

# **A draft for a typology of urban observatories**

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## **Summary**

Urban observatories represent today a global phenomenon. In the last decades, public actors, universities and civil society actors have established hundreds of urban observatories all around the world. Some of these observatories actively contribute to the analysis of urban dynamics and affect urban policy making. However, urban observatories are still understudied; the scientific literature on urban observatories is rare and culturally fragmented. This article seeks to contribute to the development of a body of knowledge on urban observatories, by proposing a typology of urban observatories that stress the potential impacts and contributions of four different archetypes on urban and territorial planning and management.

## **Key words:**

Urban observatories – typology – planning – participation – learning networks – empowerment

## **Résumé**

Les observatoires urbains représentent aujourd'hui un phénomène mondial. Dans les dernières décennies, différents types d'acteurs – publics, associatifs et universitaires – ont mis en place des centaines d'observatoires urbains tout autour du monde. Certains de ces observatoires contribuent activement dans l'analyse des dynamiques urbaines et affectent les politiques urbaines. Toutefois, les observatoires urbains en tant qu'objet de recherche ne sont pas encore suffisamment étudiés. La littérature scientifique sur les observatoires urbains est rare et culturellement fragmentée. Cet article vise à contribuer au développement d'un corpus scientifique sur les observatoires urbain. Il propose une typologie des observatoires urbains qui met en valeur les apports potentiels des expériences de différents modèles d'observatoires urbains sur la planification et la gestion urbaines et territoriales.

## **Mots-clés :**

Observatoires urbains – typologie – planification – participation – réseaux d'apprentissage – empowerment

## **1. Urban observatories a new object of study**

The word “observatory” is used to indicate a wide variety of different structures. These structures may differ in their scale, mode of operation, objects of interest and outputs. However, they’re all similar in one central thing defining their mode of operation: observation.

Observation is what observatories do. They report on certain subjects, issues or themes. This activity is not new, governmental offices have been doing census and statistics for decades – if not centuries in some cases. However, in the last two decades, organizations with the name observatory are booming everywhere. Ministries, local governments, special agencies, universities everywhere around the world are developing their observatories.

With the change in paradigm from government to governance, and mainly the advent of the “good governance” ethos, the question of monitoring and continuous evaluation has gained large credibility and became a central part of policy conception and action implementation. Observatories are seen as a key element in this process mainly in upgrading the capacity of the institutions in developing and delivering their policies.

Apart from this performance logic, the word “observatory” is also appropriated by many research centers, focusing on an issue or territory. They sometimes rename their centers accordingly. Manifestly, the word observatory, by stressing a focalization and a “grounded” knowledge – built on observation – on a certain issue, underlines an attractive scientific legitimacy.

Although observation have developed in a near science with a heavy corpus of monitoring methodologies and techniques, and despite the fact that urban observatories have become a global phenomenon, observatories in general and urban observatories in particular are understudied. International scientific documentation on urban observatories is rare and culturally fragmented. It is mainly composed of case studies produced by those promoting or managing these observatories.

What this article is suggesting is a draft for a typology of urban observatories. This typology aims at exploring the potentialities and limitations of different observatories archetypes. It aims also at questioning the added value of these observatories as planning and management tools.

## **II. Looking for a methodology**

Typologies, epistemologically, are drawn from comprehensive comparative approaches. They try to synthesize knowledge on a certain object by taking in consideration its diversity. They’re also built on comparison as a way of understanding the causality lying behind of this diversity. That’s why they are usually presented in the shape of tables where on one direction we have the different archetypes and on the other the explanatory variables.

In our case we’re facing major challenges in building such a typology. One could argue that the cultural fragmentation of the documentation on urban observatories raises the question of the validity of any comprehensive view we might propose on urban observatories. We here say in our defense that we recognize this limitation, however, we believe that the documentation in our hands, without being prolific and comprehensive of the whole urban observatory phenomenon is diverse enough to encompass the major experiences. In fact, we build on available documentation describing – and sometimes analyzing – experiences of urban observatories in France, United States of America, Latin America, the Middle East, and the UN Global Urban Observatory program.

Another limitation is the fact that this documentation focuses on very different issues from conceptual to practical, and is written sometimes in descriptive, and other times in normative or analytic tenses. Urban observatory represents also very different realities in the described cases. Making sense of this diverse and majorly non-scientific literature and identifying explanatory variables is not an easy task.

Getting back to the objective of the exercise is an excellent way to push forward and make sense of this complex literature. As we said, we’re building a typology that will help us identify the potentialities and limitations of different types of urban observatories as an urban or territorial planning and management tool. Here we can identify three entry points that seem of interest in this perspective: the capacity of urban observatories to improve urban action by providing valuable data, their capacity to improve cooperation among the actors of a certain urban governance and their capacity to empower local actors to defend their rights and interests. The consulted documentation does not directly deal

with these issues. However, it deals with several themes that can shed light on these issues. These themes are what we may call here explanatory variables

### *1. Monitoring and learning*

On a conceptual level observation is directly linked to two other activities: evaluation and learning. The duality between performance evaluation through monitoring and knowledge building by creating learning networks marks deeply the observation tradition. These two tracks represent two autonomous objectives and can be followed independently: we can monitor without building a learning-network as we can build a learning-network without displaying monitoring structures. However, these two tracks are usually intertwined in different ways. The weight of each of them in the activity of a certain observatory could represent an important explanatory variable.

In fact, the more an urban observatory is a monitoring and evaluation structure the more it tries to give itself a scientific legitimacy by using technology and relying on expertise in defining indicators. The values of these indicators are then presented as objective reality, essential prerequisite to any action. The more an urban observatory is a learning-network the more it puts forward a democratic legitimacy where actors' dialogue and exchange of know-hows is seen as empowerment levers. Diversity in representations is presented as an enrichment of the reality, and actors' know-hows as a more practical and feasible alternative to expensive expertise.

### *2. Participation*

Participation is a major recurrent theme in this documentation. It is presented by certain urban observatories as a central element for their functioning. However, it is not always the case, and when it is, the rationale behind it and its degree may vary a lot. For understanding this variation we believe that we should take in account the issue of scientific legitimacy of indicators – especially in the case of monitoring-oriented observatories – and that of resources.

Even though indicators are becoming more and more present in political debate they're far from automatically being accepted as a legitimate and objective representation of reality (Zittoun, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. In democratic societies, indicators are often at the center of debates, recurrently challenged for presumed biases in their conception and in the definition of their thresholds. Therefore, some observatories by anticipation tend to make use of early participation to legitimize their approach or to validate their data.

Another aspect of the participation theme is the observatories' quest for wider resources. Observatories open up to certain actors working on the same issues in order to mobilize their resources in the observatories' operations. These actors may play different roles: gathering information, helping in the financing of the observatory, bringing in equipment...

### *3. Knowledge capitalization and urban observatories' professionalization*

The development of urban observatories has led to the development of certain skills and know-hows that are consequential for urban and territorial planning and management. This professionalization of urban observatories has two main aspects: the development of indicators and participatory monitoring and evaluation.

Urban observatories are the place where the numerous indicators produced by research in several scientific disciplines are put to the test of relevance and feasibility. It is in the urban observatories that adaptations are made to comply with local contexts. It is also in the urban observatories that the concentration of data allows the identification of correlations and links between phenomena. This is especially the case with the urban observatories with what we call here a "technicist" tradition. These usually well-funded urban observatories rely on geographic information systems and other data processing and analysis systems. The consolidation of the strategic approach in planning has favored their development mainly on metropolitan level.

The participatory monitoring and evaluation approach developed in the last decade or so in rural development studies (Estrela & Gaventa, 1997; Guijt, 1999, 2008). In many aspects it is still experimental and linked to the here and there experiences of development agencies, mainly in the developing countries. However several documents have been produced showing a real capitalization

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<sup>1</sup> Especially in issues of sustainable development policies

of practical knowledge and techniques mainly aimed at getting local actors to work together in identifying their resources and the possible alternatives they're facing in order to anticipate crisis.

#### 4. Urban observatories' sustainability

Some urban observatories last more than others. In fact, some do not survive the enthusiasm of their launching. The majority survives by settling for a role beneath their original expectations. In fact, for an urban observatory to maintain itself a number of factors should be secured. We believe that two of these factors are central: institutional sustainability and social sustainability.

Without proper organization, stable funding and capitalization of experiences it is quite difficult for an urban observatory to survive. These institutional issues are then paramount. However, other aspects like its appropriation by the local actors – mainly through participation –, its perceived legitimacy and its visibility are equally important factors of its sustainability.

### III. Four archetypes of observatories

Based on our documentation review and previous research, we here present a certain typology of urban observatories where each archetype articulates differently these four different variables: The *city-university partnership* model, the *public actor* model, the *global network* model, the *local initiative* model.

	Explanatory variables				Potential implications on		
	Objectives	Participation	Professionalization	Sustainability	Improving urban action	Improving local actors cooperation	Local actors' empowerment
<b>City-university partnership model</b>  <i>(ex: Urban Observatories Programme, USA)</i>	Learning oriented	Functional complementarity between city and university	No new professionals or professional expertise	Weak: different agendas	Important: mainly in term of long-term perspectives	Superficial: two different cultures	Absent since the civil society is absent from this model
<b>Public actor model</b>  <i>(ex: the FNAU's urban observatories, France; number of urban observatories in Latin America and the Middle East)</i>	Initially Monitoring oriented	Weak, and aims mostly for validating established choices	Important: development of a professional body with a technicist orientation	Important institutional sustainability: enshrined in a stable public sector environment	Important: mainly in terms of diagnostic production	Important only between public actors	Absent since the civil society is only receptive in this model
<b>Global network model</b>  <i>(ex: UN-Habitat Global Urban Observatory)</i>	Monitoring and learning at the same time	Important	More important on the level of a global level with a new network of professionals than on the local urban observatories' level	Mitigated institutional sustainability but overall important social sustainability	Weak: since it is concentrating on MDG monitoring	Important: the observatory is built as a network	Important in the theoretical model though not always in practice
<b>Local initiative model</b>	Initially learning oriented	Variable	Variable	Important institutional and social sustainability	Variable with a tendency for artisanal tools that can be recuperated in urban actions	Variable with a tendency for informal cooperation	Important: based on actors' appropriation of data and analyses

## *1. The city-university partnership model*

This model emerges of one of the oldest urban observatory's experiences: the Urban Observatories Program.

In the United States, urban observatories are around for decades now. Williams (1972) explains that from the sixties the concept has known wide popularity and was then appropriated by cities and universities in the United States. It was seen as a way of introducing "objective" data in the political debate and urban politics. The data gathered by these observatories will guide in a way the urban policies and at the same time make these policies and their claims more accountable since this data will be assessing the urban situation "objectively".

The proliferation of urban observatories was boosted, in 1969, by the National League of Cities' Urban Observatories Program. This program aimed at encouraging the development of local university-city government networks for "bringing local research capabilities to bear in the search of solutions for local community problems" (Moskow, 1974). A lot of universities in different cities in the United States, sometimes in collaboration with city governments, started to set observatories – usually called centers – in different academic departments.

The choice of the department and the focus of the observatory is usually influenced by the main issues a city is facing: "The center of Miami, FL conducted research on hurricane research and post-natural disaster planning; the center of Buffalo, NY studied cross-border regions; the centers of California emphasized immigration and race issues; the centers located in large metropolitan areas focus on crime and urban poverty; the centers located in industrial and manufacturing hubs devote more resources to issues related to environmental and energy conservation" (Biderman, 2009).

At first, the outcomes of these experiences were very mitigated. The founding of urban observatories helped push research in the universities around subjects that were in the priorities of the city governments. However, the majority of the universities were already in this dynamic before the Urban Observatory Program, and the synergy to which the program was aiming between the partners didn't always went far. The impact of these observatories and their findings on local governments' agendas was very limited. On the institutional level also the contribution of this program was relatively modest. It was – and still is in a lot of cases – difficult to differentiate in the way they operated, between these urban observatories and traditional university research centers.

In linking this model to our variables we could say that this model though being primarily a learning model, usually fails in becoming a learning-network. Knowledge production here is unidirectional; it is produced by the universities and passed to city government for decision-making. It is fair to say that these observatories serve as a legitimization tool for city officials whose policies however may well develop in different directions than the observatory recommendations. On another hand, this model does not bring the development of new professional skills; these observatories are still academic structures subject to the constraints of the traditions of the academic world. Finally, this model's sustainability potential is shaky. The cooperation between the city and the university is only based on a distribution of functional roles with no real synergy; which means that a partner may well look elsewhere to fulfill this role. This is the case with cities turning more and more to private expertise for consultancies, and with academic centers turning to other issues of research.

Consequently the impact of the development of the city-university partnership model and its possible contribution to urban and territorial planning and management, are quite weak. This model, by helping universities approach on a long-term systemic basis the local issues and problems, advances a valuable input to thinking urban issues and consequently urban action. However, the existence of two different cultures (the academic and the political) – or two "different creatures" as Irwin (1972) see it – with their different respective agendas and priorities, is the main weakness of this model and may well keep the cooperation between these actors on a formal level. Transcending this challenge needs time, good will and most importantly an effort to keep both sides interested. On another level, the absence of civil society actors in this partnership is far from being an empowering experience; in the best case scenario these excluded civil society actors will be passive receptors of expert analysis and discourse.

Clearly as the American experience shows this model is more likely to be a transitional one. In fact, in the United States with time, this type of urban observatories gained in experience and legitimacy. Today, some are important partners of local and national governmental institutions in the United States, as well as of civil society actors. Lots of these observatories are moving away from the "lone



ranger” model of academic research and pushing towards more networked activity (Biderman, 2009). They’re moving towards what we call here the local initiative model.

## 2. *The public actor model*

This is a widespread model of observatories. As we said earlier, the shift from government to governance was one of the main dynamics that boosted the development of observatories. One of the basic attributes of a state has always been its ability to gather, centralize and process data to orient policies; different state bodies have done so for centuries. However, reflecting the state’s own organization, this data gathering and treatment has always been sectorial. Aggregating this information to provide a transectorial analysis to face issues like territorial or urban planning and management has always been a major challenge in the planning discipline.

Response to this challenge usually came in the modernist era through holistic schemes where economic growth is the central objective and rationale. With globalization, the fragmentation of modern society and the ever more complexity of contemporary life this endeavor becomes most improbable. However, paradoxically, the public authorities are faced with more pressing complex transectorial issues (sustainable development, climate change, urban development, decentralization...).

One typical kind of such issues is the “question of neighborhoods”<sup>2</sup> that represents a central issue in the French urban policies. A legislation, called *politique de la ville*, favors an important investment of public policies in these neighborhoods in order to counter exclusionist dynamics and improve their situation. These policies touch a wide variety of fields (social assistance, education, local economic development, security...). These fields are interdependent and synchronization between different actions in these fields is essential for improving these neighborhoods.

The French authorities have chosen to evaluate their actions and assess the improvements in these neighborhoods by developing indicators and elaborate indicators’ frameworks. Consequently “neighborhood observatories” were set in many French urban agglomerations to tackle this task. The public urban agencies on city, agglomeration or regional levels were responsible for setting and organizing such observatories. Therefore, these observatories were special bodies inside the public administration; public employees make their staff.

The National Federal Urban Planning Agencies (FNAU), in an elaborate three volumes document in 2001, tries to present these observatories and their functioning. The document focuses on 28 urban observatories with different priorities, scales, resources and efficiency. Despite the wide diversity of situations, it is clear that the approach is highly technicist. There’s a clear reliance on the national statistical agency (INSEE) for data gathering, and on GIS and other data processing systems for analysis.

It is clear that these observatories seek a certain professionalization of the observation activity. In fact, the FNAU document shows an important effort of capitalization of the different urban observatories’ experience.

These observatories tend to cooperate with certain local actors – mainly other public or academic actors, occasionally some associative actors – to validate their choices of indicators, and their methodologies. This cooperation is however limited and cannot be called participation. These actors are consulted only in certain moments of the observation process. We tend to believe that this consultation is primarily used to legitimize the observatories’ choices and analyses by getting local actors to back them.

Despite the fact that these “neighborhood observatories” are tools of a larger policy aiming at combatting exclusion by getting the people of these neighborhoods to work together and appropriate their living places, these observatories do not develop local learning-networks. If in some cases cooperation between the observatories and local actors is put forward as a priority, it is clear that the orchestration of this cooperation is far from being a synergic reflexive experience. It is more likely a distribution of roles: the local public actors provide data and the observatory the processing and analysis. The fact that intercity comparisons are a central strategic objective for the French urban observatories initiative tends to direct efforts to the consolidation of another type of learning-network.

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<sup>2</sup> Hear “difficult” neighborhoods; popular neighborhoods that face since the 70s, and the economic restructuring policies, different socioeconomic exclusionist dynamics, with high rates of unemployment, poverty, immigration and delinquency.

The only real learning networks are the inter-observatories efforts for experiences' capitalization we've mentioned earlier.

These observatories enjoy an important institutional sustainability. Anchored in the public sector, with stable finances and established *modus operandi*, these observatories have often managed to make themselves indispensable in the local urban and territorial planning and management landscape. The development of the professionalization of the urban observatories and the professional learning-network on the national level, that the urban observatories initiative has brought, have insured them also a certain social sustainability.

We believe the public actor model, as shown in the French experience – but can also be identified in other experiences around the world (Municipality of Medellin, 2009)<sup>3</sup> – can be an important tool in urban and territorial planning and management. It is an *ad hoc* structure that offers a locus for different public actors to exchange data and analyses and to have a global perspective on the evolution of a certain neighborhood. In the French case, since urban observatories are affiliated to the public urban planning agencies, their outputs could well have direct impact on urban action.

Another major contribution of this model is the development of new indicators, synthetic cartographies and elaborate urban diagnostics. In this respect, one could even argue that this model and its technicist approach is more efficient than the city-university partnership model and its academic approach, since the producers of data – the observatories – and their consumers – the city officials – share the same public sector culture focused on the quest of feasibility and practicality.

This same asset is a limitation for this model. This model has in fact a limited local actors' cooperation potential and does not seem to be an empowering lever for any of these actors.

### *3. The global network model*

The major event that brought the urban observatories worldwide notoriety is the setting of the Global Urban Observatory (GUO) as a major component of the United Nations' UN-Habitat agenda. In the UN-Habitat II Conference in 1996, the urban observatory approach was recognized as an important tool in developing urban policy-making practices and rendering them more participatory and more accountable.

The GUO initiative focuses mainly on monitoring the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) progress, but it is also a complex multi-level structure that seeks to boost the creation of Local, National and Regional Urban Observatories (LUO, NUO and RUO) around the world, by assisting on the technical and capacity building levels. The National, Regional and Global levels are networks of observatories of smaller levels. Their aim is to coordinate the activity between the different levels and provide expertise and assistance when needed to smaller levels.

The LUO is the central piece in this system, and the UN-Habitat's observatories program dedicates much energy on developing LUOs. According to UN-Habitat (2003) LUOs "serve to produce, manage and analyze data on the performance of a city on key urban indicators and other thematic issues relevant to both local decision-making and global monitoring."

One major difference between the previous models and UN-Habitat's LUO is that the latter is conceived as a network of local stakeholders, and not as an independent entity as in the case of the university centers, though it is led by a key partner that usually hosts the observatory's offices. One other major difference is the scope of the LUO initiative's ambition: LUO are perceived as an important catalyst in the propagation of "new" urban politics culture based on participation and good governance. Their central aim is to develop monitoring tools used for participatory policy-making processes.

Undoubtedly, UN-Habitat succeeded in selling its idea. Hundreds of local urban observatories sprung around the world in the last decade, lots of them are members of the UN-Habitat's GUO. The main asset of UN-Habitat is its capacity to strongly assist nascent observatories and provide all technical assistance. In fact, UN-Habitat developed detailed tools and training manuals for setting and operating urban observatories. The simplicity of its methodology also strongly contributed in its success. The central operational tool put forward by UN-Habitat in this regard is the GUO indicators'

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<sup>3</sup> In this document we can find a review of different urban observatories experiences, especially in Latin America

framework. It is a concise but very strict indicators' framework that UN-Habitat encourages to be used by all LUOs worldwide for monitoring MDG progress.

However, despite this relative success many setbacks weigh heavily on the GUO initiative. One of the most evident challenges is getting cities and local stakeholders in the developed countries to join this initiative. In the whole GUO network, the Vancouver Regional Observatory is the only partner in a developed country. As Biderman (2009) stresses it regarding the American urban observatories and their reluctance to join the GUO, the reason may be mostly UN-Habitat's guidelines to join the network<sup>4</sup>. Another reason is, paradoxically, that the network is made of LUOs of the developing countries focusing on developing countries' issues that a lot of developed countries' urban observatories do not see as their working priorities in order to get interested in exchanging experiences<sup>5</sup>.

Another important setback in the GUO initiative is the difficulty of addressing simultaneously its two objectives. In fact, these two objectives push the observatories in two different directions. On one hand, the need for reporting on MDG indicators, for national and international comparisons, defines for the observatory a fixed and strict agenda and renders the working methodology dominated by quantitative technical tools. On the other, the need to report on issues that are of interest for the local community and to enhance the civil society's participation in policy-making leads the observatory to develop important communicative skills and directs its methodologies towards descriptive and perception tools. Though these objectives are not inherently in contradiction, they are difficult to be carried out simultaneously.

From our experience in the ESCWA<sup>6</sup> region (UN-ESCWA, 2008, 2009) we can say that the majority of the GUO urban observatories stick to MDG indicators reporting. Some, with important finance and solid political will like the case of the AlMadinah LUO<sup>7</sup> in Saudi Arabia apply sophisticated and acute techniques for the calculation of the different MDG indicators' values. However, this LUO like the wide majority of LUOs in ESCWA region work as isolated independent bureaus attached to the city administration, or to sub-national state administrations. Rare are those who develop a rich and wide network with the participation of other actors.

Paradoxically, it is on the global level that the UN-Habitat initiative has helped develop a strong worldwide learning-network of new type of urban observatories' professionals. These professionals constitute an interesting group of heterogeneous profiles (civil society activists, local authority employees, academics, consultants...) who are interested in the development of the LUOs as a new domain of expertise. UN-Habitat has contributed to the development of this informal network by publishing numerous guides and reports in various languages, organizing training workshops and seminars for exchanges of experiences.

The sustainability of this kind of observatory varies a lot depending on the different contexts in which it evolves. However, there is concern about a tendency where these LUOs do not outlive UN-Habitat's financing and assistance period especially when the local authorities cannot afford to support them. This constitute another major challenge to the promoters of this model.

We believe that though this model is an important step in the evolution of the urban observatory experience, it does not always contribute to the development of urban and territorial planning and management. The focalization on the MDGs at the expense of local priorities and issues minimizes the LUOs potential in this regard. On the other hand, this model has proven in some cases to be an important catalyzer for cooperation between public and civil society actors. In other cases, it even represented an opportunity for some local actors to assert themselves in the local arena or to defend their interests by relying on the LUOs outputs that make their case.

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<sup>4</sup> To join the urban observatory has to: 1- monitor and evaluate his own performance and share the results with UN-Habitat 2- Provide its data to interested UN agencies and 3- start an application to join where the urban observatory will be assessed by UN-Habitat. Enough to discourage these observatories with long tradition.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the success of UN-Habitat in implementing LUOs in developing countries is largely due to direct financial and technical assistance by UN-Habitat itself or other international organizations.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. Western Asia encompass here roughly the Arab countries of the Middle East

<sup>7</sup> considered a best practice by UN-Habitat



#### *4. The local initiative model*

If we take a look to the three previous models, we can see an evolution in the direction of a clear increase in the heterogeneity of the experiences inspired by the model. However, despite this heterogeneity, the existence of a central organism – the Urban Observatory Program, the FRAU and UN-Habitat – presenting each model and defending it, gives some consistency to the model and makes it possible to discuss it. In the case of the local initiative model, we're facing quite a challenge in doing so.

In fact, the urban observatories experiences that we put together in this category are so diverse that it is hard to call this category a model. However, we believe that despite this heterogeneity these models share some attributes that make them have nearly similar impacts on urban and territorial planning and management.

One of these central attributes is that these urban observatories are local initiative, in the sense that they are carried out by local actors. In opposition to the others, the local initiative model is not a top-down model. The local actor behind the initiative may well be a local public authority, a civil society actor or a university department. This observatory may even be part of a larger network like UN-Habitat GUO, as long as it is first conceived and implemented by local actors. In fact this has important consequences on the explanatory variables and on the contribution of the model to urban and territorial planning and management.

The fact that it is a local initiative affects first and foremost the sustainability of the observatory. The local actors provide an essential social sustainability to the initiative. They also provide the observatory with different aspects of institutional sustainability, by enshrining the observatory in their own organizational structures. In this case also, the learning dimension may be slightly emphasized over the monitoring dimension. A local actor who aims at setting an urban observatory to observe his neighborhood or his city is in fact targeting a better grasp of the locality's issues and the consolidation of a certain local knowledge about it. The observatory serves of course also for the legitimization of this actor's position on the local issues, however it is also an occasion for thinking about those issues in a different light.

Being a local initiative observatory has in principle no direct implications on the participation or the professionalization dimensions. However, a majority of local initiative observatories are low budget projects, and in these cases the local actors are faced with the challenge of creativity in setting relevant indicators and organizing feasible surveys. It is in this light that these observatories develop some kind of artisanal expertise and capitalize on it. They may also organize cooperation with other local actors to gather the necessary data<sup>8</sup>. We believe that these methods may occasionally represent interesting know-hows that can be transferred to urban and territorial planning and management practices, especially in low-budget situations.

The most important aspect of the local initiative urban observatory is its empowering potential for the actors behind it. The urban observatory gives these actors the opportunity to enhance the visibility and problematize certain issues of interest to these actors. They can use the observatory's outputs to attack official policies or to defend their positions in a public debate.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Urban observatories represent today a global phenomenon that's imposing itself on the urban and territorial planning and management actors everywhere. Different kinds of actors are setting urban observatories as tools for building better diagnostics of an everyday more complex urban and territorial reality, for legitimizing their policies or for countering these policies. Urban observatories are –relatively – new artifacts that tend to complexify the local governance landscape, however they are a welcomed complexification.

In fact, as the typology in this article shows, urban observatories are more than just data collection and analysis tools. They're network-building loci. Urban observatories represent a frame and a stimulus

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<sup>8</sup> This is for example the case of the Sin El Fil municipal urban observatory in the suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon. This observatory is a municipal initiative to better understand the local issues especially juvenile delinquency. The municipality provided the observatory with a bureau, one full-time employee and a low-budget. To deal with such a complex issue with low resources this employee developed artisanal indicators that are however very informative on the youth behavior in Sin El Fil (one example is the regular counting of used cigarettes in a playground where local teenagers gather every Sunday after they leave at 1:00 AM). The observatory also organized a network of information exchange with other associations and NGOs.

through which different kinds of learning-networks or action-networks can develop. In this era marked by fragmentation (territorial, political and knowledge fragmentation) urban observatories are definitely among the tools that can help make sense – in a reflexive way – of this complexity and bring resources to build territories.

The study of urban observatories is not an uncharted territory. However, urban planning and geography as disciplines, till recently, did not give urban observatories the proper interest they deserve. We believe that there is much to learn from these experiences and their contributions to, and implications on, urban and territorial planning. The typology of this article is a step in this direction.

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