


Conference Report: The 8th International Conference on Urban E-Planning, 2024

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The 8th Annual Conference of the ‘International Journal of E-Planning Research’ (IJEPR), as the previous seven conferences, was organized as a forum for the critical discussion of new perspectives, methods, and e-tools in the field of Urban e-Planning. It was held online on 25-27 March 2024, from the Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Portugal. In total 96 authors were engaged in the conference, from different academic backgrounds - Geography, Planning, Social Sciences, and Information Science - and from 26 countries, in Europe, Africa, North and South America, and Asia (Fig. 1). The delegates and co-authors - scholars, researchers, planners, and postgraduate students - presented 47 papers (Fig. 2). Around 65% of the abstracts submitted in 2024 have been included in the final program. These numbers are similar to those of the pre-pandemic years, as figures 1 and 2 show.

The 8th IJEPR Annual Conference explored and discussed recent developments, emerging issues and future challenges in the field of urban e-planning, focused on four main themes or tracks: Smart Urban Governance and E-Planning; Citizens E-Participation in Urban Governance; Urban E-Planning and Climate Emergency; and Artificial Intelligence in Urban Governance (Fig. 3). The program was organized into these four themes, or tracks, divided into 12 Sessions, in which the state-of-the-art of research on Urban e-Planning was discussed, plus the Opening and Closing sessions.

Track one - Smart Urban Governance and e-Planning - with six sessions was the one that received more papers, followed by track three - Urban e-Planning and Climate Emergency - with three sessions. The other two tracks, on Citizen e-Participation and on Artificial Intelligence, had two and one session respectively. The total number of sessions was similar to the pre-pandemic onsite conferences (Fig. 4). After each presentation and at the end of the session there was a period for questions and answers, which proved useful and insightful, engaging two discussants and other participants in lively debates.

Each of these four tracks included a wide diversity of research and policy issues. Methodological problems is certainly one of the dimensions that received special attention, as in previous conferences,

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Figure 1. Number of countries represented in the IJEPR Annual Conferences (Source: own elaboration)

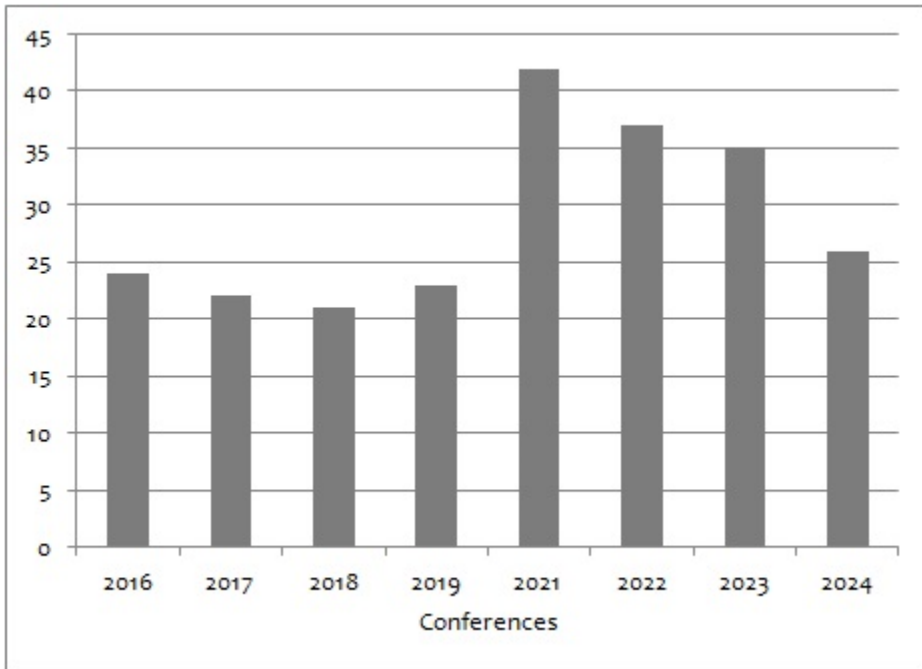


Figure 2. Number of papers presented in the IJEPR Annual Conferences (Source: own elaboration)

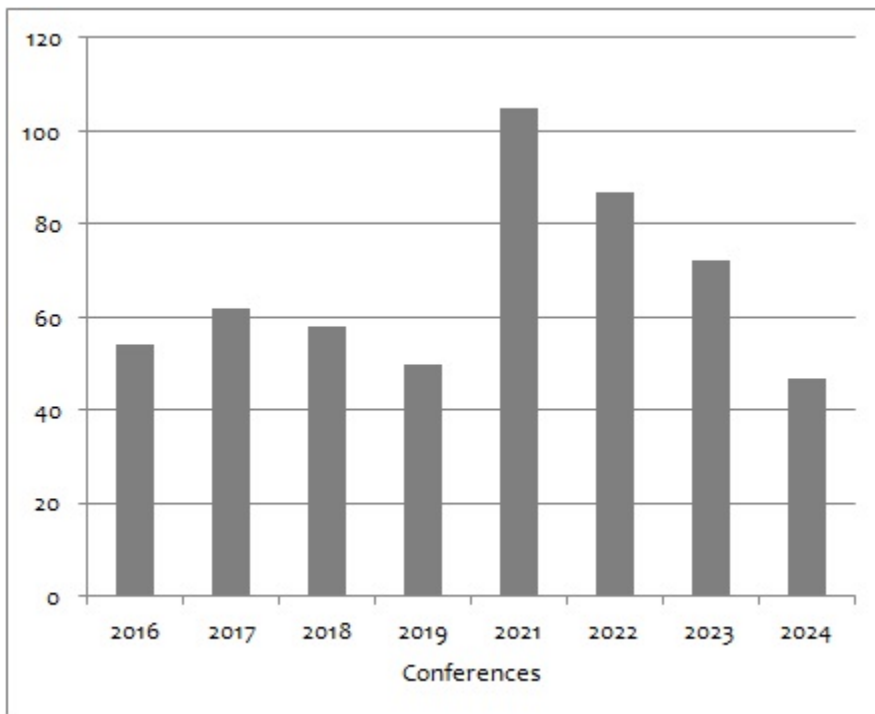


Figure 3. Number of sessions by track in the 2024 IJEPR Annual Conference (Source: own elaboration)

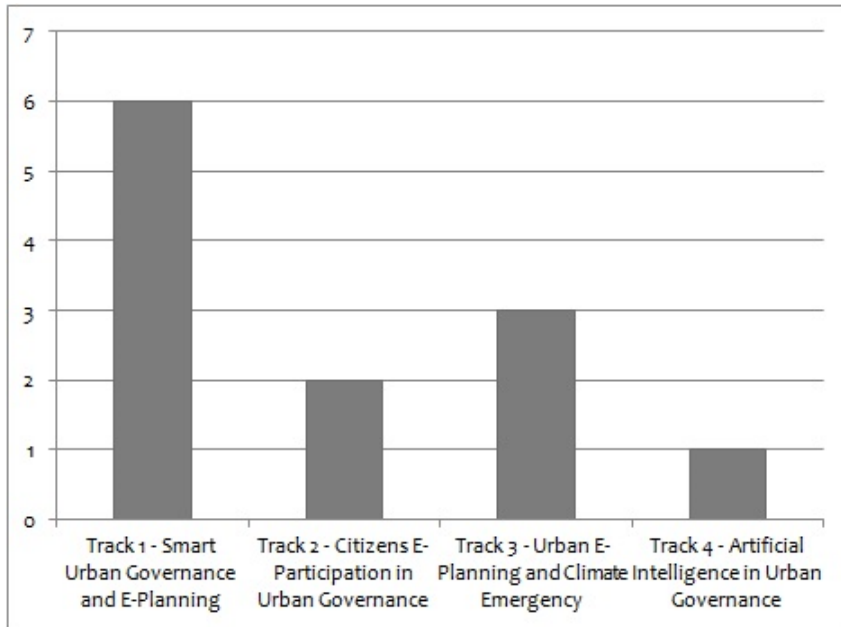
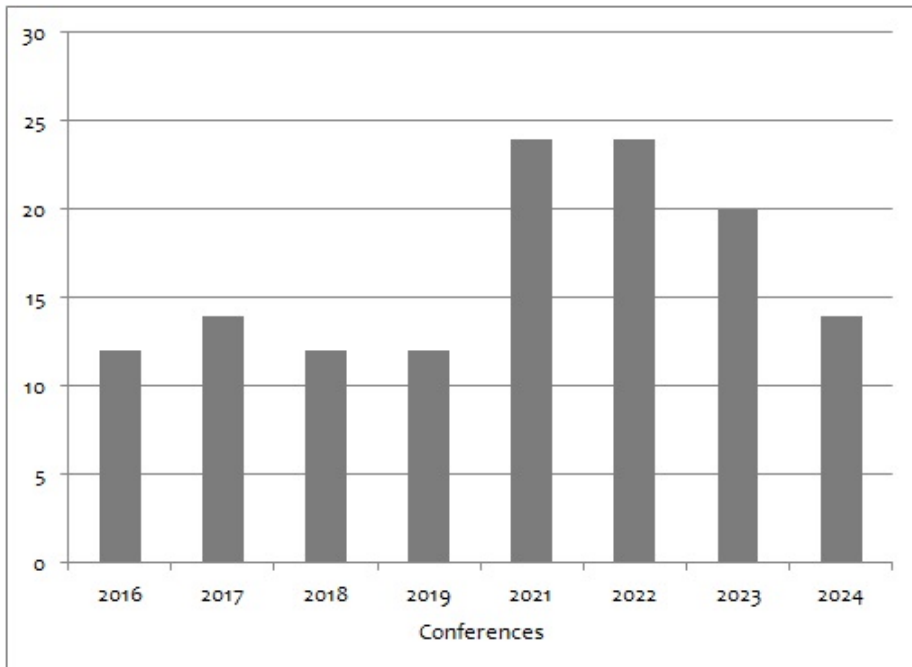


Figure 4. Number of sessions in the IJEPR Annual Conferences (Source: own elaboration)



crossing all sessions. Issues of research ethics were also addressed in several papers, namely issues of privacy and confidentiality. The integration of traditional metrics with big data for new insights on planning issues is another topic present in several papers. Discussion on the causality nexus, on representativeness, and on the difference between facts and values were also addressed in the discussions. The exact meaning of these new bits of data, for instance a tweet, and what they represent, nourished the debates as well. The same with the difficulty to generalize globally due to the huge differences between countries.

The usefulness of literature reviews, when the aim is to learn as much as possible about the world, was questioned along with discussions on some of its limits. For example, the gap between academic literature and technical reports in key sectors relevant to Urban e-Planning, with some participants arguing in favour of including also mass media, both traditional and new ones, in order to capture real world changes in the field of urban e-planning. In fact, as the evidence provided suggests, academic literature in this field lies behind technological advancement, as most of this is done by private actors who in some cases do not publish it.

The limits to the conclusions when the size of the sample is too small, or when data is qualitative, are some of the other points raised in the period of debate in some of the sessions. Discussions moved also around the use of obscure or vague concepts, on how to define or on how to apply them, with arguments put forward, for instance, in favour of adding different labels to concepts such as that of smart city, given the differences or variety of policy content under the same umbrella. The need of more comparative studies in the field of urban e-planning is another widely shared perspective that emerged from these three days of discussion.

On ‘Smart Urban Governance and E-Planning’ papers explored methodological innovations and challenges, and ethical issues, and addressed topics such as social control through big data, including behaviour in public space, and its potential use in the built environment. The use of big data was also discussed in relation to the study and diagnosis of demographic characteristics, as well as the use of social media to adjust conventional urban master plans, highlighting the fact that this data allows adjustments in the governance of the city.

The multi-level governance of smart cities and the impact that differences in the degree of administrative centralization, variable in a federal state, can make to urban e-planning, in particular through financial control, were also discussed in the context of the geography of e-government, characterized as it is by different development stages, and by ethical issues, namely those related to surveillance and privacy, transparency, fight against corruption, among other.

Besides the differences in the degree of decentralization referred before, this track showed the huge differences between countries and cities, according to size and type of stakeholders, regarding the content of the policies of smart cities. The engagement of vulnerable people in participatory processes was explored, namely through gamification in participatory budgeting, in participatory mapping with children, and in e-planning processes engaging neuro different people.

Papers offered also a clear picture of the asymmetry in technical skills between public and private actors, namely the big private corporations, and between the State and local government. The harmonization of different policies was discussed in relation to the concepts of green city and smart city, as well as on the possibility to implement the notion of green city in specific territories, as is the case of large historical cities, or the implementation of nature based solutions, as well as the attempts to recreate indigenous vegetation based on historical data.

In the track on ‘Citizens E-Participation in Urban Governance’ authors addressed the political conditions for citizen participation, and a variety of e-participation tools, social media tools, big data, among other options, as is the case of Citizen Science. The discussion on these topics included the comparison between periods before and after the pandemic and how this impacted on e-participation interactions, with the evidence collected suggesting the need of physical spaces for digital participation. The comparison of results of the research on e-participation calls for the evaluation of similar studies in other countries.

In the third track - Urban e-Planning and Climate Emergency - authors discussed adaptation and mitigation policies through urban e-planning, the challenges of disaggregate urban governance and the complex decision-making processes associated with it, the role of e-tools in that process, and on how technology tools can help promote climate resilience. In sum, papers dealt with the action of municipalities and cities towards climate neutrality.

In track four - Artificial Intelligence in Urban governance - recent advances in the use of AI in urban planning were presented and discussed, as in the case of images generated by AI within the process of plan generation, or the use of AI tools to create visualization or scenarios to change public perception of public space in the city.

A number of key ideas have been repeatedly present in most of the discussions held in the three days of the 2024 conference, as referred in the preceding paragraphs. Besides those already referred, it is perhaps worth mentioning also the following: the idea that no one size fits all when it comes to define and adopt concrete solutions and to choose specific e-tools in the context of urban e-planning; tools allow analysis but also determine the outcomes; data can drive decision making and put at risk the will of the people; and need to mix digital tools and face-to-face contacts in the different stages of the planning process.

In sum, as expected, the quality of the papers presented is high, even if they are in different stages of development. All sessions offered new evidence and innovative insights, which allowed a rich and lively debate among participants, as in the previous conferences, with most papers challenging established ideas and presenting new approaches, methods and tools. However, important to note is the fact that some papers also pointed out the limits of the analysis and findings presented, which call for further discussion on key methodological issues.

Additional information, the full program, abstracts, oral presentations, opening and closing sessions, among other aspects, are available in the website of the conference (<https://sites.google.com/view/uep2024conference/home>).

The UEPNET - Urban e-Planning Research Network, closely associated with the IJEPR, will continue its role in the diffusion of information and in the organization of futures conferences (<https://sites.google.com/site/uepnet/home>).

A selection of the papers presented in the conference is expected to be published in the International Journal of E-Planning Research (IJEPR).

A word of gratitude is due to all persons engaged in the 8th IJEPR Annual Conference on Urban e-Planning, in 2024: authors of the papers presented; members of the conference scientific committee; session chairs and discussants. The conference was endorsed by the IGU Commission on Geography of Governance.

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