

Urban Planning and Management System in Iran: A Review and Assessment

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Abstract: This paper aims to review evolution and characteristics of urban planning and management in Iran and assesses the existing urban planning system. The urban planning system in Iran traces back to the ancient time. However contemporary urban planning and management suffers from many defects such as lack of stakeholder's participation, the existence of diverse organization in the process of urban management without proper coordination and responsible mechanism, lack of local authorities' power and low capacity of the municipality, lack of finance, and poor implementation. Therefore, the necessity of replacement of existing planning system by innovative and participatory planning approach has been highlighted as a finding of this paper.

Key words: Urban planning • Urban management • Assessment • Urbanization • Iran

INTRODUCTION

Iran is known as one the oldest civilizations in the world and a home to some of the oldest cities such as Shoush from the Elam era (2700 B.C.), Hegmataneh from the Median Empire (670 B.C.), Pasargad and Takht-e-Jamshid from the Achaemenid (550 B.C.) and Neishabour from the Sassanid (224 to 650 A.D.) dynasty. All these Old Iranian cities were well developed as the origins of urban planning and urban settlement during the ancient time [1]. These ancient cities show strong evidences of urban planning from the ancient era in Iran. The Islamic conquest of Iran (633-656 A.D.) however ended the Sassanid Empire. During the Islamic era in Iran, urban planning was much affected and influenced by the characteristics of the Islamic culture and civilization [1]. In the aftermath of the Islamic emergence in Iran, the core areas of the Iranian cities were shaped and dominated by bazaars, mosques, Islamic scientific schools and pathways and roads connecting between them [2]. During the Islamic era and civilization, architecture and urban planning were given much emphasis and expanded into the construction of several new important cities such as Isfahan, Rey, Kashan and Maraghe [3]. Urban planning in Iran reached its peak during the period of the Safavid Empire (1502-1736) which witnessed the constructions of

many roads, mosques, bazaars and public buildings in the primary cities of Isfahan and Tabriz [1].

However, the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925) marked a period of economic turn down in Iran. During this time, Iran suffered from economic dependency due to a lack of government authority to boost economic growth and a lack of investment in the country [4]. Moreover, continuous economic decline and poor investment necessitated much money being transferred to other countries which consequently affected the country's socio-economic progress [5]. The Qajar dynasty finally came to an end in 1925 and Reza Khan established the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran.

Urban Planning in Contemporary Iran: Experiences of rapid urban population growth in Iran after 1940s affected the process of planning and development; and established a new era for Iranian cities. Rapid urbanization in Iran from 1940s onward was influenced by several key factors, namely: i) exploitation of gas and oil as new resources for economic development; ii) trade improvements with other countries due to the increased importance of the Persian Gulf; and, iii) changes in people's lifestyles due to growth of modernity [5]. However, the Islamic revolution which took place in 1979 toppled the Pahlavi monarchy regime and the Islamic

Republic regime came into power in Iran. The period of Islamic revolution marked a significant influence on the country's social, cultural and economic characteristics. The urbanization and the urban planning system were equally affected by this important event in the Iranian history. Hence, two important periods in contemporary Iran with regard to urban planning and development may be classified as the pre-revolutionary period and the post-revolutionary period which is discussed in the following sections.

Pre-Revolutionary Period: The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) accelerated the modernization of Iran and opened a new chapter in social transformation in the country. Reza Khan established a powerful centralized government and gave priority to the construction of public buildings, industrial buildings and road networks in Tehran, the capital of Iran and other major cities [5]. The country began a transformation to become a dependent capitalist economy and such circumstance led to an increased migration to major cities particularly to Tehran.

On the other hand, the country becomes more dependent on oil and gas; and as the price of oil increased, the country's income and Gross National Product (GNP) increased as well [4]. A higher economic growth due to the country's higher income further boosted the development of major cities and increased urbanization [5]. As reported in the country's Fifth Development Plan (1974-1978), the necessity to prepare a comprehensive plan was indicated for all cities with a population of more than 25000 people so that the city could cope with the rapid urban population growth [6]. In addition, important laws such as the "High Council of Architecture and Urban Development" (HCAUD) of Iran that were enacted in 1973 highlighted the importance of preparing a comprehensive plan for the medium and big cities (those with population more than 25000 people) and guide plans for smaller cities [7].

Post-Revolutionary Period: An important milestone in Iranian history is the Islamic revolution of 1979 which toppled the once-powerful Pahlavi dynasty. Critiques argued that the shortcomings of the Pahlavi's model of economic development caused unresolved conflicts within the country *"between traditions and modernization, between economic development and political under development, between global market forces and local bourgeoisie, between foreign influence and nationalism and finally between a corrupt and complacent elite and discontented masses"* [8].

This period of Islamic revolution was followed by the war between Iran and Iraq during 1980 to 1988. The war further undermined the Iranian economic growth and reduced investment trends in urban areas. During the war, the process of urban development faced even more barriers, whilst the government focused more efforts on rural development in an attempt to reduce rural-urban migration. Moreover, the war displaced many people from the border areas to migrate to major cities of Iran which led to increased sub-standard informal settlements around the central cities [9].

After the war with Iraq ended in 1988, the period of reconstruction took place in Iran during 1989 to 1996 to pursue some key projects for urban planning and development. Until then the dominant approach to undertake these development efforts was adopting the centralized and rigid comprehensive planning approach. However, an important turning point happened in 1998 when the Mayor of Tehran criticized the comprehensive planning approach *"for being mainly a physical development plan rooted in the political framework of the previous regime and for not paying enough attention to the problems of implementation"* [8]. Much public awareness was generated during this period concerning the ineffectiveness of the conventional comprehensive planning approach.

The reconstruction period was followed by a period of political reform in Iran (1997-2005). During this time there was an ideological shift where the aim was to share the power of central government with the local government. To achieve this purpose, the city council was re-launched for the first time after the onset of the Islamic revolution. The first city council members were elected in 1999. The establishment of the city council during this reform period marked a significant change in the city development process because it helped to facilitate the participation of citizens in the process of decision making in the city. For the first time, the local people were able to be a part of the decision making process for their urban development. This process was important and contributed as a basis of local democratic foundation. Notwithstanding the domination of centralized and rigid comprehensive planning approach, the establishment of city council improved to a certain extent the power of citizens and local authorities for urban development efforts in Iran.

The Trend of Urbanization in Iran: Similar to other developing countries, the trend of urbanization in Iran has increased the number of cities, city population and the physical nature of urban areas. The definition of a city in

Iran usually refers to the number of population and status of the municipality. In reports of Iranian national census before 1996, all places with a total of 5,000 inhabitants and above were considered as a city; however in the 1996 census onwards, each place that has a municipality regardless of the number of population was referred to as a city [10]. Urbanization trends in Iran have increased the serious problems facing cities such as lack of housing, infrastructure, welfare, jobs, health, education and quality of life [10]. During the past three decades, the urban population of Iran has increased from 15.8 million in 1976 to 36.8 million in 1996. At the same time, the share of urban population has increased from 46.7% in 1976 to 61% in 1996, respectively.

During this period, the number of cities in Iran has also increased from 373 in 1976 to 612 cities in 1996 and 1,331 in 2011. Currently, there are more than 1,300 cities in Iran [11]. The average urban population growth rate during 1976-1986 also reached the unprecedented figure of 5.41% per annum, but decreased to 3.2% per annum during 1986-1996. In 2001, the urban population of the country was around 42.2 million, which comprised 66% of Iran's total population; however, the figure has increased in 2008 to 48.2 million population which comprised 67% of Iran's total population [10, 12]. It is estimated that the urban population of Iran would reach to 95 million in 2021, even with a decline in fertility.

During the past three decades, the Iranian urban population and the number of Iranian cities have increased more than three folds. However, the population growth rates differ by city sizes. The largest cities usually experienced the largest rate of population growth; and vice versa. Generally, those cities of larger scale have more problems associated with high population growth. Major cities such as Tehran have a higher concentration of investors, so they have a better economic environment and welfare facilities that lead to attracting more population and migrants. This phenomenon creates an inequality between large cities and other smaller cities to attract sufficient capital for economic development on the one hand and the creation of slums and squatters in cities due to increased urban population and migrants on the other hand [10, 13]. As a result, urban poverty is widespread in many cities.

In Iran, it is estimated that some seven million to ten million people were residing in informal settlements and slums concentrated around the major cities [14]. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development of Iran [15], 34 percent of informal settlements' dwellers were residing around the metropolitan cities (of more than one million populations);

44 percent was staying around the larger cities (of 250,000 to one million populations); while another 22 percent were concentrated around the medium cities (of 250, 000 populations and below).

The Urban Planning System : In Iran, comprehensive planning has been the dominant paradigm to prepare urban development plans [7]. The need to prepare a comprehensive plan for all cities with a population of more than 25000 people was stated as early as 1974 in the country's Fifth Development Plan (1974-1978) [6]. Other laws such as the "High Council of Architecture and Urban Development (HCAUD)" of Iran established in 1973 and an enactment to change the name of the Ministry of Development and Housing to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD) in 1974, stipulated the need to prepare a comprehensive plan for the medium and large cities (of population more than 25000 people) and guide plans for smaller-sized cities [7]. Notwithstanding the Islamic revolution in 1979 which resulted in several changes and reforms on the comprehensive planning approach affecting the content and the process of planning, there was no significant change in this approach and the outcomes of the comprehensive plans. Since 1999, a total of 304 comprehensive plans was applied to cities in Iran; however evidence showed that most of them encountered many problems and conflicts particularly in the implementation of the plans [16].

The hierarchy of planning in Iran can be categorized into four levels, namely national, regional or provincial, sub-regional or county and local level (Figure 1). Each level of the hierarchy consists of a number of plans, which are discussed later. The urban plans are placed at the local planning level, which is at the bottom of the Iranian planning hierarchy. The first level of the Iranian planning hierarchy consists of national plans which are prepared and approved by different organizations and authorities in power in Iran. Each of these plans has a different focus and contains various elements of the development. The twenty- year vision of the country for instance represents the vision of Iran in general and in specific sectors which should be achieved by implementing other plans. Other national level plans including the five-year economic, social and cultural development plans, national spatial plans and the sectoral national plans all focus on different areas. These plans are prepared at the national level and they are the upstream of all plans in the country. The downstream plans at the lower levels must follow and comply with these plans.

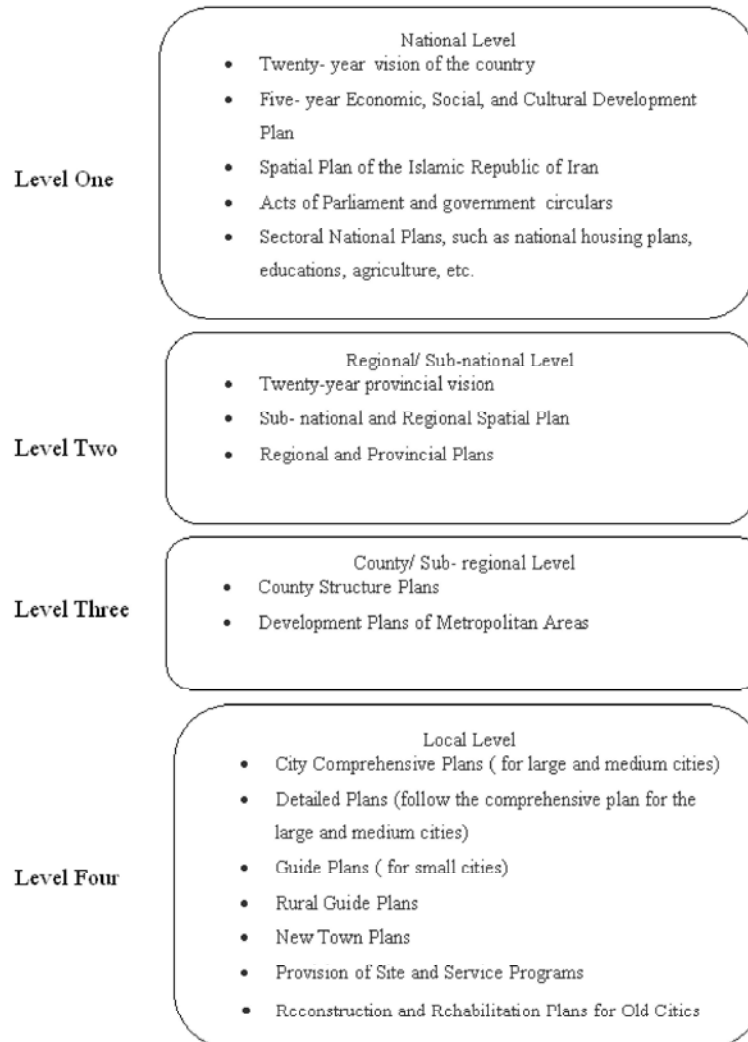


Fig. 1: The hierarchy of planning system in Iran
Source: [17, 18]

The Second and the third levels of planning comprise the subsection of national plans for each province and county. For instance, the twenty-year vision of a province is prepared based on the twenty- year vision of the country for each province. In addition, the regional spatial plan is also prepared according to the national spatial plan. However, due to the existence of the time lag for each level, the strong linkage between them is lacking. Sometimes, this deficit led to neglecting the second and the third levels in local planning efforts. At the local level, a number of plans are applied to conduct the development of a city. The comprehensive (master) plan which is prepared for the cities with a population of more than 25000 people is a long-term physical plan. This plan depicts the land use map; sectors

such as residential, commercial, administrative and industrial zoning; the road networks; facilities and public services; rules and regulation for construction of private and public buildings; as well as the criteria for protecting historical sites and monuments. The focus of comprehensive plans is very much on the physical development, at the expense of the social, cultural and economic development, which are lacking in this planning approach.

Upon approval of the comprehensive plan, a detailed plan must be prepared for medium and large-scale cities based on the comprehensive plan. The detailed plan determines the detailed land use allocations and requirements, exact physical condition of street networks and detailed population density in city parcels. The guide

plans are prepared for smaller-sized cities to guide the city development and address short-term and urgent problems of these cities.

One of the major critiques highlighted a lack of communication and inconsistency between the national level and the local level, because the regional and sub-regional levels do not work properly to connect between these two levels [17]. In other words, these four levels do not work as a system with a systematic relationship. Thus, a significant gap emerged between national plans and urban plans [18] in terms of plan formulation and implementation.

Since the 1960s the cities in Iran have employed the comprehensive (master) planning approach to prepare urban development plans. However, this approach received many criticisms from the developed countries in the 1960s and was gradually replaced by other approaches such as systematic or strategic plan [6, 8]. Nevertheless, in Iran, the comprehensive plan is still considered as the dominant approach in planning. The comprehensive plan makes a rigid blueprint of development with a minimum participation of stakeholders. The decision to prepare a comprehensive plan in Iran is undertaken through a joint effort between municipality, city council and provincial offices. In order to prepare such a comprehensive plan, urban planner and architecture experts are engaged in this process. These professionals aim to analyze the city's conditions and determine the priorities based on municipality and central government expectations [6, 18]. Hence, there is clearly a lack of participation of citizens, NGOs and other stakeholders in the process of planning in the conventional comprehensive planning approach.

The Urban Management System: The cities in Iran are managed based on the council - manager model. This model was adopted from the USA and some European countries' practices [19]. In Iran, this model can be traced back to the first municipality law sanctioned in 1952. The city council members were elected through the citizens' direct votes. The number of council members is different in various cities based on the population ratio, ranging from 31 members in Tehran (the capital city of Iran) to five members in smaller-sized cities with populations under 20,000 people. The city council is responsible for appointing the mayor; however the mayor's appointment should be issued by the Interior Ministry. In Iran, the mayor is the administrative leader and the city council does not meddle in these issues. However, the mayor is responsible before the city council. (Figure 2)

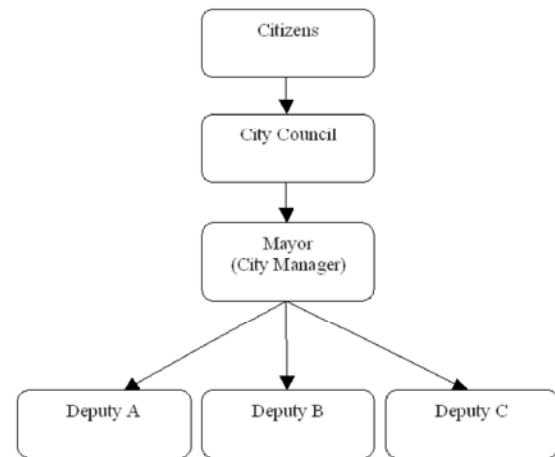


Fig. 2: The City Management Model in Iran

The city council and municipality, NGOs and citizens are the core components in the local level. In addition, the central government agencies in the city, the county and the provincial level have high influence on the urban management system. The Interior Ministry, the Housing and Urban Development Ministry, the Planning and Management Organization (PMO); and their provincial and county organizations are most effective and influential on the urban management system in Iran [20]. In addition, many services and facilities (including water and sewage, electricity, telecommunication, education, etc.) in Iranian cities are provided by the government agencies. More than 25 organizations are responsible for providing the urban services and facilities in Iranian cities [21]. Figure 3 shows the organizational structure of urban management system in Iran. Although the city council and the municipality are the core components of urban management in Iranian cities, they have relatively less power and authority. In other words, the urban management system in Iran is fragmented and much centralized [19, 21].

Based on Figure 3, it is clear that urban management in Iran is affected and influenced by several agencies and players which are engaged in urban affairs. These players and stakeholders can be categorized into three main groups:

- Local authorities that comprise the municipality and the city council.
- Representatives of central government that comprise the Interior Ministry, MHUD, PMO and their provincial and county organizations, the organizations which provide facilities and urban services and social and cultural organizations.

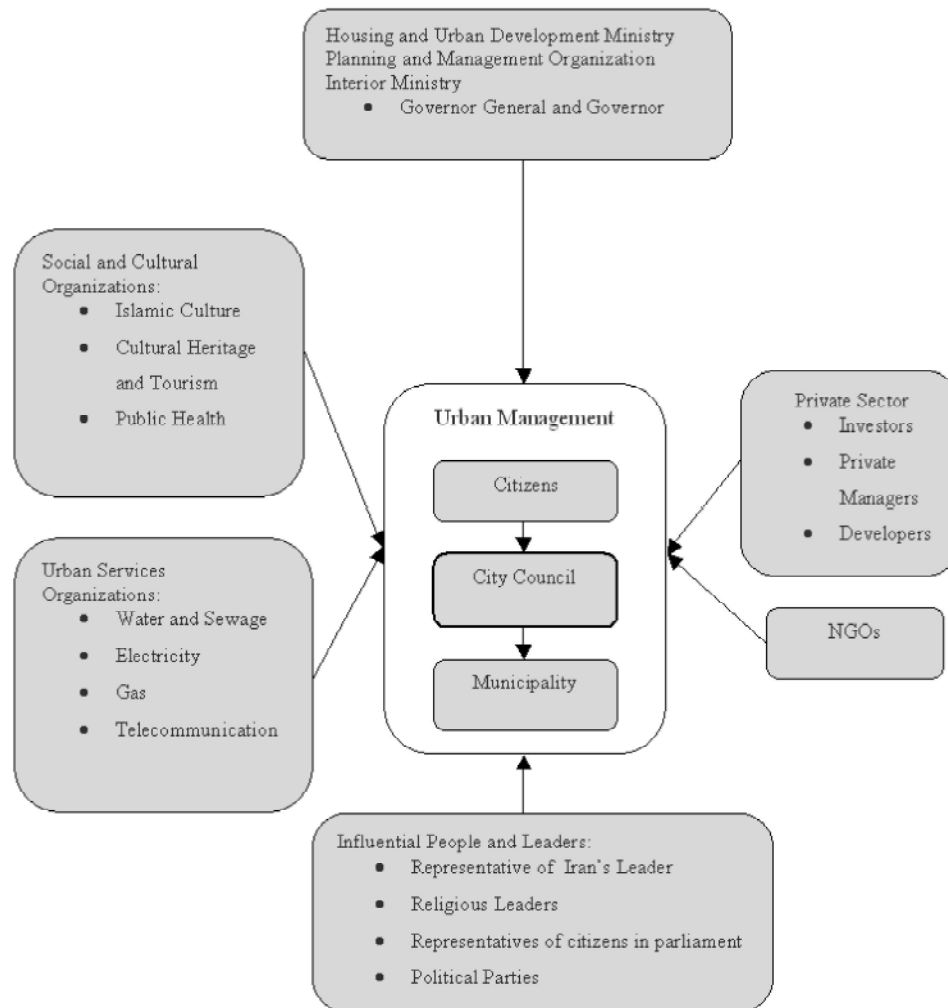


Fig. 3: The Urban Management System in Iran
Source: [22]

- Citizens, NGOs, private sectors, civil society and influential people and leaders.

These groups are very important in influencing the affairs of urban management and directly affect the urban management activities. Therefore, the implementation of the urban plan in this context is very problematic since there are many players of varying levels of power and authority.

The Process of Preparing Urban Plans: When the need to apply a comprehensive plan is recognized by the municipal office in the city, a request is submitted to the Provincial Organization of Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (POMHUD). The POMHUD is in charge of applying the urban plan for cities. According to this application, the Planning and Management Organization

should allocate enough budgets to prepare the urban plan. The PMO is in charge of providing the financial resources in order to prepare an urban plan based on the provincial priorities. The consulting engineers are selected by the coordination between the POMHUD and the PMO based on some strict regulations. The agreement is then signed between the consulting engineers and the POMHUD. The local authorities are not involved yet at this stage. The consulting engineers prepared the plan based on the local authorities' and the POMHUD's expectations and five stages of control and approval should be passed before the plan is finalized. The five stages of control including the technical bureau of provincial urban development and architecture council (including local authorities and central government agencies); the Islamic city council; the provincial urban development and architecture council; the technical

bureau of High Council of Architecture and Urban Development (HCAUD); and the HCAUD should examine and approve the plan. The approved plan is notified by the Interior Ministry to the municipality for implementation. At the final stage, the municipality is in charge of implementing the urban plan and bear full responsibility for implementation. Figure 4 shows the structure of preparation of the urban development plan (Comprehensive Plan) in Iran and the players involved.

The decision to apply comprehensive plan in Iran has been undertaken by the central government agencies and the process is under the control and supervision of central and regional government organizations [6]. Local authorities in Iran which consist of the municipality and the city council are only involved in the process of preparing the urban development plan after the establishment of an agreement between central government sector (POMHUD) and the consulting engineers and architects. The decision making process has proceeded by local authorities (municipality and city council) and central government agencies in the absence of non- governmental stakeholders and citizens. Although the city council members are elected by the citizens to represent the people's voice, due to a lack of clear mechanism to channel the contributions by the private sector, NGOs and other stakeholders, the structure of decision making and action plan is totally centralized. The consulting engineers and architects involved also play a minor role in the process of planning.

Assessment of Urban Plans: A four decade experiences of applying comprehensive planning approach in Iran demonstrate low levels of success in the implementation stage [6, 16]. The comprehensive plan, which was initially applied in Iran in the early 1960s to control and guide unprecedented and unplanned physical growth and to cope with rapid urban population growth, has however resulted in social and economic problems especially in the big cities [1]. An evaluation of the theoretical framework of comprehensive plans in Iran presents some intrinsic problems as follows [6]:

- Poor understanding of the dynamics of a changing city and a lack of capacity to forecast future problems;
- Overemphasis on the physical dimension of planning and neglecting the overall social and economic goals;
- Poor appreciation of the concerns and interests of stakeholders, beneficiaries and related end users;

- Unclear targets, goals and policies pertaining to the implementation and supervision of the plan; and
- Over attention on irrelevant details and marginal issues.

Several studies were conducted to evaluate the experiences of comprehensive plans in Iran. In 1993, Zista Consulting Engineers undertook a research on "The Evaluation of the City Comprehensive Plans in Iran" involving seven cities of Iran including Shiraz, Yazd, Arak, Rasht, Bandar Abbas, Zahedan and Maraghe. The results revealed many differences and discrepancies between plan objectives and plan implementation. Inflexible and unrealistic goals and unfeasible financial allocations are some of the underlying reasons, which resulted in a mismatch between the formulation of the plan and its implementation [23, 18].

Another research on "Strategies for Achieving Urban Development Plans" conducted by the Interior Ministry of Iran in 2003 highlighted the experiences of implementing comprehensive plans in four Iranian cities of Esfahan, Qazvin, Rafsanjan and Malekan. The results of this research revealed that the implementation of comprehensive plans in these cities was accompanied by many problems and issues [16]. Table 1 shows some problems in implementing comprehensive plans in Iran based on this research. The relative scores of "Low" (1) refers to a low level of problem, while a "Very High" score of 4 means "a serious problem".

Problems associated with plan formulation and plan implementation in the four cities have been categorized into five groups (as shown in Table 1). The table shows that the type and level of problem is different in the diverse cities. In addition, a lack of integrated and efficient laws and regulation; the existence of diverse organization in the process of urban management; poor implementation of an urban plan without proper coordination and responsible mechanism between them; the existence of parallel urban plans such as regeneration of historical urban area, upgrade of informal settlement and slum and renovation of problematic urban area without a specific relationship between them and the comprehensive plan are amongst the problems encountered in implementing a comprehensive plan in Iran [18]. Based on the four decades of Iranian experience it is clear that the comprehensive plan does not have the capacity to solve these problems and hence should be changed [6].

Lack of local authorities' power; low capacity of the municipality; lack of finance; lack of stakeholder participation; and lack of institutionalization and the necessary organization to implement the plan were

Table 1: Problems associated with the failure of a comprehensive plan in Iran

Problems with the failure of the plans	Relative Scores			
	Low (1)	Medium(2)	High (3)	Very High (4)
•Fundamental Problems		Malekan	Rafsanjan	Esfahan Qazvin
■ Lack of a locus of project managerial and implementation capabilities in municipalities				
■ Lack of coordination of central plan schemes with local schemes				
■Lack of 'whole-of government' planning for creating an understanding at national level				
•Technical Problem	Esfahan	Rafsanjan		
■Delay in preparing detailed and implementable plans	Malekan	Qazvin		
■Incompleteness and non-implementation of the plan				
■The plan not being up to date				
■Special characters of the plan				
■Inconsistency in predicted expansion of the city				
■Poor coordination between central & local government				
■Lack of enough detail for carrying out the plan				
■Lack of standards, based on official regulations				
■ Lack of implementation mechanisms				
• Constraints Inherent in the Local Human Workforce	Esfahan	Qazvin		
■Lack of availability of expert staff and of a regular trained local workforce		Rafsanjan		
■Lack of local knowledge about the content and strategic vision of the plan		Malekan		
■Lack of necessary technical ability in executing the project				
■ Ineffectiveness of local organizations entrusted with the task of implementing the schemes				
•Human Problem	Esfahan	Qazvin		
■Lack of public participation or public objections		Rafsanjan		
		Malekan		
•Other Problems		Malekan		Rafsanjan
■Lack of evaluation and monitoring system		Qazvin		Esfahan
■Lack of plan making support during the implementation stage				
■Lack of necessary experiences, information and facilities				

Source: [6, 16]

mentioned as the other barriers of implementing urban plans in Iran [16]. The existence of more than 25 organizations to provide urban services and facilities and to manage the city disclosed the low level of power and authority of the city council and municipality in managing the urban institution and city leadership in Qazvin [19, 21]. Other studies also indicated the lack of power and unwillingness of local authority and lack of stakeholder participation as the main barriers of urban plan implementations in Iran [16, 19, 21].

Urban planning is considered as a tool trying to translate vision to priorities in order to lure investment, upgrade urban areas (especially slums or informal settlements), encourage infrastructure investments and regulates land use. Planning may also be considered as governance based on participation. Therefore, planning is not a neutral technical exercise and mainly depends on making of ethical decisions [24]. However the pace of changes in cities around the world has become rapid, so at times, planners cannot adequately cope with these changes [25]. Considering the unprecedented challenges facing 21st-century cities, the new approaches to urban

planning need to be able to handle such problems and thereby achieve a sustainable urbanization.

The strategy of urban planning in coping with these challenges and in adopting new priorities should be changed to a strategic urban planning (SUP) approach; older and conventional approaches such as the use of “master plans” and “comprehensive plan” are no longer flexible in addressing the challenges of the 21st century [26-28]. Many cities in the developing countries have older forms of planning and are surrounded by large informal settlements or slums [29]. SUP is a new approach to plan for the future and it has been applied by local governments to cope with rapid economical, social and environmental challenges. This approach calls for a greater focus on decentralization, globalization and sustainable development [30-32].

CONCLUSION

The existing centralized and rigid planning in Iran creates a problematic condition for stakeholders to access local information, to be transparent in their action and to

participate in the process of preparing and implementing the urban plan. Furthermore, the urban plan itself has to be flexible enough to accommodate changes in facing rapid urban and global changes. In addition, the fragmentation of responsibilities and management over urban development present major problems in urban plans [33]. These serious problems that affect the effectiveness of the current planning approach in Iran address the need for change into a new dynamic, flexible and participatory based plans. Issues of rapid urban population growth, globalization and effects on the economy especially in the urban economy as the engine of growth of countries [34], as well as issues of decentralization particularly at the local level have created a different condition in cities and in the urban planning approaches. Cities need a new tool to cope with these new challenges and changes. However, in the Iranian context, the comprehensive plan has been employed in a centralized and rigid way. As a result, most of the comprehensive plans in Iran have been unsuccessful and problematic in their implementation. The strategic planning approach is an innovative approach and participatory approach to address important urban issues and problems. The strategic urban planning is employed in response to intense challenges and changes faced by cities around two decades ago in developed and developing countries. Strategic planning is a systematic process that can provide a long-term plan to achieve the vision and goals based on planned actions and priorities [30]. Thus, the Iranian urban planning system requires shifting to SUP approach.

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