Traveling Concepts in Megaproject Building: Links Between Local and Global Scales

By Loraine Kennedy and Glen Robbins

One of the thematic areas in the Chance2Sustain research project focused on the governance of megaproject building in cities of the Global South (Workpackage 2).[1] In the course of our research, we noted the importance of transnational models, circulated through transnational knowledge flows, including transnational policy networks. Such 'traveling concepts' embody particular ideologies about urban development and economic growth. A key issue is to understand the processes by which local actors adapt megaproject models to meet their specific objectives and needs.

Models, sometimes of domestic origin sometimes international, inspired many of the megaproject cases studied in the Chance2Sustain project. Transmission is often an indirect process, through imitation of experiences, or applying 'best practices'. In some cases, forms of knowledge pass through intermediaries e.g., international development organisations or through transnational professionals working as consultants on projects, who transpose concepts between cities. The trajectory of the "IT Corridor" concept in Chennai India is revealing in this respect: after having been elaborated by Jurong Consultants, based in Singapore, for the city of Bangalore, it made its appearance in the revised CDP plan for Chennai some years later, in a more narrowly defined form. For the Lima case too, it was apparent that established modes of public-private partnership concessions, promoted as 'international best practices', were a feature in the 'Línea Amarilla-Via Parque Rimac' Project. A word about this case is instructive.

In recent years, a very strong contract enforcement culture has been promoted in Peru, with an aim to consolidate the property rights system, improve the investment climate and boost economic growth. The conditions under which the Lima road project was commissioned were directly influenced by that broader policy context. Our research has shown that while embracing such international practices the Peruvian government, particularly at regional and local government levels, has not given equal attention to promoting better public sector capacities to perform public tendering and formulate concession contracts. This has resulted in reduced room for manoeuvre on the part of local governments involved in contracting with private firms. Interestingly, these findings resonate with literature documenting experiments in advanced industrialised countries, such as the widespread contracting by the UK's National Health System to private firms. Critics have pointed out that NHS commissioners lacked the skills to "negotiate effectively with private providers and hold them to proper account for poor performance"[2]. In India too, recent studies have shown that cities have started to sub-contract urban services to private companies or NGOs, but without capacity to supervise and sanction them in the case of poor performance. The Indian state has been promoting the adoption of new models and norms but has not adopted new modes of governing to ensure accountability to the public through more stringent regulation. This is an important reminder that new forms of governance, that give greater importance to private sector actors, require *more, not less*, state capacity, here to ensure

1 This piece is adapted from the WP2 Thematic Report by Loraine Kennedy, Glen Robbins, Bérénice Bon, Guillermo Takano, Aurélie Varrel and Julia Andrade, "Megaprojects and Urban Development in Ten Cities of the South", available on the Chance2Sustain website.

2 See Colin Leys. 2014. "NHS contracting has been a disaster", The Guardian, Tuesday 22 April 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/22/nhs-contracting-disaster-commissioners-simon-stevens, consulted 27 April 2014.

Loraine Kennedy and Glen Robbins

that private contracts are drawn up effectively and executed satisfactorily and to provide regulatory oversight.

Likewise, in the case of Delhi, the metro project involved an example of 'policy transfer', borrowing in particular the instrument of land value capture from the transit company MTR Corporation of Hong Kong. This instrument consists of financing a part of the capital costs of the metro through property development: in Delhi development rights are being sold to private real estate companies for residential and commercial projects on the land granted to the transport agency from the state. Officials from the parastatal agency in Delhi in charge of building the metro, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, traveled to Hong Kong, presumably to deepen their understanding of the technical features of that model in order to replicate it in Delhi and subsequently in other large cities in India.

In the case of the King Shaka International Airport and Dube TradePort in Durban, elements of the 'aerotropolis' concept, inspired from Dubai, Schiphol and Austin, were interwoven with local policy concerns about growing exports. There is some indication that the comparison with international projects was important in giving credibility to the initial idea, but the project was also influenced by a variety of local ideas as it became necessary to build a broader coalition in order to get decision makers to support the project. This underscores the importance of analysing for each case the actors, institutions and modes of governance that underlie megaproject development. Structure and agency interact in a variety of ways to influence the character of knowledge flows from the global to the local (and the local to the global). Whilst global networks of policy and knowledge are indeed influential in the formulation of local responses, it can also be the case that local processes, rooted in particular local circumstances, can be a leading force in determining how urban policy choices are made and can significantly influence the manner in which global concepts get absorbed in local processes. The insistence of the state leading and mobilising public funds for the King Shaka International Airport and Dube TradePort project illustrate how an apparently globally dominant model of public-private partnerships can be subject to subnational or national political influences despite the overall project concept having been heavily informed by international cases of airport development. Stretched a bit further, it is possible to see the projects examined in this research as not being simply a project of globally mobilised neo-liberal agendas, as is sometimes implied in the literature, but more often being a point of interaction between the global and the local with the resultant character of projects being more strongly framed around local power-relations than dominant global ones.

Further reading:

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