

From comprehensive plans to strategic choices:

A Social Systems Framework for Assessing Strategic Planning of the Egyptian Village

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Abstract

This paper aims at evaluating the recent Egyptian experience in strategic planning for villages. More than 4000 villages have been planned with this new approach in the period from 2005 to 2008. The paper adopts a social systems approach as a basic framework for evaluating this experience. In using such an approach of systemic thinking, the paper's aims are not limited to the articulation of evaluation results of past experience, but also extend to envisage recommendations and suggestions that may be taken in consideration to achieve sustainable results. In the terms of systems theory, the paper argues that we can enhance the current planning methodology, that adopts strategic management methods, if we succeed in dealing with the village and encouraging its transformation from a *self-maintaining reactive* system to first, one that is *responsive or adaptive* to its environment, and later, to a *purposeful system* that actively develops its environment.

Key words: strategic management and planning; system theory; social systems approach; Egyptian village.

ملخص

تهدف الورقة إلى تقييم التجربة المصرية في التخطيط الاستراتيجي للقرى، والتي تم تطبيقها لأكثر من 4000 قرية في الفترة ما بين 2005 إلى 2008. وتتبنى الورقة مدخل "المنظومات الاجتماعية" كإطار لمنهجية التقييم. وباستخدام هذا المدخل للفكر النظري للمنظومة، لا تهدف الورقة إلى تحليل نتائج التجربة فقط، بل تقدم أيضا بعض المقترحات والتوصيات التي يمكن اتخاذها في الاعتبار لتحقيق نتائج مستدامة لعملية التخطيط. وتتركز جدلية البحث في أن منهجية التخطيط الحالية تفتقر إلى الفعالية في تحقيق الأهداف المرجوة، بالرغم من أنها قد أصبحت أكثر كفاءة بتبنى المناهج والأساليب المستخدمة في مجال الإدارة الاستراتيجية. ومن خلال الفكر النظري للمنظومة، يتناول البحث أطروحة التعامل مع القرية كمنظومة اجتماعية يجب تطويرها على عدة مراحل. ففي البداية، يجب التركيز على الارتقاء بالقرية بتحويلها من مجرد منظومة تتسم أفعالها كمجرد "رد فعل" لجهود عملية التخطيط الاستراتيجي، إلى منظومة "فعالة"، تتفاعل وتتجاوب مع متغيراتها الداخلية من جهة، وكذلك تتلاءم مع الأحداث الخارجية المؤثرة عليها من جهة أخرى. أما المرحلة اللاحقة من عملية التطوير فتستهدف جعل القرية "منظومة تنموية" يمكن أن يكون لها "رسالة" تساهم بها في تنمية بيئتها المحيطة، بالإضافة إلى الأهداف الداخلية الخاصة بها.

الكلمات الدالة: التخطيط الاستراتيجي- مدخل المنظومات الاجتماعية- القرى المصرية.

1. Introduction: A Synopsis of the Egyptian Experience in Village Planning

Since the establishment of the *Organization for the Reconstruction and Development of the Egyptian Village* (ORDEV) – a subordinate agency of the *Ministry of Local Development*, in 1973, preparing master plans for the Egyptian village has been implemented as a tool for rural development. However, very few master plans, that were produced for about only 700 villages in 1970s and 1980s, have been implemented and executed due to several reasons, the most important of which was the absence of community participation in planning and implementation stages (Wafik, 2002). From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s ORDEV's rural development efforts have shifted from the master planning framework to be instead concerted within the "National Program for Integrated Rural Development" (known as *Shorouk*). The program focused on the execution of specific development projects, rather than implementing comprehensive master plans, by adopting a participatory approach where projects were prioritized and implemented in various development sectors including the provision and upgrading of utilities and infrastructure, social and public service facilities, creating jobs and income generation, as well as support of local and community institutional development.

The *Shorouk* program has indeed alleviated, to some extent, degraded social and economic conditions of the village; it has not addressed, however, the predicament of rapid unplanned settlement growth on valuable agricultural land. In spite of the numerous subsequent laws and governmental decrees penalizing the construction of dwellings on arable land, and due to the absence of law enforcement as well as a realistic substitution to needed urban expansion, dwellers had no choice except to encroach on the villages' peripheral agricultural fields. By the beginning of the 2000s, the *General Organization for Physical Planning* (GOPP) – a subordinate agency of the *Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development*, launched a national program for preparing "Demonstrational Master Plans" for all Egyptian rural settlements. The program's main focus was to prevent future loss of agriculture land throughout concentrating all development effort and intensifying all construction activity within the "legal urban boundary" of the village, approved by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1985 and based upon the existing built-up area as depicted by 1984 satellite images (GOPP, 2002). Although adopting a comprehensive master plan approach, the planning product differed than what the GOPP was usually accustomed to deliver, in that it included, in addition to the "legal master plan," delineating needed mechanisms for implementation, outlining prioritized intervention, as well as the determination and detailing of prioritized action plans and projects.

Progress in this program has abruptly terminated by the mid-2000s, however, as the GOPP realized that produced master plans postulate irrational logic in dealing only with the built-up area within the 1985 legal boundary and ignoring all actual urban development as well as social and economic activity outside it. According to a recent study, "thousands of underdeveloped, unplanned, overpopulated villages have in many cases quadrupled in

size since the 1985 decree by the turn of the century" (Abdo and Elmokadem, 2007: 587). Moreover, the GOPP have also acknowledged flaws and defects imbedded in the comprehensive master planning methodology, such as lack of community participation and involvement, cumbersome analytical procedures, and ambiguity in implementation mechanisms and responsibilities.

By the beginning of 2005, the GOPP instigated another national program to prepare "Strategic Plans" for all Egyptian villages totalling "4,623 villages within 4 years" (UNDP, 2005: 5). As stated by the *2005 UNDP Spatial Development and Housing Policy Brief*, the program "uses strategic planning to propose integrated development projects for each village through direct community participation and private sector involvement in the finance and implementation process together with the participation of local government" (UNDP, 2005: 6).

2. The Egyptian Village Strategic Plan

The "Egyptian Village Strategic Plan" program has been considered by officials and planners alike as "a substantial step towards decentralization and empowering local communities in decision-making and management" (UNDP, 2005: 6).

The underlying philosophy upon which the new planning approach was premised was that effectiveness in reaching intended results is much more realistic than aiming to efficient comprehensive plans. Dealing with such problems as inexperienced implementation bodies, ineffective legislation, and inefficient resource utilization, called for adopting a new planning approach, namely, "strategic planning." – an approach that implicates the endorsement of *contingency planning* that *envisions the future* as an alternative to master planning that strives to cope with *blueprint* future expectations; an approach that focuses on *prioritized strategic choices* contributing to effective improvement, rather than one that renders comprehensive, yet illusive and unfeasible plans.

The main aims of new strategic planning approach, therefore, are twofold. First, there is a need for *effective urban management* within a clear and agreed-upon settlement boundary for the village's built-up area. Failure to manage unplanned settlement growth has resulted to the loss of more than one million feddans of agricultural land in the last two decades (GOPP, 2006: 3). Second, there is a need for a clear and agreed-upon *strategic vision* that reflect priorities and details implementation mechanisms, to deal effectively with deteriorated environmental, social, and economic conditions such as pollution and solid waste management, lack and insufficiency of service facilities and infrastructure, and degradation in socioeconomic characteristics such as the increase in illiteracy and unemployment rates.

Preparing the strategic plan adopts a methodology that differs from master planning in both its analytical and synthetic aspects. Problems, constraints and potentials are determined throughout a number of strategic planning analytical tools such as stakeholder

analysis, environmental scanning, PEST factors analysis, and SWOT analysis. In contrast with synthetic alternatives and holistic master plans produced by the orthodox approach, results of strategic planning focuses on only a selection of priority choices and details the strategy to implement them.

As participation of all constituents is a main ingredient of the strategic plan methodology, the formulation of the stakeholder group is an essential first step in the planning process. Stakeholders include local government (e.g., local executive administration, ministerial department officials, utility agencies officials, village mayor), institutional bodies (e.g., development bank, agricultural associations, credit institutions, etc.), community associations (e.g., community development associations, voluntary associations, NGOs, vulnerable groups' associations, etc.), and community leaders (e.g., community public council representatives, private-sector businessmen and land owners, influential key persons, natural leaders, etc.). This stakeholder group will participate in all stages of planning, beginning from the assessment of needs, to the agreement on and selection of prioritized action and projects, as well as being responsible for implementation and execution of projects in the post-planning phase.

A variety of participation mechanisms have been specified in the Strategic Plan Project Document (Terms of Reference) and been implemented throughout planning implementation. These included stakeholder structured interviews and questionnaires; stakeholder village meetings to determine problems, agree on priorities, propose alternatives, and discuss different viewpoints; and several ad-hoc workshops to finalize results of strategic plan (e.g., settlement legal boundary, prioritized and detailed project lists, development control regulations for different zones, etc.).

The planning methodology proceeds in sequential steps beginning from needs assessment and ending with strategic intervention. Further, planning stages are articulated within basic development sectors, namely, environment and pollution, local economy, social characteristics and population, service facilities, urban shelter, infrastructure systems, and settlement management. First the current situation for each sector is assessed throughout both field surveys as well as stakeholders interviews and questionnaires. GIS technology is used to provide a geo-database that could be utilized to regulate land use and land management in the implementation stage. Strategic issues and priority alternatives are then identified in each sector using strategic analytic tools such as the SWOT analysis. Finally, throughout a series of successive workshops, the strategic plan's outputs are agreed upon and finalized. These outputs include the new urban boundary and its coordinates showing future extension visions and possibilities; planning and building regulations and development controls; the list of detailed action plans, proposed services and utilities, and projects, including their location, cost, finance, and responsibilities; and the formulation of a institutionalized group for undertaking the implementation of the plan and executing projects.

The implementation of the strategic planning methodology was carried out by consulting firms and university schools with professional expertise. During the period 2005 to 2008 the author has participated within the *Faculty of Urban and Regional Planning* team in preparing strategic plans for about 80 villages in the Governorates of Giza, Kafr El Sheikh, Gharbeya, Sharkeyah, and the New Valley. In the following section, the paper will attempt to evaluate this relatively new experience of adopting the strategic planning approach in rural development. Indeed implementation results have not yet been fully materialized, and it would seem intuitive, unscientific, or rather unfair, to evaluate a new-embraced approach against deeply-rooted traditional ones that both professionals and executives have been used to for decades. In this short period, however, various healthy symptoms indicate that strategic plans have begun to generate some fruitful results. Most importantly is that local communities in the settlements that have experienced the process of strategic planning have been motivated and enthusiastically embraced and participated in implementing strategic choices – an important ingredient that was undeniably missing in previous planning approaches.

3. Evaluation and Future Implications

In evaluating the past experience and suggesting future implications for the strategic planning of the Egyptian village, a theoretical abstract framework can be used to understand and analyze past and current procedures, as well as to hypothesize future propositions. As such, the paper will adopt a *social systems approach* and its theoretical concepts of a system and its environment. Systems theory provides a trans-disciplinary framework of the abstract organization of phenomena, independent of their substance, type, or spatial or temporal scale of existence (Heylighen, 2000). It is commonly used as a conceptual basis to avoid being overwhelmed by complexity (Univ. of Washington, 2005).

The systems approach considers two basic components: elements and processes. Elements are measurable things that can be linked together. They are also called objects, events, patterns, or structures. Processes change elements from one form to another. They may also be called activities, relations, or functions. In systems thinking, the elements or processes are grouped in order to reduce the complexity of the system for conceptual or applied purposes (Churchman, 1968; Checkland, 1981).

3.1 The Village as a Social System

Considering the village as a social system implies that it is a set of elements and components (e.g., community social attributes, economic structure of good production or the classification of jobs, physical setting in regard to housing, service facilities, road and infrastructure patterns, etc.). These elements, components, and subsequently sub-systems, are interrelated and interdependent in such a way that give the system, as a whole, a certain overall meaning and behavior that are dependent and affected by the behavior of its parts. Essential properties and the performance of the system, hence,

derive from the interaction of its parts, rather than how they act independently from each other (Ackoff, 1971: 661).

Any social system is not only bound to its internal structural elements and their interrelationships. It will definitely have some certain exchange and interaction with other elements and components outside its boundary. Such elements, and their relative properties, are not parts of the system; they rather compose the system's environment. A system's boundary which separates it from its environment is always determined depending on the purpose of the researcher. In that sense, while systems and their environments are objective things, they are also subjective insofar as the particular configuration that forms both is dictated by the interests and purposes of the researcher. Hence, different observers of the same phenomena or events may conceptualize them into different systems and environments (Ackoff, 1971: 662).

As the social system cannot be studied isolated from its environment, the notion of the *nested system* is pivotal in social system theory. In a nested system, there are three levels of environment, namely, the *internal*, the *external transactional*, and the *external contextual environments* (Emery and Trist, 1969; Davis, 2003). The *internal* environment of a nested system is merely the system in study (i.e., the village in this paper). The external environment to this system can be subdivided into two levels. The first is the *transactional* environment, which contains the direct input/output transactional interactions or interdependencies with the system (e.g., *input transactional action*: project budget allocation to the village from higher-level administrative local government body; *output transactional interaction*: use of village residents to higher-level services in the village's region). The second level of external environment is the *contextual* environment, which encompasses relevant general political, economic, social and techno-scientific (PEST) factors or forces (e.g., *political*: local administrative system, laws and regulations, etc.; *economic*: micro- and macro- economic states of unemployment rates, poverty and job creation, etc.; *social*: tradition, value system, social behavior and norms, etc.; *techno-scientific*: state of technological production or use, state of scientific research, etc.).

In the context of this paper, therefore, we are looking at the village as a system encompassing both its physical and non-physical attributes as mentioned earlier. The environment of this system in turn are also *physical*, such as the village's region (*zimam*) and surrounding rural communities, as well as *non-physical* such as the PEST factors that affects the village as human settlement in a certain context (e.g., rural characteristics or attributes) and setting (e.g., rural region, governorate, Delta, Upper Egypt, etc.).

Processes occur in a system and its environment according to the occurrence of system events. A system or an environment event is a change in one or more structural properties of the system or the environment over a time of specified duration (Ackoff, 1971: 663). If an event or more occur, the system may react, respond or act according to this event. As such, reactions, responses and actions constitute system behavior (Ackoff, 1971: 664).

3.2 Planning Stages, System Behavior and Actor roles

Figure (1) below shows the village as a system in relation to four stages of planning, namely, (1) planning methodology, (2) implementation of planning, (3) execution of projects, and (4) dissemination of experience. Table (1) below shows the classification of the system in each planning stage according to system behavior. Table (2) shows Actor roles in each planning stage.

The first stage of planning, which is setting out the methodology, occurs outside the system (village), i.e., in its external contextual environment. Processes at this stage, therefore, are characterized by *external - external* interrelationships, interdependencies and linkages. Modification and changes occur in the system's environment without any interference with or from the system. As shown in Table (2), actors in this stage are those only external to the village, namely: the national government (GOPP) and the planner.

Figure (1) Village as a system and the stages of planning

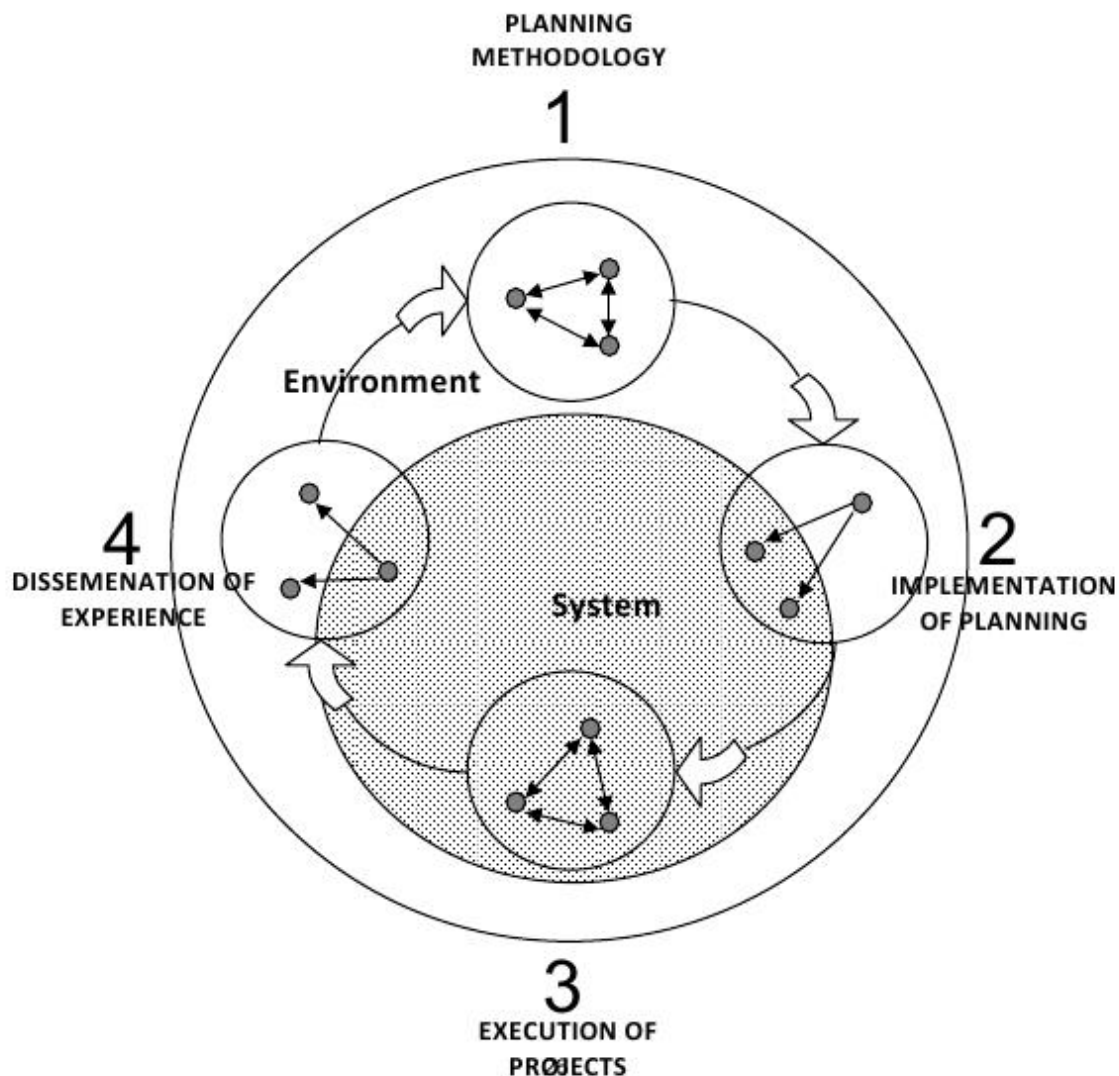


Table (1) System classification and behavior in different stages of planning

STAGE	1 PLANNING METHODOLOGY	2 IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANNING	3 EXECUTION OF PROJECTS	4 DISSEMINATION OF EXPERIENCE
System Classification		REACTIVE SYSTEM	RESPONSIVE SYSTEM	PURPOSEFUL SYSTEM
System Behavior		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reacts • State maintaining • Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responds • Goal seeking • Adapting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts • Pro-acts • Developing
Inter-relationships / processes	External - External	External - Internal	Internal - Internal	Internal - External
Modification / change setting	Environment	System	System	Environment

Table (2) Actor roles in different stages of planning

STAGE	1 PLANNING METHODOLOGY	2 IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANNING	3 EXECUTION OF PROJECTS	4 DISSEMINATION OF EXPERIENCE
ACTORS	National Level	Local Level	Local Level	Regional / National level
National Government	■	□	□	□
Local Government		■	□	□
Stakeholder Group		■	■	
Community CBOs, NGOs		■	■	■
Planner	■	■	□	□
CBOs: Community-based organizations NGOs: Non-governmental organizations			■	Primary role
			□	Secondary role

The planner's role in this first stage is theoretical rather than practical. He is responsible for developing planning methodologies and tools to cope with continuous rapid change in extremely complex and uncertain settings. These are in turn adopted by national government to be translated into national policies and programs.

Examples of *external - external* processes are GOPP's actions of developing of planning methodology based on continuous assessment to achieve effectiveness and efficiency. These processes have resulted in changing planning methodology from comprehensive master planning towards strategic planning, focusing on action plans and projects rather than producing cumbersome master plans. Environment modifications regarding operational planning methods include changes such as outlining relaxed criteria for boundary determination instead of determining the 1985 boundary as limits to settlement growth, and abandoning the top-down approach in favor of participatory one where stakeholders are involved in all phases of planning process.

In implementing the new strategic planning approach to a specific village setting (Stage 2), *external - internal* processes from the environment to the system begin to occur. In this stage the planner is the primary key player in transferring knowledge from the environment to the system, and therefore modifying the system. The role of the planner in this stage is that of an executor expert, carrying out activities of preset policies and programs (i.e., the strategic plan). The role of the GOPP in this stage is secondary. Its role is that of a facilitator and a regulator, supporting implementation contractual and technical procedures, monitoring results and implementation phases, and evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the process. Primary actors in this stage are obviously those inside the system: local government, the local community and its organizations, and the stakeholder group that was particularly formed for the strategic plan implementation.

The village at this planning stage can be conceptually classified, in regard to system theory terms, as a *reactive system* (Ackoff, 1971: 665). The system behaves in such a way that it reacts to external events to maintain a prescribed desired state. As such, the system is behaving in accordance with the set procedures of the strategic plan methodology. In other words, it is behaving according to *specific means* to achieve *specific goals*, both fixed and given by actors outside the system (in its contextual environment) such as the GOPP. In participating in different steps of the strategic plan, local actors are involved in a *learning-by-doing* process. From the very start, they work together with experts (planner and his team) in needs assessment, analysis of problems and potentials, determination of strategic issues, proposing action plans and projects, agreeing on the urban boundary, and prioritizing strategic intervention.

After the strategic plan of the village have been set, detailing what needs to be done in a specific agreed-upon setting, the system moves to the third stage of the process. In Stage 3, execution of action plans and projects within the village reflect *internal - internal*

interrelationships inside the system, as local actors begin to implement the strategic plan outputs. Modification, therefore, occurs within the system as a result of internal events.

The village in this stage is a *responsive system*, as its elements respond to the changes that will occur when executing action plans and projects. It is a *goal-seeking system*, as it is attempting to achieve certain specified outcomes. A goal-seeking system's behavior is responsive as the system has the choice to respond differently to different internal events (Ackoff, 1971: 665). The system in this stage is practicing. It is engaged in active adaptation, choosing different means (e.g., project contractor selection, alternative resources for financing projects, changing project phasing or implementation precedence, etc.) to attain desired prescribed goals (e.g., needed service facilities, upgrading of infrastructure networks, economic project, etc.).

The stakeholder group as well as the community and its organizations are the key actors in this stage. They are institutionalized in order to execute action plans and projects under the support and supervision of the local government. The role of the national government as well as the planner become secondary at this stage, as the regulative role of the first is transferred to the local government, and the expertise of the planner is transferred to the stakeholder.

To achieve sustainability, the planning process should not end at the realization of intended outcomes. As shown in Figure (1), any problem-solving activity should be an ongoing continuous cyclic process rather than a linear one. In Stage (3), *internal - external* processes are produced from the system (village) to its transactional and contextual environment. Good practice in implementation and execution of action plans and projects could result in replication in other villages. Gained experience within the village can be disseminated to other settings. The system in this stage is involved in active adaptation, but not within its internal environment as in the previous stage, but rather within its external transactional environment. The modification is happening this time in the environment, and the system acts to develop and improve its environment. Using systems theory's vocabulary, the system in this stage can be classified as a *purposeful system*. It is a system that pursues *chosen goals* in variable behavior patterns and by different *chosen means*. The system, therefore, is not *purposive* as it behaves to accomplish a certain purpose (i.e., set outcomes of the strategic plan) as it does in Stage (3); it is rather *purposeful* as it actually establishes its own purposes that it will attain (Ackoff, 1971: 666).

The community and the community-based organizations (community development associations or non-governmental organizations) are the primary key players in this stage. Convinced that the development of the system is certainly dependent on the development of its environment, they will act to disseminate their gained experience to other villages in their system's transactional environment. They will be motivated to indulge in such action out their sense of social responsibility, or in pursuit of materialistic

benefits. As the community is encouraged to take the lead in this stage, the planner, the GOPP and local government play the roles of supporters at both the national and regional levels.

In light of the above theoretical framework, the experience of strategic planning of the Egyptian village can be assessed. Evaluation of the two first planning stages (planning methodology and implementation of the strategic plan) is discussed below. These two stages have already taken place and constitute the current range of the strategic planning experience. The last sub-section of the paper presents some suggestions and implications for the future subsequent stage of execution of projects.

3.3 Evaluation of Planning Methodology and Implementation

Practice experience with the new planning methodology has revealed that the strategic plan is distinguished than the orthodox master plan in a number of aspects. Most importantly it is an inclusive approach. All important stakeholder groups have a voice in the planning effort (Mittenthal, 2002: 3). The success of the planning approach is indeed premised on the incorporation of views of all the constituencies that will be affected by the plan or have a role in its implementation. The planning process is therefore characterized by “collaborative, inclusionary consensus-building practices through which the stakeholders discuss their common concerns, get to know each other across their divisions and conflicts and develop strategies that most can ‘own’ and abide by” (Weik and Walter 2009: 361). Furthermore, participatory and collaborative practices have proven to be not merely ‘nice-to-have’, but rather a necessary setting that “allows for mutual and joint learning among the involved stakeholders,” and “leads to robust and sustainable decisions” (Weik and Walter, 2009: 361).

However, a number of concerns can be raised regarding participatory processes in the implementation phase. First, to achieve inclusiveness without sacrificing productivity, there was always a need to formulate smaller ‘taskforce’ stakeholder groups within different sectors of the strategic plan’s structure (e.g., urban shelter, environment, social issues, services, infrastructure, etc.). Second, in many cases lack of transparency, insufficient information, and skepticism and distrust towards government gestures has often hampered genuine stakeholder participation. Further, participation of private-sector businessmen and landowners has been often rather symbolic and insubstantial, because of “an embedded assumption that the planning could work against their social and economic interests” (Abdo and Elmokadem, 2007: 587). Third, participatory processes are often undermined because of power relations, value conflicts and corruption. Landowners of peripheral agricultural pockets that had a potential to be included within the new urban boundaries, have mostly opposed the planning process as the rules for peripheral land selection and compensation often contradicted with their interests.

Using strategic analytical tools such as environmental scanning and SWOT analysis is yet another procedural differentiation from conventional planning practice. Such analytical techniques produce a clear and comprehensive grasp of external opportunities and challenges that reshape solutions, plans and suggested projects. Dealing with the village a social system, not merely a physical entity, makes it feasible to render a realistic assessment of the system's strengths and limitations. Yet, although considered as a substantial methodological shift in planning thought and practice in the Egyptian context, the strategic planning methodology that was adopted and implemented is missing some important ingredients such as deriving at clear statements for the vision and the mission, formulating scenarios, and delineating operational plans.

The formulation of the *vision* and *mission* statements is pivotal in the strategic planning process. GOPP has indeed recently added this important ingredient to the strategic planning methodology for cities. The *vision* statement outlines what the system desires to be in the future. It is a source of inspiration and "stems from the values of all stakeholders involved in the process" (Shilder, 1997: 5). The vision is then translated into a *mission* statement: a broad, comprehensive statement of the purpose of the system, which specifies the desired level of its performance. Absence of the vision and mission statements from the planning methodology and implementation of the strategic plans will most probably have negative implications on the next planning stages. Execution of action plans and projects as well as dissemination of successful experience will need an overall sense of direction and a clear statement of purpose that can serve as driving forces towards desired goals.

Scenario planning is also another strategic planning technique that have not been specified nor used. It is used to formulate strategies the system can undertake in response to anticipated changes that may occur to the existing situation of the village or its context. Several scenarios can be constructed depending on the interplay and selection of external forces and their potential impact on the system (McNamara, 2006: 121). A worse-case scenario often provokes strong motivation to change within the system. A best-case scenario, on the other hand, may render unrealistic over-ambitious conceptualizations. Most reasonable strategies that the village may use to respond to changing circumstances will probably fall in between the worst - and best - case scenarios. Because this technique was not used in implementing the strategic plans, strategies for dealing with different sectoral issues lack flexibility and adaptation to any possible change that may occur within the village and its transactional and contextual environments.

Another missing component of the strategic plan that may be urgently needed for starting the execution of its outputs is the *operational plan*. The strategic plan may provide the general outline describing the action steps and the resources needed to accomplish them within an overall framework to insure maximum efficiency and impact. This has been done through preparing a portfolio including a brief description for priority projects. However, this is unfortunately not enough as a basis for moving into execution. Operational plans for different proposals and projects are needed. The operational plan is

a coordinated set of tasks for carrying out the goals delineated in different sectors of the Strategic plan. It goes into further detail than the strategic plan from which it is derived, spelling out timeframes and roles of different stakeholders, and has a shorter time horizon (Mittenthal, 2002: 2). It also may include a results-based accountability system, which comprises methods and tools for goal measurement such as indicators representing quantifiable measures of progress, and benchmarks representing target levels of performance against which actual achievement can be measured (Silder, 1997: 7).

3.4 Implications for Project Execution

To date strategic plans for all Egyptian villages have been prepared and most of them approved. The documents of the strategic plan include the plan of the village with its new urban boundary, proposed areas for settlement extension, and location of proposed service facilities and utilities, portfolio of projects, and the list of stakeholders who participated in various stages of planning implementation. Despite the intention that the stakeholder group would be responsible for detailed action planning and project execution, no practical procedures were undertaken to institutionalize and empower this group to enable it to act as a project implementation unit (PIU).

If the strategic plan should contribute to effective improvement of the Egyptian village's conditions, establishing a PIU is of extreme importance to render the desired impact regarding strategic chosen issues. To implement the strategic plan outputs, there will be a need for an institutional setting enabled to undertake decision making and taking. The core of the PIU will include the original stakeholder group, and may be further broadened to include other potential community leaders and community-based organization officials.

In addition to the necessity of empowering this unit as an executive entity, there will be a need also for institutional capacity building for the PIU's officials so that they can effectively execute the strategic plan outputs. Training programs will be needed for PIU's officials in various fields such as managerial skills, feasibility studies, project management and execution mechanisms, allocating finance resources, conflict resolution, and consensus building. Training guidelines and procedural manuals will be also a needed resource for the PIU operations.

High-level political support and insured financial and managerial autonomy are prerequisites for the establishment of the PIU to ensure decentralized institutionalization and sustainability. As mentioned above in the theoretical framework, the role of local government and the planner in this stage will be secondary in contrast to that of the community and the stakeholder group (or the PIU). Devolution of authority in terms of legislation and financial budgeting is needed at this stage so that the local government can play its regulatory role as effectively as possible. The extent of the regulative role of the national government will depend on the degree of decentralization and powers delegated to local government. Similarly, the scope of supportive role that the planner will play

depends on the degree of technical capability of the PIU and the community associations. Hence, the planner's role could range from an ad-hoc expert, rendering his services when needed, to merely a facilitator, responsible for organization, mediation and networking among different activities.

Concluding Synopsis

In evaluating the Egyptian experience of strategic planning for villages, the paper attempts to present an abstracted view where planning phases (planning methodology, planning implementation, execution of projects, and dissemination of experience) are articulated in accordance with system – environment behavior and interrelationships. In the first phase, planning methodology is formulated to suit the turbulent environment of settlement systems. The GOPP has adopted the “strategic planning” methodology instead of the conventional “comprehensive” approach. Evaluating results presented by this paper calls for further development of the strategic planning approach to enhance participation, analytical tools, and plan operation. Such deficiencies in planning methodologies were derived at when planners engaged in the implementation of the new planning methodology, applying internal – external processes to the system (village).

In the third planning phase, the system applies internal – internal processes in executing projects agreed upon by the stakeholder groups and delineated in the approved strategic plan of the village. In this stage, the paper argues that the formulation of a “Project Implementation Unit” is crucial for successful execution and effective impact. To complete the planning cycle, a fourth planning stage of “dissemination of experience” is envisaged. Experience, accumulated throughout the individual practices of planning implementation and project execution in villages, will act as stimulus for planning methodology development and efficiency. Internal – external systemic processes occurring at this planning stage develop the village from merely a reactive and responsive system to a purposeful one – a system with a diverse set of purposes which include not only these related to its own improvement, but also those that aim at upgrading other villages in its transactional environment as well as the enhancing the characteristics of the contextual environment itself.

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