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## URBAN GOVERNANCE INNOVATIONS IN RIO DE JANEIRO

By Harry Blain based on the article by Paschoal and Wegrich (2017)<sup>a</sup>

*Harry Blain is a Researcher at LSE Cities.*

### Introduction

Urban governance innovations are usually analysed in terms of their impact on administrative and technical efficiency. By contrast, their role in shaping broader political strategies and leadership styles is relatively under-examined. In Rio de Janeiro – often internationally lauded for its smart city initiatives – urban governance innovations have been deeply embedded in the mayor's political agenda. In this case, while some of these tools have expanded public participation in policy and planning decisions, they have served primarily to strengthen, rather than loosen, the mayor's control over city institutions.

The former mayor, Eduardo Paes, who was first elected in 2008 and then re-elected with a greatly increased majority in 2012, developed three notable governance innovations based on digital information and communications technology: the Rio Operations Centre (Centro de Operações Rio – COR), the Unified Service Hotline (Rio 1746) and the Social Participation Laboratory (Lab.Rio). These innovations have emerged in the context of greater global attention being directed towards Rio de Janeiro, as a result of mega-events such as the Pan-American Games (2007), Rio+20 (2012), the FIFA World Cup (2014), and the Summer Olympics (2016). Along with the international spotlight, these events stimulated infrastructure and business investment in a city that was facing relative decline compared to the economic power of São Paulo and the shifting of the capital to Brasília.

The platform of Mayor Paes promised major redevelopment projects in central areas of the city, as well as investments in basic sanitation in the poorer West Zone, facilitated by private investors and without raising taxes. These spatial interventions formed part of an overarching vision of pursuing 'what works': downplaying political ideology while emphasising a managerial, business-like efficiency in government. According to Brash (2011), a similar governing style was promoted by New York's former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who combined rhetoric and management techniques to create an image of an apolitical 'what-works' approach to urban governance.

In Rio, Mayor Paes' managerial style was cemented through the introduction of private sector practices into public administration, contained within an overarching strategic plan. Paes created the Secretaria da Casa Civil to reform public administration and gain greater control of the bureaucracy, such as the different city secretaries, and the executive relation with the local council (Câmara Municipal) and the state and federal levels. The newly created Casa Civil recruited from major consultancies, multinational enterprises, and the city administration to introduce Paes' new managerial measures. Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) have also been a common feature of Paes' administration, including the 'Porto Maravilha' project for redeveloping the old port area of Rio. Similarly, much of the infrastructure of the 2016 Olympics was developed under PPPs, with some projects – such as the \$US1 Billion accommodation for athletes – seen

<sup>a</sup> Paschoal, B., Wegrich, K. 2017. Urban governance innovations in Rio de Janeiro: the political management of digital innovations. *Journal of Urban Affairs* DOI: 10.1080/07352166.2017.1310561.

as controversial and potentially susceptible to corruption (Belisário, 2016).

### **Urban innovations**

The Rio Operations Centre was created in 2010. The idea was driven by the damage caused by a summer storm in Rio, which resulted in landslides and floods in favelas, and major damage to public and private property. More than 60 people died, in part due to inadequate infrastructure for monitoring and coordinating rapid reaction from different city agencies (Singer, 2012). Mayor Paes responded by agreeing with IBM the development of a new operations centre to coordinate communications between 30 city departments, agencies and utility companies. The personnel in the Operations Centre are now located in a large control room with over 80 46-inch monitors, which transmit images from over 500 locations throughout the city. The monitors display a detailed digital map of Rio, which also marks out potential issues such as traffic patterns and streets blocked for service repairs. The control room is continuously monitored by over 400 employees.

While the basic rationale for the Operations Centre is smoother inter-agency coordination and response, it also has political functions. It is equipped with both a crisis room with a direct line to the mayor's official residence and the headquarters of the civil defence, as well as a press room. In this way, the Operations Centre provides an opportunity for 'embedded journalism', developing an important public relations dimension.

There is evidence that the Operations Centre has increased the resilience of Rio's city administration by combining high-tech innovation with the horizontal and vertical integration of staff and public agencies (see Frey, 2014; Singer, 2012). Its director suggests that the Operations Centre functions primarily as an 'umbrella unit', or a 'hub of services', where individuals maintain their organizational role while becoming liaison officers, removing 'turf-barriers' and building trust and personal relationships between them (interview with Pedro Junqueira, Executive Chief of Centro de Operações Rio).

The director was appointed by Mayor Paes, moving from a corporate position managing shopping malls.

This change from the private to the public sector was mediated by a family member working for Paes, who had in turn helped advance his early career in public service. The mayor was impressed by his skills in organising transport for over two million visitors attending the Copacabana New Year's Eve festivities. The mayor arranged a meeting and said "I don't want to know how many languages you speak or what you graduated in; I just know that you work and I like people who work and I want to trust you in this position" (interview with Pedro Junqueira). This preference for trusted individuals and 'outsiders' has been a key feature of the mayor's leadership style, in this case also ensuring the political loyalty of the Operations Centre.

### **Rio 1746**

After Mayor Paes was introduced to the New York City hotline (311) by Michael Bloomberg in 2011, Rio's mayor created the service hotline of Rio's city hall: Rio 1746. The aim of the service is to ensure that "citizens can inform themselves about any problem, complain about city services, place requests, get information about debts, fines and permits, and even get tourist information in English and Spanish" (Rio City Hall, 2012, p. 69). It streamlines requests and calls for 26 municipal agencies, receiving an average of 10,000 calls per day and more than 3.5 million per year. With a budget of approximately \$US 80 million for 2012-16, the most commonly requested services have concerned trimming of trees and debris removal, improperly parked vehicles, locations of dengue mosquito swarms, as well as complaints about lack of street lighting and potholes.

As with the Operations Centre, Rio 1746 has been hailed as an important governance innovation. It is also directly aimed at strengthening central (i.e. mayoral) control. This is achieved through the development of administrative capacities in the Casa Civil that Paes built at the beginning of his first term. The private sector management practices developed with the help of McKinsey are also central to the management of the service hotline, while personal loyalty and partnership bargains again play a role. Compared to the Operations Centre, communication with the mayor is less frequent and more formal; however the element of personal loyalty remains, along with a preference for senior advisers and leaders from the private sector.

## Lab.Rio

Lab.Rio (“The Lab”) is, like the Operations Centre and Rio 1746, technology-based. Nonetheless, Lab.Rio aims to foster citizen engagement with city development, rather than functioning purely as a responsive, or emergency-based platform. Created in December 2014, The Lab is led by nine people with a variety of backgrounds in social sciences, communication, design, web programming – and all under the age of 30. It was established largely in response to the protests that shook the city in 2013, and was inspired by similar initiatives implemented around the world, frequently called ‘public policy labs’.

In its first year, the Lab developed seven different projects concerning, for instance, moves towards crowdsourcing city problems and suggestion mapping, as well as social networks where people can interact and make public policy proposals: both online and offline. The principal role of the Lab is gathering ideas from citizens and sending them to the different secretaries: examples include a 7.5 km bike lane from Tijuca to downtown, as well as the creation of a city Youth Council. The Lab also receives requests for particular tasks from different secretaries in the city government, especially concerning the design of its new participatory programmes.

In contrast to the directors of the Operations Centre and Rio 1746, the coordinator of the Lab is an open critic of the Paes government. The coordinator describes the process as “a constant negotiation”, where “we disagree more often than agree; nevertheless, we manage to work well together,

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because we respect the place and the role of the other” (interview with Luti Guedes, Coordinator of Lab.Rio). Differences aside, the Lab is similar to the other initiatives in two key ways: based on a personal loyalty bargain involving direct and informal coordination; and as a programme cutting across departments and formal institutional boundaries under the leadership of a relatively small management team. Moreover, with the Lab operating under the ultimate tutelage of the mayor’s office, its ideas and inputs are capable of being ‘captured’ by the priorities and constraints laid down by city hall.

## Conclusion

Across Rio’s three governance innovations, the language of political neutrality and ‘what works’ obscures underlying political dynamics. Indeed, the Rio de Janeiro case shows that digital urban governance innovations will not always empower the population nor make policies more democratic. On the contrary, those innovations can easily be used to reinforce the control of one or a few over the bureaucracy, investments and policies of a given city. With this in mind, future research on digital urban governance innovations should consider the ‘capture’ of these tools by executive leaders as one possible impact of such innovations on urban governance, and move beyond the apolitical assessment of direct (potential) effects of such innovations and systematically explore which normative model of urban governance and politics is cemented by different designs and uses of digital innovations.