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# Conclusions / The Importance of 'Watersheds' and Related Methodological Proposals

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## The Role of Local Experiences in Spatial Planning Processes

The fall of the authoritarian regime in Albania by early 90-s, opened a new chapter of developments for the country. The transition from 'centrally planned' economy towards 'free market' combined with the change towards pluralism and democracy were and still remain one of the greatest challenges of the country. The relatively weak state with limited capacities to govern the society towards democracy could not easily reform the planning system in order to be able to respond to local and societal changes, resulting in a total freedom and potential anarchy for the territorial development.

The fragile democratic system during transitional Albania could not respond immediately to the local social-economic demands and was not able either to plan in due time, therefore leading through misunderstandings and "systematic allergy" towards territorial/urban planning. The resulting chaos with uncoordinated/unplanned development resulted with over 400,000 informal and illegal dwellings. The latter had strong impacts on the fragmentation of rural/agricultural land, especially along surrounding areas of the main cities. It also increased pollution and environmental degradation, high cost of infrastructure provision and pushed for more chaotic and informal urban development within the cities.

On the other hand, the transition period proved to stimulate the creativity and energy of people. Frustrated by the slow

reaction of governments, people took matters at their own hands by investing in property and economic activities. However, the absence of a clear economic policy and poor financial credibility by the banking system, directed citizens to invest most of their earnings towards "dead capital". Thus the necessity for territorial/spatial planning was urgent but it took almost two decades of chaotic developments for the political and professional milieu to prepare for initiating reforms towards formal and positive planning and developments. Only at this point one can speak for objectives aiming to correcting mistakes of the past and set platforms for the future.

In this retrospective, different attempts were made in 1992 and 1998 to introduce and institutionalize urban planning system through the respective legal acts. But both legislations could not grasp the complexity of the new democratic system and respond to the demands of the new socio-economic system, thus they failed by losing political priority. Meantime by early 2000-s the Municipality of Tirana initiated relatively for the first time new tactics for changing the situation at city scale. And this was replicated quickly by other local authorities. However, it took up to 2006, to enter a real process of designing a new planning system, which reflected a comprehensive and integrated approach towards spatial planning. The initiative culminated in 2009 with a new legislation on "Territorial Planning and Development", which would enter in force in 2011 after the preparation of bylaws and detailed regulations.

Most of these activities and changes during the transition period have been subject to the continuous support and assistance from foreign actors such as the World Bank, UNDP, USAID, GIZ, ADA, IHS Rotterdam, etc, combined with the process of European Integration and its pressure for positive change. But the legislation and the creation of governance structures is only the “top of the iceberg” for real cultural changes. Nevertheless, a legislation can change even overnight, but to change a planning and governance culture requires time to mature and become institutionalized. This appeared quite an intrinsic and complex process in Albania that required the change of frames, values, beliefs and mentalities of planners, officials and practitioners, as part of general socio-cultural understanding of certain processes by the citizens themselves. Thus, the role of foreign actors is important, however, their impact in the cultural change in Albania would be limited without the support and partnership of local epistemic communities and actors.

The story of the evolution of Co-Plan Institute ([www.co-plan.org](http://www.co-plan.org)), and later on of Polis University ([www.polisuniversity.edu.al](http://www.polisuniversity.edu.al)), shows how important local expertise is in shaping processes of change and modernization in a developing country like Albania. Co-Plan and afterwards POLIS University have been at the forefront of most issues related to urban development, territorial planning and development, territorial governance and administrative reforms, trying not only to shape legal and institutional frameworks

but also by continuously engaging local communities and general public, in an approach which aimed at establishing and consolidating the capacities of institutions. Their success story is based on the fact that international experience has not been just “copied” within the Albanian framework, but it has been contextualized through scientific and practical research in order to best fit the countries needs as well as by creating new knowledge and methodologies. The production of context based research, methodologies, projects and alternatives have proven to be a key factor in shaping the cultural change in territorial governance.

These local experiences only iterated the eminent necessity of drafting regional and national spatial plans and policies, which would support the development of the country and serve as a reference for the coordination of local initiatives. As a response to that - by 2014 - “Albania 2030 Manifesto” was published with the aim of offering a new methodology and a vision towards the national authorities for drafting the General National Territorial Plan of Albania. This initial research document served as a key reference for the authorities in drafting the official national document/plans, but at the same time showed the necessity of an intermediate level of planning such as the regional one. As such, the research publications of the International PhD workshops of Polis-Unife are new contributions in such a historic timeline. This last publication concludes on ‘watershed-based planning’ as an important contribution which can

be used by authorities in response to the question of regional planning and regional development, especially under the conditions of climate changes, and growing concerns from flooding and environmental pollution.

### **The Importance of 'Watersheds' and Related Methodological Proposals**

The combination of the different disciplines is one of its strongest points in developing a new methodology for sustainable planning at the regional/national level. The amalgamation of planning contributions with landscape architecture, environmental studies and engineering, with good governance approaches and architecture; which makes this a unique publication which is based especially on Polis/Co-plan experiences. It is also offering good theoretical and practical sustainable responses to the local and regional challenges of the day.

Watersheds are a useful planning level which can offer sustainable solutions for development. Being a natural ecosystem at first, they guarantee that the ecological sustainability of the plans and measures to be taken in response, and not only to the local challenges but also to more global ones, such as climate change. From a methodological point of view, the workshop experience emphasizes the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach in developing territorial strategies at this level. Watersheds, offer a complex system which take into consideration a multitude of interests, values and development perspectives in their relationship vis-a-vis with ecosystem values. Thus the watershed can be planned for and managed in an integral fashion and through comprehensive, yet practical and targeted instruments. The latter is also supported by the fact that also from an institutional and governance perspective watersheds fit well within the framework of multi-level and multi-layered governance, thus integrating a wide range of actors, institutions and agents at different levels.

Looking at the 'Semani Watershed' case per se, we see that it is faced by the dichotomy between 'economic', urban development and infrastructural development, against the necessity to protect the environment and the biodiversity. Especially, the high number of planned hydro-powers is an imminent threat to the watershed and the biodiversity, thus according to Muharremaj, V., in this publication, it is highly important to avoid the construction of dams and aggressive/massive infrastructure works

in high biodiversity areas with sensitivity. In addition, it is highly recommended to support the development of ecosystem services and climate change adaptation measures. In addition to this, hydropower plants should not be seen as the only alternative for the provision of electric energy. Other options such as sun energy can be used in a complementary manner with actions taken at the individual building level for increasing energy efficiency and savings.

Emanueli, L., and Lobosco, G., add to these concerns by introducing the concept of riverscapes and the importance of not only preserving landscapes but also to plan and design them accordingly. Especially, the development of hydropower plants in Albania is one of the main threats for changing landscapes and preserving them. Their view of a 'new' planning approach and framework "... blurring the boundaries between disciplines - such as engineering, landscape planning, geography, economy, etc. - is a paramount concern to shift the viewpoint having a more holistic approach to the subject of waterscapes evolution ... " (p.68). The importance of landscape is reiterated also by others and comes as a recurrent topic throughout the publication. Thus it is advocated the necessity to try and create an equilibrium between environmental quality, economic activities and society's needs, promoting the development of sustainable tourism, which considers the landscape a collective good and inheritance for future generations.

Agricultural activities play also an important role in polluting the rivers and water basins. The increased use of fertilizers and other chemicals combined with pollution from formed industries and urban development poses a threat not only on waters but on the whole 'food system value chain' in Albania. Most of the agricultural lands in the area get water from the river, thus creating a vicious cycle of pollution which directly affects the health of people. Erosion in addition is an important factor threatening the watershed hence forestation and vegetation densification is very necessary. Thus the riparian area of rivers needs to be aggressively and strictly protected at all means. With regard to restoration of water quality in the watershed, and in line with the above initiatives, an interesting perspective is also the inclusion and use of natural measures for the reduction of pollution through phyto-, hydro- and biological depuration.

The watershed has also substantial and important natural reserves and protected zones which are a high potential for the development of sustainable tourism. As advocated by Porfido, E., tourism used in a prudent way, with low impact activities based on the eco-tourism approach can offer a good basis of economic development for the watershed region. In addition to this, cultural heritage plays an important role for tourism development and adds another layer to it. It is argued that historical and cultural heritage offers a great potential and thus should be valorized and become part of the touristic offer.

Furthermore, is an imperative now that climate change is the paramount threat of all watersheds. The increase of extreme weather events such as flooding and droughts is evident. Thus building a resilient future requires new methods and approaches in designing and planning.

According to Van Driessche, M., and Veerbeek, W., advocate for a new approach of building with nature, offers the adequate tools for creating a design strategy for rivers and islands that is resilient for all types of extreme events including flooding and droughts. As such, flexibility is an important matter in the projects/plans allowing for the shaping of activities accordingly providing a more robust future. Resilience is an important concept also for Palazzo, A., who argues that " ... nature management, agro-clusters, rural services and the role of design as a tool for local resilience, are all fundamental principles to achieve the sustainability ... " (p144).

In relation to resilience the two competition projects designed by Metro\_POLIS Studio (Albania) and Felixx (the Netherlands) offer two interesting and distinct illustrative approaches on the topic. Felixx proposal is based on the manipulation of river flow patterns in a natural manner to offer a flexible space which can absorb and live with water in cases of flooding. Meanwhile Metro\_POLIS propose a more complex and sophisticated approach through a series of intervention based on the concept of "dynamic edges" which try to offer a symbiotic solution between nature and city in achieving resilience. Both projects show that besides technical and engineered solutions landscape architecture and "designing with nature" can play an important role in finding solutions for the near future.

This conclusive publication and the respective international workshop have offered a unique viewpoint from a theoretical, methodological and practical solutions for the sustainable development of watersheds and especially for the planning of watersheds. Most articles, although focused in different themes, are interrelated and hint at the importance of having an integrated approach not only from a sectorial point of view but also from an interdisciplinary perspective. Therefore, landscape under such context is seen as a unifying concept for the above mentioned, and there is absolutely a great need to further develop methodologies and discussions about landscape in the Albanian context. Thus, with this in mind, there is no better way than to conclude this publication with a comprehensive definition of landscape by Metro\_POLIS (p.216): " ... Landscape is an open system, it is a MEDIUM, uniquely capable of responding to temporal change, transformation, adaptation, and succession. These qualities recommend landscape as a medium uniquely suited to the open-endedness, indeterminacy, and change demanded by contemporary urban conditions ... ".