



**Improving collaborative planning in urban
development of post-communist Albania**
A network governance perspective

By Denada Veizaj and Peter Scholten NUMBER 28 / 2017

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Abstract

Post-communist realities remain intrinsic cases of study because of their transitional phase from centralized top-down models of governance toward more democratic, pluralistic and inclusive ones. In Albania is notable a positive evolution of planning instruments that it is not coherent with the situation of governance and urban management mechanisms. How this fact does affect planning and urban development processes in the country? Meanwhile, in a wider context, global urban agendas are requiring the presence of democratic and decentralised models of governance in order to assure their implementation in regional levels. The object of the paper is to deal with the question of what specifically causes the missing environment for the improvement of urban governance models in post-communist societies.

With the aim to identify the mentioned factors, an analytical model based on the theoretical frame of the network governance is used to “scan” the existing context. The analysis evaluates a series of factors in which is translated the generic definition of “post-communist society”. A further analysis of those factors evaluates the high level of corruption and the vague implementation of the legal reform of decentralisation as the most influential on impeding the implementation of network governance concepts.

Keywords

Post-communism, network governance, rule of law, decentralization, corruption.



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1. Introduction

Albania remains an interesting case regarding the relations existing between decision-making processes, urbanisation and the transition from centralised models of governance toward more democratic ones. This is due to an overlapping of a variety of social and historical factors and to the specific development path of the main urban centres in the country. Most of cities, appear quite late as proper urban entities, in the country's development history. This, because Albania was almost unaffected by historical shifts that involved many of European countries during the industrial revolution. Industrialization and urbanisation processes will happen in Albania only during the XX century. In addition to this, by quickly observing the main development stages of Albanian cities, it is noticeable the presence of centralised planning or governance models. The first significant phase, in the evolution of cities through planning instruments will be under the regime of King Zog, followed by the communist period. For almost one century, the political power has been the most decisive vector modelling Albanian cities, and only after 1990, when the communist regime will fall, urban centres will face a new situation where the free market economy will introduce a complex network of actors and stakeholders that participate in the city development and decision-making processes.

By concluding this historical perspective, it is understandable the strong influence (in cultural and legal terms) of centralised or top-down governance models in the country's context.


On the other hand, having experienced a dictatorial system of governance still remains an important factor that keeps influencing the Albanian reality.

The past two decades have been characterised by a dynamic situation in terms of producing instruments for controlling and orienting urban development. It is easily perceivable the evolution of such instruments in favour to the quality; from the rigid Master-plans that operated in large scale, mostly relying on intellectual and technocratic approach, to more flexible documents of a strategic nature.

The new national strategic plan of Albania (2016) tends to embrace fundamentals of sustainability by promoting concepts such as regions, social inclusion or equity. But still, it is also readable the existing gap between the quality of such instrument and its implementation degree into reality. Despite the efforts to control development, the last two decades have produced chaotic situations mostly in disfavour of the public space, infrastructure, environment, and of the public interest.

Why planning instruments are destined to be poorly implemented in transitional post-communist societies?

Answers might be multiple and deriving from different natures, but regarding this failure, the paper is limited in evaluating the role of the missing urban governance models. The debate relies on analysing the relation between two levels of governance; central and local, and at the same time, the relations between local authorities and other stakeholders in decision-making processes.



By exploring the argument of the urban dynamics during the past two decades, differently from the positive evolution of planning instruments, almost nothing is done in improving governance models or mechanisms, or introducing new alternative ones that would help the implementation phase of such instruments.

It is still perceivable a strong presence of rational, top-down models of governance that emphasize the role of the central level as the main actor on the decision-making process. Because of the complex nature of the phenomenon, it is understandable that transition from one form to another requires time and mostly happens organically.

The panorama cannot be complete if the analysis remains only within the margins of the chosen context. A wider perspective is required for considering global circumstances as well. Actually, the challenges for sustainable development, inclusion, equity or the aim to transform cities in systems that promote these values are part of a more global agenda.

2. Governance models and collaborative planning in fragmented societies. The strong role of *the context* in planning and governance issues.


In most theoretical approaches is widely accepted the strong role of the context in planning practices. In this sense, in many cases, the right answers for specific contextual challenges, problems or controversies come from the context itself.

As Healey admits, the planning discipline will always face the challenge of the continuous change of global and regional situations. On the other hand, it is almost impossible to transport theoretical models or dogmas from a context to another.

In order to go towards an integrated approach in planning, she proposes a model that doesn't promote distinction between instruments and implementing mechanisms. In this sense, the concept of governance should be seen as an indispensable set of mechanisms needed to be explored by planners:

"The system of governance of a society or community refer to the processes through which collective affairs are managed. Governance involves the articulation of rules of behaviour with respect to the collective affairs of a political community; and of principles for allocating resources among community members". (Healey, 2006)

According to her, the current challenge for the planning discipline remains the translation of global issues and agendas in regional and local levels; and this can be achieved only through new flexible and alternative concepts for planning, where the main keyword remains "collaborative". This, with the aim to transform cities and regions as engines that promote sustainability, inclusion and equity.



"...new directions in governance modes which are more sensitive to the "consumers" of public policy" (Healey, 2006)

Urban governance is seen in this sense as a set of complex mechanisms, affecting many sectors and that implement urban development goals. To go towards a flexible and collaborative model of planning that considers the variety of contextual challenges, a pluralist and inclusive mode of governance is required.

"A democratic and pluralist mode of governance is required to combine with collaborative planning to help realising the goal" (Healey, 2006)

From top-down models to the alternative of network governance. A brief theoretical panorama

As described in the previous discussion, for fulfilling urban development goals, flexible governance mechanisms are needed to promote collaboration and participation of a large number of actors in decision-making processes.

Most theoretical concerns identify three main governance models that differ by the role that actors have during negotiations: the top-down model, the multi-actor one and network governance. According to Koppenjan:

"We define governance networks as sets of autonomous yet interdependent actors (individuals, groups, organizations) that have developed enduring relationships in governing specific public problems or policy programs". (Koppenjan, 2014)


The network governance model goes far from considering central government authorities as the dominant stakeholder in policy making or administration issues. Still, the model is used to understand these processes in democratic societies governed by the rule of law. Negotiations happens in a favourable environment characterized by the trust between actors and trust of actors on the system.

The model considers the actors and their decisions as autonomous. They have individual agendas and specific goals to achieve. The continuous interaction between them creates the opportunity to face and know each-other's interest, while the negotiation process starts to establish the network of mutual interdependencies.

The opposite happens in top-down models when decision-making works differently. More than a *heterarcic*¹ model, it is perceivable a hierarchic structure where specific actors or stakeholders have stronger role than others. Usually the governmental authorities are on the top of the pyramidal structure. Agendas and goals are pre-defined and negotiation process is almost absent.

In a first prospect, it looks like the top-down approach is more efficient in policy making or public administration then promoting complexity by allowing different stakeholders of different natures to act and negotiate for achieving their individual goals. Because of this, it becomes essential

¹The inverse concept of hierarchy



to deal with the understanding of complexity as a phenomenon in network governance.

"Governance networks are multi-actor systems that are not simply complicated, but complex" (Koppenjan, 2014)

"Substantive complexity however is not caused only by the absence of information and knowledge. What is often more important is that information is available, but its validity is contested. Since actors have different perceptions of problems and view them from different frames of reference, they interpret the available information differently" (Fisher, 2003) (Rein, 1994)

Despite the complexity created, this model still assures at the end of the process more satisfied actors and by consequence more sustainable decisions. This, because the goals of actors keep changing during the negotiation game.

According to also what collaborative planning is asking for, this model of governance seems to accomplish the requirements for pluralistic and inclusive processes.

At this point, the discussion is about:

Can specific models of governance that are functional in different social and cultural contexts be transported in other ones?

In governance, as well as in planning, the answer is no. As long as we talk about social constructs, it is not possible to pretend that these models would work the same in different contexts.

Changing the perspective to the Albanian context, it is already understood that shifting toward a more democratic and inclusive model of urban governance is becoming more and more a necessity.

The purpose of the research work is not to refer to network governance as a transportable model that would solve the contextual problems, but using its theoretical perspective for understanding what is creating obstacles in the Albanian context for implementing pluralistic and decentralised governance models.

What specifically causes the missing environment for transforming the existing rational model to a more decentralized and inclusive one? How planning processes are affected as a domain of public policies or administration?

2.1 What specifically harms trust between actors and the rule of law in this specific context?

In a generic view, the post-communism context is interpreted mainly as a strong presence of top-down models in governance level but also in socio-cultural terms.

The hypothesis elaborated in this research work tends to further examine this generic approach, by specifically identifying the factors that impede or slow the transition from rational and centralised models to network governance, as an inclusive and more pluralistic one. According to the theoretic frame of the model, the presence of the rule of law and trust

between the actors participating remains crucial to the process. In this sense, the analysis tends to identify the factors harming exactly *the trust and the rule of law*.

2.2 Transcription of the generic definition of “post-communist society”. Scanning the context.

The limit of the research is to analyse the relations between the missing decentralised and inclusive governance models and the above fact.

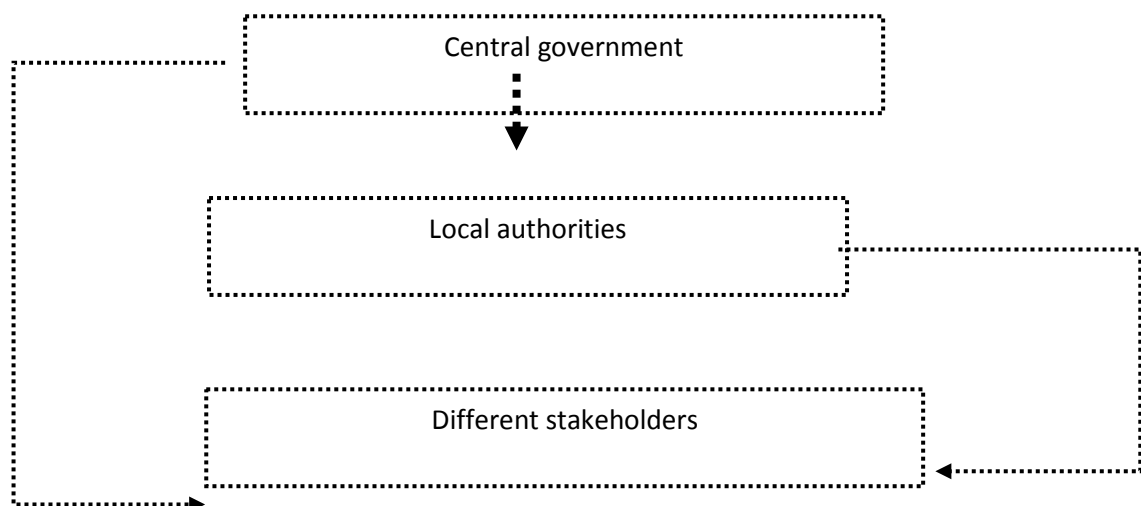
The analysis tends to focus on two main points:

1. The relations between the central government and the local authorities
2. The relations between local authorities and other stakeholders in decision-making processes

Analysing the governance mechanisms through which these levels communicate helps to understand how the territory and its development is controlled or managed.


Until the past year, legally the governance was designed in two levels: the central authority, as the main actor leading strategies, policies and administration, and the local authorities with reduced competences, mostly on the administration of small territorial units. Most of the decision regarding the territory are under the strong influence of the central government. Municipalities can manage their administrative territories, but still in a top-down hierarchic structure.

Figure 1: Schematic description of the hierarchic inter-dependencies between the main actors in a top-down model



And referring again to the theoretic core of network governance, it is important that many stakeholders affected from decisions participate in the process.

What characteristics of the post-communist context harm trust between actors, and the rule of law?



1. Strong legal and cultural presence of the top-down models of governance and planning, due to the historical factor and the missing territorial reforms

From 1990 to 2015 the administration of the territory has followed a model relying on the dominant role of the central government. There is a total dependency of the local authorities from the central one. All planning documents, concerning medium and large territorial scales were controlled by central authorities. This situation is reflected in the low efficiency of territorial management and of the public administration as well. What is missing here, is the evaluation of the importance of the control on small scale territory. At the same time the regional characteristics cannot be identified.

The first step for improving the environment in favour of other stakeholders is to diminish the dominant role of the central government. The territorial reform, started in 2015, tends to achieve this through mechanisms that empower the competences of local authorities (UNDP-STAR, 2014). According to the report it is seen that in economical and administrative terms these entities appear more autonomous. On the other hand, a third level of regional governance is proposed, in order to introduce the concept of regions as a definition of territorial units sharing similar characteristics. (Co-Plan, 2014)

The reform is not fully implemented and still the government keeps playing the dominant role on planning or managing the territory.


And still it can be noticed a discordance between the concept of the decentralisation and the vertical hierarchy of authorities mentioned in the report, describing the policies of the ministry of urban development.

2. Sectorial structure of administrative institutions

The structure of most of administrative entities (both in local or central level) is based on the principle of differentiated sectors (UNDP-STAR, 2014). Even current planning instruments aim to offer an integrated approach by coordinating sectorial plans, it still remains difficult for actors belonging to different sectors to get informed about strategies or goals concerning the other stakeholders within a specific process. Especially in similar situations, it is imperative the presence of mechanisms enabling collaborative processes.

3. High level of corruption in public administration domain

According to the latest reports regarding the phenomenon of corruption in the Albanian public and administrative sector, its presence is still notable in high levels. According to the transparency international report of 2016, Albania is ranked in the 88th place out of 168 countries listed for the perceived level of corruption. Referring to older reports (2006, 2014) dealing with the same argument, the improvement on such perception is noticeable, but still it remains one of the most debated issues of the



Albanian context, and many reforms need to be initiated to deal with the phenomenon (Council, 2014) (Alternatives, 2006).

4. Trusting the system?

One of the strongest externalities of high level of corruption in public administration remains the missing trust of citizens or other stakeholders toward the system. People still do not believe that they play a real role in decision making processes. Even the trend shows a tendency towards the improvement of the participatory environment, still in the general perception, the public administration is seen as highly corrupted (Council, 2014).

5. Weak presence of citizens in decision-making processes

There are many factors influencing the weak presence of citizens in collective processes. Firstly, this fact is directly related to the high presence of corruption and to the missing trust towards the system and its institutions. At the same time, studies show a typical post-communist polarized society. This phenomenon is reflected in the low percentage of citizens belonging to the middle class (INSTAT 2016). The middle class is seen as the cohesive layer that plays an important role in social constructs and collective actions.

6. Missing environment for PPP. The private sector

The private sector remains a very important stakeholder and a crucial actor in planning processes. Again referring to OSCE reports related to the high level of corruption, the climate isn't encouraging for public-private partnerships. Bureaucracy emerged from vertical and hierarchic structures seems to impede the participation of the private sector in planning or development processes.

7. Capacity building – human resources in local and regional level

Due to the specific socio-economic shifts of the past two decades, the Albanian demography is characterized by strong migratory fluxes targeting the capital of the country. Most of the qualified people have targeted the dynamic reality of Tirana by causing the lack of human resources in the regional and local level (UNDP-STAR, 2014) (INSTAT 2016). Especially in planning practices, it is quite understood that this constitutes one the main causes of the poor implementation of policies or instruments. According to the analysis done to the urban governance of local entities in the frame of the territorial reform, the need for raising local capacities and human resources is highlighted.



Conclusions

By analysing the listed factors, it is perceivable the strong influence of two of them: the high level of corruption and the strong role that the central government still holds in decision-making processes.

Even the decentralization reform has started, it is still far from creating the opportune environment to encourage the participation of many stakeholders in decision making processes.

A third level of governance is introduced in between the local level one and the central one, with the aim to empower the regions. On the other hand, a revised legal framework is offered to enlarge the competences of the local units.

In this sense the decentralization reform would be the first step for improving the environment for network governance. Avoiding the top-down hierarchic decision-making in many levels would reduce bureaucracy and would encourage participatory processes.

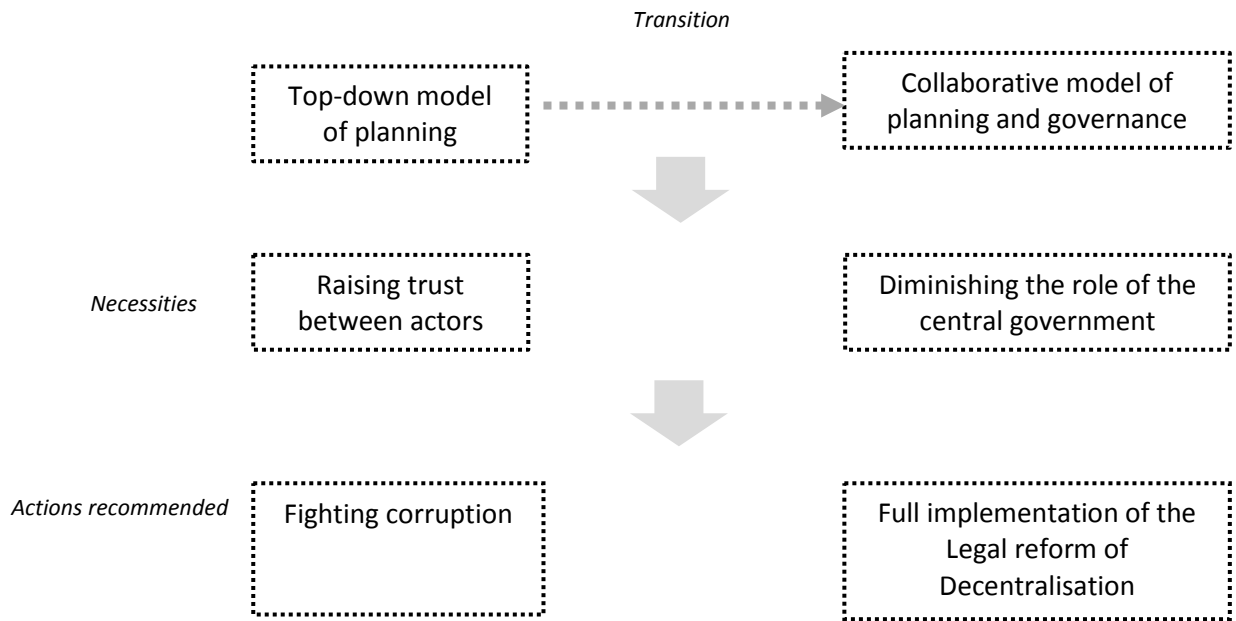
But it is mandatory that this fact should be accompanied by two other important processes: fighting corruption and re-allocating human resources or building capacities in the regional or local levels.

High levels of corruption is firstly reflected in the missing trust of citizens in the system, followed by low levels of participation or social inclusion. The same happens with the private sector as well.

High level of corruption would harm the participatory processes of actors more easily in local levels than in a centralized system.

In this sense, a hybrid model of governance might be appropriate for the specific context. But to facilitate the implementation of such a model, a set of actions need to be undertaken where more immediate are evaluated diminishing corruption and the full implementation of the decentralisation reform. (Fig. 2)

Figure 2: Schematic description of dependencies between the transitional processes from one model of planning to another and the main findings from the specific context.





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