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Brokers in Participatory Urban Governance: Assembling Formal and Informal Politics

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Introduction

- 1 Bart¹ is an associate professor at a Dutch university and a board member of a city wide association for amateur sports. He is also involved in all kinds of other sports-related projects in the city. Under the banner of improving health and encouraging the growth of social capital, the municipality has developed specific sports policies. As a representative of the population, Bart discusses these sports policies with public officials. What facilities should come where? What kind of subsidies will the municipality provide and under what conditions? When and how will the municipality transfer ownership of facilities to citizens? The municipality organizes participatory meetings to discuss these issues with the population. Meanwhile, on a daily basis, Bart has informal conversations to people about the policies: he talks to city residents, to sports club board members, and to officials. He meets them on the sports field, in the pub, and in City Hall. He discusses issues with the responsible bureaucrat or alderman on the phone. He asks his academic colleagues for advice. In this city, Bart is an important node in the governance assemblage around participatory sports policies. If we want to understand the extent of his influence, we would have to take account of his formal and official practices, e.g. at the meetings, but also his informal practices and contacts, e.g. his private phone calls and encounters with officials. This article will present an approach for such an analysis of participatory governance.
- 2 Over the last two decades, city administrations have implemented forms of participatory governance as a means of deepening democracy, seeking to improve citizen representation and the equitable distribution of resources. Within participatory governance, specific individuals position themselves as voluntary representatives, or brokers, between the state and their fellow citizens. This article reflects on the role of brokerage – the social mechanism of mediation between different groups or levels in society – in participatory urban governance. In recent years, government officials, politicians and journalists have discussed the impact of such brokers on state-citizen-engagement, political representation and decision making processes. In 2013 the mayor of Rotterdam, the Netherlands, praised citizen representatives for their contribution to good urban governance; that same year, one of the city’s councillors resigned after being accused of overly personal ties to such citizens in one particular neighbourhood. Meanwhile, in Brazil, Recife’s much-celebrated Participatory Budgeting program was shut down by the city’s new government, as it was considered to have become a vote bank for the former mayor’s party.
- 3 Brokers, identified as citizens who officially ‘speak for’ and ‘act on behalf of’ their fellow citizens vis-à-vis the state, are increasingly present in democratic urban governance across the globe. They are active in, for instance, public consultation bodies, residents’ committees, neighborhood watches, local care networks and community-run social centers or sports facilities. Through their political representation, brokers have an impact on state-citizen relations and decision-making processes regarding the allocation of resources such as housing, infrastructure, security, social care and healthcare. Brokerage in urban governance, like in Bart’s case, always consists of both formal/official and informal/personal actions and transactions. As such, this article emphasizes the importance of paying attention to how brokers intertwine practices, discourses, and networks both inside and outside officially sanctioned channels and institutions.
- 4 In participatory urban governance, some brokers develop their own initiatives, while others are invited by the authorities to act as representatives of other citizens. Studies of brokers’ impact on democracy are divided: some scholars see brokers as impeding democracy while others see

them as facilitating it. The first point of view argues that brokerage elevates personal interests over the common interest; the second asserts that brokerage lubricates bureaucracy or solves democratic deficits, as brokers have knowledge of the population's needs (Hilgers, 2012). Further informing this scholarly debate are two distinct literatures: the first, on neoliberal deregulation and the self-responsibilization of citizens, mainly based on research in the global North, and the second, on modernization, social inclusion and government transparency, mainly based on studies in the global South (Geurtz and Wijdeven, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2005; Gay, 2006). In practice, however, brokers' activities and the participatory programs in which they work always contain elements of both, giving rise to analytical contradictions and ambiguities. This article sets out to combine these divergent schools of thought, in order to gain a novel and more balanced understanding of brokerage in participatory governance. Advancing theories in both urban studies and studies on informality, I conceptualize brokers as 'assemblers', connective agents who bring together different actors, institutions and resources, while merging formal and informal politics.

5 This article is based on my research on brokerage and urban governance in both Brazil and the Netherlands. In Recife, Brazil, and in Utrecht, the Netherlands, I have conducted ethnographic research on urban governance in underprivileged neighbourhoods. Such neighbourhoods are particularly relevant to study participatory governance as their low-income residents most directly experience changes in the administration and its resource flows, be they direct or via brokers. In Recife, I have conducted 22 months of fieldwork; most of it between 2003 and 2006, with substantial returns to the field in 2009 and 2015. Recife is the capital of the state of Pernambuco in the Northeast of Brazil. The city, with an estimated 1.6 million residents in its municipality and 3.7 million residents in its metropolitan region (IBGE, 2015), is known to be one of the less affluent cities in Brazil. The city is also known for its participatory urban governance. Although the *Orçamento Participativo* (OP; Participatory Budgeting) of Recife may not have been as famous as its counterpart in the city of Porto Alegre (Baiocchi, 2003), it was one of Brazil's largest programmes aimed at infrastructural improvement and citizenship construction. It was introduced and used by the city administration of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT; Workers' Party), from 2001 through 2012, as a participatory governmental instrument (Vries, 2016). Another participatory instrument, with a longer history, is the *Plano de REgularização das Zonas Especiais de Interesse Social* (PREZEIS; Regulatory Plan of Special Zones of Social Interest). In 1987, the then administration introduced a system of laws that attempted to legalise the slums and provide them with infrastructure (Souza, 2001). This system of laws, which still exists, was co-established by various social movements that had played an important role in resisting the military rule (1964-1984). An important dimension of PREZEIS is that it prioritises shelter over ownership rights and that it, through all kinds of building regulations, sets out to avoid land speculation. Within PREZEIS, several poor areas in the city were recognised as ZEIS, *Zona Especial de Interesse Social* (Special Zone of Social Interest). Every ZEIS has a Comul, a COMissão de Urbanização e Legalização da posse da terra (Commission for Urbanisation and Legalisation of land titling), in which representatives of the population participate. These representatives have regular meetings, alternating between the neighbourhood and the office of the urban planning department in the city centre (FASE et al., 1997; Souza, 2001).

6 In Utrecht, I have conducted research between 2009 and 2014 on participatory urban governance and infrastructural development. The research consisted of interviews, participatory observation and an analysis of policy documents. Utrecht, with 340,000 residents the fourth largest city of the Netherlands, is the capital of the province with the same name. The city administration is involved in many forms of participatory governance, partly projects that have been designed by the authorities and partly projects that have emerged from citizens' own initiatives. Many of these projects are co-organized with housing corporations, privatized not-for-profits that provide affordable housing and play an important role in city planning and in welfare-related policies (Beekers, 2012; Koster, 2015). Most participatory projects take place in neighbourhoods that have been labelled as 'powerful neighbourhoods' (*krachtwijken*), a status applied by national and local government to particular areas that have been

socioeconomically underprivileged, which are targeted by policies to develop their potential. In such participatory projects in Utrecht, like in other Dutch cities, the municipal authorities summon residents to participate, referring to their duties as “active citizens” (Tonkens, 2006). When planning and citizenship construction policies are carried out in the city’s underprivileged areas, many meetings are organized with citizens. The policies fit in the new Dutch paradigm of the ‘participation society’, in which the state encourages citizens to take responsibilities that were formerly the task of the state, such as security, maintenance of public space and welfare (Koster, 2014b; Tonkens, 2014). Adding my research experiences with participatory urban governance from different parts of the globe to the current literature on participatory governance, brokers and informal politics, I have developed the ideas presented in this article. I will first outline the main debates regarding participatory urban governance, brokerage and formal and informal politics, demonstrating the dichotomies they present. Second, superseding these dichotomies and thinking beyond them, I will show what an approach of brokers as ‘assemblers’ contributes to current debates on participatory urban governance.

Participatory urban governance in the North and the South

- 7 Participatory urban governance has become a global phenomenon, with remarkable similarities in cities around the world and across different political cultures, in terms of its concerns with representation, responsiveness, equity and effectiveness (Fung and Wright, 2003; Gaventa, 2004). Worldwide, the implementation of participatory governance has increasingly led to the entry of voluntary citizen actors, such as local community leaders, community activists and other active citizens, into governance ‘spaces’ that were formerly closed to public scrutiny. In so doing, participatory governance has created new spaces in which particular citizens – conceptualized here as brokers – assume responsibilities as representatives of the population (Cornwall, 2008).
- 8 Urban governance has been critiqued for (re)producing inequality between citizens through uneven access to decision making and the imbalanced allocation of resources (Harvey, 2003; MirafTAB, 2009). The right to the city is still hard fought, including in cities with democratic governments (Banerjee-Guha, 2010). The central question here is how urban democracy becomes manifest, in terms of citizens’ direct or indirect access to governance, and the inclusion or exclusion of their interests in decision making regarding the allocation of resources, such as housing, infrastructure, security, sports and leisure facilities, social care and healthcare.
- 9 If we use a broad brush approach to the academic debate on participatory governance, we see how it is divided into two schools of thought, largely informed by the geographical divide between the global North and the global South. The first centres upon neoliberal deregulation in a context of state retrenchment, focusing on decentralized governance, self-responsibilization and self-management of citizens. In this view, participating in governance is considered a duty that has become increasingly synonymous with the mandate to be a ‘good citizen’ (Schinkel and Houdt, 2010). Within this body of research, the optimism of those who see democratic potential in deregulated governance is balanced by those who note the risks of weaker formal mechanisms for representation and accountability (Beaumont and Nicholls, 2008; Newman and Tonkens, 2011).
- 10 The second argument centers upon the modernization of governance, and envisions regulation and transparency as solutions to entrenched ‘cultures of informality’ in city administrations. Participatory governance is thus seen as a way to include formerly excluded groups and to allocate resources in a transparent and egalitarian process (Wampler, 2007). In Latin America, this argument has been made with the intent of supporting the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy (Gay, 2006; Kingstone and Power, 2008). Some scholars also argue that political clientelism may bolster the legitimacy of regimes that, under neoliberal conditions, have little to offer their populations in the way of social policies and service provision (Hilgers, 2008).
- 11 Next to research that assesses the formal design of participatory programs in a more instrumental way, much recent research approaches it from a ‘governmentality’ perspective,

demonstrating how states discipline populations to behave in desirable ways through techniques such as participation and deregulation (Foucault, 1991; Blakeley, 2010; Uitermark, 2005). While this perspective instructively points out the power relations inherent in participatory governance, it tends to highlight structure over agency and, in doing so, may turn a blind eye to the creative agency of actors. Instead, I would argue that governmental attempts at discipline are always incomplete as we have to take account of the many resistances, refusals and negotiations of individual actors, especially of influential actors such as brokers (Clarke, 2004).

Brokerage

- 12 'Brokerage' is the term used in anthropology, sociology and political science to indicate acts of mediation between different levels or groups in society that would otherwise have little to no (constructive) contact. Traditionally, brokers have mediated between a 'patron' (a person with a high status and resources, usually a political office holder) and that patron's 'clients' (a population) (Stovel and Shaw, 2012). More recently, they have been studied as key actors in modern democratic governance (Auyero, 2001). Brokers have organizational skills and valuable networks, and they establish reciprocal relationships in which material and symbolic resources are exchanged. They are skilled at translating different rationalities, interests and meanings (Lewis and Mosse, 2006). The anthropology of brokerage has recently experienced a revival, as brokerage appears to be thriving in governance transitions across the globe, often spurred by neoliberal state retrenchment, the emergence of new commercial actors and interests, and administrative modernization (James, 2011; Lindquist, 2015; Piliavsky, 2014).
- 13 Scholars have paid much attention to the role of brokers in the functioning of political systems, yet less attention has been paid to the practices and transactions of individual brokers in the day-to-day mediation that takes place between authorities and citizens, to the complexities, conflicts and 'messiness' of brokerage as a practice. Brokers have been studied in different settings: electoral politics, with political canvassers as brokers between politicians and the population (Auyero, 2001); land claims, where land brokers coordinate a (re)distribution of titles (James, 2011); human rights, with activists as mediators between local legal systems and (supra)governmental human rights institutions (Merry, 2006); finance, with local 'consultants' helping people to obtain loans (Palomera, 2014); migration, where private agents organize people's mobility (Lindquist et al., 2012); development, where state agency or NGO workers mediate between policies and programs and the local target populations (Lewis and Mosse, 2006); and management, where middle-managers broker between different organizational levels (Gastelaars, 2013).
- 14 Brokers are translators of the priorities and aspirations of the population towards the authorities and vice versa. At both ends of their translations and transaction, they are often considered as (morally) ambiguous figures (James, 2011, p.319). Brokers are situated between different groups that may have conflicting values and interests, and group members may see the broker as someone who does not fully subscribe to their values. Indeed, 'apparently unlike moral qualities' coexist in the person of the broker, which may give rise to distrust (James 2011, p.335). Brokers may even be thought of as 'amoral, in the sense that they are inadequately embedded in a moral community' (Stovel & Shaw, 2012, p.144).
- 15 I argue that for understanding brokerage in participatory governance, we need to depart from the current divide between seeing brokerage as democratic mediation and seeing brokerage as anti-democratic clientelism. In both the global North and the global South, the politics of brokerage are not only structured along institutional lines and official bureaucratic procedures, but are also enacted in personalized actions and transactions outside the officially sanctioned channels and institutions. As studies of brokerage demonstrate, a relatively small 'inner circle' of citizens (the 'clients') tend to gain from the brokers' work, and political party interests may tend to prevail over the public interest (Auyero, 2001). Hence, we need to focus on the connections and tensions between brokers' individual or partisan preferences and the egalitarian ideal of democratic city governance. To do so, gaining an understanding of the entwining of formal and informal politics is crucial.

Formal and informal politics

- 16 As scholars have demonstrated, both formal and informal practices shape the relationship between urban governments and citizens (Von Lieres and Piper, 2014). Although the official discourse on participatory decision making has tended to ignore the informal dimension of participation (Cleaver, 1999), recent studies have pointed to the important role of informal politics (e.g., Davies and Imbroscio, 2009). Decentralization, declining public resources under neoliberal regimes, and greater recognition of community activism have led to the increasing inclusion of new actors and their informal politics in the formal domain of city administration; these new players can also impact the allocation of resources in the city (Miraftab, 2011). Within this domain, scholars have noted the discretionary practices of bureaucrats (Hulst et al., 2012), and the informal dimensions of governmental bodies (Tatenhove et al., 2006) and urban planning (Yiftachel, 2009; Roy, 2005). In addition, electoral politics continue to play a role in city administration, influencing state-citizen relations and political representation, in ways often considered informal, both in the global North and the South (Koster, 2012; Silverman, 2009).
- 17 Theories on the impact of informal politics diverge, seeing informal practices as either impediments to democracy, disturbing the balance in both representation and the distribution of resources, or as a valuable lubricant for bureaucracy (Christiansen & Neuhold, 2012). The second point of view is pushed even further by authors such as Chatterjee (2004), who argue that informal politics may actually make governance more democratic, as it provides people with unique channels to voice their needs. According to Auyero, democracy and informal, clientelist problem solving networks do not exclude each other. Indeed, for marginalized city residents, as I have seen in my own research, informal exchanges may enhance access to governmental resources: e.g. in Brazil, *favela* residents would easily obtain free identity documents through personal contacts among the civil police, while the official procedures would be difficult and costly (Koster, 2014a). Although the debate on the impact of informal politics has long been structured along dichotomous formal/informal or legal/illegal lines, or along the North/South divide, recently a more nuanced understanding has emerged. In this view, the formal and the informal are always and everywhere enmeshed (Varley, 2013). Formal state programmes always contain informal practices, such as personal negotiations between state representatives and citizens. Likewise, informal transactions such as clientelist exchanges between politicians and citizens cannot exist without the formal electoral system. The distinction between formal and informal may become rather academic when studying specific practices. As Dovey (2012, p.363) points out: ‘The informal/formal conception is both fundamental and non-dichotomous – it is a single twofold concept rather than two concepts in opposition.’ Following this line of thought, I argue that in governance formal and informal politics are interwoven and become often indistinguishable, even in contexts that may appear highly formal or informal. Below, I present an approach that combines this notion of governance with the focus on the acts that make up brokerage.

Superseding the dichotomies: approaching brokers as assemblers

- 18 To supersede the dichotomies between North vs. South, brokerage as democratic mediation vs. anti-democratic clientelism, and formal vs. informal politics, I have developed an approach that conceptualizes brokers as ‘assemblers’: persons who actively connect the different elements of participatory governance. They are the linchpins, having contacts with representatives of the urban government and with their fellow citizens. They bring residents’ ideas into policy design, translate local meanings into bureaucratic categories and vice versa. They connect the institutional with the personal and the official with the unofficial.
- 19 This approach, seeing brokers as ‘assemblers’, is inspired by, on the one hand, an anthropological orientation that focuses on the agency of individual actors and, on the other hand, recent assemblage-based work in urban studies and studies of governance that demonstrate how urban governance is an amalgam of different actors, institutions and resources that function together. An assemblage approach sees participatory urban governance

as a networked whole that consists of different components, such as state representatives, citizens, entrepreneurs, NGO workers, formal and informal arrangements, formal and informal practices, and different resources. Those components ‘fit together’ and give shape to a provisional unity (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Phillips, 2006). Assemblages are always incoherent and unstable, yet they form a temporary whole (Collier & Ong, 2005). Deleuze and Guattari’s ([1987] 2013) notion of *agencement* (translated to English as assemblage) signifies a productive aligning of different elements (McFarlane, 2011, p. 653). In this line of thought, assemblages are always productive of particular power relations that become manifest in their effects. Indeed, governance assemblages produce interventions in the lives of populations that give expression to such power relations (Li, 2007).

20 My approach is informed by the warning against naïvely objectifying the assemblage, which can obscure actually existing social practices, relations and institutional arrangements (Brenner et al., 2011). It adds to assemblage theory a focus on the agency of the individual actor and on actually existing social practices and relations. As assembling is a process of ‘forging alignments’ (Li, 2007, p.265), my approach focuses on the actual acts of assembling done by individual brokers. In so doing, my approach “puts the actor back into the assemblage”.

21 In my research, I have studied brokers in participatory urban governance in the Netherlands and in Brazil. I will give a specific example of how I approach brokers in participatory urban governance as assemblers and what insights this provides. In Recife, one of the brokers I have studied is Edilson. He was a well-known resident of one of the many *favelas* (slums; low income-areas) in the north of Recife. The residents of the area considered him a *líder comunitário* (community leader). For eight consecutive two-year terms, he had been an elected representative of the population of his district in the PREZEIS programme. More recently, Edilson became a coordinator of PREZEIS for the whole city, a position that demonstrated his central role in the assemblage of participatory urban governance.

22 As a representative, he discussed all kinds of issues with municipal officials, lawyers and project developers, varying from the implementation of large scale slum upgrading programmes to inheritance issues related to people’s real estate. As a coordinator, working at the urban planning department, he had to make sure that the demands of the population, from the different ZEIS in the city, were acted upon by the municipal authorities, the urban planning department in specific. Edilson also maintained close ties to his fellow residents. He wanted to know their needs and aspirations, especially their opinions of current urban projects. In addition, Edilson depended on the support of the population to be re-elected as a representative. Until 2012, Edilson also was a representative in the Participatory Budgeting programme, negotiating with the municipal authorities about improvements to his neighbourhood. Apart from these formal positions and negotiations, Edilson also engaged in what we often refer to as informal politics. For instance, Edilson was active in party politics and earned a salary through this. After helping in the campaign of the PSB, the party that had won the 2012 elections, he was offered a job with the municipality. He told me that it consisted of ‘delivering services’, but he entrusted me that he never had to go there. He collected a monthly paycheck as a ghost employee (cf. Auyero, 2001, p.4). As this provided him with an income, he did not need to look for other employment. In so doing, the informally arranged salary enabled him to spend most of his time at the urban planning department, strengthening his formal work in PREZEIS as a coordinator.

23 Following people like Edilson shows how brokers assemble elements of different formal and informal arrangements and how they combine official and unofficial practices. Edilson combined democratic representation in PREZEIS with clientelist exchanges related to party politics. His informally obtained ghost employment enabled him to better carry out his work in the official democratic programme of PREZEIS. Likewise, Bart’s story in the introduction of this article is an example of how, also in the global North, the formal and the informal are entangled: private phone calls, informal lunch meetings and personal encounters are just as well part of what happens within participatory governance as official meetings and procedures. The examples show how both formal and informal politics are part of the assemblage of urban governance.

24 Following the brokers and analyzing their acts of *assembling* provides us with a unique vantage point for understanding participatory governance. It demonstrates how the formal and the informal are assembled, how they are inseparable and often indistinguishable, both in the global North and the South. More specifically, it shows a political reality in which participatory governance contains both democratic representation and personalized, often clientelist transactions. In such a political reality, theories of brokerage are relevant for analyzing both the official mediation between the state and the population and the personalized exchanges between state representatives, citizens and representatives of the private sector such as project developers or consultants. As the examples show, the analysis goes beyond the question whether brokerage is a form of democratic mediation or an expression of anti-democratic clientelism. An empirical focus on the acts of *assembling* of specific persons demonstrates how practices in and out of officially sanctioned channels and institutions often go hand in hand and even become amalgamated. On a theoretical level, conceptualising brokers as assemblers of participatory urban governance implies that governance consists of a networked whole that is produced and reproduced by both formal and informal politics. Indeed, as Dovey (2012, p.354) argues, the formal and the informal ‘cannot be seen as separate nor as dialectic relations but rather as overlapping and resonating together in assemblages’. This approach allows us to avoid an either/or reasoning and to refrain from dichotomous analyses of urban governance arrangements in terms of the formal or the informal. Instead, it provides us with an opportunity to theorize urban governance as a whole of different actors, institutions and resources, related to each other by very concrete acts of assembling, in which the formal and the informal co-exist, overlap and blend into each other.

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Notes

1 All names of informants are aliased

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Résumés

Participatory urban governance, with its focus on citizen representation and the equitable distribution of resources, has been implemented globally to deepen democracy. Some individuals position themselves as voluntary representatives, or brokers, between the state and their fellow citizens. In this article I analyse the increasingly important and largely informal roles of such brokers in participatory urban governance. Informed by my research in Brazil and the Netherlands, this article explores how brokers position themselves in administrative schemes and how they operate both in and out of officially sanctioned channels and institutions. In general, the scholarly debate on brokerage within participatory governance is divided into two arguments: first, an argument about neoliberal deregulation, which encourages the practices of active citizen-mediators, and second, an argument about modernization, which sees brokers as remnants of a clientelist political system. The first argument, mostly based on research in the global North, sees brokers as formal mediators, while the second, mostly based on studies in the global South, sees them as engaged in highly informal and personalized transactions. In this article, to bridge the existing divide between these arguments, I present an approach of brokers as 'assemblers', connective agents who actively bring together different government and citizen actors, institutions and resources while combining formal and informal politics.

Les courtiers dans le cadre de la gouvernance urbaine participative : assembler pratiques politiques formelles et informelles

La gouvernance urbaine participative, qui met l'accent sur la représentation des citoyens et sur la distribution équitable des ressources, a été globalement mise en œuvre pour accroître la démocratie. Certains individus se positionnent entre l'État et leurs concitoyens en temps que représentants volontaires – ou courtiers. Cet article analyse le rôle de plus en plus important et largement informel de ces courtiers dans la gouvernance urbaine participative. Fondé sur mes recherches au Brésil et aux Pays-Bas, cet article explore la manière dont les courtiers se positionnent par rapport aux programmes administratifs et comment ils opèrent à la fois dans et en dehors des canaux et institutions officiellement reconnues. En général, le débat

scientifique sur le courtage dans le cadre de la gouvernance urbaine participative est divisé entre deux points de vue : un premier qui le place dans le cadre de la dérèglementation néolibérale, qui encourage les pratiques des citoyens-médiateurs actifs ; un second qui le voit dans le cadre de la modernisation, qui considère les courtiers comme les restes d'un système politique clientéliste. Le premier point, principalement inspiré des recherches faites dans les pays du Nord, considère les courtiers comme des médiateurs formels, tandis que le second, provenant principalement d'études réalisées dans le Sud, les voit engagés dans des transactions informelles et très personnalisées. Afin de combler le fossé entre ces deux positions, je propose dans cet article une approche qui considère les courtiers comme des « assembleurs », des agents de mise en relation qui participent activement à la réunion d'acteurs du gouvernement, de citoyens et d'acteurs de différentes institutions et ressources, combinant différentes pratiques politiques formelles et informelles.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Gouvernance urbaine participative, courtage, agencement, informalité, Brésil, Pays-Bas

Keywords : participatory urban governance, brokerage, assemblage, informality, Brazil, the Netherlands