

Abstract

Dissertation: *The Possibilities of Sustainable Urban Development in Iran in Light of the Example of the City of Arak*

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There are two timeframes that do not concern me: the past and the future. For me, the past is the treasure chest where I preserve my positive and negative experiences. The experiences that I am really proud of are those that have made me who I am. The future is just as important because it is the product of my past actions. However, I am always concerned about my present. I live in the present now. In the present, I remember my past so that I do not repeat those mistakes and can re-experience the positive energy of happy moments. The present is NOW. It is the moment when I think and responsibly plan for the future. In the future, I will only be able to embrace my past with a good conscience if I live the moment now, in the present. A person who is anchored solely in the past is hopeless, whereas a person who only waits for the future to arrive is a dreamer. By contrast, a person who lives in the present will always be truly hopeful and happy because the present never ends. "Sustainable development" is not only a technical term for me, but rather a principle that has its place in every situation in our lives. To me, sustainable development means quality living in the present to responsibly ensure the future and avoid feeling guilty about the past.

During the UN conference on "environment and development" in Rio in 1992, the international community of states - including Iran - agreed to the principle of sustainable development: "Sustainable Development, which implies meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, should become a central guiding principle of the United Nations, Governments and private institutions, organisations and enterprises."

The present dissertation under the rubric of *the Possibilities of Sustainable Urban Development in Iran in Light of the Example of the City of Arak* addresses the possibilities and limitations of sustainable development, as well as the way in which spatial and social development processes are handled in Iran. The subject of sustainability will first be discussed in terms of the international debate. For this purpose, it is worth explaining the concept of sustainable development as a model and the Agenda 21 as a program of action to analyze the status of the sustainability process at the local level on this basis.

In order to assess the institutional sphere, the state of the sustainability debate in Germany will be used for comparison. The focus here will be placed upon the significance of the tools for sustainable urban planning. For the purpose of comparing the status of Agenda 21 in Germany and Iran (despite the distinct overall political, economic and social conditions), the stage that the sustainability process has reached in Iran will be evaluated and its shortcomings will be identified.

Using the city of Arak as an example, this text will examine whether the principles of sustainable development are being taken into consideration in everyday planning, as well as the extent to which the sustainable urban development action program is transferrable to Iranian cities. From an Iranian perspective, the city of Arak is a very significant industrial city within Iran's national development plan, also reflecting the typical problems of Iranian cities; for example, the conflict between rich and poor, modernity and tradition, the priority of economy over ecology and the

social, as well as the relationship between agriculture and industry. Moreover, after a precise comparative information phase, the situation in the provinces with Arak as the capital of the provinces crystallised itself as a region typical for all other closed industrial regions and the choice of the city of Arak as an object in a case study was confirmed.

The research methods include literature research, data collection, site visits, surveying and on-site interviews with key people. A solid base of trust with the key personalities was an important element of the research success. Whilst conducting conversation (interviews), trust was established on both sides, holding central importance as the basis of interpersonal interaction. To establish a common trust, many factors are taken into account. While one can generally not write a recipe for how to win over the trust of the other person during an interview, I can say the following specifically in relation to the discussions in Iran within the framework of this research journey. From the outset, I made clear to my contacts that I am here because *WE* want to begin a sustainability movement *together*. Considering that the respondents wanted to be informed regarding the aims, approach and their own influence, rather than simply being regarded as an information channel and an instrument, a brief overview of the topic of "sustainability" was given prior to each interview, whereby any ambiguities were clarified.

Additionally, the subject of sustainable urban development was more extensively addressed as part of a seminar, a conference and a workshop. The main goal of this workshop was to analyse and discuss the situation and the possibilities of participation processes in Arak together with the involved parties.

This workshop was particularly a kind of "test case" to ascertain whether - with the given societal possibilities - it is possible to execute the project of participation in Iran. The future workshop concept of methods was deliberately picked as a suitable "method".

A special role for researchers is expected in selecting the research methodology of "action research". In conducting these interviews, it became apparent that the interviewees had little or no knowledge about the principles of sustainable development. This gave rise to the need for "action research." As previously mentioned, while executing "action research" one has to eliminate their distance as an analyst and contribute directly to the process: from involving observation to purposeful influence on the process with means of presentations, workshops, media relations and participation in symposiums as an instructor. Only through this process can one start to build trust as a researcher, which will enable access to key personalities during the action research, as well as further necessary data and information.

In summary, for sustainability to become a reality in Iran, science, politics, planning administration and not least the citizenry must become involved in sustainability planning. In essence, the action recommendations focus upon aspects of participation and local sustainability strategies. These were the steps that would take the city of Arak on the road to sustainability and accelerate the sustainable development process with priority:

- *Development of a local sustainability concept;*
- *Development of a participatory approach; and*
- *Establishment of the neighbourhood offices of the Local Agenda 21.*

The implementation of sustainability strategies is also related to the development of transparent information databases in the context. Accordingly, one needs structures and an awareness of the effectiveness and necessity of participation for society. Participation not only provides "democratic planning", but also gives urban planners and local stakeholders a realistic perspective for their actions and follows the principle of a needs-orientated urban planning.

In addition, the commitment of citizens to their city is significantly strengthened. To increase sensitivity and attention regarding environmental issues, social issues and the local economy in their own homes, these issues need to be discussed in public. Planning and politics alone can only create target values and basic conditions for the success of sustainable development and sustainable city development.

As a result, I can say that the sustainable development process in Iran has no continuity. Additionally, in my view, there is no model or continuous long-term sustainability program in Iran. This also needs to be seen as a critical obstacle for sustainable urban planning there. To date, long-term orientation and sustainable planning have failed due to the "Phoenix principle", which is typically Iranian, whereby "a new phoenix rises from the ashes of the old," experiences are lost and mistakes are not processed. Accordingly, each new government and presidency begins again with fresh enthusiasm, albeit without acknowledging the previous attempts or following up on them, whereby steps that are introduced fail because subsequent political responsibility for programs is not pursued. Ultimately, this needs to transform management strategy!

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