Playing with Supertankers: Centralization in Land Use Planning in Israel — A National Experiment Underway

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A B S T R A C T

Compared with decentralization of planning powers, centralization has not been popular in planning policy in the past few decades. Centralization has become associated with dysfunctional governance, obsolete planning, and unconstitutional and unaccountable policies. Nevertheless there are cases in which countries have experimented with centralization in order to solve crises and improve the supply of goods and services. This paper focuses on centralization reforms in Israel that were designed to deal with a chronic shortage in housing. Through interviews with experts, and analysis of laws, and related documents, we address several questions. First, what kinds of steps have been taken recently to centralize planning in the Israeli planning system? Second, what were the motivations behind these steps? And last, in what way have these steps reformed planning in Israel, and what were their consequences? We investigate these issues by looking at a newly established national planning committee:the National Committee for Preferred Housing Plansalso known as "the Supertanker". The paper examines the aims and objectives of the legislature in forming theSupertanker, and whether these objectives were fulfilled. The findings show that the new policy arrangement has revamped the planning system, reduced the roles of regional planners, and created a fast track that circumvents older, and slower, planning processes, in an attempt to increase the production of housing units, including affordable apartments. The findings also suggest that despite public scrutiny, the Supertanker's performance cannot be judged solely on the grounds of it being undemocratic and environmentally destructive, as there is conflicting evidence about its ability to speed-up plan approval processes, and enlarge the future housing stock.

1. Introduction

This paper reviews land-use planning policies in Israel in the face of the centralization of planning powers. The paper addresses three questions. First, what kind of steps have been taken recently to centralize planning in the Israeli planning system? Second, what were the motivations behind these steps? And last, in what way have these steps reformed planning in Israel? We investigate this issue by looking at a newly established national planning committee:the National Committee for Preferred Housing Plans (NCPHP, also referred to by its Hebrew acronym "Vatmal" or by its nickname- "The Supertanker"). Specifically the paper examines the aims and objectives of the legislature in forming the Supertanker, and whether these objectives were fulfilled.

The Supertanker was established as a planning committee controlled by government ministries with a high level of power and authority, hence its nickname "Supertanker". In fact, a Supertanker is an airplane designed to extinguish wildfires.[1] In the Israeli case, the wildfire has been a dramatic increase in housing prices and a shortage of housing.

The main purpose of the Supertanker was to create a fast-track for the production of housing units. This was to be achieved through cutting red-tape, streamlining planning procedure in various ways, and through ancillary measures such as endowing the Supertanker with the capacity to take back government land held by farmers, as well as the capacity to override all former national, district, and local-level plans.

The Israeli case-example is particularly interesting in the context of international research for two reasons. First, it is an example of efforts to centralize planning which were extreme in their scope. This case illustrates a national government takeover of planning and a move towards 'hands-on' planning by national-level officials. Looking at the

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[1] The nickname for the NCPHP - *'Supertanker'* - was coined by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The inspiration for this name was a wildfire that spread in Northern Israel in 2010. The Israeli government hired an American 747 Supertanker airplane to assist in extinguishing the fire. In the initial stages of the formation of the 'Supertanker,' the government established the National Housing Committee (NHC - referred to by its Hebrew acronym "*Vadal*") in 2011. The NHC, nicknamed the 'Supertanker for Battling Bureaucracy,' was established following the massive 2011 social protests over high costs of living. Owing to matters of scope this paper does not relate to the NHC, but focuses on its successor- the 2014 'Supertanker,' the NCPHP.
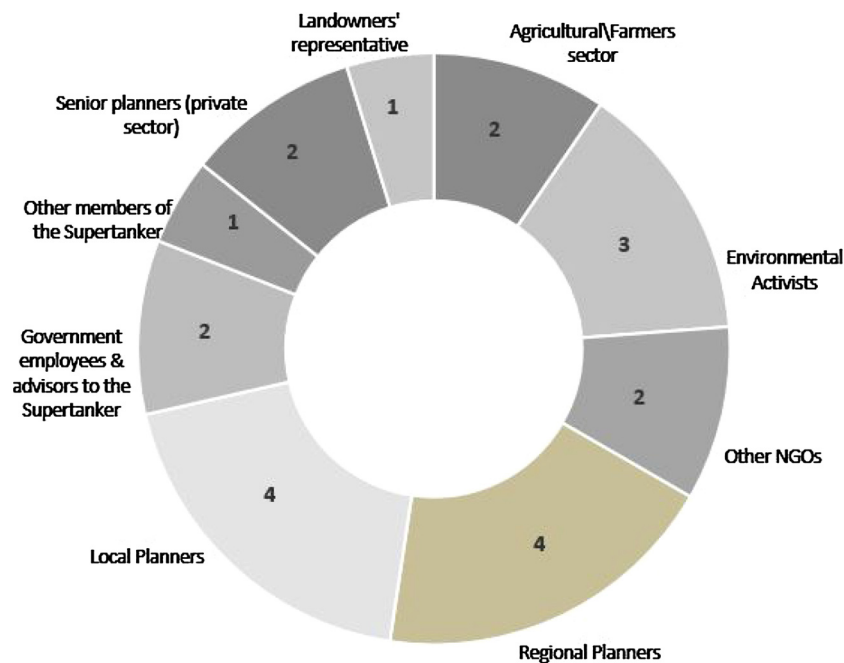
Fig. 1. Key informants, sorted by group.

Israeli experience, other countries that consider centralization could gain much insight. Second, the Israeli case should be interesting to wider readership because it involves an urgent reform designed to deal with the housing crisis and specifically, the housing shortage. The Israeli experience is highly relevant because of conditions that underlie recent policy changes including a lingering housing crisis, high population growth, land scarcity, and environmental challenges (OECD, 2011; Rachewsky, 2010). For these reasons, an analysis of Israel's urban planning reform may provide useful information for other countries struggling with the reallocation of planning authority in the face of multiple socio-economic challenges.

Specifically the Israeli case unravels an attempt by the government to deal with the housing crisis by way of centralization.

We address this reform first by exploring the context of crisis in which it occurred. We then introduce the Supertanker, and finally evaluate the consequences of the planning reform.

The Supertanker reform should be understood as an example of centralization in land use planning. Decision-makers across the globe have attempted to assemble planning policies that reduce bureaucracy while facilitating national stewardship and oversight over resources, goods, and spatial activities. These efforts can materialize as two seemingly opposing trends,; both centralization and decentralization of planning powers have emerged as strategies to achieve those goals on both national and local levels.

Globally, centralization is utilized by governments in order to control the production of goods and services (De Vries, 2000; Klosterman, 1985). With housing in mind, centralization of planning powers is often tied to attempts to increase output and minimize the time needed to plan and build new housing projects. The paper introduces these goals of centralization and then investigates whether the Supertanker has achieved them.

Israel, with a historically ridged urban planning hierarchy, contends with housing issues with heightened urgency. In dealing with an entrenched housing crisis, Israeli politicians have spurred numerous initiatives to resolve the housing shortage through a variety of means, including increasing the production of housing units all across Israel, building new neighborhoods, and supplying public amenities to serve those neighborhoods.

2. Methods

In this exploratory paper we analyze recent structural and legislative reforms at the national level. The exploratory design is intended to provide insight and familiarity with a topic that has not been fully researched. The analysis of the history and goals of the government in creating the Supertanker relies on evidence concerning the Israeli land-use system and the newly established Supertanker committee.

At first, we analyzed newspaper clippings from the years 2010-2017, TV broadcasts, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data, government reports, State-Comptroller reports, conference proceedings, circulars and guidelines issued by ministerial authorities, transcripts of parliamentary discussions, draft bills, court decisions, and legislation. From the above sources it was possible to elicit the key *goals* of the government in establishing the Supertanker Committee, to map the *measures* utilized in this reform, and to review its intended and unintended *consequences* in the first years of its operation.

Following this, we studied the content of plans approved by the Supertanker in 2015-2017. This was carried out using the Planning Administration's website which archives statutory plans. We identified 32 statutory plans that were passed by the government, and analyzed each of these carefully in line with the short-listed *goals and measures* identified earlier. The analysis also provides additional statistical data on some of the *consequences* associated with the Supertanker's operation.

The inspection of Supertanker plans and other documents, in the previous stages, enabled us to shortlist key types of stakeholders that influence, or are influenced by the Supertanker. In order to complement the analysis, we conducted 21 semi-structured interviews (for a full list, see Annex 1). The interviews add rich data on the functioning of the Supertanker, and on the aims of the new reform and its consequences. We interviewed planners, architects, lawyers, environmental activists, and other practitioners who work in, with or against the Supertanker. We interviewed members of the Supertanker, employees of related government ministries, regional planners, local planners dealing with Supertanker initiatives, advisors to the Supertanker, and other informants who filed objections against proposed development (Fig. 1). These interviews were designed to shed light on the Supertanker and the effects of its operation.