

STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING IN THE ERA OF CRISIS: CURRENT TRENDS AND EVIDENCE FROM THE METROPOLITAN AREA OF THESSALONIKI

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Strategic spatial planning has enjoyed widespread implementation since the 1990s, especially in urban and metropolitan areas, having its focus on promoting their competitiveness and sustainability. Nowadays, the effects of economic crisis, together with growing environmental and technological risks, trigger the vulnerability of these areas and stress the need for resilience. This paper examines the role of strategic spatial planning in promoting metropolitan resilience in the era of crisis. It is argued that this type of planning is capable of supporting the adaptation of territorial systems to crisis-induced risks, as is, for instance, the case of planning for climate change. This is further analysed in light of four of the key aspects of the new strategic spatial planning, namely its principles, content, process, and utilization of resources. The paper draws evidence from the case of Greece and examines the above-mentioned aspects of the recently prepared new Regulatory Plan for the Thessaloniki greater area. The first results of this examination show that, provided there is political will which allows for necessary adjustments, the Plan has the potential to incorporate the dimension of resilience. The elaboration and exploitation of the strategic nature of the Plan and of its sustainable development principle constitute key elements of a resilience-oriented approach.

Key words: *Strategic spatial planning in Greece, Thessaloniki metropolitan area, metropolitan vulnerability, metropolitan resilience, resilience planning.*

INTRODUCTION

Strategic spatial planning has been promoted as a key planning instrument in recent years (Vasilevska and Vasić, 2009), finding a preferential field of application in urban and metropolitan areas (Albrechts *et al.*, 2003). When it re-emerged in the mid-1990s, it mostly responded to new challenges facing these areas, especially challenges stemming from intensified competition in the context of globalization, as well as the challenge of enhancing sustainable spatial development. Since then, a variety of strategic plans have been elaborated that focus on promoting entrepreneurship, innovation, creativity, sustainability, and so on, the aim being to orientate spatial organization and spatial development towards bold visions. This model

has been transferred to peripheral urban and metropolitan areas which seek to improve their relative position in the global terrain. As Raco and Flint (2012: 3) have noted, the prevailing sustainability planning model has proceeded in tandem with the effort to enhance economic growth, thus promising a 'win-win' agenda.

However, since 2008, several areas have been exposed to the impact of economic crisis, a fact which has made them vulnerable to related socio-economic risks. This is particularly true for urban and metropolitan areas in which the bulk of employment and productive activities is concentrated. At the same time 'the assumptions that underpinned planning systems and city strategies during the 1990s and 2000s have been rapidly undermined' (Raco and Flint, 2012:3), as public and private funding have been continuously reduced. This in turn has necessitated a new role and identity for strategic spatial planning, one capable of meeting these new challenges. It is then worth

questioning which characteristics, when incorporated into strategic planning, would best allow it to respond to current threats. This paper examines this very question, focusing on the Thessaloniki greater area, which is one of the two metropolitan areas of Greece. The paper draws evidence from the updating of the strategic planning document for the area which is currently in progress, attempting to identify the weaknesses and potentialities of this type of planning in current circumstances.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The second section addresses some of the key issues raised for urban and metropolitan areas

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with an emphasis on the notions of vulnerability and resilience. In the third section the role of strategic spatial planning for metropolitan resilience is discussed. The fourth section draws evidence from the Thessaloniki greater area and particularly from the process of updating its Regulatory Plan, which is a strategic spatial plan. Finally, some conclusions are drawn with regard to the potentialities of strategic spatial planning for a resilience-oriented approach.

URBAN/METROPOLITAN AREAS AND CRISIS

Globalization and spatial competition have become increasingly influential during the past two decades; within this context, urban and especially metropolitan areas have played an important role in the development of regions and countries. The strengthening of urban competitiveness has been at the core of spatial development policies. It represents a shift on the part of governments and local authorities towards economic performance and away from social equality through redistribution, which had prevailed during the previous period (Thoidou and Foutakis, 2006). Thus, it contrasts with older Keynesian-type policies whose main aim had been 'administrative modernization, interterritorial equalization and the efficient delivery of public services' (Brenner, 2003:297). At the same time, it seems that the competitiveness-cohesion dipole, which has been the prevailing policy direction until now at urban and regional levels (Maloutas *et al.*, 2008), is no longer able to address the effects of multifaceted crisis on these areas.

In recent years several urban and metropolitan areas have suffered the consequences of economic crisis (Cohen, 2011; EC, 2013). The crisis has had multiple negative effects, which mostly concern 'economic life,...unemployment and underemployment,...urban poverty,... housing foreclosures...and financial crises of local governments' (Cohen, 2011: 11–12). It also has intertwining social and environmental dimensions. The impact of the crisis has varied from continent to continent, from country to country and from one area to another. In each area the severity of the impact of the crisis has depended on its particular manifestation, the prevailing pre-crisis conditions, and other area-specific factors (Clark, 2009). Urban and metropolitan areas are exposed not only to the impact of economic crisis, but also to natural and technological hazards, such as the impact of climate change (Greiving *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the situation is aggravated by the growing complexity of these areas' functioning and institutional framework. This combination of

increased potential for dysfunction, together with their currently reduced coping capacity, creates vulnerability within these areas and consequently highlights the need for resilience planning.

Initially, the concept of vulnerability referred mainly to the conditions which arose from technological and natural hazards, for instance industrial accidents or climate change. However, in recent years, these same dangers have intensified, this intensification coinciding with the emergence of new threats due to the economic crisis. The 'coupling of a deep economic crisis with the perceived threat of an imminent global ecological crisis, above all because of climate change' characterizes the situation currently existing within cities and regions (Hudson, 2010:11–12). In the context of a recent study of European regions (ÖIR *et al.*, 2011:5), the notion of regional vulnerability was defined as 'a function of regional exposures and sensitivities towards the analyzed challenges and the regional adaptive capacities that are available to mitigate the impact exerted by the challenges'. So, the notion of vulnerability has now been extended to encompass current socio-economic risks (CJRES, 2010), which are either directly or indirectly connected to the economic crisis.

Indirectly, the worsening of the economic situation in an area could increase its vulnerability, because the latter also involves a lessening of the area's ability to deal with potential hazards, and given the fact that this ability is, to a large extent, connected to factors of socio-economic development which are being undermined. For example, the per capita GDP of a country is considered to be one such factor, because it reflects the ability of a region to face a catastrophe and, therefore, a decrease or increase in its vulnerability (Schmidt-Thomé, 2006).

The economic crisis not only intensifies the vulnerability of a city or a region, but it can also be a direct cause of it. The crisis influences both public and private spaces such as new residential areas, whose development depends to a large extent on the financial sector. One of the clearest examples of this was the collapse of the real estate market which was accompanied by the phenomenon of massive scale foreclosures covering huge areas of cities and metropolitan areas in the USA, and which led to the development of strategies for building resilient cities and regions (Swanstrom *et al.*, 2009). Actually, the utility of methods used to deal with vulnerability caused by natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods and so on, can be taken into consideration when dealing with the risks resulting from the economic crisis (Cohen,

2011:6–7). The consequences become more serious when they extend to all aspects of life in the city, such as deterioration of public services and infrastructure, unemployment and urban poverty. The crisis also affects the public sector, along with spatial planning institutions.

As a result, cities and regions have to develop their resilience to various risks so as to be able to overcome the impact of economic crisis, as is the case with the impact of environmental and technological hazards. Resilience is defined as 'The ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organization, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change' (IPCC, 2007). Despite the fact that the above definition originated in the field of natural sciences and is used mainly in descriptions of the ecosystem and of combating climate change, resilience can also be used more generally in connection with cities and regions in crisis conditions (Foutakis, 2012). In this sense resilience to recessions can be viewed as 'the ability of a local socio-economic system to recover from a shock or disruption' (Martin, 2012:4).

STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING FOR RESILIENCE

Strategic spatial planning has enjoyed widespread implementation since the 1990s when urban and metropolitan areas all over the world prepared and applied strategic plans which were based on bold visions. Their goal was not only to deal with spatial organization problems, but also to guide the future development of these areas towards achieving a better position within the urban network on a worldwide scale and attracting tertiary economic activities especially in the sectors of the highest added value. New strategic spatial planning differs from the old type of strategic spatial planning in terms of its content as well as its procedures, which in turn are related to its key principles. As Albrechts (2011:15) notes, 'such planning involves the critical interpretation of structural challenges and problems and creative thinking about possible solutions and how to achieve them'.

While any attempt to tackle the consequences of the economic crisis in a uniform manner would be unfeasible due to the differences between cities and between regions, each case illustrates the need for mobilization of planning. Recently, strategic planning has become closely connected with tackling the vulnerability of cities and regions and ensuring their resilience (Dos Santos and Partidário,

2011), as well as with “linking different types of regional stresses to alternative resilience frameworks” (Pendall *et al.*, 2010).

Hence, it can be argued that new strategic spatial planning can be connected to ‘planning for resilience’ as outlined above. This is, firstly, because neither of these types of planning is substantially concerned with highly detailed or binding plans; instead, their focus is on the planning process in which the involvement of citizens plays a central role. Secondly, because sustainable development holds a prominent position both in strategic spatial planning (Albrechts *et al.*, 2003) and in planning for the resilience of territorial areas (Davoudi *et al.*, 2012:323). Of course particular attention is needed when applying “an ecologically rooted concept to the social setting” (Davoudi *et al.*, 2012:306).

Besides this, in crisis conditions spatial planning itself appears particularly vulnerable, due to the fact that its institutional framework is under pressure, and its funding is subject to restrictions. Hence, strategic spatial planning needs to incorporate a resilience-oriented approach if metropolitan resilience is to be promoted effectively. Schematically, such an approach should be incorporated in at least four aspects of strategic spatial planning, these being: principles, content, process and funding. More specifically:

The principles pertaining to metropolitan resilience should underpin and guide the key strategic objectives of each plan. In general, these principles have similarities with those of the new strategic spatial planning, for instance regarding the fact that sustainability plays a key role in both. At the same time strategic objectives should take into consideration the new challenges with which urban areas are faced, thereby forging a closer connection with the key principles of resilience. Resilience-oriented planning principles are still being formulated and several approaches can be found. Albers and Deppisch (2012) suggest the following principles for urban and regional resilience: ‘diversity, redundancy, flexibility/adaptability, modularity/interdependency, mobility, and planning foresight’.

The content of the plan specifies the plan’s principles and at the same time has to take into consideration key vulnerability factors, which of course differ from one area to another. Evidently, there are some factors of general importance which should not be underestimated, namely those pertaining to the impact of the economic crisis on metropolitan development. Particular emphasis should be placed on the way the urban fabric develops, so

as to counteract or reverse some of the effects of the economic crisis, for instance by securing the provision of public goods by means of a minimum level of public services and public infrastructure. It is worth noting that, in general, policy options that concern both urban interventions and residential development are closely interrelated. Both are affected by the economic crisis, with the severity of the impact, of course, dependent on the particular situation in each area and country (Ball, 2010).

The process of planning plays a decisive role in the development of metropolitan resilience, in particular in connection with the way citizens are involved in the stages of planning. Planning for resilience is in essence ‘a capacity-building process whose ultimate goal is to sustain a process of individual, organizational and social change’ (UNEP, 2006 cited in Dos Santos and Partidário, 2011:1525). It is argued that an improvement in coping capacity is essential to build resilience ‘to withstand the effects of natural and other hazards’ (ESPON, 2003:11). Necessary changes can be connected to changes in the organization of planning, for example through more active involvement on the part of the citizens. At the same time, the state appears to be changing direction, moving towards more interventionist policies (Raco, 2009). Arguably, active democratic participation in policy making could increase the resilience of strategic spatial planning.

The efficient utilization of available resources is also an issue pertaining to the resilience of cities and regions which indeed confront the danger of cuts in public and private funding. The choices made regarding the distribution and use of funds are closely connected to the need for a renewal of strategic spatial planning. Given that funds are limited, it is all the more important that decisions regarding their allocation are well documented (Kurban, 2008), and that the prioritization process is effectively informed by spatial planning strategy.

STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING IN THE THESSALONIKI GREATER AREA

The two metropolitan areas of Greece play a leading role both in the strategy of promoting spatial competitiveness and in the country’s development in general. An example of this would be the attempt of Athens to reorientate the production and spatial development model by focusing on the organization of the Olympic Games in the first half of the 2000s, as would Thessaloniki’s earlier strategic vision of playing an enhanced role in SE Europe. Today, the

effects of the crisis are apparent throughout the economy, and particularly in the employment sector (EC, 2013). These effects include a reduction in incomes, a sharp increase in unemployment, the undermining of public services and infrastructure, and the social and environmental effects of the crisis which are worsening in both metropolitan areas (see also Hadjimichalis, 2011).

In both areas an ambitious start to strategic spatial planning was given by the 1985 Regulatory Plans for Athens and Thessaloniki, which, however, were not perceived as strategic instruments at that stage. In 2003 the updating of the two Regulatory Plans began, and today the related studies have been completed. Public consultation has taken place and modifications have been made but the new laws have yet to come into effect. The following constitutes a brief examination of the Draft Law on the new Thessaloniki Regulatory Plan (henceforth ‘Plan’), in light of the four aspects of strategic spatial planning suggested above. The aim of this examination is to highlight some aspects of resilience which are considered to be crucial for planning under crisis conditions. Of course, further research would be necessary for a full analysis.

An examination of the Draft Law on the Plan (Or. Thes., 2012) reveals both its strategic nature and a preliminary projection of strategic goals. If the key characteristics of strategic spatial planning are taken into account, the strategic role of the Plan is also evidenced in the introduction of new ideas – first and foremost the sustainability principle – as well as in linking process and outcome by means of the provision made for an Action Plan (Thoidou and Foutakis, 2012). More particularly:

Firstly, concerning the principles of planning, it seems that the Plan places emphasis on the model of competitive and sustainable spatial development. This observation is based on the fact that the Plan sets the following long-term key strategic objectives (Or. Thes., 2012: 2):

- *Promoting development, competitiveness and innovation and strengthening internationalization.*
- *Promoting territorial and social cohesion and improvement of quality of life.*
- *Securing environmental balance and protection of natural and cultural resources.*

Of course it should not be overlooked that the conditions for pursuing these objectives have changed in the current crisis circumstances. More particularly, as regards the first objective, spatial competitiveness dominated the past

decade's vision for the development of the Thessaloniki metropolitan area (Thoidou and Foutakis, 2006). However, in regard to this objective, it is worth examining whether a continuation of pre-crisis strategies or a transformative action (Raco and Street, 2012) better meets current challenges, especially since in the past two decades 'The city failed to face the structural problems of its economy and to initiate a restructuring process' (Lambrianidis, 2012:1815). At the same time, the issues addressed by the second and third objective respectively, namely social cohesion and environmental balance, which in general are under pressure nowadays (Davoudi *et al.*, 2009:3), are of critical importance for securing the city's overall resilience. Possibly, the above three objectives could also form the basis of a shift towards a resilience-oriented approach, if their content and relationship were reconsidered, and if the emphasis were to be placed on the issues of social cohesion and environmental balance.

Secondly, as regards the content of the Plan, we have selected the issue of urban residential development for further discussion, as it highlights some of the major facets of vulnerability in metropolitan areas, involving not only the dimension of economic crisis, but also that of the energy and environmental crisis. Evidently, residential development is promoted by both the broad and the more specific targets of the Plan, which specify its strategic objectives. More particularly, the following broad targets can be distinguished as the most resilience-oriented (Or. Thes., 2012: 2–3):

- *Reducing social inequalities between different districts and fighting the phenomena of social exclusion that have a spatial dimension.*
- *Promoting urban sustainability, with the aim of improving the quality of life and the social well-being of citizens.*
- *Promoting a sustainable development model with its key axes being the reorganization and exploitation of 'within-the-plan' areas and the prevention of urban sprawl; the non-built environment being a critical sustainability factor.*

In turn, the broad targets are broken down into specific targets among which the following are potentially supportive of the resilience of the most vulnerable residential areas (ibid.):

- *Planning and designing urban and residential development with priorities placed on the upgrading of the urban landscape and the quality of housing, improving living conditions in deprived areas, and implementation of social policy for housing*

and upgrading of public services ...

- *Targeted management of deprived urban areas and pockets of social exclusion by means of integrated urban regeneration programs.*
- *Giving priority to residential and economic development for 'within-the-plan' areas (the compact city principle) in tandem with a focus on the identity of urban areas ... and the return of residents to inner-city areas.*
- *Land use regulation in the peri-urban space, control of 'out-of-plan' building, protection of ecological functions and of agriculture, and preventing urban sprawl.*

It should be acknowledged that the above policy options of the new Plan advocate the increased potential of strategic spatial planning to ameliorate metropolitan vulnerability in a twofold way. Firstly, selected urban interventions can serve primarily as a means of addressing the problems of the areas which are suffering the most from the symptoms of crisis. Furthermore, in conjunction with the compact city principle, strategic spatial planning could promote the containment of urban sprawl. This would appear to be crucial, due to the fact that severe environmental and financial problems often accompany new residential urban developments, especially in peri-urban areas wherein 'there are numerous conflicts, primarily related to the land use' (Živanović Miljković *et al.*, 2012:16). As Giannakou (2012) notes, starting in the mid-1990s, there was a rapid growth of urban sprawl in the Thessaloniki greater area. This growth was triggered by the residential development of suburban areas, a fact connected to the construction industry being stimulated by investment in any type of real estate.

Thirdly, concerning the planning process, in the early 2000s, in tandem with an attempt to establish metropolitan governance in the Thessaloniki greater area, efforts were made to initiate a participative strategic spatial planning model (Kafkalas, 2008). These efforts were indicative of the acknowledgment at the local (metropolitan) level of the need for a renewed planning process. Deficiencies stemmed from the fact that, 'the planning system in Greece is based on a hierarchical but fragmented structure' (Delladetsimas, 2012:11). Since 2010 prospects have arisen from the administrative reform which placed emphasis on self-elected authorities at the regional and local levels. Within the context of this reform, which emphasizes the second degree self-elected regional authorities, the provision made for the so-called metropolitan regions of Athens and Thessaloniki respectively could be utilized as the

basis for upgrading the role of both the metropolitan level bodies and the relevant participatory process in strategic spatial planning. However, this would require a reorganization of the metropolitan region and its competencies in this respect (see also Beriatis, 2012).

Fourthly, concerning the efficient utilization of financial resources, it is worth mentioning that during the last three to four years dramatic cuts in public expenditure, and consequently in public investment, have been in progress. This has been a result of the austerity policies implemented in the country since 2010. For instance the Public Investment Budget as a percentage of the country's GDP was reduced from 4.9% in 2003, to 3.2% in 2011 (Min. Fin., 2012: 98). Consequently there has been a drastic cut in resources available for the Plan's implementation, a situation which has demanded the prioritization of selected programs, measures and actions, based on specific criteria (Thoidou, 2012b). In fact, the Plan makes provision for its implementation by means of a five-year Action Plan consisting of five priority sectors. One noteworthy function of the Action Plan will be to set the criteria for the prioritization of the actions within each priority sector. Thus, the fundamental issue of prioritization of actions is transferred to the time of the initiation of the Action Plan.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the economic crisis continues and its impact on several countries intensifies the vulnerability of their cities and regions, an elaboration of specialized plans and methods capable of coping with these new challenges is becoming urgent. Urban and especially metropolitan areas are particularly susceptible to the consequences of the crisis. This is, to a large extent, due to their magnitude and complexity. As they face new types of problems, they have to rethink and re-orientate planning principles and content, as well as upgrade democratic participation in the planning process and utilize the resources available to promote their overall resilience. At the same time, spatial planning is under pressure as there are significant changes in the means of its application, especially in the institutional and funding framework. Of the spatial planning tools applicable in metropolitan areas, strategic spatial planning can, in the current situation, be considered the one most relevant to the need for both resilience of spatial planning and planning for resilience.

In the case of strategic planning for the Thessaloniki greater area, provisions are made by the new Thessaloniki Regulatory Plan for both civil protection and protection of the

environment. These provisions also place significant emphasis on climate change mitigation and adaptation, and can, therefore, be considered representative of a resilience-oriented approach to strategic spatial planning (Thoidou, 2012a). So, this approach to strategic planning could be extended to include dealing with the risks associated with the impact of the crisis on metropolitan development.

In seeking to define those elements of the new Regulatory Plan which confer the dimension of resilience thus enhancing the Plan's ability to address crisis-induced challenges, this paper has briefly examined the issues of principles, content, process and funding as they emerge from the Plan. It can be concluded that even though no direct provision is made for planning in conditions of crisis, and this is due to the fact that the draft of the new Regulatory Plan was almost completed just before the start of the crisis, there are, nevertheless, significant elements within the Plan which could secure a new role for planning towards metropolitan resilience, the most important of these being the positioning of the sustainable development principle as its overall aim. At the same time, even some of the weaknesses of the Plan could be turned into opportunities, for instance the fact that the issue of prioritization of actions is transferred to the time of the initiation of the Action Plan.

Overall, it could be argued that a resilience-oriented approach could be incorporated in the Plan, as long as its focus is on sustainable development, and provided that the social cohesion and environmental balance components of sustainability along with the Plan's strategic character are further elaborated and exploited.

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