties, this model was also adapted to a more pragmatic version that limits the analysis to a small number of critical elements to achieve instead of perfect equilibrium a satisfactory outcome.

More recently, technological developments allowing the collection and processing of massive amounts of data in real time, enable the pursuit of evidence based decision making that currently defines the state of the art of planning (Batty 2011). The new trends require ex-ante, ongoing and ex post evaluation of impacts corresponding to the inception, implementation and operation phase of a spatial plan. However, despite this apparent consensus on methodology the question of how to proceed from the analysis to proposal remains as hard as ever and there is no clear and/or agreed way of how to bridge the gap from the data to the proposals.

According to Davoudi (2012) there are two paths of decision-making: the instrumental path in which planning is a rational endeavour to implement policies taken which are taken as given and the enlightenment path in which knowledge informs both the formulation of policies and planning decisions. The paper proposes to follow a combination of the two paths through the elaboration of a methodology consisting of three main components: (i) a theoretical model for the simulation of the impact of a given change in transport infrastructure, (ii) an identification of the main policy priorities for a given territory, and (iii) a system of territorial impact indicators for the analysis of empirical evidence. The approach views the system of indicators as the mediating tool via a double correlation that links policy priorities to the steps of the theoretical model.

The specific value added of this approach lies in the promotion of scientifically rational and politically legitimate solutions to the 'wicked' problems of spatial planning through its comprehensive and integrative character and the ability to combine qualitative and quantitative aspects for the assessment of the impact of transport infrastructure change and the (re)formulation of spatial development policies.

Keywords: spatial planning, development policy, impact of transport infrastructure

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