

Bridging the Gap between Vision and Reality: A Methodological Assessment Tool for Long-term Normative Planning Implementation

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Key words: Regional planning, Spatial analysis

SUMMARY

Action plans and spatial organization should reflect a long-term normative vision of a desired future for a given area. In practice, however, the attempt to translate a normative long-term vision, utopian in nature, into operational steps is often overpowered by obstacles and difficulties inherent in current realities. Reality overpowering vision reduces the ability of vision to influence at the local level and contributes to weakening the ability to achieve overall sustainability. The increasing complexity and dynamics characterizing the present planning field create a demand for applicability, quality and reliability. At the same time, the field is directed by strong pressures for reduced time scales and delivery at a reasonable cost. This reality calls for the development of new methodologies tailored to those specifications. The present paper presents a novel, integrative methodology that stimulates action to mitigate significant challenges addressed by long-term normative vision by means of strategies that bridge the gap between vision and reality. The methodological tool offered aims at assisting planners to formulate an implementation-oriented spatial plan rooted in long-term vision, yet flexible and adaptable to temporal changes. The suggested methodology originates in diverse theoretical disciplines and fields of public governance, planning, economics and social science, and relies on methodologies developed in other countries.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Utopian thinking - the ability to imagine a future that is radically different from what we perceive to be the prevailing order - involves two closely connected aspects: critical and constructive (Friedmann, 2002). The vision, which is normative, long-term, and often represented by a "Vision Plan" (VP), is always a debatable subject both on its own terms and when measured against alternative proposals; it thus generates public discussion of the question, "What if?" (Baer, 1997).

If in the planning field action plans and spatial organization are to reflect a long-term normative vision, then an "adoption" process for the desired future it portrays is advised. Successful utopian constructs must have the power to arouse the passion for political action that will bring us a little closer to the visions they embody. For that to happen, public figures and decision-makers need to be convinced of the VP's applicability and be captivated by the prospect it envisions. It is for this purpose that a VP conveys just enough "realism" to help suspend disbelief, at least temporarily, thereby stimulating thought and eliciting comment to enable the communication of the vision in a more empathetic, intuitive way (Baer, 1997; Friedmann, 2002).

City and regional planning have an enduring tradition of utopian thought (Baer, 1997; Friedmann, 2002). In the early days of town planning, there was a tendency to believe that a Vision Plan could readily be converted into a "Master Plan" (a general plan designed as a blueprint). However, plans as blueprints require that each and every aspect of the plan, as well as their interconnections, be mapped in considerable detail. This should include a set of well-defined criteria for each control point in order to demonstrate mastery of all aspects, to control how they are joined, and to ensure sedulous implementation (Baer, 1997). Friedmann (2002) emphasizes that if we are to obtain sustainable development based on a region's own resource endowment, long-term sustainability should also be a compelling dimension addressed by VP. Unfortunately, this approach produced little success in the "real world."

Consequently, it was soon followed by the notion of alternative routes, some of them contrary to VP. In this approach, the plan is constructed as a remedy, its aim being to find a cure for an existing problem. Alternatives complementing VP are social/administrative plans, land-use design plans, land-classification plans, verbal policy plans, or development management plans (Kaiser et al., 1995 in: Baer, 1997).

Despite a revival that originated in the so-called post-modern era, VP retains a reduced ability to influence at the local level. Attempts to translate a normative long-term vision, by

definition utopian in nature, into operational steps are often overpowered by obstacles and limitations that typify the short-term decision-making inherent in politics and local realities (Dror, 1986).

The increasing complexity and dynamic character of the planning field at present create demands for applicability, reliability, and quality (Baum, 1994; Wegener, 1994; Baer, 1997; Healey, 2006; Poon et al., 2006). The planning field is directed by strong pressures for reduced timescales and delivery at reasonable cost. At the same time, traceable "footprints" are increasingly being required in order to show how planners move from the description of the current situation to their recommendations for the future. Mere assertion that a plan is in the public interest must be replaced with evidence to prove that this is so (Baer, 1997).

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology we have found to be most efficient and suitable to improve on the VP spatial implementation process combines Top-Down (TD) and Bottom-Up (BU) analyses, using management tools (Benchmark, SWOT, and TOWS analysis). Underlying this choice is the assumption that a two-way methodology will enable the emergence of more applicable products through a better integration of their vision components. This methodology draws its justification from and integrates a diverse body of research that originates in the fields of public governance, planning, economics, and social sciences (Bourdieu, 1986; Anheier et al., 1995; Scott, 2001; Porter, 2003; Kitson et al., 2004; Weber et al., 2006).

The novel, integrative methodology stimulates action to mitigate challenges posed by any long-term normative vision; its aim is to assist planners in the formulation of an implementable spatial plan that is rooted in long-term vision, but is flexible and adaptable to temporal changes (See Figure 1).

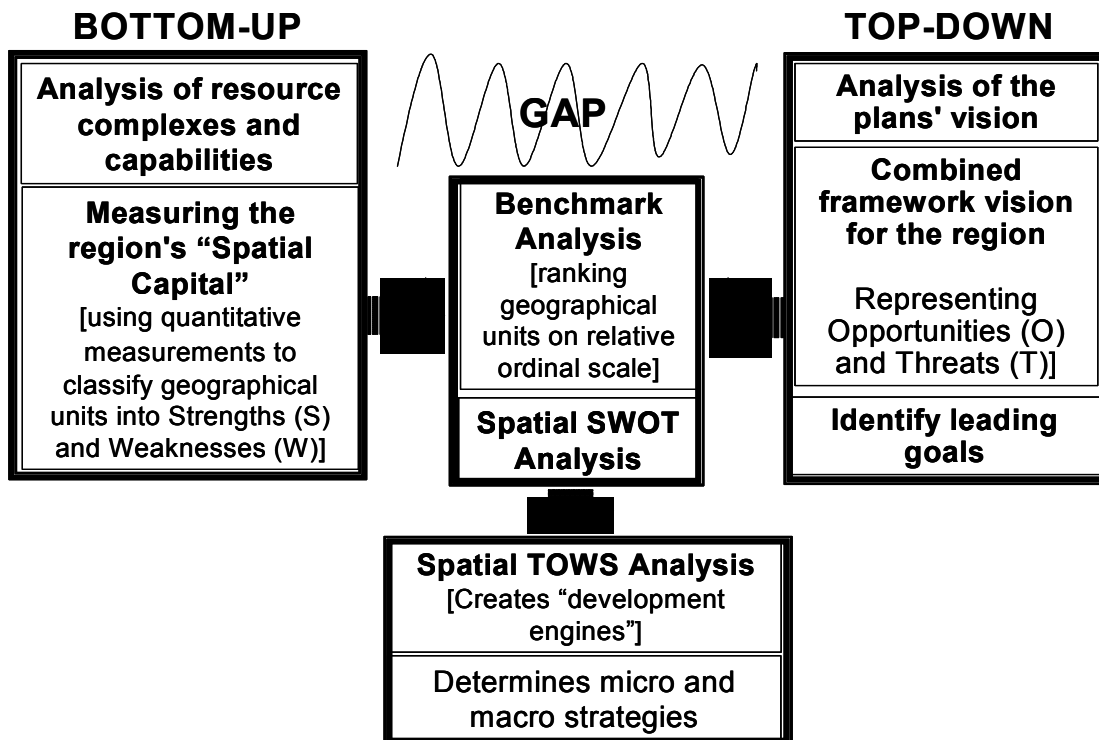


Figure 1: Methodology Schematic Framework

This framework enables strategic planning and is also capable of offering an immediate, short-term solution, while providing the flexibility and adaptation to changes over time in order to fit political, as well as professional requirements. The methodological tool we developed employs the concept of "spatial capital," which is similar to what Friedmann (2002) calls "resource complexes." These are based on the accumulation of assets and capabilities by spatial-political units. Another concept adopted here is that of "development engines," representing the character of an overall "spatial capital" needed to achieve long-term vision. The ranking of "spatial capital" at the level of sub-units also harmonizes with the principle of "subsidiarity."

In the study presented, the northern region of Israel was selected to exemplify the implementation of the tools described in the methodology section. The northern region definition includes the Haifa metropolitan area, which is the largest urban center in northern Israel, and the eastern Galilee. The region comprises a total of 4,767 square km., constituting 22% of the total area of Israel. In 2006, some 1.72 million people, amounting to 24.4% of the total Israeli population, resided within this region. Different population groups inhabit the region, consisting of 1.04 million Jews and others (60.4%) and 0.68 million non-Jews¹ (39.6%), most of them Moslem Arabs (68.2%) and the rest Christian Arabs and Druses. This

¹ The "Jews and others" population category includes Jews, non-Arab Christians, and those not classified by a religion.

region is an example of heterogeneity, but characterized by spatial and social segregation and a lack of affinity and synergy among its various parts and sectors. The region, therefore, supplies an excellent experimental platform for testing the models that were developed with the aim of bridging the gap between vision and reality.

3. RESULTS

As discussed in the theoretical background section, the inherent characteristics of normative vision detach it from current realities and call for the development of dynamic intermediate means that are responsive to changes over time and enable the incorporation of VP in day-to-day decision-making.

The model presented here and its products seem to be contributive and adequate to this end, with its emphasis on three important components:

- The spatial concept, based on a Top-Down-Bottom-Up analysis capable of presenting regional disparities.
- The creation of a type of basic data units to serve both the process of a redefinition of normative vision and the creation of a spatial profile of changing realities.
- The iterative nature of the tool developed and its ability to evoke tailored targeted strategies for varied aggregations (spatial clusters) of basic data units.

To date, there has been little attempt to represent an envisioned spatial future in the form of capitals. This paper has done so, attaching importance to inter-regional differences, an important factor in the ability of localities and sub-areas to achieve overall well-being and sustainable development. This paper thus joins a growing body of literature that stresses the importance of regional heterogeneity and the implications of disparities (Beenstock and Felsenstein, 2008).

The proposed model assists in the creation of varied functional clusters and in the identification of their nature - constructive or interfering in regard to the process of promoting a desired resource-management. The model linking SWOT-TOWS analyses to resource-based planning is seen to be an iterative rather than a linear process, and is embed within the overall planning process. We have found the works of Friedmann (2002), Florida (2003) and Kitson, (2005), to be especially useful for the purpose of resource assessment, as they provided a framework within which to arrange spatial data so as to gain a better understanding of a region's spatial profile as a whole.

As shown previously, the model which is based on local assets, enable analyses that are sensitive to diversity, allowing the creation of various spatial aggregations. Diagnosis and a profile based on sensitive spatial analysis serve the purpose of tailoring targeted strategies. These strategies account for regional heterogeneity and improve a region's effectiveness in maintaining its resources. It also enables the use of quantitative indicators, linking them to spatial dimension, reinforcing our ability to understand and support spatial location decisions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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