

Abstract

Planning for sustainable spatial development is challenging due to the many pertained uncertainties and the multi-disciplinary nature of the affecting causes. This is more problematic in the inextricably volatile geo-political context of Bethlehem in the West Bank that circumscribes Palestinian spatial planning policy in many ways since it is afflicted by a prolonged military occupation, as well as a weakened planning capacity to manage the limited natural resources. Tellingly, the Western definition to sustainability in terms of spatial development is indeed problematic to such an evolved context, especially under the ongoing Palestinian flagship project of ending the occupation and building the statehood.

This doctoral research aims at identifying the suitable Spatial Planning Strategies towards Sustainability (“SPSSs”) to the context of Bethlehem. “Smart Growth” that is a term in vogue as a progeny of sustainability in the Palestinian planning vocabulary is assessed and debunked to show that such ready-made recipes would only pay a lip service to sustainable spatial development at the local level. In more concrete terms, the empirical-oriented objectives of this doctoral research include assessing the present-day situation and the future impact of the *status quo* of spatial development and planning on the limited Palestinian natural resources; and developing scenarios for sustainable spatial development and planning, in order to adapt (not subject) to the prevailing geo-political context. As per the theoretical-oriented objectives they include additions to the palette of theoretical discourses that advocates to realizing sustainability as a right-based approach, along to the hitherto articulated need-based approach especially in the turmoil geo-political context that spawns present Palestine; and proposing an expert-consulting model for decision support that is theoretically informed, and practice relevant within a context unequivocally perceived with complexity. All of all, this would contribute in the improvement of the state of spatial order in present Palestine, by devising strategies and designated policies towards sustainability in such a geo-political context.

Methodologically, this doctoral research deploys a mixed research methods of quantitative and qualitative approaches, and musters data from two sets: primary and secondary. The primary data are extracted mainly from direct field observations from the case study environment of Bethlehem and its environs and from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with Palestinian planning experts, academia, and decision-makers from the policy community of Bethlehem. Accordingly, the acquired data are triangulated, and all filtered to feed the discussion organized in focus group format with key informants and decision makers to draw more data of primary importance to the theme of research. Concurrently, the secondary data are built through deliberations on the available data sources in the forms of archived research, published documents by state and non-state actors, including municipal and civil society, along with mapping interpretations using Geographic Information System.

The expected outcome of this doctoral research promises to address interlinked knowledge gaps. In the context of complex geo-politics and an emergent statehood: how to plan for sustainability in terms of spatial development; what is the definition of sustainability in terms of spatial development; wherefore the prevailing spatial order conditions are associated with a stance of deterioration and malfunctioning; and what are their implications in terms of the triple bottom lines of sustainability: social, economic, and environment.

It bears repeating that geo-politics basically prevents Palestinian cities from wittingly adopting “SPSSs” that satisfy the needs of the present without compromising the future aspirations and rights. As such, the intellectual merit of this doctoral research is manifested in placing the critical issue of the geo-political role of the city and its spatial planning policies in the forefront of research in contemporary cities of imbalanced power relations, where planning process must stay abreast of wrenching changes on the ground that loom large. It is envisaged that the findings of this doctoral research will have a far-reaching impact on the planning policies of the Palestinian government towards conceiving the Palestinian statehood and realizing it as a fact on the ground.

Keywords: Spatial Planning Strategies towards Sustainability “SPSSs”; Geo-politics; and Bethlehem.