Towards a conceptual framework for urban management: The Iranian experience

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper is the outcome of a sustainable urban management conference held in Dubai in 2010. A number of high ranking city officials including mayors, vice mayors, city council members and urban planners attended the conference and shared their opinions about the formidable challenges facing Iran cities and their perceived solutions. Drawing from this unique data on what experts constitute the current urban management problems and prospects in Iran, four key categories emerged: *trust building*, *feedback*, *accountability*, and *participation*. This article addresses these key challenges and lessons against the broader backdrop of four fundamental questions on the *goals* and *scales* of effective urban management practices in Iran along with exploring the *standards* and *indices* for evaluating them. It also discusses the sequential order in which these key categories ought to be operationalized. This sequence seeks to break the gridlock of the current practice of sustainable urban management in Iran characterized by the vicious circle of mistrust between people and the state, little public participation, lack of accountability, and ineffective or biased feedback.

Introduction

Iranian cities face serious challenges in controlling and managing urban growth (Zamani & Arefi, 2013). Even though Iran's population growth rate has decreased since the 1980s, its demographic dynamics and problems associated with the previous eras demand potent urban solutions for years to come. For one thing, the reconstruction of the war-damaged areas during the Iran-Iraq war leaves much to be desired. This eight-year war and the natural disasters (i.e., earthquakes and floods) have had far-reaching consequences ranging from the forced dislocation of the population of the affected areas to different parts of the country to heightened identity crises associated with the completion of reconstruction projects which do not necessarily comply with the social and cultural norms of their inhabitants.

For another, Iran's sectoral urban management process coupled with its demographic characteristics have given rise to numerous urban problems from mushrooming informal settlements (Fanni, 2006), in and around major cities to substandard public works to procedural issues in the development of new towns (Zamani & Arefi, 2013) and from deferred maintenance, deterioration of the urban core (Atash, 1993), disinvestment in infrastructure (Rondinelli & Kasarda, 1993) and increased deforestation to chronic pollution problems in large cities. Iranian authorities, decisionmakers, and administrators consider these and many more environmental, socio-cultural, infrastructural, and technical issues daunting threats the magnitudes of which are perhaps on a par with if not surpass those of the other developing countries in Asia and Africa (i.e., Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey).

With the mega cities in the developing countries facing more formidable challenges everyday urban officials increasingly pay attention to urban management as a solution and a practical roadmap to future growth. Broadly, urban management sets out to help decisionmakers and officials to cope with the problems facing their cities more effectively. This paper first gives an overview of the urban management literature, and then presents four key urban management questions. The third section critically evaluates the data collected on urban management issues in Iranian cities. The paper ends with concluding remarks.

Urban management: From definition to discourse

The challenge in many cities—especially in developing countries—is that while a necessity urban management ought to be integrated and coordinated. However, critiques

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of urban management theory and practice characterize it as "elusive" (Stren, 1993). Some question its utility as a concept with practical applications. Others compare sustainable urban management with the "traditional urban planning approaches" (Islam, 2011) and see similar criticisms (Wildavsky, 1973) relevant while also find too much overlap between the two.

To what extent is urban management different from the conventional comprehensive planning, or by the same token, reflects what is known as "the master planning syndrome" (McGill, 1998)? Some others question government's involvement in urban management and distinguish management from administration (Stren, 1993), arguing that the private sector does a better job running the city than the public sector.

Regardless of one's philosophical or political position in these critiques, urban management broadly implies coordination, control, and management of resources to direct and guide future growth. Examining each of these components, however, conjures up additional questions and qualifications. The question of coordination, for example, has been long debated in the less developed countries (LDCs) literature. LDCs are typically known to be inefficient (Richardson, 1993), physically and socially fragmented (Atash, 1993), and synonymous with bureaucratic parallelism and double work when it comes to implementation and managing urban growth. The increasing rates of development and urbanization in most LDCs necessitate robust and effective control and management strategies. Lack of appropriate policies coupled with limited resources exacerbate chronic and enduring management problems in these countries. These challenges in Iran's new town development and management specifically, also include the fragmentation of responsibilities and roles, multiplicity of actors, lack of inter-sectoral coordination and public participation (Zamani & Arefi, 2013).

Severe traffic problems, air and water pollution, degradation of natural and environmental resources, and little public participation and governance exemplify some of Iran's urban management challenges. These and other severe structural problems pose four questions relative to *goals*, *standards*, *indices*, and *scales* of urban management. These broad rubrics also capture the main criticisms the literature of urban management aims to addresses. It can be argued that these four dimensions aptly reflect the procedural and institutional challenges facing urban management.

In addition to these well-documented criticisms in the literature, other questions further confound theorizing urban management. For example, in most debates on effective urban management strategies (especially in LDCs), the implicit assumption is that urban services are "bundled." That is, increasing or improving efficiency in the coordination, control, or management of service delivery as the goal of the decisionmakers (or planners for that matter) assumes that services are "bundled." The bundling of services implies that the quality of the services remains the same irrespective of the users' power or socioeconomic status. However, the concept of "splintering" (Graham & Simon, 2001), implies a paradigm shift from "bundling" to "unbundling" where the power and socioeconomic status indeed, affects the quality and availability of services to users. In that sense, political economy plays a crucial role in the "unbundling" process and therefore, control, management and coordination of resources. Under these circumstances, it is highly unlikely to think of management or coordination as monolithic concepts which can be easily measured by indicators such as efficiency, sustainability, or transparency. Under such regimes then, how would the decisionmakers or planners be able to manage or coordinate resources to ensure social justice or social equity? How could resources be equally distributed among the citizens when gated communities and squatter settlements create the ordinary drama of the contemporary metropolitan landscapes? And if adhering to the tenets of neo-liberal orthodoxy legitimizes or indeed, allows cities to grow uneven, then would it not make discussions on urban management pointless or redundant?

Challenges of urban management in Iran

The data for this research was collected through a participant observation research method where copious notes were taken from the presentations of a group of mayors, vice mayors, city council members, professionals, and academics and their interaction with the audience on various urban management issues facing Iran. This group attended a four-day Conference on Sustainable Urban Management at the Islamic Azad University in Dubai in 2010.[1] This mixed group of experts candidly shared their views and opinions about sustainable urban management strategies in Iran. This research proposes a conceptual framework based on how these discussions and observations unfolded. The premise is that although drawn solely from the Iranian experience, the framework demonstrates a useful evaluative tool for examining the state of urban management in LDCs (see Fig. 1).

The city officials who attended this urban management conference directly or indirectly participated in the discussions. They either presented formal papers, or reacted to the conference presentations and shared their experiences and views towards the urban management concerns in their own cities. Not all presenters focused on Iran; several shared the UAE experience, and discussed the ways in which the UAE urban officials struck a balance between historic preservation and growth management. Case study presentations raised awareness about how the UAE officials formulated problems and adopted policies toward sustainable urban management in Sharjah, Dubai, and Ajman. Lively discussions followed the presentations on the Iranian cities. The reason Iranian case studies attracted more attention and induced more debate compared to the other presentations is rather obvious. The majority of the conference attendees were urban planning and architecture students, scholars, and government officials from Iran who had intimate familiarity with and reacted more passionately to its urban management issues. The

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[1] The conference participants ranged from experienced academics with more than four decades of teaching and professional experience in Iran to well-rounded mayors and vice-mayors, who had intimate familiarity with the issues in their cities to professional planners who worked in consulting firms and other public officials including the President of Iran's Society of Urban Planners. The mixed group of politically well-established and well-informed politicians, professionals, academics and students made this conference a good forum for exchanging ideas on sustainable urban management in Iran.