

Nienke Boesveldt (2015)

***Planet Homelessness:
Governance Arrangements in Amsterdam,
Copenhagen and Glasgow***

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'Planet Homeless' is the publication of Nienke Boesveldt's PhD thesis. In this book, Boesveldt argues that the efficiency of public administration in dealing with the challenges of homelessness is appreciably better when governance arrangements are characterised by heterogenic, integrated and customised homeless services and when decision-making is centralised. The substance and validity of these propositions is based on the author's 'testing' of three 'hypotheses' using evidence derived from three north-west European cities: Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Glasgow. The selection of the three case-study cities is based on the assumption that they are all located in countries with approximately similar levels of prosperity, they are presently experiencing a collapse in public welfare expenditure and that they share a broad consensus with regard to homelessness objectives – namely its eradication and prevention. It is Boesveldt's contention that, given these commonalities, any variation in the efficacy of homeless policies can be attributed principally to differences in the detail of governance arrangements postulated in the three hypotheses.

The first hypothesis proposes that the composition and configuration of overarching governance arrangements make a difference in shaping the nature of policy goals and instruments, in determining the efficacy of network structures and resource allocation and in moulding management relations between local government, non-profit and private organisations. The second hypothesis postulates that an established network of diverse but complementary services is most effective in tackling and preventing homelessness. Boesveldt's third hypothesis suggests that the efficacy of homeless service delivery is facilitated by a more centralised structure, where decision-making is concentrated in a single organisation or department.

The methodology employed for hypothesis-testing involved collecting evidence in each city: from policy and administrative documentation; from interviews with policy-makers, service personnel and some service users; and from published municipal homelessness statistics. This evidence formed the basis for the construc-

tion of two primary measures which, Boesveldt claims, (i) differentiate the governance regimes in each of the case study cities and (ii) identify the social effects (i.e., impact on homelessness) of these governance arrangements.

In compiling the first of these measures, the author subjects the documentary evidence and transcripts of the interviews to content analysis (Atlas.ti), from which she derives nine indicators (pp.28-25) relating to (i) governance policy (e.g., internal goals and instrumentation), (ii) governance structure (e.g., allocation of budget responsibilities, networking) and (iii) governance management (e.g., relations between public, private and not-for-profit agencies). Each of the indicators is then assigned a score by the author reflecting her assessment of the degree to which the governance regimes of each city conform to the ideal governance type – that is, “heterogenic, integrated, customised homeless services with centralised decision-making”. A score of ‘0’ reflects low conformity, ‘1’ a medium level and ‘2’ a high level of conformity. Radial graphs (from Excel) provide a visual demonstration of the performance of the three cities on each of the nine indicators, with Glasgow performing best, Amsterdam next and Copenhagen in third place. A summation of assigned scores for each city demonstrates the same ranking: Glasgow (13) Amsterdam (7) and Copenhagen (3). The second primary measure -‘social impact’- comprises four ‘quotient scores’ derived from published housing and homelessness data. The first of these quotients – labelled ‘overall service’ – calculates the proportion of recorded homeless people receiving care from more than one provider; the second measures the proportion of homeless people with a diagnosed mental illness that are receiving assertive support; the third quotient identifies the proportion of homeless clients housed in temporary accommodation; and the fourth records the proportion who have moved on to permanent accommodation. Glasgow performed best on three of the quotient scores (overall service, temporary and permanent housing), while Amsterdam and Copenhagen tie for second place, though Amsterdam has an extraordinarily high score for ‘mental health’. Thus, there seems to be a direct correspondence between social effects (impact on homelessness) and the degree of conformity to the ideal governance model.

The headline conclusion that Boesveldt draws from her analysis is that “governance really does matter” (p.155) and that, indeed, the efficiency of public administration in dealing with homelessness is more effective when governance arrangements are characterised by heterogenic, integrated and customised services with centralised decision-making. Based on her three case studies, Boesveldt calls for a corporate, instrumentalist approach in governance arrangements relating to homelessness.

In the concluding chapters and in her detailed analysis of the individual case study cities, Boesveldt attempts to introduce some analytical nuance in separating out the differential impact of governance policy, governance structure and governance

management – but herein lies one of the major problems of this work: the writing style is so convoluted and prolix that meaning is often lost and, try as I might, I have been defeated in my attempts to decipher Boesveldt's more subtle points. I have considerable admiration for researchers who write in a language not their own and would want to attribute linguistic inadequacies primarily to failings in supervision and editorial control. I think Dutch academia is unique in publishing PhDs 'as is' without professional editorial interventions. In many cases this works well; in this case, however, the weaknesses associated with the procedure are unfortunately all too apparent. The question remains as to why these linguistic lacunae were not addressed prior to the final submission of the thesis.

There are, however, additional problems with this work that transcend language, and many of these relate to issues of research design. For example, Boesveldt's derivation of her three governance types is somewhat perplexing in that she moves from an initial consideration of Esping-Andersen's three welfare regimes to the identification of four 'western European administrative traditions' (Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic and Scandinavian) before deciding on her final choice of 'Scandinavian', 'Anglo-Saxon' and 'Continental' (Table 4, p.27). I could not find a clear explanation of the links between these typologies or justification for her final choice. Further, the selection of the three cities representing her chosen governance types seems to have been largely opportunistic – chosen because they were the ones that *agreed* to participate in the study. Boesveldt is a member of HABITACT – the European exchange forum on local homeless strategies – and helped host the first HABITACT peer review in March 2010 on Amsterdam's homeless strategy, since which time five further HABITACT peer reviews of local (city-based) homeless strategies have been published. It is puzzling as to why the findings of these studies were not called upon to support Boesveldt's definition and choice of governance regimes.

Boesveldt rightly suggests that assessment of the efficacy and efficiency of city governance should be based on the views of the 'broader public'. Yet the textual data that provides the base material for her governance analysis – derived from municipal policy documentation and semi-structured interviews – predominantly reflects the views of the policy-makers and homeless service providers. The contribution of service users – the closest we get to the 'broader public' – to the interviews seems to have been minimal. There are, of course, major problems associated with gathering the views of the 'broader public' but the impact on this study of the failure to do so has not been fully explored by the author.

In compiling her 'quotient scores', Boesveldt uses municipal homelessness statistics seemingly without recognition of the problems of definitional differences that accompany comparative analysis across national and (sometimes) regional boundaries. There has been long standing recognition of this problem and indeed

it was and continues to be a bugbear in attempts to get FEANTSA's ETHOS typology adopted by EU countries. Some recognition of this issue and assessment of the potential impact on results should have been a required part of the thesis. In this context as well, the mental health quotient as a measure of heterogenic service provision appears unnecessarily restrictive. While mental health is undoubtedly a key issue in homelessness – and clearly predominant in the delivery of complementary services in Amsterdam where Boesveldt works – a broadening of the measure to include, for example, employability and substance use support might well have changed relative scoring on this quotient.

Despite these criticisms, Boesveldt's work can be seen as a bold attempt to draw our attention to some important issues and questions regarding the efficacy of homeless services. Beyond broad notions of coordination and competence, little is actually known in detail about how different forms of public administration (governance) influence the delivery and impact of services for homeless people. Boesveldt argues that they are of fundamental importance. Indeed, this may be so, and properly edited future publications from this author may reinforce that message. Yet the suspicion remains that, within the wider context of depleted welfare resource allocation and government priorities focused on deficit and debt reduction, the minutiae of governance regimes is very much of secondary importance. Increasingly, west European governments in cahoots with the EU are transforming a crisis of capitalism originating in the 2007-2008 financial collapse into a crisis of the welfare state. The current national and local obsession with 'resilience' and the constant jiggling with governance arrangements for the delivery of education, health and social care (including 'affordable' housing and homelessness services) – a theme that Boesveldt hints at but does not develop – is redolent of 'shifting deckchairs' while the ships of welfare provision sink about us. If, however, we were to get our priorities right and invest sufficient resources, we would not perhaps need to be too precious about the finer details of governance arrangements.

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