

## **Power relations in climate adaptation planning: learning from Santiago, Chile**

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Santiago de Chile, like many of Latin America's megacities, is dealing with the threat of worsening water shortages and floods in the face of climate change, in a context of high extant socio-spatial inequality. Seeking to address increasing vulnerability, the city's Regional Government engaged in a planning process from 2010 to 2012 to produce a Climate Adaptation Plan for the city with recommendations on reducing urban vulnerability to climate change (Krellenberg & Katrin 2014; Barton et al. 2014). Despite being hailed as a 'meticulously participatory' process, however, and against the best efforts of its political and professional supporters, the resulting plan was neither ratified nor implemented by the city's authorities.

In a context of socio-spatial inequality and increasing vulnerability, this study asks how a participatory planning process with significant political backing failed to achieve its goal of reducing the city's climate vulnerability. The methodological approach involved an in-depth ethnographic-inspired case study with semi-structured interviews purposively selected on the basis that they participated in the planning process on behalf of public, academic, civil society, and private sector entities. Interview questions were designed to elicit information on the social rules acting at each phase of the process, and were refined during the course of fieldwork in line with observed phenomena.

The research finds that multiple opportunities to pursue ambitious change were quelled through the subtle workings of social power, through decisions over the scope and agenda by the process coordinators, and the pervasiveness of a techno-scientific epistemological orientation. Decisions taken before, and during the process, acted to privilege consensus over conflict and rationalization over politicization, suppressing civic aspirations to tackle longstanding socio-spatial inequality and vulnerability.

A first area of theoretical interest is to examine how it came to be that the elaboration of an urban adaptation plan, a highly political issue, was entrusted to a team of researchers. The research finds that such a practice mirrors the approach for the academic sector to take on a 'rationalizing role' in public policy in Chile, given the retrenchment of the state during the military dictatorship, and the reification of scientific rationality in policy processes. The Regional Government's decision can be understood as an exercise of the 'third dimension of power' (Lukes 2005 [1974]), where socio-cultural assumptions go unchallenged and quietly dominate proceedings to the detriment of the relatively powerless. By following precedent from the time of the military dictatorship on expert-led planning and based on scientific and market rationality, the Regional Government allowed a most pervasive, yet largely invisible exercise of power, to infiltrate the process.

A further area of theoretical interest is to examine how it came to be that a foreign-owned corporation could withhold information on glacial melt that was essential to decision-making on future water availability. The research reveals the extent pro-market logic being privileged over equity concerns, leaving unchallenged the decades-old tradition of planning as technocracy and the 'management of things' (Silva, 2013). Decisions taken by the coordinators on the rules that would govern the planning process demonstrate the exercise of a 'mobilization of bias' that acted towards the exclusion of certain participants and issues in political decision-making.

As Chile now replicates Santiago's adaptation planning experience in cities throughout the country, and other Latin American megacities follow suit, this study suggests that participatory adaptation planning can achieve little without challenging the wider political and economic development logics and power relations of urban politics. The failure of Santiago's experience should not be attributed to the coordinators alone, who succeeded in fulfilling their mandate to produce a plan with practical, viable solutions. Rather, we should see the coordinators and participants as agents constrained and enabled by the wider socio-political structures that went unchallenged in Santiago's planning process. As climate impacts sharpen existing socio-spatial inequalities, and as more cities engage in responses to climate impacts,

it is now incumbent on planning scholars and practitioners to interrogate the many ways in which power and politics shapes adaptation.

While these are still early days for the planning profession's engagement in adaptation, now is a crucial juncture that will determine whether change can be pursued through planning, or else beyond planning. In Santiago, there are already signs that given the failure of formal planning, civic resistance may more effectively challenge the roots of urban vulnerability, with social movements having succeeded in pressing President Bachelet to reconsider the market-dominated governance of water that many consider a primary driver of urban water stress. In their pursuit of effective adaptation planning, planners ought to engage in fully discovering and exposing the structural causes of climate vulnerability in the societies in which they plan, in order to uncover the political barriers to more equitable and transformative adaptation.

**Selected References:**

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