A METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING HOW MASTER PLANS CONTRIBUTE TOWARD ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT*

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of master plans and their role in advancing the goals of sustainable development at the local level. The research objectives are threefold: to examine the role of sustainability planning among other strands of planning and to assess the importance of sustainable local development plans/strategies as an important tool for contemporary planners based on literature produced at the international level; to examine how the evolutions in the field of international planning theory and practice fit with the Romanian context; and to empirically test the perception of local planners with regard to the role sustainability planning and plans play in the future development of their communities. The empirical research is based on two complementary methods: interviews with planners and the assessment of master plans based on a set of pre-determined criteria. The conclusion of the article is that despite the widespread evolution of master plans, they are perceived as a goal in themselves rather than a means. Sustainability considerations are often part of these plans; however, planners themselves seem to have difficulties in labeling a certain policy/program as sustainable or not. In addition, sustainability is defined based on existing definitions rather than being context-driven. The master plans rarely reflect if certain issues are on the public agenda and how the community will address them; thus, in our opinion, the plans by themselves, cannot represent a good indicator of how seriously communities take sustainability.

1. Introduction

Sustainability has been for the last three decades a 'buzz' word in the environmental and planning literature, conveying a multitude of meanings, that are often divergent, to a variety of individuals, professions, interest groups, governmental agencies and political leaders, NGOs and grassroots organizations. As the broad concept of sustainability has evolved, so, too, have several of its derivatives – sustainable communities, livable communities, and sustainable cities (Neamţu *et al.*, 2009, p. 123). Sustainable urban planning (or sustainability planning; the two concepts are used interchangeably throughout the paper) appears as a logical corollary of sustainable cities, implying a long-term approach to decision-making, a holistic outlook integrating various disciplines, interests, and analytic approaches, a questioning of traditional models of growth and acceptance that limits to these exist, a new appreciation of the importance of place, and proactive involvement in healing societies and ecosystems (Wheeler, 2004, p. 35).

In this article my objectives are threefold: my first is to examine the role of sustainability planning among other strands of planning and to assess the importance of sustainable local development plans/strategies as an important tool for contemporary planners based on literature produced at the international level; my second is to examine how the evolutions in the fields of international planning theory and practice fit with the Romanian context; my third is to empirically test the perception of local planners with regard to the role sustainability planning and plans play in the future development of their communities.

2. From early planning efforts to comprehensive, rational planning and then to sustainability planning

Both in Europe and North America, the roots of planning as an organized profession go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the rapid growth of the cities following the industrial revolution led to a multitude of urban problems such as physical decay, functional chaos, poor sanitation, water supply and housing, all these disproportionally affecting the working class (Beauregard, 2003; Klosterman, 2003). Engineers, architects, and social workers were all involved in enhancing living conditions within the 'city of the dreadful night' (Hall, 1996). These early planners undertook various 'master planning' schemes that would arrange land-using activities in a way that achieved functional and aesthetic objectives (Beauregard, 2003, p. 110). Aside from planners, there were also the urban visionaries (Howard, Wright, and Le Corbusier) – they not only dreamed of a better world; they went a step further and planned one. They prepared extremely detailed models and drawings ranging from the general layout of the city to the layout of living quarters. They also focused on the economic and political organization of their ideal cities (Fishman, 2003, p. 21).

It wasn't however until 1950s and 1960s that a dominant theoretical paradigm occurred in the field of planning – a comprehensive, rational model of problem solving and decision-making. The occurrence of comprehensive planning took place in the context of modernism, which goes beyond planning, and which is based on a set of core

values (Wheeler, 2004, p. 27): a desire to leave traditional forms behind and to create a new, 'modern' world, often oriented around technology; a faith in science, rationality, and an objective viewpoint; a search for universals often connected with science; methodological approaches that break problems down into their constituent parts and that tend to view the world atomistically and mechanically; a frequent discomfort with normative statements and value-based discourse. Under this planning model, planners analyze situations, define goals, identify obstacles, develop alternative solutions, compare these, decide on a preferred approach, implement it, and then evaluate its success (Faludi, 1973; Hudson, 1979; Wheeler, 2004; Levy, 2010). Comprehensive planning has gained its popularity due to a clear method of formulating policy and programs and its compatibility with quantitative methods and use of indicators and synthetic data; it also appears logical to many members of the public and politicians while in the same it offers the promise of being comprehensible (Hall, 1996; Wheeler, 2004; Levy, 2010).

Modernist planning began to come apart in the 1970s and 1980s, once the belief in 'the synthetic city – that is the city of singular form invariant over time', began to shatter (Beauregard, 2003). Postmodernist values stressed pluralistic viewpoints based on cultural and cognitive traditions, relativity and uncertainty principles while in planning the focus is placed on decentralized decision-making that meets pluralistic community needs. Wheeler (2004) questions the utility of postmodernist type planning due to the value nihilism and relativism associated with it: 'if the existence of any shared values or grounds for social change is denied, is there any point in trying to build cities one way as opposed to other?' (p. 29).

In planning literature there is a relatively limited discussion with regard to the influence of postmodernist values. Most writings come from the field of urban geography. The profession and how they carry out the planning process was influenced by postmodernist ideas. For example, during the strategic planning for the entire community, planners tried to reach disadvantaged groups by using specific communicative strategies or mediators. Or, in other cases, they discuss as a limitation the impossibility to identify and operationalize the common good or the public interest for a given community. Kaiser and Godschalk (1995) argue that though critics of comprehensive physical planning have regularly predicted its demise, the evidence demonstrates that spatial planning is alive and well. Their statement is based on evidence from communities throughout North America. The same is true for European countries. They also claim that planning is less prone to deconstruction by a postmodern revolution than other field, *i.e.* architecture (p. 376).

The ecological paradigm makes the transition toward advancing sustainability. While the ecological worldview acknowledges cultural diversity, it also promotes the existence of a set of common values and ethical principles based on common problems. It also emphasizes interdependence among systems as well as organic unity. In planning, this paradigm marks the return to an ecological holism (Wheeler, 2004, p. 27). Other movements intertwined with sustainability planning but with a somewhat narrower scope include environmental justice, New Urbanism, Smart Growth etc.

We can depict what sets sustainability planning aside from other planning strands by examining some of the principles pertaining to sustainability planning. Wheeler (2004) discusses the following principles: a long-term perspective; a holistic outlook; acceptance of limits; a focus on place; and active involvement in problem-solving. The long-term perspective, according to Wheeler, needs to be extended as to cover not the standard long-term interval (usually up to 20 years) but 50, 100, or 200 years from now. Wheeler makes an interesting observation, namely that time horizons need to be expanded not just into the future, but into the past as well. The reason for doing it is because we need to understand how places have evolved under the action of economic, environmental, and social factor on the one hand as well as a result of planning decisions on the other hand. The holistic approach emphasizes mainly two aspects: linking the different specialties in planning that have been traditionally compartmentalized and integrating the different scales at which planning activities take place. Acceptance of limits means that planning should focus on qualitative improvements in human and environmental conditions as opposed to a quantitative growth in consumption and resource use. A focus on place refers to reasserting the importance of place/territory/community and the struggle undertaken by local groups to maintain their identity in the face of a global society. Active involvement in problem-solving requires all stakeholders to participate more actively and constructively in planning activities meant to tackle local problems; it is also consistent with the view that planners should seek to give voice to unrepresented points of view – lower-income groups/communities, racial/ethnic minorities etc.

Berke and Manta Conroy (2000) propose six principles: harmony with nature, livable built environments, place-based economy, equity, polluters pay, and responsible regionalism. Beatley and Manning (1997) suggest the following themes: fundamental ecological limits to development, reduced consumption of non-renewable resources, a restorative and regenerative approach to development, quality of life, community, equity, and full cost accounting. Some of the principles offered by various scholars clearly overlap. Also, sustainability planning draws on many different planning theories and strategies. If we closely examine the principle proposed by various scholars advocating sustainability planning, it is easy to see that it weaves together elements pertaining to rational/comprehensive planning (the long-term perspective), to communicating planning (active involvement in problem-solving), and to new urbanism (a focus on place and livable built environments).

There are authors (Campbell, 2003) who claim that sustainability and implicitly sustainability planning are vulnerable to the same criticism of vague idealism made thirty years ago against comprehensive planning. Campbell argues that planners, in their struggle to reach the sustainable development of their communities, need to reconcile three divergent priorities: to grow the economy, to distribute this growth fairly, and in the process not degrade the ecosystem. These three priorities, which overlap with the traditional dimensions of sustainability, the so-called three Es (environment, economy and equity) are represented by the author by using a triangular

model. Besides the three priorities, the triangular model also incorporates axes which represent conflicts between the priorities; the nature of the three axial conflicts is mutual dependence based not only on opposition but also on collaboration. Sustainable development lies in the middle of the triangle and represents the balance that needs to be reached among these priorities. Another important remark in Campbell's critique is that sustainability should not be defined in reference to an idyllic, non-industrial past; it should rather be seen as socially constructed and gradually evolving into the future. The role of planners is therefore twofold: to manage and resolve conflict; and to promote creative technical, architectural, and institutional solutions.

By means of summarizing, it can be noted that the planning agenda as well as the understanding of the planner's role have evolved over time. Some debates have been fought mostly at the theoretical level while others have had an important impact on practice and on the profession as well. Throughout the 20th century no other planning paradigm has gain so much support (criticism as well) as comprehensive planning which continues to play an important role even today. Sometimes the process of comprehensive planning is 'contaminated' by values/practices pertaining to postmodernism or to the ecological worldviews, leading to the creation of an interesting mélange.

3. Tools for sustainability planning – the master plan and its derivatives

Wheeler (2004, p. 85) argues that the most traditional planning tool, important for sustainability planning, is 'the simple construction of a plan, that is, a well-supported collection of strategies for achieving desired results in the future'. Because these plans are so important, Portney (2003) considers that they can be used in order to determine how seriously cities are pursuing sustainability. In other words, these plans could indicate whether issues of sustainability are clearly and unambiguously on the public agenda. The emphasis here, Portney claims, is not on the extent to which cities have actually achieved particular environmental results; it rather focuses on the existence, or lack thereof, of a set of policies and programs aimed at increasing sustainability (pp. 32-33).

The plan itself has evolved in close connection with the developments that have taken place throughout the 20th century in planning theory and practice. Kaiser and Godschalk (1995, p. 368) compare the evolution of the physical development plan to a family tree:

'The early genealogy, relatively disparate, is represented as the roots of the tree. The general or the master plan, constituting consensus practice at midcentury, is represented by the main trunk. Since the 1970s this traditional land use design plan has been joined by several branches – the verbal policy plan, the land classification plan, and the development management plan. These branches connect to the trunk although springing from different planning disciplines, in a way reminiscent of a Ficus tree. The branches combine into the contemporary, hybrid comprehensive plan integrating design, policy, classification, and management, represented by the foliage of the top of the tree'.

Though the authors developed the tree mostly based on the evolution of US planning and practice, it applies, with amendments, for European cities as well. The remaining part of this section will highlight the characteristics of the comprehensive/master plan as well as of the other contemporary plans.

Beauregard (2003, p. 112) argues that 'both the practice and theory of modernist planning revolves around the use of master narratives. For practice, the narrative synthesizes developmental processes and the built environment into a coherent urban form that fulfills the functional necessities of the city. The text is the master plan'. The comprehensive plan is a tangible representation of what a community wants to be in the future. Other similar concepts used are master plan or general plan. In Romania currently planners call these plans development strategies. Aside from the name used, there are three main important factors that make a plan comprehensive (Kelly, 2010): geographical coverage (a comprehensive plan should include all of the land area subject to the planning jurisdiction preparing the plan); subject matter (the comprehensive plan should include all subject matters related to the physical development of the community such as land use, transportation, parks and open space etc.; in addition it should include at least the physical aspects of plans related to economic development and other programs; time horizon (a comprehensive plan must consider a fairly long time horizon, usually around 20 years). The early comprehensive or general plans tended to focus to a great extent on the physical dimension of development. They were not necessarily action-oriented as their focus was not on how to achieve certain objectives but on how to determine and implement the spatial distribution for public and private land use activity within the jurisdiction of the city/community.

Contemporary plans are a lot more diverse than the typical master plan from the mid-20th century. Kaiser and Godschalk (1995) argue that there are four main types of such plans: the land use design, the land classification plan, the verbal policy plan, and the development management plan. The land use design and the land classification plans are the direct descendants of the traditional comprehensive plan, mainly because they also focus on how land uses are arranged within a given territory. As opposed to the land use design plan, the land classification plan focuses on broader types of land uses and it is usually meant to direct growth at a larger scale such as the county or metropolitan level (*i.e.* it establishes that certain areas are to be subjected to a building/construction moratorium for a five years period). The verbal policy plan represents a clear departure from the physical oriented ones; it focuses on policy statements and its strategic component is more accentuated. Usually there are no maps or technical proposals or action plans to support the achievement of the vision. One should not underestimate the practical importance of such a plan. Its value resides in the inspirational character of the statements offered and it may have the power to mobilize the community and the important stakeholders toward achieving the vision/objectives listed in the plan. The development management plan is a true action program that usually focuses on infrastructure or services or targets a specific area for development or redevelopment. It is usually accompanied by a description of the unit responsible for its implementation and by a budget.

Even the authors who suggested these categories acknowledge that it is hard to label a plan as clearly belonging to one category. Nowadays plans tend to borrow features from all the four categories. This is why Kaiser and Godschalk talk about a new, hybrid plan, which incorporates concerns about measurable implementation and realistic funding mechanisms, community design, and sustainability. They argue that the plans of the future will be more participatory, more electronically based, and concerned with increasingly complex issues. Participation, for example, is currently mandatory in many jurisdictions, at least when it comes to projects that impact the environment. The complexity of issues is affected, for example in the EU, by the necessity to take into consideration at the local level policy objectives and regulations established at the EU level.

4. The situation in Romania

It is important to discuss where Romania stands in terms of planning theory and practice in comparison with to international developments discussed above. This section does not intend to offer a comprehensive overview but rather to point out some key aspects. Spatial planning during the communist regime was heavily influenced by the party ideology, sharing some common features with the other communist countries but having also some specific elements. Some of the spatial organization principles which can be derived from the communist ideology include: a rejection of market mechanisms, the elimination of differences between the urban and rural areas, a more balanced spatial distribution of industry and population across the entire territory, the planned integration of agriculture and industry etc (Musil, 2005). It is important to note that economic development was closely intertwined with spatial planning – in many cases spatial arrangements were the result of planned economic activities. Specific for Romania during communism is also the so-called process of systematization, which took a drastic form, not encountered in the other communist states. This program was initiated by the dictator in 1974 with the purpose of urbanizing, reorganizing and levelling urban and rural settlements.

Since the collapse of the communism, there have been no significant progresses made in planning theory. The existing literature is eclectic, mostly technical or urban geography. Scholars are struggling to access the international literature, to discuss it and to analyze whether or not it is relevant for informing practice. This is due on the one hand to the fact that during communism planning theory was mostly grounded in the ideology of the party, with a heavy focus on spatial planning, being thus isolated from paradigmatic approaches at the international level. On the other hand, there were no planning schools, no professional planners (this job was left to be performed by architects and civil engineers) and in general there was not a cohesive knowledge community which could have undertaken the task of generating debates in planning theory.

In practice, immediately after the collapse of communism, macro-economic problems were regarded as being more important than local matters (Pichler-Milanović, 2001). Any type of development was considered as an indication of progress and well-being

in the community. The mantra of those early years was 'everything goes' as long as there is some economic development. In this context it is easy to understand that there was little room left for planning or planners. It was only after 2000, when local authorities and citizens have started to question the wisdom of allowing this type of chaotic, haphazard development to take place. Local authorities were faced with the fact that their General Urbanistic Plans were no longer accurate – they had been adopted in some cases under the communism and no longer reflected the transformation in the spatial structure of the cities that took place in the years following the collapse of communism. Another challenge in the way of comprehensive planning at the local level has to do with the fact that our administrative system is rule-oriented. In this context, the urbanistic plans, which are mandatory and comprise clear legal provisions, tend to be considered at the core of guiding urban development. Master plans or other type of development strategies which are drafted 'voluntarily' by local authorities, tend to be regarded as being less important. This leads to compliance and enforcement problems.

Currently, land use planning and zoning as well as construction activities and permits are regulated in Romania both at the national and at the local level (Law no. 350/2001 regarding land use planning and urbanism and Law no. 50/1990 on construction authorization). At the local level, Local Councils coordinate the drafting of three types of regulations related to land use planning and zoning: the General Urbanistic Plan (GUP), the Area Urbanistic Plan (AUP), and the Detailed Urbanistic Plan (DUP). They represent three different levels of complexity and scale of intervention within a nested hierarchy of urbanistic norms: GUP operates at the city level, AUP at the neighborhood level, and DUP at the site level.

The General Urbanistic Plan (GUP) is a master planning document which offers the most important guidelines for the territorial development of villages, towns and cities. In the same time, the plan comprises the general norms based on which the subsequent smaller-scale plans are drafted (AUP and DUP). In addition to GUP, the City Council approves the Local Urbanistic Ordinance (LUO) which sets the rules for building location and construction as well as for retrofitting and renovations. It is important to note that LUO allows for direct authorization of construction activities with two major exceptions: a) when rapidly changing conditions have made it impossible for the specialists who draft the LUO to set and incorporate detailed norms for certain areas/zones within the city; and b) when those who request the building permit also request a variance from what it is permitted through GUP and LUO. Under these circumstances the drafting and approval of an AUP and/or DUP may be necessary.

The Area Urbanistic Plan (AUP**)** is a document whose role is to provide specific detailed norms in order to coordinate the urban development from within different areas of the city with the provisions of the GUP. The areas for which an AUP is required are expressly listed in the GUP. Such a plan will be drafted only if the local authority has requested it prior to issuing an urbanistic certificate and following the rules listed in GUP or if a variance has been requested by the developer.

The Detailed Urbanistic Plan (DUP) is a strictly technical document which details the requirements that must be followed on site: location of the building in relation to adjacent properties, correlation of its use with adjacent uses, utilities etc. Similar to AUP, DUP will be drafted only if requested by the local authorities prior to issuing an urbanistic certificate and following the rules listed in GUP or if a variance has been requested by the developer.

Theoretically, the drafting of these local regulations falls into the responsibilities of the local authorities. However, after the fall of the communist regime, most of the existing urbanistic regulations became soon outdated, without any new ones to replace them. In this context, land use planning has been conducted in a fragmented manner, without a strategic vision. During the 1990s, most of the big cities in Romania carried out real estate development projects and construction activities in the absence of an updated GUP. In many cases by the time the local authorities finished the GUP, the existing conditions in the city have already changed. Even today, if a city doesn't have AUPs or DUPs for all the sub-areas in the city (as defined in GUP), a developer may be requested to prepare such a plan, with the assistance of an architect. Once such a plan is drafted and then adopted by the local authority, it becomes part of the local regulations opposable to third parties.

In addition to these urbanistic plans, many communities have already drafted master plans or are in the process of drafting them. They are not mandatory; there are however pressure factors that may 'convince' local authorities to initiate this process: in most cases the plans are a prerequisite for obtaining financing. The struggle nowadays is to gradually move away from the urbanistic plans as the only tools for guiding local urban development toward a more holistic vision (the master plans are often called integrated plans, reflecting their focus on a bigger scale, such as the metropolitan area) (Hinţea, 2007). Table 1 below shows this shift.

5. Methodology

There are two main research questions that the current study tries to answer: a) which is (if any) the role master plans play with regard to the long-term development of local communities; b) based on the assessment of the master plan, are some communities taking sustainable development more seriously than others?

The methodology was designed in order to respond to the exploratory nature of this research, which will set the stage for a broader research effort in the near future. The study will serve as an input for refining the research hypotheses and the research instruments. Two research methods were used in order to answer the present research questions – semi-structured interviews conducted with planners working for city halls located within the North-Vest region, Romania[1]; master plans were also assessed in order to determine whether they uphold the principles and objectives of sustainable development.

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1   There are eight such regions in Romania, their main function being related to the process of promoting local/regional economic development; from a legal point of view, they represent cooperative structures formed through the voluntarily association of the existing counties.

Table 1: Traditional versus strategic planning

Traditional planning (GUP, AUP, and DUP)	Strategic/comprehensive planning (local development strategies and master plans)
Regulate land use	Are based on a long-term vision concerning development, shared by a variety of local stakeholders
Establish how land uses are distributed across the territory of the community	Comprehensive, including economic, environmental, and social dimensions of development
Drafted by multi-disciplinary teams of specialists	Prior to their drafting by specialists, the plans, the objectives and the programs are negotiated with the relevant stakeholders in the community
Implemented by the specialized services from within the local authorities	They are institutionalized (the unit for the implementation/management of the project) according to the combination of actors and responsibilities relevant in light of the goal of the project; they imply a rigorous planning effort of all types of resources involved (human, financial etc.)

Source: Translation by the author from MDPWH (2007)

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2009 and November 2010. A number of 25 planners (15 from cities and towns and 10 from rural communities) were interviewed via the phone, using an interview guide comprising 10 general questions (some questions had follow-up questions), split into two main sections: section one dealt with general questions regarding the role of master plans in the development of a community; section two dealt with more specific questions regarding how sustainability considerations were included in the drafting of the plan. All the planners that were interviewed worked for communities that have a master plan for at least one year.

A number of 40 master plans (22 belonging to urban communities and 18 belonging to rural communities from the North-Western and Central regions) were assessed in addition to the interviews. In most cases the plans were downloaded from the website; in the rest of the cases they were obtained following a written request sent to the local public authorities. We used several criteria for conducting the assessment which were grouped around the two dimensions from the interviews. For each criterion there were three possible choices namely yes, it fulfills the requirement of the criterion, partial, it fulfils only in part the requirement of the criterion, and no, it doesn't fulfill at all the requirement of the criterion. As already explained, a more detailed multi-criteria analysis will be performed in the future.

The second research question we tried to answer refers to whether some communities take sustainable development more seriously than others, based on the master plan.

A first criterion used for the assessment of the master plans refers to the existence of a community vision stated in terms of sustainable development. Moreover, we were interested in determining if the said vision was context-specific, the result of an 'adaptation and internalization' of the requirements of sustainability by the community. 82% of the master plans assessed had a vision for the future of their community. In over

60% of these cases we were able to identify sustainable development requirements. However in only two master plans we were able to find a vision stated in the jargon of sustainability that had to do with the specific context of these communities: in one case the vision was related to place-based economy and the sustainable development of the community through tourism and the use of local assets, emphasizing the importance of local folk art objects sold to tourists; in the other case the vision referred to a pollution-free community, based on developing economic activities in the realm of tourism and leisure such as climbing (the main economic activity used to be related to mining). We also assessed if the operational objectives were stated in terms of sustainability jargon. Over 80% of the plans had at least two objectives stated, totally or partially, in this manner.

Another aspect analyzed refers to the proportion of each dimension of sustainability (namely economic, environmental, and social) in the number of proposed projects/programs. We took into consideration only those projects which were labeled as relevant toward reaching sustainable development. The environmental dimension accounts for 48% of all projects/programs, followed by economic development which accounts for 37%. If we look however at the estimated value of the proposed projects (in those cases when these data were available), the economic ones are worth 1.6% more than the environmental ones. Social sustainability represents only 15% of the total n umber of projects. While most communities differ quite significantly with regard to the economic or environmental project proposed, there is a high degree of similarity with regard to the social projects. All communities focus on social housing, most of them strive to promote employment for disadvantage groups while also more than half promote some sort of services for the elderly, poor children, low-income families etc.

The interview questions are summarized below. The first question was: Are you familiar with the concept of sustainability or sustainable development? If so, how often are you faced in your day by day planning work with issues related to sustainability? Are problems explicitly defined in terms of sustainability? All of the planners seemed to have at least a basic understanding of the concept of sustainability. From all the definitions provided, two aspects are worth highlighting: on the one hand, the constant reference to the Brundtland report or to some parts of the definition offered in the report (mostly intergenerational equity); on the other hand an emphasis on the environmental dimension of sustainability referred to as environmental protection, prevention of environmental degradation, consideration for the environment during economic development etc. Several planners were able to cite elaborate definitions of sustainability, and volunteered that they have read and/or heard about them during training programs or while pursuing graduate degrees. They stated however that sustainability is rarely part of their activity as planners, either explicit or implicit. As one planner stated 'the only time when I heard the word sustainability at work was when we discussed about the master plan'. Another planner claimed that 'we do not

ignore sustainability on purpose but there are other words we use when we define problems…they are more easily understood by all the people involved'.

The second question: Which is (if any) the role of sustainability considerations in developing the strategic vision for the future of your community? What about operational objectives and action plans/programs? Several planners said that at the beginning of the drafting process of the master plan or prior to that they had received some training or information regarding this process. Thus, some of them knew which are the steps that you need to follow during the strategic planning process and argued that they spent at least several hours trying to come up with several key words that would go into the final vision statement. When asked about key words that had been pointed out with regard to the vision statement, the following were most often offered: knowledge-based and/or service oriented economy; pollution-free environment and more green spaces; economic well-being; conservation/rational use of natural resources; protection of historic monuments and/or districts etc. When asked if they consider these concepts as being part of the broader sustainability notion, many responded that they are not necessarily part of sustainable development but for them are more easily to work with because they have a clear representation of what they need to plan for when they talk about creating more green spaces or upgrading facades in the historic district: 'for me sustainable development doesn't translate into anything concrete…the citizens are not asking for sustainable development…they ask for better roads for better public transportation or for social housing…'. Such a negative response was given especially with regard to objectives such as historic preservation or the remodeling/upgrading of old buildings. Other planners admitted that they did not pay a lot of attention to the vision statement and were not concerned regarding the concepts used to word it. Several even said that they searched the web for what they thought to be a nice, proper vision and just used it.

When asked about the role of sustainability in defining operational objectives and action plans most planners said that sustainability had played no role at all. Only one planner said that 'it could be that some of the proposed actions fit the description of sustainability, but neither me not the other staff have thought about it…we are just not used to think in this way…if I think better probably most of our environmental policies/programs could be labeled as efforts directed towards the sustainable development of the community'. Another planner, unsure of what counts as sustainable, said that 'we try in our community to support economic activities that do not harm the environment but I don't know if this is sustainable development'.

The third question: When drafting the master plan of your community, was there a debate among the planning staff about including sustainability considerations into the plan? If so, did you try to define sustainability in a way that was unique to your community? Was there a public debate about the final definition of sustainability or sustainable development? What was the role of non-experts in reaching that definition? Most of the planners stated that the process of drafting the master plan had not started in a very organized and methodic fashion, with a discussion about what should and

shouldn't go into the plan; it had rather started with the announcement of the mayor that a plan was needed and the process was then carried out by a working group formed for this purpose. At least in the early stages one planner noted 'chaos reigned and everybody involved tried to understand what his/her responsibilities were…we also tried to identify which documents we could use as templates…'. Several planners stated however that they came across sustainability in the early stages of the planning process through a document called Agenda 21. Probably as famous as the Brundtland report, Agenda 21 emphasizes the role of local communities in achieving sustainability; it also coined the famous saying 'Think globally, act locally'. The interviewed planners stated that this document was used as a template for wording policy objectives and priorities in the sustainability jargon. Only three of the planners stated that the master plan of their community includes an explicit reference to sustainability as a policy objective. Most of the planners interviewed argued that they see no need to look for other definitions of sustainability since the concept is already defined: 'we did not see any reason why not to use the Brundtalnd definition; it is easy to understand and every staff member liked it…'; 'we tried to combine two definitions one of the staff member found in some books and I think that in the end our definition looks a bit different, not like the ones in the book'. Since in most cases sustainability is not seen as a socially constructed concept but as a rather predefined set of elements, planners saw no reason to consult with the public on the definition of sustainability. Moreover, one planner said that the introductory parts of the plan were not discussed with the public: 'nobody really cared about the definitions and principles listed in the beginning, they wanted to hear about specific services and facilities…we thought it was more important to emphasize how the city hall will provide these services in the future…'.

Planners were also asked if all aspects/dimensions of sustainability are carrying the same weight and if it comes to prioritization of dimensions, which one will they favor. We were interested in determining how they approach such a potential conflict. Most of the planners argued that in theory all dimensions should carry the same weight; however they acknowledged that in practice conflicts do occur. Several of them mentioned that in their opinion the environmental dimension is already above the others in light of very stringent legal provisions, some of them adopted under the pressure of EU: 'as I said before, in the field of garbage removal, we plan in a certain way not because we want to but because we have to…we are forced in a way to become more protective of the environment…'. Most of the planners argued that it is usually not up to them to prioritize policy objectives and action programs; even if they decide during the drafting of the plan that the environmental dimension has priority, in practice their decision is overruled by weak enforcement of existing decisions or simply by contradictory decisions made by the elected officials who choose to disregard the strategy: 'we [planners] do not have the final word; the council can decide otherwise, they can ignore the master plan and there is no consequence for them…'.

Moreover, planners were asked to provide some examples with regard to how economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainable development are to be achieved in their community (in light of the master plan). Most of the planners were able to elaborate on specific projects related to the different dimensions of sustainability. In the area of social sustainability, all planners discussed about social housing and programs for persons with various disabilities. Two planners brought up the issue of advocacy planning, stating that in some cases 'the local authorities should do more for minority groups, such as the Rroma minority; their voice is never heard when it comes to planning the future of the city and without an intermediary person who is able to convey their requests they will not be taken into consideration…it is the same with the very poor who live in unfinished or degraded apartment blocks in one neighborhood in the Eastern part of the city…'. With regard to the environment, two issues were frequently brought up by planners: brownfield redevelopment or the broader topic of urban regeneration and the necessity to plan for more open/green spaces. It is easily observable that despite the absence of a context-specific definition of sustainability, sustainability concerns are framed in terms of the problems that they have to solve in their communities. Planner from rural communities argued that their communities do not have to plan for such a wide array of environmental problems and three of them actually mentioned that 'garbage collection and removal is the only real problem in rural areas when it comes to environmental problems…in other areas villages are better off than cities, less pollution, less noise…'. The interviewees were careful when referring to the economic dimension of sustainability. Some stated that sometimes you need to compromise on the environmental side if you want to achieve something in the economic development of the community: 'in my community people harvest timber for survival…and though they do it often illegally it represents their only means for survival…though we say that we want to protect the environment the plan also tries to encourage people not only to harvest the timber but to also transform it into furniture or other goods…'. Other claimed that smaller communities should not plan for unrealistic types of economic activities – i.e. service or knowledge-based industries, when they know from the beginning that their communities do not have the assets these industries are after: 'the mayor has tried to negotiate with several textile manufacturers to come and locate in our community but since there is no public transportation between the city and our village nobody wants to come here…'.

At the end of the interview planners were asked to assess/discuss how effective their master plan is towards achieving the sustainable development of the community. All of the interviewed planners initially assessed favorably the role of the master plan toward reaching sustainable development within their community: 'the plan is very good…it is the most important instrument for reaching sustainable development…'; 'the plan represented an opportunity for us to learn new things, to think about innovative programs for approaching the problems in our community…I think therefore it is important toward reaching sustainability'; '…though I did not initially understood why we need a plan I now think that every modern community should

have one…it is the first thing the mayor can show to investors who want to locate in our community or to foreign delegations from sister cities…'. When reminded about their earlier comments regarding the disconnection between the planning process and their daily activity, some of them openly admitted that they have never questioned the contribution of the plan toward the future development of the community, even less toward reaching sustainability. As one planner stated 'if we are pressured from so many directions to draft a master plan, it has to be a good thing for the community, doesn't it?'. Others have stated that they do not necessarily think about the future of the community in terms of sustainability but rather in terms of 'what is good for the community'. These planners who spoke about the public interest or about what is good of the community claimed that it is not very complicated to determine what should be done for the community; in one opinion, 'as long as people are honest, there is no corruption and the money are used wisely, citizens won't have a thing to complain about…the community is usually stagnant when the mayor doesn't care about the community, starts hiring his/her own relatives to hold public positions and spends the public money in a non-transparent way…'. All planners expressed a great deal of hope regarding the development of the community in the future, even if most of them do not perceive the vision from the master plan and the actual development of the community as evolving together and eventually mutually influencing each other.

6. Main findings

First we examine the data relevant for answering the first research question – which is (if any) the role master plans play with regard to the long-term development of local communities.

From the assessed master plans, following the typology proposed by Kaiser and Godschalk (1995), 65% fall into the development management plan category, 10% into the verbal policy plan category, while 25% could be considered hybrid plans, combining distinct features from at least two different categories. Most communities are trying to draft plans that depart from the traditional model of the urbanistic plans, which are highly technical and map-oriented. However, the emphasis on the physical dimension of development is still present. Verbal policy plans are rather unusual because they represent a drastic departure from the urbanistic plans, containing very few (if any) statistical data and maps but focusing instead on a vision statement and strategic objectives for the community. Usually short, these plans are perceived by planners as not professional and lacking substance (see the interviews below).

We also tried to determine the relation between the local master plan and other existing planning documents. On the one hand, we looked at whether during the planning process at the local level other existing strategies from upper tiers of government were considered: *i.e.* metropolitan or county master plans, as well as regional plans. On the other hand, we looked for any mention of the possible relationship between the master plan and the General Urbanistic Plan. 10% of the master plans make reference to the county or regional plan/development strategy;

these communities are usually part of a metropolitan area for which an integrated urban plan was drafted, as a precondition for accessing EU money. None of the master plans assessed explained how the master plan and the General Urbanistic Plan should be synchronized and how changes in one of these documents affect the other one.

Another dimension that was assessed refers to the nature of the planning process – was there a broad involvement of the stakeholders within the community? Were there any special strategies used by the planning department in order to encourage public participation? In 85% of the plans there was no mention with regard to how the strategic planning process was carried out. In 5% of the plans there was a description of strategies used in order to generate more public input – most frequently meetings held in the community, in cities where there are city hall departments organized at neighborhood level as well as meetings held in the school building or in a community center/gym. In one community there was a three days workshop organized on a public field, where architects and planners worked together with community members in order to draw the new city hall building and another public building. In this case however there was a grant received by the public authority as well assistance from international donors to carry out this process.

A final criterion used refers to how the 'success' of the plan will be evaluated. 64% of the strategies mention that an intermediary review/evaluation will be performed; however in only 7% of these cases there are at least three indicators listed which will be considered during evaluation. In all these cases an indicator cited refers to how many EU financed grants will be attracted in the future.

Additional data for answering the first research question was provided from the interviews. The findings below are based on the opinions and perceptions of the planners working for these communities. The first question from the interview guide was: How do you assess the role of master plans in guiding the development of your community? Do you think that all communities should have such a plan? Are these master plans different from urbanistic plans? There were at least two recurrent issues brought up by the interviewees: on the one hand, they referred to the fact that drafting the plan is almost an obligation or a prerequisite for gaining access to financing (mostly EU money) or other opportunities, not all of them financial – *i.e.* increased willingness of the County council to support projects coming from communities which have shown initiative in drafting a master plan. One planner even claimed that communities have a legal obligation to draft such plans, which is not accurate. On the other hand, planners talked about how the plan, once the initial momentum is gone, tends to be nothing more than a document without much connection to reality. The drafting of the plan becomes according to the planners a goal in itself, mostly because it involves a very complex process – the tedious collection of data, some of which are not easily available, the actual drafting, the coordination of different people and services etc. As one planner has stated 'when the plan was done we all felt that we had conquered a mountain…there was a sense of pride that we finally had a plan after so many months of hard work….nobody seem to think that the plan was just the

beginning, that we should somehow translate it into reality…'. Most of the planners interviewed stated that all communities should have such a plan; however the reasons offered for this were very different: '…even if we do not see the relevance of such a plan we had to draft it two years ago…we were told that otherwise we will loose a lot of opportunities to get money, European funds… '; 'it is important to have such a plan because in this way you stand out among the other rural communities…you have a chance to prove that things are moving in the right direction in your community, that you have initiative …however now there are more and more rural communities drafting such plans…'; 'it [the plan] offers you a chance to take a good look at your community and think where it could be in the future…however, because of various reasons, once we draft it, we tend not to think about it or about how it was drafted, we just say it is in the strategy'. The planners' perception with regard to the role of the master plan becomes even clearer when compared against the urbanistic plans (mostly the General Urbanistic Plan). Several planers stated that urbanistic plans are easier for them to understand, they have drafted them for many years and are used to their requirements. As one planner stated 'because of my background [architect] I know exactly how to draft the General Urbanistic Plan…it is true that nowadays we work with a consultant but I know exactly what to look for and how to check for irregularities'. Most of the planners argued that the master plan and the urbanistic plans are not necessarily connected; while it is mandatory to have a General Urbanistic Plan, drafted according to legal requirements, communities are free to choose whether to draft a master plan and its format is also a matter of choice.

Planners were then asked to describe an ideal master plan: how it should be drafted (the process), who should be involved, how the final outcome (the plan itself) should look like, who should be its main beneficiaries. Most of the interviewees complained about the fact that data gathering had been very complicated and tedious. Some of them openly admitted that they lack the expertise needed in order to refine the data and to use it for forecasts: 'we used to have a person who had a degree in statistics but he was let go, because of budget cuts…none of us knows how to draw complicated charts or to make forecasts…'. The process was further complicated in some cases because elected officials (the mayor or the Local Council members) wanted to get actively involved, not just in setting priorities but also in the technical stages of the drafting of the master plan: 'the mayor had been a hassle, always wanting to check on the draft of the plan and to make changes…'. Especially in cases where there were conflicts surrounding the drafting of the plan, planners claimed that elected officials had no business in interfering with the drafting process since in most cases they did not possess the necessary knowledge or skills. With regard to the involvement of the public, the interviewees had mixed reactions. Several of them claimed that the public is usually a nuisance, which offers no useful input to the planning process: 'in general only old people or people who are dissatisfied with the city hall usually show up at these meetings…and very often they complain about things that are unrelated to the matter at hand'; 'people have very specific claims/wishes and do not

understand that sometimes they cannot be included in the strategy as such…an old lady wanted to have garbage removal changed from early morning to mid-day because of the noise and got very upset when we tried to translate it into a more general objective…'. Others claimed that the public is very useful when it comes to pointing deficiencies in how public services are operated and in providing alternatives, all of which were then used in building the SWOT analysis, which is part of many master plans: 'they [citizens] are very good at saying what is not working, even if it is minor stuff, sometimes they put a lot of energy into telling you what's wrong and how they think it could be fixed…'. With regard to other actors who might get involved, most planners seemed distrustful of both NGOs and business. Far from regarding them as valuable partners, they stated that NGOs and businesses have their own agenda and that they become demanding only when it serves their purposes: 'NGOs…yes, they might care when it comes to public parks and social housing but they do not get or want to get that we operate sometimes under serious constraints…'.

Most of the planners stated that they are relatively satisfied with the final outcome of the strategic planning process, namely the master plan. One common complaint from the planners had to do with the fact that these plans are rather long and technical and thus are not very accessible to the ordinary citizens: 'our master plan is very long and at least the first two sections comprise a lot of detailed demographic and economic data…I don't think that there are too many citizens who would understand or care about it…'. Echoing this opinion, another planner suggested that 'perhaps we should have a shorter version of the strategy available for the citizens, with more pictures and drawings…in this way they would be better informed and will stop asking for things that are not planned for in the master plan…'. Several planners pointed toward another limitation of the plan: the sections of the master plan are unbalanced, usually a lot of attention given to the description of the past and current situation, and less details put into the section comprising future policies and plans. One planner even said that 'in order to have a very long text of the master plan, and to make it impressive, we included a lot of information about the soil, the landscape, the natural resources…some of it was not necessarily needed but it made the text more impressive I think…'. Several planners stated that the final document could benefit from comprising more attractive graphs, maps or computer simulations; they acknowledged that most planners do not have skills for developing them. The planners also stated that they would like to have someone who knew to work with GIS, though most of the interviewees were not able to state the exact purpose of such expertise.

Almost all planners considered that the beneficiary of the plan is in the first place the local authority and only in subsidiary the community: 'the city hall will be the one to benefit from numerous opportunities once we have the plan…it is true however that in the end, once the projects are implemented, the community will benefit the most…'; 'in my opinion the local authorities are those who use the plan on a daily basis…I don't think that citizens know about it but I understood that sometimes businesses may look at the master plan to see if there are some incentives for them…

we once had a situation when a company asked for legal assistance because we said so in the plan...'.

Another question referred to how planners perceive their role in the process of drafting the master plan. Most of the interviewed planners stated that they should be in charge of this process; the main reason offered being their expertise. A few of them even complained that elected officials appointed themselves heads of the task force that had carried out the drafting process, without having any clue about what was going on: 'the mayor wanted to chair the working group but he only showed up to several meetings...'; 'the director of our department...she knew nothing about the community...she had been recently hired and lives in the city and commutes for work...'. Only one planner, who had worked in the past with NGOs as a social worker, claimed that planners should be mediators, people who want to get a variety of points of view across and only then, eventually, make the final decision. Especially in relation to the general public, the planners expressed the view that they are better informed and know what is possible and what is not in their communities: 'some people only have requests...they say that they had seen this or that in other countries...I don't even think that some projects should be considered...'

The final question from the first dimension was: How would you assess, five years after it had been adopted, the effectiveness of the master plan? What criteria would you use? Several planners stated that they know that in their master plan there is reference to a future evaluation to be conducted after a certain number of years after its adoption. Though they were aware of its finality – to update the plan in light of the new conditions, they were not sure how this task will be completed. They argued that they do not know of any specific criteria against which you could evaluate the effectiveness of the master plan. When asked to think about such possible criteria, only a few offered a response: 'we might look to see if certain economic indicators have improved over the years...standard data that are available such as the rate of unemployment...'; 'we could try to determine how many of the policies/ programs proposed in the plan have been implemented and see if their implementation brought any positive results...I think however that this will be done for each project individually'; 'I don't know whether you can determine the effectiveness of such a plan...the mayor already claimed during the last election campaign that it is a result of his activity...'.

7. Conclusions

Comprehensive planning and plans seem to continue to maintain their importance in planning and directing local economic development and growth into the 21st century. They have incorporated over time issues such as community participation, budgeting, and sustainability. In Romania, where there is almost no debate about the theory or practice of comprehensive plans, a proliferation of these plans has started almost a decade ago; local communities were pressured to draft such master plans in order to get financing or be eligible for certain grant competitions. Planners

are not completely aware themselves of the role the profession has in drafting these plans or how they should be used in order to efficiently guide the development of the community into the future.

Sustainability-related concerns are often incorporated into the master plan. The concept is often perceived by planners as something rather abstract. They are not aware of how certain specific, operational objectives fit the bill of sustainable development. There is an overemphasis on the environmental dimension; however this could be formal because of stringent environmental regulations. With regard to how planners think that sustainability should be defined there is a paradox worth mentioning. On the one hand planners do not think that they should struggle to find a definition that is constructed at their community level through a process of negotiation among the relevant stakeholders. On the other hand, when we look at how specific programs are worded, it becomes clear that sustainability is at least in part context-driven.

Most planners do not have a clear idea how to measure the impact of a master plan; this happens mostly because the plan is seen as an end in itself rather than a means. Planners usually overestimate the importance of the plan, though they generally recognize that they rarely go to the plan when decisions regarding development are made.

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