

## **Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): the internationalization and contextualization of a 'travelling concept'**

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# Business Improvement Districts (BIDs): the internationalization and contextualization of a 'travelling concept'

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## Abstract

In many countries across the world, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) are seen as a new model of sub-municipal governance to secure private capital for improving the attractiveness of a city's central spaces. Originating from North America (Canada and the United States), this model of self-taxing districts, often based on public-private partnerships, has spread to other continents, including Europe, Australia and Africa. This theme issue explores the internationalization and the contextualization of the BID model in both Northern countries (the United States, Canada, Germany and Sweden) and Southern countries (South Africa). The collection of articles focuses on key debates surrounding BIDs and presents different theoretical perspectives as well as lines of argument in relation to these debates. Relying on approaches based on political economy and local governance regimes, Foucault-inspired sociology of governance and governmentality studies or critical discourse analysis, the authors discuss the nature and significance of BIDs in relation to state restructuring and the neoliberalization of urban policies and to emergent rationalities and practices of security governance and policing arrangements. Using the recent discussions of policy transfer and 'urban policy mobilities', they look at the international circulation of the BID model and its local embeddedness, exploring the role of the global circuits of knowledge and the ways in which the model has been adopted and reshaped in different cities. Drawing a complex and differentiated picture of BIDs across continents and cities, this collection of articles emphasizes both the need for more comparative research across diverse urban experiences and contexts and the relevance of a relational perspective in urban studies that blurs the traditional lines of separation between studies of Northern and Southern cities.

## Keywords

Business Improvement Districts, neoliberalization, policing, policy transfer, security, urban policy mobilities, urban regeneration

In many countries across the world Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)<sup>1</sup> are considered as a new model of sub-municipal governance to secure private capital for improving the attractiveness of the city's central spaces. BIDs are based on the

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principle that all land owners (in some countries also business owners and other actors) within the BID-defined perimeter are legally required to pay a levy towards the BID organization. With this income the organization conducts programmes to improve the attractiveness of the area. The initial establishment of a BID requires the support of the majority of affected owners. The majority of BIDs worldwide concentrate their work on those services seen as most effective in increasing the value of the real estate and the turnovers of the shopkeepers in the particular area. They fund mainly security and cleaning services and marketing to promote and develop the district.

Three themes in relation to BIDs have attracted research interest. A number of studies have focused on governance arrangements within and around BIDs (Morçöl and Zimmermann, 2006; Wolf, 2006)<sup>2</sup> and located them within current debates on state restructuring and the neoliberalization of urban policies in Northern and Southern countries (Ward, 2005, 2006; Miraftab, 2007; Dubresson, 2008; Didier et al., 2009, 2011, forthcoming; Baron and Peyroux, 2011). Among these studies, particular attention has been paid to governance arrangements regarding security and policing (Berg, 2004; Eick, 2007; Morange and Didier, 2008). Other studies have focused on the increased social control over public spaces generated by BIDs and, more particularly, on their sociospatial implications in terms of exclusion and discrimination (Mitchell, 2003; Coleman, 2003; Töpfer et al., 2007; Marquardt and Füller, 2008; Lippert, 2009). Finally, some scholars have analysed the processes and agents involved in the international circulation of the BID model, looking into the global circuits of knowledge and the ways in which the model was adopted and reshaped in different cities in a context of 'urban policy mobilities' (Hoyt, 2006; Ward, 2007; Cook, 2008; Peyroux, 2008; McCann and Ward, 2010, 2011; Ward, 2011).

This collection of articles focuses on key debates surrounding BIDs and presents different theoretical perspectives as well as lines of argument in relation to these debates.

## **A critical examination of the neoliberalization of urban governance**

For many scholars, BIDs are emblematic of the spatial and scalar reorganization of urban governance and of the qualitative restructuring of the state that has occurred since the 1980s in Europe and North America. These changing patterns of governance have often been analysed within broader processes of neoliberalization, processes whose conceptualization and theorization have been the subject of much debate in recent years (Brenner and Theodore, 2002a, 2002b; Peck and Tickell, 2002; England and Ward, 2007; Brenner et al., 2010; Künkel and Mayer, 2011). The analysis of BIDs has been more particularly located within the context of the set of new regulations, programmes and policies that characterizes the shift towards 'urban entrepreneurialism' (Harvey, 1989; Ward, 2005, 2011). By enhancing the attractiveness and the vitality of various urban areas within the city, BIDs' strategies respond to the prime objective of strengthening the competitiveness of the city and of specific quarters in a context characterized by an intensified inter- and intra-metropolitan competition (Ward, 2000; Wilson, 2004; Heeg and Rosol, 2007).

Key elements of an entrepreneurial urban politics that stand out include: the establishment of new configurations of partnerships that strengthen the role of the private actors, an increased importance of the local and sub-municipal scale, and different dimensions of privatization (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997; Peck and Tickell, 2002). BIDs represent the paradigmatic embodiment of these elements both in institutional form and in content:

- BIDs are a specific form of public–private partnership and of 'networked local governance' in which the boundaries between the public and the private spheres become fluid.<sup>3</sup> They can be considered as quasi-public entities for a number of reasons: they are legitimized by public law<sup>4</sup> and they deliver services that used to be delivered by public bodies (at

least in the welfare states of the North). In some countries, the state raises levies on land owners and passes these on to the BID organization. At the same time, BIDs are often constituted as private non-profit organizations: land and business owners constitute the key agents in the BID organization and thus significantly influence the activities of the BID according to their economic interests.

- The strengthening of private actors goes along with an increased importance of the local political scale linked to the devolution and downscaling of central government functions (Brenner, 1997a, 1997b). BIDs as a sub-municipal form of governance furthermore represent a re-territorialization: existing political and administrative territorializations and their institutions such as local authorities lose their significance. This is supported by a view that spatially bound 'interventions' in societal or economic processes seem more easily achieved if they are not organized according to traditional levels of government and their existing institutional powers, but instead bypass these with new and flexible territorializations. BIDs and their boundaries, which do not take into account existing district or municipal boundaries, thus embody this establishment of new territorializations at the sub-municipal scale as an ideal type.
- Finally, BIDs are paradigmatic of different forms of privatization in urban development policy and of various forms of cooperation arrangements with other private and non-profit organizations.<sup>5</sup> They represent a partial transfer of the delivery of public services to private actors.<sup>6</sup> Although, in general, existing public ownership rights are not transferred to private actors within the BID framework, BIDs nonetheless signify an expansion of a market- and competition-oriented approach to the provision of public services. BIDs may also intervene in strategic planning, e.g. land-use planning, that is a prerogative of local government (Lloyd et al., 2003). Not least, BIDs are an element by which traditional

urban functions such as those of the marketplace are transferred into spaces that are organized, if not completely then at least in part, along private business principles; in these spaces private actors provide management and security services (Glasze, 2001). Although the private sector is emphasized as key stakeholder in current urban policies and, more specifically, within urban revitalization strategies, scholars draw attention to the fact that implementation of BIDs does not necessarily mean less state involvement or the diminution of state capacities, but implies a different form of state involvement (Ward, 2007). This echoes a wider debate on the qualitative restructuring of the state, which emphasizes that economic deregulation and the retrenchment of state welfare spending go along with more direct assistance to capital accumulation and with new disciplinary forms of state intervention (Brenner and Theodore, 2002b; England and Ward, 2007).

The increasing acceptance, in both planning and politics, of BIDs as an instrument of city centre development goes hand in hand with a particular perception and social construction of problems, as well as with specific ways of defining the purpose of urban policy and designing solutions to resolve these problems. This has far-reaching consequences for the design and use of urban spaces, as well as for the ways in which public services are understood and delivered by public actors themselves. The reallocation of decision-making powers in neighbourhood development and the multi-layered processes of privatization encourage – this is the concern – the commodification of spaces within city centres and suburban centres. As underlined by many scholars, the design of public spaces according to commercial interest carries the risk of promoting a policy that relies on the exclusion of 'objectionable' social groups (Zukin, 1995; Ronneberger, 2000; Mitchell, 2003), and this in turn consolidates the role of the city centre as a retail and leisure space for affluent customers.

The articles in this special issue address core questions of urban governance and their implications

from different standpoints. Relying on political economy and local governance regimes, Eick (2012) analyses BIDs in Germany within the theoretical framework of 'actually existing neoliberalism' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002b). BIDs are seen as part of the devolution of responsibilities from the national to the local scale and as part of the 'institutionalization of lobbyism'. Focusing on the policing of public space, Eick argues that the 'semi-privatization' by BIDs goes along with the 'extended policing family' from state police into the realm of for-profit and non-profits, thus blurring the boundaries between state police and private police. His analysis of 'hybrid policing' in Germany, however, shows that both cooperation and competition characterize the relation between the police and BIDs, making these networks contested terrains. The lack of democratic control related to 'the respective opaque regimes of public-private decision-making' is underlined.

This complex picture of BID practices and security provision is also handled in Lippert's article about BIDs in Canadian cities (2012). Lippert explores emergent rationalities, practices and security arrangements and challenges previous accounts of neoliberal governance, which imply that the public police role in BIDs is being supplanted by private security arrangements. Contesting the use of neoliberalism as a universal explanation of emergent forms of urban governance, he argues that current approaches tend to neglect 'contingency, nuances, and less celebrated or allegedly defunct logics of government'. His approach, rooted in a Foucault-inspired sociology of governance, suggests taking into consideration a 'place-specific reflexiveness rooted in response to situated conditions and circumstances', which is entailed in the notion of 'contingent urban neo-liberalism' (Wilson, 2004). His analysis of 'clean and safe' security models, such as ambassadors programmes, shows that these programmes are anchored by public police and that some BIDs rely on the continued or enhanced flow of public services. This demonstrates their capacity to shift responsibility for security back to public authority according to their needs. Through this move from 'steering' (back) to state 'rowing' or 'anchoring' in some BIDs' practices in Canadian cities, Lippert suggests that analyses should go beyond the surface of

alleged neoliberal arrangements and look into BIDs' concrete modes of operating and governing.

Marquardt and Füller (2012) locate their analysis of BIDs in Los Angeles within the debates about 'urban renaissance' and the privatization of cities. They adopt a perspective based on the concepts of governmentality studies. Although not explicitly referring to debates about neoliberalism, they bring attention to the contemporary governing of 'urbanity' and underline how BIDs have intensified their security workforce and established new forms of cooperation with the local police to train and professionalize their employees in the private security sector. The Los Angeles case study shows how extended functions of BIDs even interfere in established structures of social service provision and existing partnerships in the social service sector, in particular with regard to the homeless population. New forms of governance, such as the collaboration between BIDs and non-profits in job training and employment services for the homeless (which are also underlined in Eick's article on Germany), are analysed to show that involvement in workfare measures goes along with direct and harsh forms of social control.

### **'Safe and clean' rationalities and beyond: Revanchist urbanism versus urban renaissance**

BIDs may differ worldwide in terms of their legal and institutional frameworks and the range of funded activities, but they usually follow a similar basic strategy based on a 'safe and clean' rationality. Providing visible security measures (through CCTV surveillance arrangements and/or ambassador patrols) has indeed become a shared feature of many BIDs across the continents, independent of the levels of crime and insecurity within the districts. Often considered as a prerequisite for the success of other activities, 'clean and safe efforts' have wider implications in terms not only of shaping public spaces but also of people's behaviours and representations. The enforcement of social control influences the symbolic visions of the city and the specific ideas of urban life that are associated with it (Marquardt and Füller in this issue). In this regard, BIDs tend to

become a more general tool for producing and governing urban space and urbanity without losing the focus on the promotion of business and private commercial interests. The exercise of social control through BIDs indeed represents a reconfiguration of governance at a micro level through indirect forms of governing or ‘governing at a distance’ (Marquardt and Füller in this issue; also Lippert and Sleiman, 2011) – a new way of exercising power at a local level by a wide range of stakeholders involved in BIDs or associated through partnerships and cooperation agreements. The production and use of knowledge within BIDs become crucial in this endeavour: building on Foucault’s work (and more particularly on the ‘power/knowledge nexus’ conceptual framework), Marquardt and Füller underline the various forms of knowledge and their instrumentalization within social control strategies.

Although a shared feature of BIDs, security arrangements have brought up different analyses and interpretations among scholars. In a number of studies, BIDs’ security practices and the private management of public space have been assimilated into the ‘zero tolerance’ approach to policing and to ‘revanchist urbanism’ (Smith, 1996; Mitchell, 2003). Exploring the legal, spatial and humanitarian impacts of BIDs in Germany, Eick’s article follows this line of thought and argues that BIDs are part of exclusionary and/or containment policies towards some segments of the population referred to as the ‘superfluous’ (beggars, the homeless, drug users, prostitutes, migrant youths). A new understanding of ‘public’ space is being institutionalized in the city centres, which entails a process of ‘de-democratizing’, all of this being seen as an expression of the revanchist local state.

Dealing with ‘safe and clean’ rationalities in Los Angeles, Marquardt and Füller’s article argues for the need to take into consideration extended forms of security arrangements, regulations, forms of surveillance, and a new degree of control in addition to and beyond ‘safe and clean’ public spaces. They focus on perception, discourse and rhetoric, stating that BIDs ‘are involved in an organized staging of urbanity, ambitiously supporting the experience of consuming urban space as a “life, work, play” landscape’. They argue that the mode of governing social relations in

Los Angeles’ inner-city public spaces is not only about discipline and control but also about cultivating and optimizing a certain degree of difference. Furthermore, this mode of government seeks to manage risk proactively, as opposed to erasing what is seen as danger. ‘Providing the comforts of a protected environment without losing out on the excitements of urban life’ can be conceived as ‘a sophistication of the privatized city’. Two paradigmatic examples of social regulation are presented: ‘place making’ and ‘the selective masking of the homeless population’. Their article underlines the double function of BIDs in social control: promoting a safe and clean environment and influencing the symbolic dimension of ‘urbanity’; and their pivotal function in the new modes of social control in the context of ‘urban renaissance’.

In his article dealing with the role of BIDs in securing and shaping conduct in public and retail entertainment spaces in Canadian cities, Lippert extends this debate by emphasizing that crucial aspects of ‘clean and safe’ have been neglected in the current literature: the governance of businesses by BIDs, in particular the targeting of moralized enterprises (‘adult entertainment’ establishments, discount stores, coffee shops) that are thought to interfere with quality consumption, pedestrian flow and security. The article argues that, through this governance, BIDs’ coordinators become ‘knowledge brokers’, and their role in brokering specialized knowledge is pivotal in shaping changing security arrangements. Security knowledge created locally by CCTV and ambassadors is emblematic of relations between public police and BIDs and is used to justify existing public funding and to lobby the municipality for increases. Lippert underlines that this ‘clean and safe security’ mode shows a reflexivity of BIDs that takes into account contingencies on the ground. The question of whether this situation can be generalized outside Canada and the US is raised.

### **Urban policy mobilities and local embeddedness of the BID model**

BIDs as paradigmatic tools of governance find seemingly worldwide application as globalization unfolds

(Ward, 2006, 2007, 2009; McCann, 2011). The first BID was established in 1970 in Bloor West Village (Toronto, Canada) to fund the upgrading of a commercial quarter (Wiezorek, 2004). In the following decades the BID concept spread initially across Toronto and the province of Ontario and eventually across the whole of Canada. The first BID in the US was established in 1975 with the Downtown Development District in New Orleans. However, as early as the 1960s specific concepts for central cities such as the 'special purpose district' and the 'special assessment district' existed in the US and served as models; therefore, US BIDs are best understood as a 'hybrid of these two concepts' (Hoyt, 2004; Houstoun, 2003). The 1990s witnessed a boom in the establishment of BIDs in the US. Around two-thirds of all current BIDs, whose total number is estimated at several thousand, were founded after 1990 (Briffault, 2004; Ward, 2007).

In mid-2010, BIDs were established in at least 16 countries; in several more countries, legislation was in preparation. The spread of BIDs can be considered in three conceptually different ways (Pütz, 2010).

First, the discourse on the entrepreneurial city, which is now hegemonic across several world regions, aligns urban policy with the objectives of inter- and intra-local competitiveness and economic efficiency. This discourse is powerful because it frames a specific perception and definition of problems. As a consequence, these problems are assumed to be similar across different geographical contexts, calling for the adoption of similar solutions. There is thus a reorientation of urban policies towards specific concerns, as exemplified by the focus BIDs lay on 'security and cleanliness' in different urban settings. All in all, an increasing international policy convergence is promoted by this hegemonic discourse.

Second, BIDs are disseminated by means of international imitation and learning processes. In these, new governance or urban management models are taken up as 'best practice', then possibly modified and returned into the global circulation of concepts (Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann, 2011) by urban development actors at different levels (for example, politicians and town and regional planners). A few

selected BIDs in New York City and Philadelphia regularly serve as examples of 'best practice' and as empirical evidence of the success of the model (Ward, 2007). At the same time, these examples are taken as evidence for transferability to one's own city. Such exemplary BIDs are then destinations for study trips by actors who want to establish a BID in their home town (for example, visits to US BIDs by South Africans, among others) (Hoyt, 2006: 232; Peyroux, 2008) or Germans (e.g. Fuchs et al., 2004).

Third, international organizations and their representatives are influential and instrumental in promoting and facilitating the circulation of the BID model. One such organization is the International Downtown Association.<sup>7</sup> This network of more than 650 members, including public agencies, units of government, state associations, non-profit organizations and for-profit corporations and businesses, produces expert knowledge through thematically organized specialist conferences for its members, publication of specialist advice literature, and training courses. The network thus contributes decisively to the production and global circulation of conceptual blueprints for city centre revitalization by BIDs. Also, organizations engaged in state development cooperation act in part as accelerators of such globalization processes. This can be observed in Eastern Europe, for example, where BIDs are being implemented to support the modernization of administration. Thus, the Serbian BID model was financially supported through the Serbia Local Government Reform Program (USAID, 2007; Ward, 2007). In Albania, the German Technical Co-operation (GTZ) funds policy advice projects to support the transformation and modernization of local authorities and local planning in Tirana. In this context, a private consultancy based in Frankfurt/Main, which also advises German local authorities on the implementation of BIDs, is encouraging entrepreneurs in the main shopping streets in Tirana to consider a BID initiative (Pütz, 2010).

In their analysis of the internationalization of the BID model, Cook and Ward (in this issue) emphasize the role of conferences in mobilizing and embedding urban policies, that is, in 'facilitating the movement/fixing of policy models across/in space'. Drawing on a critical examination of the traditional

political science approach to policy transfer, their article builds upon the literature on mobile policies, relational economic geography and geographies of knowledge circulation. It focuses on the role of face-to-face communication 'in the construction of overlapping and intersecting territorial circuits of policy knowledge'. Using a 2009 conference in Sweden on the BID model as an empirical example, the authors develop the notion of 'trans-urban policy pipelines' to conceptualize the movement of policy models from one place to another. This notion is used in particular to capture the process of comparing, educating and learning about the experiences of other cities. The article raises the issue of the social and political acceptability of the BID model in Sweden and underlines the frictions and conflicts that may be involved in mobilizing and embedding policies.

Peyroux (in this issue) brings a complementary perspective to the internationalization of the BID model and to the role of relational comparison by looking at the local reinterpretation of the BID model in South Africa. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, her article focuses on the ways in which the private sector (property and business owners) has justified the adoption of the model and shaped its appropriateness in the context of Johannesburg's inner city. Using a socio-cognitive approach, she explores the construction of social reality underlying the legitimation strategies and the opinions, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values conveyed by discourses. Her case studies show how the argumentation strategies rely in some cases on an unreflective comparison between North American and South African urban contexts. This masks a number of societal issues of significance in post-apartheid South Africa and conceals some of the economic and social rationalities. The transfer of arguments from US and UK sources also implies an interplay of different discourses and ideologies. Whereas a neoliberal economic discourse is particularly noticeable in areas dominated by corporate and business interests, the analysis of more socially oriented BIDs in low-income residential areas shows changing attitudes and assumptions. Furthermore, this means, at least rhetorically, the disappearance of US and UK references over time in the legitimation strategies. This demonstrates how the imported model is reshaped

by different discourses associated with different social practices, but also by changing policy imperatives as the City of Johannesburg attempts to promote a more socially sensitive urban policy.

### **Analysing BIDs across continents and cities: some reflections from the European and non-European case studies**

We believe that gathering case studies of BIDs in European and non-European contexts and confronting various theoretical approaches can contribute to enhancing our understanding of a number of key issues in urban research.

First, this collection emphasizes both the need for more comparative research across diverse urban experiences and contexts (McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2011a) and the relevance of and the need for a relational perspective in urban studies (McCann and Ward, 2011). Case studies of BIDs in Sweden and in South Africa reveal the internationalization and the multiple points of reference and comparison, as experts and advocates of BIDs selectively mobilize emblematic cities and BIDs to discursively construct and legitimate the adoption of BIDs. The references to UK examples in the Swedish case (Cook and Ward in this issue) underline the role of past histories between countries in the process of comparing and learning. The local reformulation of the model in South Africa (Peyroux in this issue), while sharing some conceptions of the state/market relationships conveyed by US and UK examples, shows the progressive reappropriation and recontextualization of the model in order to better fit local needs and interests. Beyond the circulation of the model itself, the underlying conceptions of urban problems in the US and in Europe and the policy paradigms travel along with it in explicit or implicit ways. In this regard, the analysis of discourses proves to be relevant to identify and interpret the trends that connect these cities across and within the continents and offers a methodological basis for a more systematic comparison.

Second, studying BIDs through the governmentality approach (Marquardt and Füller in this issue;



Lippert in this issue) or the political economy approach (Eick in this issue) in Europe and in non-European contexts brings a more context-sensitive and complex picture of local forms of neoliberalization by looking into both material and symbolic practices and effects. This can feed into broader debates on the internationalization of urban theories (Robinson, 2011b) and blur the traditional lines of separation between studies of Northern and Southern cities.

## Notes

1. There is no standard naming convention concerning BIDs. Denominations vary from country to country (Special Improvement Districts, Public Improvement Districts, Neighborhood Improvement Districts are found in the US, Business Improvement Areas in Canada, City Improvement Districts in South Africa) (Hoyt, 2004). The establishment of BIDs in residential areas also led to other denominations such as Community Improvement Districts and Residential Improvement Districts.
2. See, in particular, the special issue of the *International Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 29(1), 2006, on BIDs and metropolitan governance.
3. See the analysis of BIDs in the US by Morçöl and Zimmermann (2006).
4. In some countries, in addition to legally established BIDs, some BIDs may operate on a voluntary basis, as in Germany and in South Africa. In this case, the payment of the levy is not compulsory.
5. This is the case when BIDs provide social services and work in cooperation with NGOs or other non-profits.
6. Services such as safety, cleaning and maintenance are provided by BIDs in addition to those delivered by the public authorities. These authorities usually do not reduce or disconnect the delivery of such services within the BID perimeter.
7. <http://www.ida-downtown.org>.

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