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Urban observatories and knowledge translation processes in the context of planning research and practice

Observatorios urbanos y procesos de traducción de conocimiento en el contexto de la investigación y práctica de la planeación

Observatórios urbanos e os processos de tradução do conhecimento no contexto da pesquisa e prática sobre planejamento

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to introduce some conceptual elements that will broaden the understanding of urban observatories and the knowledge translation processes that take place through them. To this end, a literature review was carried out to find information on the conceptual origins and the first models of urban observatories, as well as their development and expansion in the context of the conferences on settlements and urban development organised by UN-Habitat. It was also possible to identify elements of the relationship between observatories and the processes of knowledge production in urban areas aimed at improving the capacities of local, regional, and national governments to formulate public policies and decision-making. It also addresses some current debates related to research and practice in urban planning, particularly those concerned with knowledge translation processes, their interactions, and interfaces. Finally, some conclusions are presented about the role of observatories in urban policy making and the importance of deepening these processes of knowledge translation, as this is an interesting area of study that needs to be further explored and deepened.

Keywords: urban planning, policy making, regional development planning and policy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca introducir algunos elementos conceptuales que amplíen el conocimiento de los observatorios urbanos y los procesos de traducción de conocimiento que tienen lugar a través de ellos. Para tal fin, se realizó una revisión bibliográfica que permitió encontrar información sobre los orígenes conceptuales y los primeros modelos de observatorios urbanos, así como sobre su desarrollo y expansión en el marco de las conferencias organizadas por UN-Habitat sobre asentamientos y desarrollo urbano. Asimismo, fue posible identificar elementos sobre la relación de los observatorios con los procesos de producción de conocimiento en las áreas urbanas destinados a mejorar las capacidades de los gobiernos locales, regionales y nacionales en la formulación de políticas públicas y en la toma de decisiones. Adicionalmente, se abordaron algunos de los debates actuales relacionados con la investigación y la práctica en la planificación

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urbana, especialmente aquellos concernientes a los procesos de traducción del conocimiento, sus interacciones e interfaces. Por último, se presentan algunas conclusiones sobre el papel de los observatorios en la formulación de políticas urbanas y la importancia de profundizar en estos procesos de traducción del conocimiento, pues se trata de un interesante campo de estudio que necesita continuar siendo explorado y profundizado.

Palabras clave: planeación urbana, formulación de políticas, planeación y políticas de desarrollo regional.

RESUMO

Este artigo procura introduzir alguns elementos conceituais que ampliam a compreensão dos observatórios urbanos e os processos de tradução do conhecimento que se realizam através deles. Para este fim, foi realizada uma revisão bibliográfica para encontrar informações sobre as origens conceituais e os primeiros modelos de observatórios urbanos, bem como seu desenvolvimento e expansão no âmbito das conferências organizadas pela UN-Habitat sobre assentamentos e desenvolvimento urbano. Também foi possível identificar elementos sobre a relação entre os observatórios e os processos de produção de conhecimento em áreas urbanas, visando melhorar as capacidades dos governos locais, regionais e nacionais na formulação de políticas públicas e na tomada de decisões. Além disso, alguns dos debates atuais relacionados à pesquisa e à prática no planejamento urbano são abordados, especialmente aqueles relativos aos processos de tradução do conhecimento, suas interações e interfaces. Finalmente, são apresentadas algumas conclusões sobre o papel dos observatórios na elaboração de políticas urbanas e a importância de aprofundar estes processos de tradução do conhecimento, pois este é um campo de estudo interessante que precisa ser mais explorado e aprofundado.

Palavras-chave: planejamento urbano, elaboração de políticas, planejamento e política de desenvolvimento regional.

Introduction

In recent decades, urban observatories have experienced rapid growth around the world as more organisations are interested in establishing their own observatories. In this sense, these structures are now found not only in public administration or academia but also in the private sector and civil society organisations, which has an impact on the diversity of the research areas covered and territories selected for their implementation (Farah, 2011). One reason that could explain this situation is that, over time, observatories have evolved from being mainly focused on collecting and systematising data to becoming an indispensable tool for knowledge production to monitor cities, diagnose their problems, provide evidence for public action, and support decision-making processes (UN-Habitat, 2015; Washbourne *et al.*, 2019).

Despite these considerations, several authors agree that observatories remain an unexplored area of knowledge (Farah, 2011; Siedlok & Hibbert, 2014; Washbourne *et al.*, 2019), because although there are some studies on the subject, most of them come from sources involved in their promotion or management (Farah, 2011, p. 2). As organisations that are designed "to 'bridge' and navigate this 'knowledge transition zone' between research and decision-making" (Washbourne *et al.*, 2019, p. 2), urban observatories are part of debates on planning research and practice, which reinforces the relevance of delving into their studies. With one additional aspect. The interactions between knowledge and power taking place in observatories, and their ability to influence, at least in part, issues that shape development in cities, also make them a matter of urban equity that needs to be addressed in the pursuit of social justice (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1996).

In light of the above, this article aims to contribute to the expansion of knowledge about urban observatories by pointing out the relationship between processes of knowledge translation in planning research and practice. To this end, a literature review was the methodology carried out, making it possible to find information on the conceptual origins and the first models of Urban Observatories developed in the United States in the late 1960s (Williams, 1972; Szanton, 1981), as well as on their development and expansion promoted by UN as a result

of the global urban agendas that emerged from that organisation's Habitat conferences, which made the GUO approach the reference model for the creation of these structures (UN-Habitat, 2015).

By studying the role of observatories within the United Nations system, it was also possible to identify their essential relationship with knowledge production processes in urban areas aimed at improving the capacity of local, regional, and national governments in policy and decision-making (Farah, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2012; UN-Habitat, 2015). For this reason, the definition of the terms related to knowledge itself was deepened, and then some current debates on research and practice planning were also addressed, especially those related to knowledge translation processes (Cociña *et al*., 2019; Frediani *et al*., 2019).

From this initial analysis, two key elements emerge that can explain, to some extent, why urban observatories have adopted their current characteristics and functions, which focus on the development and use of different means (e. g. papers, research, reports, data analysis, technical concepts) for policy and decision-making (UN-Habitat, 2015): i. their role concerning the construction, communication, and use of knowledge enables them to shape power relations (see Foucault, 1980); and ii. knowledge translation processes during UN-Habitat Conferences influenced not only how global urban agendas were defined and materialised (Cociña *et al*., 2019), but also how observatories were subsequently used as instruments for planning in cities.

A dichotomy also emerges from these variables. On the one hand, one could examine in depth the use of observatories as tools for knowledge production and then analyse their methods, information systems, and outcomes, among other things. There could also be studies on how this knowledge circulates (if it does circulate), where it is disseminated, and what impact it has on public policy and the provision of evidence for decision-making. But there is also the possibility of analysing the processes underlying the observatories' functions and activities. In other words, to focus on an earlier stage of implementation and examine the historical, political, economic, cultural, and even environmental contexts that determined the need to create a structure for collecting and processing certain data.

The hypothesis put forward in this article is that the form and approach of urban observatories are determined by the interactions that take place during the processes of knowledge translation, not only at the time of their establishment but also during their operation. To support this, additional literature was drawn on current debates between planning research and practice where concepts such as 'interfaces of knowledge translation' (Frediani et al., 2019) were found to be an appropriate analytical framework to address this issue.

Finally, it is important to note that the references and secondary information used for this article are largely drawn from academic sources at the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy [STEaPP] and the Bartlett Development Planning Unit [DPU] of the University College London [UCL], which have developed a research agenda around Urban Observatories. As mentioned earlier, several authors agree that this is an unexplored area of research (Farah, 2011; Siedlok & Hibbert, 2014; Washbourne *et al*., 2019), which is one of the reasons why STEaPP and DPU aimed to generate knowledge on the diversity of these structures. In addition, academic papers dealing with the concept of knowledge translation were also consulted, as well as United Nations working papers on the Conferences organised by UN-Habitat, which mainly relate to the issues and recommendations emerged from those meetings.

Literature Review

The literature review comprises two main sections. The first one looks at the field of urban observatories, examining their conceptual and operational origins, their evolution based on the guidelines of the UN system, and their current definition and characteristics. The second, presents the literature consulted on debates on planning research and practice involving knowledge translation processes and urban observatories. It starts with a necessary clarification of the main terms used in these debates and then goes into the debates themselves.

1. Urban observatories: Development, characteristics, and conceptual definition

This section of the literature review aims to set out the conceptual origins of urban observatories and the context in which they emerged, as well as identifying some of the objectives and main research areas defined for the first observatories established. It also includes a summary of their evolution as instruments adopted by the UN system since the 1970s, particularly in the context of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN -Habitat), before concluding with the presentation of a current definition of the concept posed by the Global Urban Observatory [GUO], and a brief analysis of their forms, typologies, characteristics, and purposes.

A) Conceptual origins and first implemented models

The first antecedent of the concept 'Urban Observatory' dates from 1962 when Robert C. Wood-who was a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, [MIT] and also a consultant to the government of the United States of America (Szanton, 1981) - presented it in the paper 'The Contributions of Political Science to Urban Form'. In this paper, he claimed that studies related to urban policy lagged not only those of the natural sciences in "the treatment of phenomena under observation", but also behind those of "other social sciences in their studies of personality, family behavior, economic behavior, and even the parts of political science dealing with electoral analysis" (Williams, 1972, p. 5).

For Wood, this delay occurred because academics did not have an adequate scientific compendium of existing knowledge and experience in the field of urban politics (Williams, 1972); hence he made two suggestions. The first was to stop formulating new theories on urban problems to concentrate on collecting "grubby" data, similarly to what natural scientists do in their research through "field stations, data centers, and observatories" (Williams, 1972, p. 5). The second proposal was to create a network of urban observatories in his country to bring together information from local governments and their experiences, allowing bureaucrats to conduct experiments and compare findings, as well as test theories and get feedback for urban policy (Williams, 1972). It should also be "operated jointly by universities and city governments and following a master research plan, could begin to develop a science of urban affairs" (Szanton, 1981, p. 21).

The network came into being in the late 1960s through an agreement between the Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] and the National League of Cities [NLC] and began its work in the early 1970s. It became one of the first documented cases of using information analysis and data collection tools to understand and solve urban problems through the use of urban observatories (Williams, 1972; Farah, 2011).

In analysing the process of creation of this network, two other aspects stand out that would be considered later in the design and implementation of new urban observatories (Farah, 2011). These were the objectives and the research agenda. In terms of objectives, these were defined at the beginning of the network as i. to enable local governments to use the resources of universities to understand and solve urban problems; ii. to establish a coordinated, continuous, and relevant programme of urban research based on experience and practice, and iii. to promote the capacity of universities to establish more effective links between their research activities and urban concerns (Szanton, 1981).

The research agenda included topics of national relevance - i.e., they were addressed simultaneously by all local observatories - related to issues such as citizens' participation in policy development, citizens' attitudes towards municipal government performance, municipal financial needs, analysis of the impact of local government proposals on budget allocation, social indicators, and the cost of substandard housing. Similarly, each local observatory had its own research topics, including studies of property issues, medical services, water pollution, social service provision, housing, neighbourhoods, police recruitment and transport services (Williams, 1972).

The process of conceptualising and implementing of this network of observatories in the United States must also be understood in the context of the "demographic and socioeconomic crisis" caused by the accelerated process of urbanisation in the world during the 1960s (Cociña *et al.*, 2019, p. 5). As a result, scholars and authorities turned their attention to the challenges posed by the "slums" that emerged both on the outer edges of cities in the South (the so-called 'Belts of Misery') and in urban areas in the Northern Hemisphere. This scenario would precede what can be considered a milestone in the development of urban observatories: The UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat I) held in Vancouver (Canada) in 1976.

B) Urban observatories development in the context of the UN system

Habitat I is considered a turning point from which discussions on urban affairs gained a global reach (Cociña *et al.*, 2019). In this regard, some of the participants saw the conference as an opportunity to create, for the first time, a collective narrative on human settlements, incorporating and giving relevance to knowledge coming from different actors and regions, which would be reflected in documents such as the Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements and a Plan of Action, but also in the creation of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements [UNCHS], the seed of today's United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) (Cociña *et al.*, 2019).

The UNCHS/UN-Habitat is considered a pioneer in the collection of urban indicators (Ferreira *et al*., 2012) through the implementation of programmes such as the City Data Programme [CDP] and the Housing Indicator Programme [HIP] - (initiated in 1991 in collaboration with the World Bank and renamed as the Urban Indicators Programme [UIP] in 1993). From them can also be said to have been a demonstration of the use of data to construct the collective narrative envisaged in Habitat I (Cociña *et al.*, 2019).

The UIP produced a global database of urban indicators in 1996, presented in the same year at the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in Istanbul (Turkey) which, helped to "identify regional trends on key urban issues" UN-Habitat (2009, p. 3) in the areas of housing, social and economic development, poverty reduction, environment, and governance. Member States and Habitat Agenda partners also called on UN-Habitat to continue to use these indicators to monitor public policy in the above areas. To this end, they would commit to compile their data and report regularly on trends in their countries.

This new responsibility of UN-Habitat led to the creation of the Global Urban Observatory [GUO] in 1997, which took up the activities of the UIP and even expanded them towards the measure specific indicators of the Habitat Agenda and Agenda 21 (UN Conference on Environment & Development [1992] also known as the Earth Summit) (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2015). Similarly, following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000, UN-Habitat was tasked with monitoring progress towards Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7, Target 11: To achieve a significant improvement in the living conditions of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 (Rai, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2015).

GUO's main goal was to "find a scientific solution to the urban information crisis (and thus generate) better information for better cities" (UN-Habitat, 2015), focusing on building local capacities to select, collect, manage, and apply policy-oriented indicators for statistics and other urban information (Farah, 2011; Ferreira *et al.*, 2012; Rai, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2015). Consequently, this observatory created a network that partnered with local and national authorities in a few selected countries and initiated a process that would lead to the development of a globally networked urban data collection system (UN-Habitat, 2015). With its formulation and implementation, UN-Habitat "recognized the importance of the participation of cities to achieve the targets set in the Millennium Development Goals" (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012, p. 260), therefore GUO set as aims:

> assistance to governments, local authorities and of local civil society to amplify their ability to collect, manage and maintain and use information on urban development; enhance the use of knowledge and urban indicators for policy formulation, planning and urban management through participatory process; and collection and

> dissemination of results of global, national and city level monitoring activities, as well as disseminating good practices in the use of urban information world-wide (UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 16).

Notwithstanding these guidelines, it is undeniable that the development and dissemination of urban observatories has had a major impact on the UN in recent decades, as evidenced by the fact that 187 of them are currently part of the GUO network (Farah, 2011; Washbourne *et al.*, 2019).

C) Contemporary definition and characteristics

According to Farah (2011), the term 'observatory' is used to refer to various structures that may differ in scope, design, research topics and outcomes, but whose common denominator - and which outlines their mode of operation - is 'observation' from a scientific perspective that enables them to gain information on specific topics. In the case of observatories dealing with urban issues, their analyses aim to better understand how cities function as economic and social systems, and then use this knowledge as an input for integrated and effective planning (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012).

The facts presented show that it is necessary to explicitly define the term 'urban observatory'. For this reason, this article will use GUO's definition, which describes urban observatories as "government agencies, research centres or educational institutions that are designated as 'workshops' where monitoring tools are developed and used for policy formulation through consultative processes" (UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 18).

As mentioned above, urban observatories can take different forms. One of them depends on their area of operation (Ferreira *et al.*, 2012), which according to UN-Habitat (2015) is mainly at three levels: Local, National or Regional. Farah (2011) adds the global level, pointing out that the national, regional, and global levels are "networks of observatories of smaller levels whose aim is to coordinate the activity between the different levels and provide expertise and assistance when needed to smaller levels" (Farah, 2011, p. 7). Similarly, observatories can be classified according to their focus (Washbourne *et al.*, 2019), across a broad spectrum that can range from city-region to continental.

Washbourne *et al.*, (2019) claim that observatories can also be classified according to their thematic focus (e. g., poverty, gender, housing) or according to whether they follow a mandate to collect information and produce knowledge on a particular topic. Finally, Farah (2011) presents four "archetypes" of observatories: City-university associations, models of public actors (related to the public sector agenda), models of global networks (promoted by global organisations such as GUO) and models of local initiatives (developed by non-governmental local actors). Regardless of the form they take, they can be seen to have at least three common goals (Washbourne *et al.*, 2019):

i) to create sustainable urban monitoring systems in support of local planning and management processes, linking data to policy;

ii) to strengthen local capacity for the development and use of urban indicators that facilitate the collection of disaggregated data at city and sub-city levels;

iii) to promote local ownership of urban indicator systems and a culture of monitoring and assessment in the urban sector (UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 16).

Another facet of urban observatories that cannot be overlooked is that as UN-Habitat (2015) asserts, they have also become a focal point for urban policy development and planning in cities, as they allow for exchanges that would hardly take place in other scenarios and foster collaboration between policymakers, technical experts, and interest groups representatives. Thus, an urban observatory can also be understood as "a local network of stakeholders responsible for producing, analysing and disseminating data on a significant set of indicators that collectively reflect priority issues on sustainable development" (UN-Habitat, 2015, p. 18).

2. Knowledge translation and the debates on planning research and practice: the role of urban observatories

The previous section presented the current definition of the concept of 'urban observatories' and some of their characteristics. In doing so, it was also possible to establish that, since

their inception, they were intended to produce knowledge to strengthen planning processes and policy formulation in cities, a task highlighted in recent decades by the data collection and information analysis programmes developed by the United Nations system, which not only led to the creation of the GUO network but also encouraged the expansion of observatories at the global level (Washbourne *et al.*, 2019). In addition, this conceptualisation also identified other ways of thinking about knowledge production and knowledge translation processes inherent to urban observatories, rising the need to deepen their role in these areas from the perspective of the debates between planning research and practice.

The second part of this literature review explores aspects within these debates that reflect theoretical elements that can be applied to the study of observatories. In this sense, it is also necessary to introduce some important descriptors to contextualise the analysis proposed in this article. For this reason, the next section will first explain some knowledge-related terms before looking at the relevant debates on this topic.

A) A common basis for engaging in the debates

As mentioned earlier, several actors consider urban observatories as fundamental instruments that can be used to improve or strengthen public policy and decision-making (Farah, 2011; UN-Habitat, 2015; Washbourne *et al.*, 2019). On this basis, it can be argued that knowledge is a crucial factor that links the study of observatories to debates on planning research and practice, as they represent a scenario in which both production and knowledge translation processes take place. It is therefore important to clarify this and other related concepts. In its broadest sense, 'knowledge' refers to "a sum of data, information and experience" (Komninos 2013, cited in Washbourne *et al.*, 2019, p. 3), a statement supported by Jones *et al.* (2009), who adds:

> … It can be theoretical as well as empirical and context-specific. As Foucault famously emphasised, the construction, communication and use of knowledge are heavily imbued with power relations, and this needs to be considered in any efforts to shape the policy process through research-informed and other types of evidence (Jones *et al.*, 2009, p. 4).

As seen, 'knowledge production' for public policy formulation is a process that involves two other variables. These are 'data', understood by Batty (2013, cited in Washbourne *et al.*, 2019, p. 3) as "collected quantitative variables and statistics", and 'information', explained by Acuto *et al.* (2018, cited in Washbourne *et al.*, 2019, p. 3) as "processed or purpose-specific data". For Roth (2002, p. 27), in turn, policy refers to the existence of "one or more collective goals that are deemed necessary or desirable [and that are undertaken] by a government institution or organisation ... in order to modify a situation that is perceived as unsatisfactory or problematic"

While the term 'knowledge translation' originates in the field of public health and medicine (NCDDR, 2005; World Health Organisation [WHO], 2015; Rushmer *et al.*, 2019), it also finds interpretation in the area of development policymaking, where it is understood as "the process of repackaging knowledge to make it more accessible to potential users" (Jones *et al.*, 2009, p. 30). Nevertheless, this text uses the connotation postulated by Frediani, Cociña & Acuto (2019, p. 8) who, in the context of urban planning studies, describe knowledge translation as "multi-scalar and non-linear processes of encounter between research and practices in which different forms of knowledge are articulated". Furthermore, Cociña *et al.* (2019, p. 13) state that "this approach seeks to avoid a simplistic linear definition of knowledge translation as a process that always takes place from research to practice".

For its part, the term 'planning' is frequently used in the literature, but still embodies a variety of concepts. While authors such as Scott and Roweis (1977, p. 1112) state that planning is a "definite phenomenon to be explained and accounted for in terms of its roots and development, and not as an autonomous system of ideas to be accepted or rejected merely on the grounds of its own internal standards of judgement", others such as Gaber and Gaber (2010, p. 2) describe planning research as

"an applied investigation that uses empirical observations in the development and assessment of plans or planning inquiry [whose main purpose] is to expand on the breadth, depth, and applicability of what the planner knows about a particular topic". Another definition comes from Alexander (2016, p. 91), who states that it is futile to explain this term as "realism demands a contingent, not a universal, definition of planning", for which he echoes Vickers' (1968, quoted in Alexander 2016, p. 91) assertion that "planning is what planners do", highlighting the principle of validation as it implies a social construction of knowledge.

B) Urban observatories and knowledge translation processes

The definitions presented earlier are good examples of the complicated relationship between research planning and practice that has accompanied these debates for several decades (Frediani *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, the Habitat Conferences, held every 20 years since 1976, can be described as one of the scenarios in which the complexity of these interactions has become more evident. This view is supported by Cociña *et al.* (2019), who point out that looking at the history of the Habitat Conferences and the resulting global urban agendas can provide a "perspective to understand knowledge translation as a space of negotiation and unveils the mechanisms through which these processes can become vehicles for challenging inequalities" (Cociña *et al.*, 2019, p. 15).

Returning briefly to the conferences, Cociña *et al.* (2019) also highlight the importance of understanding the link between research and practice in Habitat I (1976), as it was already embedded in the prevailing modernisation paradigms of the time, which undoubtedly influenced the design and outcomes of the summit. In the case of Habitat II (1996), the review of the GUO reveals how some of its features also responded to the prevailing knowledge translation approach of the time, which can be partly explained by "the spread of managerial and neoliberal development agendas" (Cociña *et al.*, 2019, p. 10), that were already prevalent at the time of this second meeting.

The Istanbul Declaration, on the other hand, took a more pragmatic position and focused on sectoral and specific concerns. While the underlying logic of the Habitat I process was the attempt to build a collective narrative, in Habitat II this logic was replaced by the logic of 'objectives and sectors', giving considerable prominence in the final declaration to issues such as partnership, international cooperation, the role of the private sector and the notion of 'best practices', contrasting with the detriment of participation and equality related subjects. Taking up Cohen's critique of the reduction in the role of research in Habitat II (1996, cited in Cociña *et al.*, 2019), these authors stress its repercussions on the knowledge translation processes since then. Thus, at the last conference (Habitat III) held in Quito (Ecuador) in 2016, the production of knowledge led by experts and with measurable data delivered in the form of 'policy units' and 'issue papers' became as the main inputs accepted as 'valuable knowledge' (Cociña *et al.*, 2019, p. 13).

As could be observed, the discussions on knowledge production and knowledge translation processes at the Habitat conferences were held at the same time as the urban observatories were emerging and gaining prominence in these spaces. This suggests not only a direct relationship between the approach taken to knowledge at these summits and the development of the observatories but also that they have long been embedded, directly or indirectly, in the core of debates on planning research and practice.

Nevertheless, this is not the only debate going on today about planning research and practice. According to Frediani *et al.* (2019, p. 5), they have become "a more central disciplinary issue in recent years", a situation that can be explained by two reasons. The first, as Frediani *et al.* (2019) argue, is due to the increasingly high expectations of planning and the opportunities it offers to achieve development goals. A second reason, closely related to the previous one, is the significant role of academic knowledge in strengthening policy, which, as Jones *et al.* (2009, p. 3) argue, shapes the thinking of policy actors and practitioners and influences policy research to have a greater impact on the design of

programmes and the allocation of budgetary resources, benefiting the poorest and most marginalised populations.

These debates "tend to be based on an apparently linear approach to the relationship between research and practice, assuming a one-way flow of knowledge from research to practice. However, knowledge is produced through multiple means, actions, and networks" Frediani *et al.* (2019, p. 5). Overlooking the multiplicity of ways to produce knowledge, one can ignore the existing correlation between research and practice - which influence each other. This also proves that the importance given to certain types of knowledge is also a form of manifestation of power relations and socio-cultural constructions. This situation can lead to widening gaps between planning research and practice precisely because theoretically only one type of knowledge is given relevance and others are left aside.

Therefore, processes of knowledge translation are so important because this is where research and practice interact. These interactions can be addressed by identifying the parts that make up the 'knowledge translation interfaces'. These mainly consist of actors, typologies, instruments, and tactics that interact with each other. "We recognise that an interface is not a neat space that supports a linear process, but rather complex multi-directional exchanges in which constellations of what we call typologies, tactics, instruments, and actors are articulated" Frediani *et al.* (2019, p. 10).

In this sense, these authors understand that 'typologies' of knowledge translation are an outcome produced by the nature of the relationship between research and practice. On the other hand, 'tactics' are the means that different actors use to mobilise knowledge, position themselves and push through agendas. Finally, 'instruments' are the specific mechanisms or tools used by actors to apply the above tactics and typologies. "Interfaces are never neutral, as they define the spaces and norms in which knowledge is translated. They are the arenas in which the exchanges between research and practice occur at different scales and geographies, and in which different kinds of knowledge are - or are not - recognised" Frediani *et al.* (2019, p. 10).

To understand who participates in these interfaces and how these constellations of interactions are expressed could be an alternative way to address the tensions between research and practice. Urban observatories could be part of these learning processes, as a tool but also as an input.

Conclusions

Urban observatories have become a fundamental tool for public policy formulation and decision-making in cities. For this reason, it is necessary to deepen their knowledge to understand not only the aspects that have shaped them (i. e., the actors, methods, and outcomes) but also their impact on contemporary urban societies.

In this sense, they can be seen as a result of trends in urban planning research and practice that have favoured a particular approach at different points in time. Looking at the processes of implementation of the knowledge created by the GUO in the Habitat Conferences convened by the United Nations, it is possible to see the relevance of these structures precisely because of their function of collecting and analysing information, which allowed them to become a relevant actor in defining public policies. Although the observatories do not directly make decisions on which policies should or should not be implemented, as these are in different spheres of power, it is clear that their activities shape these policies and can thus influence not only urban development but also the power relations in a city.

Knowledge translation processes are present in everyday relations in a city, not only in the spheres of power but also permeating the lives of citizens through the decisions that are made, whether based on research or practice. Likewise, these processes can take different forms, manifesting themselves in different scenarios and times. So just as it is difficult to predict when they will emerge, it is also difficult to predict what will result from the interactions at the interfaces. In this sense, knowledge translation processes in planning research and practice are an area that is just beginning to develop but is already showing its importance

for the future of urban planning. Closing the gap between knowledge generated by observatories and policy implementation by governments (and ultimately by planners) is a challenge that all actors in modern societies must face to effectively influence the quality of life of urban dwellers.

Finally, and relatedly, it is proposed that the study of interfaces to address these debates about knowledge translation processes seeks to identify some actors and define some of their tactics, typologies, and instruments. It is a matter of characterising the types of interactions that interfaces exhibit, giving them attributes and trying to describe the results expected in the interactions. That is, how they express themselves. It would be worthwhile to analyse in detail the specific moments in which knowledge translation processes shape instruments such as this one. This is an interesting task not addressed in this paper, but it is undoubtedly a field of action that can be explored in the future. Those entrusted with the management of urban planning processes need to create spaces (interfaces) where knowledge gained from research and practice converges, and foster dialogues that enable progress towards mutual recognition in our society and the creation of inclusive cities with social justice.

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