



The role of proximities in improving territorial governance

Lise Bourdeau-Lepage

Reviewed: Torre, A. and Beuret, J.-E. 2012. *Proximités territoriales. Construire la gouvernance des territoires, entre conventions, conflits et concertations*, Paris: Economica – Anthropos.

What can be done to improve territorial governance? André Torre and Jean-Eudes Beuret emphasise the role of proximity in this process, where conflict and negotiation are two sides of the same coin.

This work, through its 105 pages, proposes the broad lines of a method for managing and coordinating territories using a proximity-based approach (Gilly and Torre 2000; Pecqueur and Zimmermann 2004). The key idea is relatively simple and can be stated as follows: territories are subject to major changes, most notably processes of suburbanisation and periurbanisation, which affect not only urban spaces but also natural spaces. These changes involve numerous stakeholders (businesses, householders, local authorities, associations, etc.), increasing the complexity of each situation. Consequently, the growing numbers of parties concerned, the demand for more participatory democracy, and the desire of citizens to participate more actively in public life are all factors which, according to André Torre and Jean-Eudes Beuret, call for a move from local government to local governance.

Conflict and negotiation: twin aspects of territorial governance

At the heart of the concept of territorial governance – understood here as a process for managing a given territory that involves local and outside stakeholders of various types – are two opposing but complementary and closely related elements: negotiation and conflict. This concept is particularly original because it considers conflict and negotiation as two sides of the same coin that is governance. Conflicts are seen not as an indicator of the failure of the governance process, but instead, on the contrary, as an essential part of the development process. This chimes with the idea developed by André Torre that conflicts are an important means of expression for local populations that must not be eradicated (Torre 2011).

To support their argument, the authors propose a tour of France and indeed the rest of the world, revisiting the areas in which they have explored and implemented their approach over the last 10 years, during which the reader will encounter associations for the protection of the environment and the local area on the periurban fringes of Paris, inhabitants of shanty towns and residents of wealthy ghettos, and French oyster farmers whose livelihood is under threat from the gradual urbanisation of their harvesting areas. But all of these groups, however different, are faced with the same conundrum: how to live side by side and work together for the successful and harmonious development of the areas where they live, despite their differences and the fact that they often do

not share the same visions and expectations of the development process to be implemented; and how to avoid stalemate situations or the departure of certain parties for greener pastures.

Proximities: tools for resolving coordination-related issues between stakeholders

The response provided by André Torre and Jean-Eudes Beuret – and this is the second original aspect of the work – lies in the use of different categories of proximity.¹ As they put it, although agreement, for example, is a key for development, proximities offer a bunch of keys that can be used in combination to solve multiple coordination-related problems linked to the process of territorial governance. It is, of course, geographical proximity that not only allows neighbouring stakeholders to get to know one another and to discuss and develop possible solutions, but also directs them into conflict situations in cases of, say, competing land uses or difficult neighbourly relations; while non-spatial (also known as organised) proximities, on the other hand, will develop alongside the development of utilities networks, a sense of belonging and even similarities due to shared cultures, references and goals. These organised proximities enable local stakeholders to discuss matters together, as well as to compete, become acquainted with and oppose one another, but without compromising the links established between them or allowing the desire to develop a common objective to founder in the face of obstacles. In other words, it is important to have a shared development goal, even if opinions on how to achieve it are sometimes diametrically opposed. Furthermore, it is in mobilising the virtues of these proximities that an agreement – always fragile and subject to renegotiation – can be reached on the processes of governance and territorial development.

The use of research by Albert Hirschman and his famous trio of *exit, voice, loyalty* is also particularly interesting, as the authors transpose his initial analysis, applied to interprofessional relationships, to methods of territorial governance (Hirschman 1995).

Conflicts are thus understood as a form of *voice* or expression of the populations, which must be supported and controlled by the interplay of proximities – too much organised proximity within groups will lead to their isolation from one another and to an increase in conflicts or processes of segregation and spatial isolation; while a mobilisation of proximity in favour of wider consultation-based processes must enable an agreement, which will in turn rely on *loyalty* and keeping promises, even if this is at the expense of local ambitions. On the other hand, relations of organised proximity that are non-existent or too weak will lead to the death or abandonment of territories, through the departure of a large part of the population, and in particular its driving forces, who are no longer able to find solutions or even muster hopes for future development when faced with the failure of local governance; this is the price to pay for *exit*.

Managing territories by mobilising proximities

In this way, the proximity-based approach, which has developed in recent years, has found a key application in the context of local development issues, via the overarching concept of territorial proximity in its various forms. Local decision-makers will find food for thought (and action) here, with the presentation of principles for territorial management – including the integration of conflict in local governance – and the underscoring of a number of “red lights” that must be heeded in order to stay on track...

¹ These different categories of proximity were defined from the 1990s onwards by a group of researchers known as *les proximitistes* (“the proximists”). Here, we are dealing with a proximity-based approach. Two main categories of proximity were identified: geographic proximity (which can be broken down into permanent geographical proximity, temporary geographical proximity and virtual geographical proximity, as this is a subject of some debate among proximists) and organised proximity (sense of belonging and sense of similarity).

Bibliography

- Gilly, J.-P. and Torre, A. (eds.). 2000. *Dynamiques de proximité*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Hirschman, A. O. 1995. *Défection et prise de parole*, Paris: Fayard.
- Pecqueur, B. and Zimmermann, J.-B. (eds.). 2004. *Économie de proximités*, Paris: Lavoisier – Hermes Science.
- Torre, A. 2011. “Du bon usage des conflits ! L’expression des désaccords au cœur des dynamiques territoriales”, *Métropolitiques*, 26 June. Retrieved 17 April 2013, URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Du-bon-usage-des-conflits-L.html>.

Lise Bourdeau-Lepage is professor of geography at the Université Jean Moulin Lyon-3. She is a member of the “Environnement, Ville, Société” mixed research unit (CRGA – Centre de recherches en géographie et aménagement). Her research in urban geography and urban economics takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of urban recomposition and growth processes (urban forms, residential localisation, urban sprawl, megacity formation and socio-spatial segregation) and metropolitanisation (including the role of cities in the world and in history) in conjunction with the issue of sustainable development. Her current work focuses on socio-spatial inequalities in the city, the measurement of individuals’ well-being and the role of nature in the city.

Her publications include *Regards sur la ville* (Anthropos, 2012), *Repenser la ville* (2011) and *Économie des villes contemporaines* (Economica, 2009; co-authored with Jean-Marie Huriot). She is associate editor of the *Revue d'économie régionale et urbaine* and she also co-edits a regular column in the journal *Géographie, économie et société*.

Further reading:

Beuret, J.-E. and Cadoret, A. 2010. *Gérer ensemble les territoires : vers une démocratie coopérative*, Paris: Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer.

To quote this article:

Lise Bourdeau-Lepage, translated by Oliver Waine, “The role of proximities in improving territorial governance”, *Metropolitiques*, 10 July 2013. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-role-of-proximities-in.html>.