

## Co-PLAN / An Urban Chronicle

*Co-PLAN / Institute for Habitat Development  
Tirana, Albania*

The journey of Albania's modern urban transformation (and not only) is closely related to 1992, like much of its most late 20th century contemporary history. The end of a centralized system marked the beginning of an all-encompassing reform sweeping across all sectors simultaneously, catalyzing fast physical changes on the ground. The pace of such physically impactful changes was hard to match on a mindset and policy level. The enthusiasm and energy feeding the urban growth in Albania was hard to contain, and it started manifesting features of cemented chaos, particularly in the urban areas. Both central and local governmental institutions failed to comprehend and keep pace with the socio-economic and political changes at the time. They remained confined to the inherited traditional *modus operandi*, which was not designed to anticipate, or regulate any of the transformations. Whilst a good part of the majority viewed and used this institutional and legislative gap to adopt a 'laissez faire' attitude by exploiting and making questionable use of resources and land alike, not all news was bad news.

Amidst these transformations, in the early 1990s, as one in four Albanians left the country forever via emigration, a few young Albanian professionals, supported by a Dutch Development Organisation (Cordaid), saw suitable ground, and seized the momentum to introduce experimental urban planning practices in Albania. This pioneering incentive was initially met with skepticism from officials and local professionals, who for various reasons

represented what was to develop into a sequence of challenges. The young professionals, who grew to form one of Albania's forerunning institutes (organisations) in urban development, Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, started developing and experimenting their methodology with informal settlements/neighbourhoods. The first such neighbourhood to develop informally was Bathore - growing out of Tirana's northern part, serving as a showcase of two crucial drivers in the Albanian urban transformations of the early '90s:

(1) With the change of the political system, people were reinstated their right to freedom of movement, leading to large-scale, unmonitored internal migration, mainly from rural to urban areas;

(2) Great demand for housing stock and improved living conditions lead to the construction industry skyrocketing in an almost complete legislative vacuum. Consequently Bathore was only but the start of a long journey of good urban governance interventions on a neighbourhood and later city and national level which looked at planning not merely as simple planning, but as concerted effort to achieve concrete, tangible, results. Through a philosophy of performance-oriented plans, strengthening of local government finances, connecting individuals' interests to government priorities and introducing public-private-partnerships, became an inseparable part of the Co-PLAN's good urban governance agenda.

Over the past 20 years, several local government units in Albania were



Fig1 / Historical pictures of the Co-PLAN team during the first field works  
source / Co-PLAN archive.



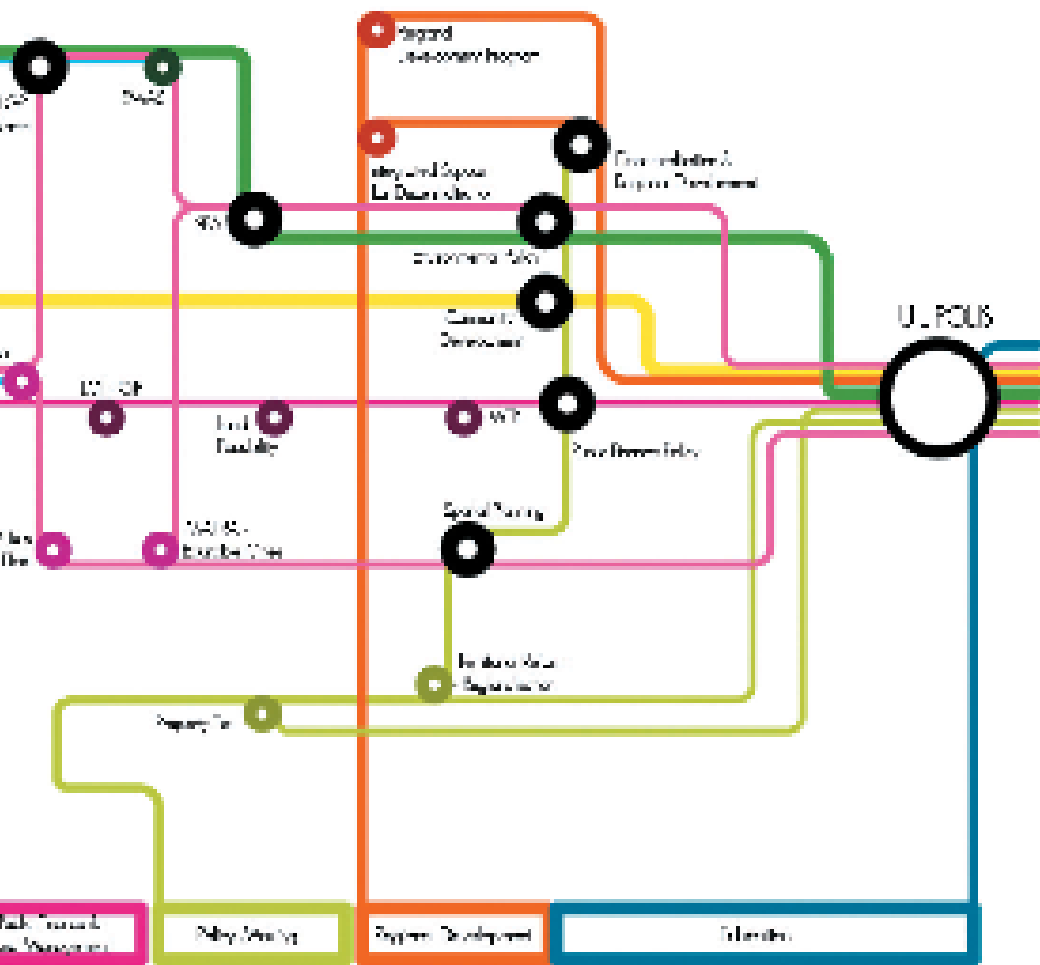


Fig2 / Part of Co-PLAN's project portfolio  
source / Co-PLAN

areas, namely:

- (1) Spatial Planning and Land Development;
- (2) Urban and Regional Governance;
- (3) Urban Environmental Management;
- (4) Public Policy, Research and Advocacy.

At the core of Co-PLAN's activity is the work with people and institutions, to foster tangible social transformation and positive change on the ground by inducing change-driving knowledge in our society for smart management of our habitat. Co-PLAN fulfils this mission through means of pilot activities and advisory services financed by national and international institutions and direct involvement with communities, local government units and other non-governmental organizations in the field of urban and regional management, environmental management, and municipal finance. Over the years Co-PLAN has implemented projects ranging from 10,000 - 4,000,000 Euro all implemented with the same dedication and accountability.

In more specific terms, the activities under each field can be summarised as follows:

- (1) Spatial Planning and Land Development – This field constitutes the core of

Co-PLAN's technical expertise, and a pioneering field for the Albanian context when first introduced back in 1995 through grassroots participatory neighbourhood upgrading programs, mainly focused on informally developed settlements. Through applied and research projects, Co-PLAN has supported communities, local governments, NGOs, and business communities in addressing sustainable urban development through the preparation of city development strategies, urban regulatory plans, neighbourhood development plans, and other guiding documents, yet at the same time building capacities. Through its participatory planning approach, in the process it has engaged key actors and interest groups, such as local communities, authorities, private sector, and other key stakeholders in planning processes. Today, Co-PLAN plays an important role on a policy-influencing level, proactively engaged in the discussion on regionalisation of Albania, more specifically in the "Regional Development Management Reform"; further, pro-actively engaged since 2010 in the reviewing of the law and bylaws on territorial planning, related capacity building for a correct implementation,



Fig3 / Co-PLAN Director Dritan Shutina during projects activities  
source / Co-PLAN

coaching and assistance to the LGUs for the preparation of their Territorial Comprehensive Plans, etc., building on one of its core strengths, which is excellent knowledge of the legislative framework applying on both local and central government level.

Co-PLAN's ambitions, involvement and commitment to this field have matured over the years, clearly reflected in the multiple scale activities (i.e. the neighbourhood, city, regional, inter-regional, and national levels), and the multitude of actors it engages with, such as communities, local and central government, businesses, donors, and civil society organizations.

For over 10 years, Co-PLAN has closely worked with municipalities to provide policy advice on subjects pertinent to sustainable development, introducing subjects such as sustainability, green cities and aspects of city resilience.

(2) Urban and Regional Governance - Finances constitute an inseparable element of any development, and as such since many years Co-PLAN has seized the importance of municipal finance management to the current urban developments in Albania. To this end, Co-PLAN works with local governments to improve municipal finance management practices through the preparation of the capital investment programs, annual and mid-term budgets generated through participatory practices, cost analyses of public-private-partnerships, and the improved levying of taxes. Social accountability, and transparency matters make for an important part of the Co-

PLAN project portfolio, focusing on the importance of open data for improved local government performance in terms of accountability and transparency in quantifiable terms.

(3) Urban Environmental Management - Sustainable environmental management makes for an essential part of Co-PLAN's core expertise and project portfolio. Territorial development, particularly when rapid and informal, can have vast and irreversible consequences on the environment.

As such, the focus on this particular field has been on the improvement of environmental management (practices) from an integral perspective, including territorial, research, policy, and capacity development. Although the environment constitutes a separate, dedicated unit, we treat environment as a cross-cutting theme, for it is not possible to separate it from other developments and institutional and financial implications. For instance, the territorial plans – the Strategic Environmental Assessment as a key component, comprise numerous analyses of environmental mediums, the impact of development, including environmentally protected areas, forests, biodiversity, water and aquifers, etc. The integral approach, allows also to look at protected areas and ecosystem protection, not merely as conservation, but how to make them useable in a sustainable and resilient manner, contributing positively to economic development, especially in circumstances where access cannot be restricted.



Fig4 / The program manager Zenel Bajrami during Elbasan Strategic Plan presentation  
source / Co-PLAN

From an urban environmental management perspective, we work also on environmental public services standards and efficiency (particularly in solid waste management, energy, etc.), upgrading capacities, strengthening institutions through the provision of guidelines and on-the-job assistance, connecting environmental management projects to the concept of public private partnerships, etc.

Being embedded in POLIS University and having the possibility to tap into the infrastructure (laboratories) and human resources available at the university, Co-PLAN can undertake specialised research work, and collaborate with the academic staff from the Environmental Management discipline taught at the university. This research work, goes beyond the urban dimension of environmental management, and focuses on topics such as ecosystem services (valuation) and common pool resources focusing on forests, integrated watershed management etc. These topics constitute also Phd researches that Co-PLAN fellows are currently carrying out.

(4) Public Policy, Research and Advocacy - Public Policy, Research and Advocacy-Research forms an integral and extensive part of Co-PLAN's working methodology and project portfolio. Starting from the early days of informal developments and the discussion on their legalisation and integration, Co-PLAN extensively analysed the phenomenon from a socio-economic perspective (resulting in a number of publications and policy platforms), such as: The foundations of policy reform for

legalization and integration of informal settlement (1995-2005); Poverty Social Impact Assessment for the water sector (2004), the Damage and Need Assessment in Agriculture in Kosovo (1999), the Regionalization Policy in 2014, etc. In addition, Co-PLAN has engaged during 2007-2012 in a broad program financed by Open Society Institute for strengthening internal capacities in policy influencing, policy research and writing, lobbying and advocacy. To date, Co-PLAN is implementing in partnership with Partners Albania and Open Society Foundation Albania LëvizAlbania – Local Democracy Promotion Project, which aims at supporting (both capacity development and grant-making) civic society actors to make local government more accountable, transparent and democratic. Co-PLAN has also initiated the KINDLE Advocacy program, supported by the American Embassy in Tirana, aiming at identifying and then supporting civic society groups, individuals and activists through training and coaching them during a full policy cycle for bringing forward causes relevant to public interest.

In addition to individual research and consultancy projects commissioned by various international agencies, research is always used in the ongoing projects, mainly in the form of feasibility studies, environmental assessments, and audits, focusing on planning, participatory processes, local governance, service provision, etc. The pioneering research for the Albanian context, is not necessarily (always) linked to a specific project. Often when the local context and developments



Fig5 / Ceremony of the street named after Co-PLAN  
source / Co-PLAN archive

could benefit from any such concepts/practices, Co-PLAN carries out research with own resources, trying to create a critical mass that will take the discussion to the next level, and ideally anchor the proposed (researched) concepts in current practices. Co-PLAN assembles this research into the dedicated policy-influencing publication: "Policy-followers or Policymakers".

Through its solid research-backed studies and reports, as well as knowledge extracted from direct field-work and involvement with the community, Co-PLAN has increasingly sought to influence policy-making within Albania. To this end, Co-PLAN has undertaken policy research aimed at generating policy recommendations, which are provided to stakeholders and main political parties in the form of Political Platforms. In April 2015, in anticipation to the local elections taking place in the country (in June), Co-PLAN prepared a platform of proposed policies for better management of the city and shared it with the candidates across the spectrum, media, and the general public. In March 2014, in the frame of the "Regional Development Program Northern Albania" project, Co-PLAN published an elaborate proposal on the "Regionalisation of Albania: The Governance, Administrative and Territorial Reform that Albania needs on a regional level" becoming a key contributor to the discussion on regionalisation, in an effort to contribute to the modernisation and democratisation of governance in Albania. In May 2013, Co-PLAN prepared and

shared "A Platform of Policies on Territorial Governance", preceding the parliamentary election campaign, held on June 23, 2013. The platform, which was circulated among the main political stakeholders, media representatives, donor organizations, and general public, provided a clear set of recommendations for a Good Territorial Governance, a good part of which were reflected in the government program.

Today, Co-PLAN is innately linked to POLIS University: It is part of the POLIS University Research and Development Institute, resulting in boosted expertise and research capabilities. Given the similarities in shared values, and mission, Co-PLAN and POLIS University align their collaborative efforts to bring about new developments such as the recently opened "Professional School of Energy Efficiency" (with the support of a TEMPUS funded project), the set-up of a dedicated energy efficiency laboratory within the POLIS University premises, etc. Clearly, Co-PLAN's history of growth and year-to-year experience might not be that of an ordinary straight Think Tank approach. Reflecting the natural evolution in response to the changing context, which later resulted into a formula of success, we have chosen to serve an important public good purpose, through a comprehensive approach: direct engagement in field-work through projects, and extensive follow up research particularly focusing on public policy, to conclude with clear recommendations for policy-influencing in the form of policy briefs, research papers, and why not...more good governance stimulating platforms!

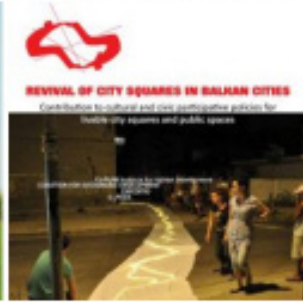
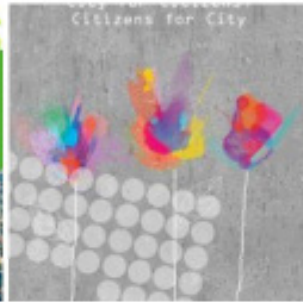
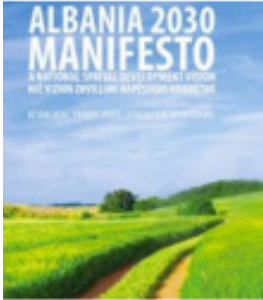


Fig 6 / Co-PLAN publications and magazines source / Co-PLAN