Community-Led governance: Exploring self-governance dynamics

Carolina Tavares Lopes*1*, Edimara Mezzomo Luciano*1*, Gabriela Viale Pereira *2* and Lucas Roldan*1*

1 Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil
2 Department for E-Governance and Administration, Danube University Krems, Krems, Austria

Abstract

Communities with established governance structures have increasingly assumed responsibility for their own development, moving to self-governance models. This research aims to explore contemporary debates surrounding community governance and proposes a fresh approach inspired by principles of anarchism. Communities seek self-governing strategies to address their needs more effectively, distancing themselves from citing inefficiencies in public service delivery. Moreover, the study delves into how individuals and communities pursue alternative solutions to meet their needs when they perceive public services as ineffective. By exploring how people organize themselves outside the traditional governmental system, the paper identified examples of social and economic innovation that could inspire new approaches to addressing governance. This investigation includes examining self-management systems, community cooperation, and communication channels. However, the study also acknowledges the essential role that the government plays in providing essential services and promoting social welfare, thus avoiding overgeneralization. Through a focused review of literature on community governance, we examine the challenges and opportunities of decentralizing power and decision-making processes. Our study, conducted as a case study in Porto Alegre, Brazil, involves an in-depth analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with community leaders, social center personnel, entrepreneurs, consultants, City Hall representatives and citizens. The results section reveals how these communities embrace self-governing strategies and identifies examples of social and economic innovation that could inspire new approaches to addressing governance. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections integrate theoretical insights with empirical evidence to offer fresh perspectives on the dynamics of community-led governance.

Keywords

Community Governance, Anarchy Governance, Community-Led Governance.

1. Introduction

In recent years, significant discourse in governmental systems and academia has focused on the impact of communities with established governance structures. These communities, serving as vehicles for urban development and embodying the concept of sustainable

progress, have increasingly assumed responsibility for their own growth. However, various aspects of this phenomenon are still not fully understood [1].

This research aims to explore contemporary debates surrounding community governance and proposes a fresh approach inspired by principles of anarchism. Communities seek self-governing strategies to address their needs more effectively, distancing themselves from citing inefficiencies in public service delivery.

Wall [2] explores how economic planning based on anarchist principles can be viable and advantageous for 21st-century economies. He stresses the significance of self-management and decentralization of power as fundamental pillars of anarchist governance, asserting that granting communities direct control over their affairs promotes accountability and efficiency [2]. This perspective resonates with Leeson's [3] viewpoint, suggesting that governance structures can organically emerge from repeated interactions among community members in certain contexts, leading to a decentralized enforcement approach without formal government intervention.

Consequently, as individuals grapple with challenges related to public services, there emerges a pressing need to explore innovative governance approaches that empower them to address their needs more efficiently. Moreover, discussions of what a vital city entails are inherently connected with issues of power, politics, and participation in cities [3]. By exploring how people organize themselves outside the traditional governmental system, the paper identified examples of social and economic innovation that could inspire new approaches to addressing governance. This investigation includes examining self-management systems, community cooperation, and communication channels.

However, the study also acknowledges the essential role that the government plays in providing essential services and promoting social welfare, thus avoiding overgeneralization. Our goal is to delve deeper into understanding the evolving landscape of governance, particularly focusing on how communities organize themselves outside the traditional governmental system. By identifying examples of social and economic innovation, we seek to illustrate how these new forms of governance can inspire other approaches to addressing urban development challenges and service delivery issues. Through the adoption of self-governing strategies, communities are able to detach themselves from public authorities and establish novel governance structures, thereby empowering themselves to take charge of their own development. However, it is essential to acknowledge the government's vital role in providing essential services and promoting social welfare to avoid overgeneralization and in governance structures. The motivation for our study stems from the increasing importance of understanding innovative governance strategies to solve problems in urban development. By examining the case of Porto Alegre's 4th District, the research aims to contribute to the understanding of how new approaches can lead to resilient and adaptive urban landscapes, filling a significant gap in the literature on urban development and governance [1,4].

Starting in Section 2 with a literature review to establish the theoretical context of community governance, our paper proceeds to outline the specific conditions of the Porto Alegre case study, focusing on the Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program for +4D. We seek to explore Self-Governance Dynamics, identifying new approaches and structures to effectively address community issues. Section 3 details the methods employed for data collection in this case study research. Subsequently, Section 4 discusses the results of the in-depth interviews, highlighting the multifaceted nature of community governance, which involves community management and decision-making while addressing broader community needs and enhancing capacity and well-being. Finally, Section 5 concludes by

emphasizing the importance of developing innovative governance practices to foster community development and to improve communication and collaboration between these communities and public authorities.

2. Literature review

The literature review in this section lays the groundwork for our analysis by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of community governance. It entails the mechanisms and processes through which communities organize, make decisions, and manage their affairs. To provide a comprehensive understanding, we draw insights from existing literature and scholarly discourse.

Craig et al. [5] illustrate how communities enhance civil society by fostering internal cohesion, prioritizing group actions and amplifying the effectiveness of community-driven efforts. Similarly, Hautekeur [1] argues that communities adopting a robust governance-oriented approach become interconnected in urban development, transforming them into active citizens. Wenmei et. al [6] further support this perspective, asserting that communities are part of good governance as they can solve certain problems that individuals acting alone, markets or governments cannot solve.

Gottdiener and Budd [7] offer a comprehensive definition of community as a closely-knit group characterized by enduring bonds among its members, often sharing a geographical location. This communal identity is manifested through regular engagement in group activities, a strong sense of belonging, and a shared physical space. Additionally, there is also emphasis on the functional and social interconnectedness within a community, wherein individuals and organizations collaborate to enhance various aspects of community well-being, including health, education, and overall quality of life [8].

The emergence of community governance gained momentum in the 1990s, spurred by movements like communitarianism, which sought to balance individual rights with social responsibilities. Influential scholars such as Massey [9] and Boddy et al. [10] have highlighted the significant influence of institutions on shaping community dynamics, thus sparking scholarly interest in the concept of community governance.

While governance typically encompasses three primary forms—state (command-based), market (voluntary exchange), and community (cooperation)—these categories are seldom mutually exclusive [11]. However, the intricate demands at the community level necessitate a tailored institutional framework that fosters cooperation among community members themselves, acknowledging their diverse needs and contributions.

Furthermore, we have highlighted that community governance plays a vital role in both central and local government, offering a strategic approach to addressing individual community needs. Sullivan [12] emphasizes the role of community governance in securing success at the local level by attracting funding from central government. Imrie and Raco [13] contrast traditional local government with contemporary governance models, illustrating a shift from bureaucratic to flexible and responsive approaches.

Gates [14] advocates for a transition from 'government to governance,' suggesting that community governance enables collaborative decision-making among government, business, community groups, and citizens. McKieran et. al. [15] define community governance as collaboration, recognizing the need for collective action to address complex community issues. Bowles and Gintis [16] view community governance as essential for good governance, emphasizing its ability to address problems beyond the scope of individual or governmental efforts.

Overall, community governance emerges as a crucial structure for addressing urban development challenges and promoting community well-being. It facilitates collaboration and empowers communities to address their highest priority issues effectively. Additionally, a recent research highlights communities as vehicles for urban development, emphasizing the importance of sustainable community construction in the context of smart city initiatives [17].

3. Research method

In this section, we present the methodology guiding our study, providing insight into the systematic approach we employ to address our research objectives. We outline the steps taken, from data collection to analysis, ensuring thoroughness and precision in our investigation, as well as the description of the case.

3.1. Data collection and analysis

As suggested by Cukier et al. [18], we conducted empirical research by meticulously searching for keywords, with a focus on "community governance". Following Ridley's [19] recommendation for a step-by-step process, our second step involved selecting and organizing data, reading texts, and interpreting and explaining the results in a three-stage process. These findings were elaborated upon in Section 2, where we presented a comprehensive theoretical review, serving as a guiding structure for our analysis [19]. Given that we are conducting a study on governance through semi-structured interviews, we acknowledge the significance of adopting a multi-level approach [20]. Consequently, we carefully selected five distinct groups (community leaders, social center personnel, entrepreneurs, consultants, City Hall representatives, and citizens) to ensure the comprehensive representation of diverse viewpoints.

During October to December 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews lasting 40 to 100 minutes, employing the semi-structured technique as outlined in Appendix A. These interviews provided a diverse array of perspectives, intertwining to create a rich narrative that encapsulated the essence of governance. Utilizing the Qualitative Data software Transkriptor, audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed, depicting the intricate landscape of governance within the +4D case context. Transcript analysis followed a deductive coding approach based on content analysis techniques [21], facilitated by the digital software NVivo and employing thematic analysis to identify and cluster (sub)themes. The Porto Alegre case study underscores a significant emphasis on community governance, which we elaborate on in the following section where we present the results and discussions. Finally, based on prior literature and theories, we explore the following proposition through the empirical work: that communities with established governance structures ultimately gravitate towards principles of anarchy for their development due to the lack or delay of public sector involvement.

3.2. Description of the case

The Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program for +4D in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was selected as the focal point of our research due to its inclusive approach, engaging various stakeholders in its development. Encompassing a district comprising four neighborhoods,

this program provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine the city's extensive history spanning 251 years [22].

As a unique case study, Porto Alegre offers a nuanced perspective, capturing diverse viewpoints and historical moments shaped by collective societal efforts. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the district thrived as a vibrant hub of industrial activity, witnessing the establishment of factories, clubs, unions, schools, churches, and associations that defined its character. However, as the city expanded, the district experienced a decline due to industrial activities dispersing to other areas.

To address these challenges, the municipal government of Porto Alegre initiated numerous urban management initiatives over the past three decades, with a particular focus on the 4th District. The Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program for +4D was launched to revitalize the area by promoting diverse activities, preserving its identity, and attracting new businesses. Today, the 4th District boasts a socially diverse landscape characterized by urban activism, social movements, innovation hubs, and the resilience of its residents.

Through in-depth interviews and drawing on prior literature and theories, our research aims to explore the following proposition: that communities with established governance structures ultimately gravitate towards principles of anarchy for their development due to the lack or delay of public sector involvement. This exploration will be conducted through empirical work, shedding light on the dynamics and motivations driving community-led initiatives in the 4th District of Porto Alegre.

4. Results and discussion

This chapter delves into the findings obtained from 25 in-depth interviews investigating both community governance and anarchy governance. Engaging with diverse stakeholders, we analyze community-led governance structures, shedding light on their multifaceted nature and strategic significance in enhancing civic engagement and community development. The condensed synthesis underscores key themes and implications, encompassing community structure, community cooperation and cohesion, communication channels, and the role of government.

4.1. Community structure (Self-Governance Dynamics)

In the realm of community studies, the concept of community structure holds significant weight, serving as a foundational pillar in understanding community dynamics and interactions. Interviewee 1, for instance, underscores the importance of community structure in lending credibility to the community's endeavors. As articulated by Interviewee 1, "Governance brings credibility, power, and a platform to make an impact." However, Interviewee 5 offers a contrasting perspective, suggesting that the imposition of community structure and power in dialogue may not always foster a friendly or beneficial atmosphere.

Additionally, Interviewee 6, also a community leader, views structure as a manifestation of power within the community, noting that various objectives are achieved through the unity and organization of the group. This sentiment is echoed by a member of the community social center team (Interviewee 9), who emphasizes that an enhanced structure fosters better community relations. Furthermore, a city hall representative shares a case where a highly structured community wielded significant mobilization power to influence and amend laws, highlighting the tangible impact of community structure.

Moving forward, governance plays a pivotal role in decision-making processes, public policies, and community structures essential for fostering innovation and efficiency. Interviewee 4, operating within a community setting, emphasizes the collaborative nature of addressing shared concerns. For instance, when faced with issues like irregular garbage collection by the municipality, entrepreneurs collaborated to seek solutions, demonstrating the importance of stakeholders engaging in discussions about governance structures and organizational frameworks.

Similarly, Interviewee 9 echoes the sentiment of self-initiated governance structures, highlighting the initiative taken to establish effective governance mechanisms tailored to address community needs. Interviewee 13 provides insights into the reciprocal relationship between the community and public authorities, advocating for a community-oriented approach to address population needs responsively.

Building on these insights, Interviewee 14, a key figure in the city hall, discusses the challenges of balancing short-term goals of various actors with the municipality's long-term planning needs. This underscores the importance of aligning community efforts with overarching governance strategies for sustainable development. Interviewee 18 emphasizes the benefits of community governance in facilitating precise dialogue with governmental bodies, ensuring effective communication and addressal of community needs within the broader governance framework.

Moreover, Interviewee 19, a distinguished consultant, stresses the importance of governance coupled with action plans, particularly emphasizing the significance of master plans as diagnostic tools for ICT resources and processes. Additionally, Interviewee 21 notes that while internal governance fosters dialogue, it also presents challenges as another form of politics prioritizing the common good, highlighting the dynamic nature of governance structures and the need for continuous adaptation to effectively address contemporary challenges.

As we explore these interconnected dynamics, it becomes clear that governance structures play a crucial role in shaping urban environments. By incorporating insights from these discussions, we enrich our understanding of community governance's implications for urban development and resilience. This prompts us to critically examine the influence of power dynamics on the vitality and inclusivity of cities, emphasizing the need for governance approaches that prioritize community empowerment and participation.

4.2. Community cooperation and cohesion

In this subsection, we explore the dynamics of community cooperation and cohesion, essential elements in fostering a sense of belonging and unity. Interviewee 1, a community leader, characterizes the community as a hub for active participation, emphasizing its role in promoting cooperation and cohesion among members. Similarly, Interviewees 2 and 3 highlight the community's significance as a symbol of citizenship, with its own set of rules and regulations that contribute to its longevity and the achievement of common goals.

The community acts as a catalyst for collaboration, bringing individuals together to work towards shared objectives. Interviewee 4 views the community environment as a platform for constructive dialogues facilitated by organized entities. Interviewee 8 emphasizes the importance of cohesion in uniting individuals with similar goals, seeing it as a means to empower and drive positive change. From the perspective of Interviewee 18, a representative of the city hall, organized community efforts have a profound impact on collective progress.

Lastly, Interviewee 24 envisions meeting points within the community as transformative spaces, where relationships are nurtured and intricate networks of connections are formed.

Together, these insights underscore the pivotal role of community cooperation and cohesion in shaping vibrant and resilient community structure.

4.3. Communication channels

Communication channels play a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of communities, facilitating relationship-building, dialogue, and problem-solving processes. In contemporary studies within the realms of business and organizational studies, the significance of communication channels is widely recognized. These channels serve as conduits for conveying crucial information, exchanging ideas, and soliciting feedback, thereby fostering collaboration and innovation within communities.

The establishment of effective communication channels is paramount for nurturing robust networks of relationships and driving collective progress. Successful innovation often hinges on collaborative efforts and synergies cultivated through these channels. As such, communities prioritize the development of efficient communication infrastructures to enhance connectivity and engagement among members.

During our study, all participants underscored the role of the community as a platform for dialogue and mutual learning. They recognized the collective strength and influence embedded within the community fabric. However, amidst discussions on innovation and technological advancements, Interviewee 22, a concerned citizen, brought attention to the government's heavy investment in innovation tools and technologies.

Interviewee 22 emphasized the need to address fundamental issues and prioritize essential services and infrastructure before striving for full innovation. This perspective highlights the importance of aligning technological advancements with the immediate needs and priorities of the community. By focusing on enhancing essential services and infrastructure, communities can lay a solid foundation for sustainable development and inclusive growth.

In essence, effective communication channels empower communities to leverage their collective wisdom and resources in addressing challenges and driving positive change. By fostering open dialogue and collaboration, these channels facilitate the exchange of ideas, promote mutual understanding, and strengthen community cohesion. Thus, communication becomes a catalyst for community-led initiatives, enabling residents to play an active role in shaping the future of their communities.

4.4. Role of government

In recounting the history of their community, Interviewee 4 highlighted its formation out of necessity due to perceived governmental neglect. They described ongoing efforts within the community to address infrastructural needs, such as organizing waste collection and advocating for improved public transportation. This narrative underscores the proactive stance taken by the community in addressing its own needs and aspirations.

Interviewee 5 highlighted the community as the primary avenue for exerting pressure on the government to maintain inflexibility towards certain changes. This perspective emphasizes the role of community activism in advocating for policies and decisions that align with its members' collective interests and values.

Respondents recognize that governments play a role that ranges from important to vital because they have – or should have – capacities to solve local issues, and, in some cases, just they can do so. However, after many years of trying to be listened to, communities started giving their way and establishing governance structures bypassing the city hall. In the studied community, leaders continued to be part of formal governance structures

(coordinated by the City Hall) but, in addition to that, started to build other governance networks when they have a more central role. Something intriguing is that the executive branch has been replaced by the judiciary, by using public ministry as enforcement for the executive branch to do something. Often, this forced action is related to issues that started months or years (or decades, eventually) before and that the community has been trying its best to solve in the regular governance channels.

5. Final Remarks

This study underscores the vital role of community governance structures in Porto Alegre, Brazil, demonstrating innovative approaches to local governance and citizen engagement. Through qualitative interviews conducted as part of the Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program for the 4th District (+4D), we have observed a diverse array of these structures, reflecting the intricate dynamics of community life in the city.

Our research was motivated by ongoing discussions surrounding community governance, aiming to propose a fresh perspective rooted in principles of anarchy. Beginning with a literature review defining community governance and discussing theoretical aspects, we situated our study within the unique context of Porto Alegre, Brazil, focusing on the Sustainable Urban Regeneration Program for +4D.

Through our exploration of self-governing dynamics, we sought to uncover new approaches and structures to address community issues effectively. By examining the case of Porto Alegre's 4th District, our study contributes to understanding how innovative governance strategies can foster resilient and adaptive urban landscapes, filling a significant gap in the literature on urban development and governance.

Looking ahead, it is essential for future research to investigate whether similar patterns exist in other Brazilian cities and the way their governance is structured, as well as to understand how the public sector perceives and collaborates with such initiatives. By delving deeper into these aspects, researchers can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of community governance initiatives in Brazil, ultimately fostering more resilient and empowered communities.

Our findings highlight that when communities are structured and empowered, they often take on the role of governing agents themselves, solving problems and leading initiatives. Communities seek agility and control over decision-making processes, rather than relying solely on government intervention. As such, community governance emerges as a crucial mechanism for fostering local autonomy and addressing the needs of residents in a timely and efficient manner.

This study reaffirms the importance of community-driven governance in shaping inclusive and participatory urban management. By continuing to support and promote community governance initiatives, we can work towards building more sustainable, equitable, and democratic cities that empower their residents to take charge of their own destinies.

Acknowledgements

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A. In-depth semi-structured interviews

What is your vision regarding the 4th District development process? What short-term and long-term results are expected with the implementation of +4D?

Are there specific strategies to promote social inclusion and generate employment for citizens?

How is the local community involved in the development process?

Are there specific forums or channels for residents' participation in decision-making?

What are the transparency and accountability mechanisms to inform residents about decisions and allocated resources?

Is there any incentive to encourage civic engagement among residents?

What is the role of civil society in district planning?

What are the main benefits for the government in actively including communities (small governance) in Master Plans?

How are challenges of representativity and diversity addressed when including these communities in governmental planning processes?

What are the main barriers faced by citizens when trying to participate in these plans and solutions?

What is the importance of ongoing collaboration between the government and communities in building "smart city" strategies?

How do you anticipate the evolution of citizen participation considering innovations, not only in data collection but in general collaboration?