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**EFFECTS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN PLANNING: THE CASE  
OF NABLUS CITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Public participation in Nablus City, the commercial center of Palestine, advanced the urban planning process in the city. The establishment of Palestinian Authority in 1995 led to engage the public through a ‘comprehensive development plan’ by the partnership established between Nablus Municipality and the Urban & Regional Planning unit at An-Najah National University. The strategic planning of Nablus city reached its peak in 2006, when the Municipality widely engaged the civil society in the planning process. This occurred mainly through the representation of most civil society bodies during the period from 2006 to 2015.

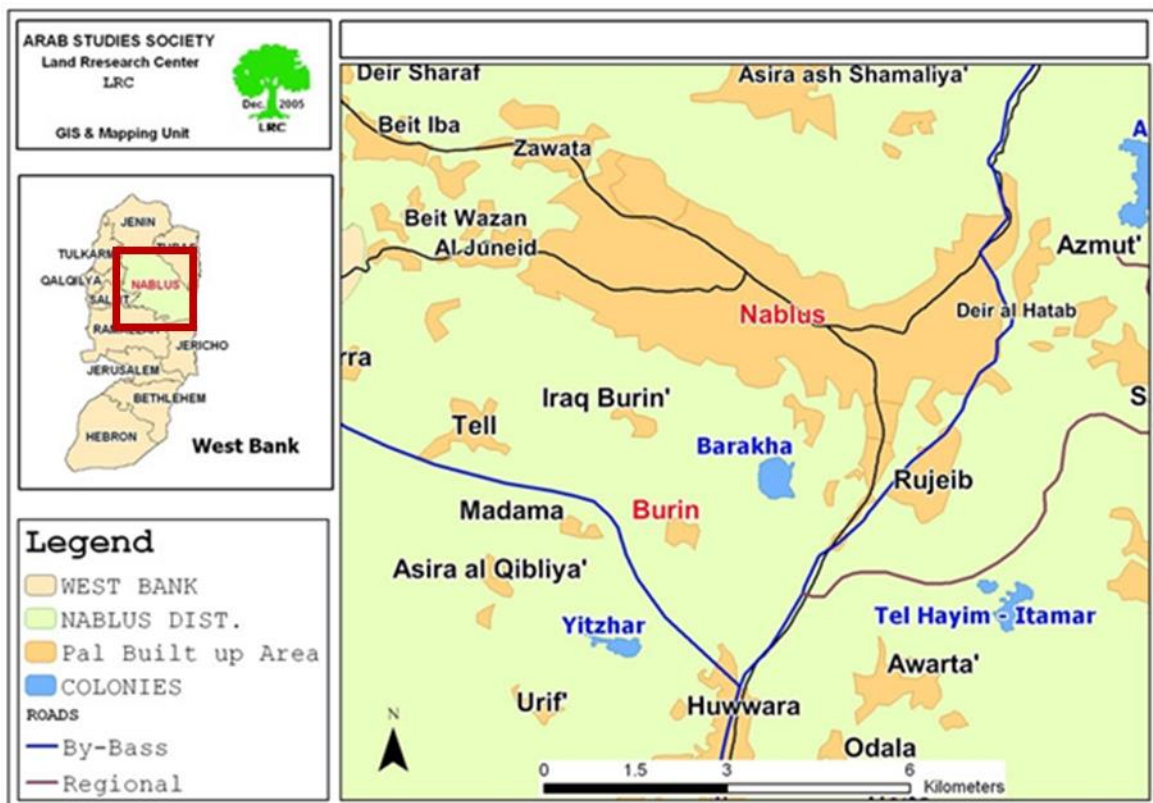
**1 INTRODUCTION**

Nablus, a northern city of West Bank, is located approximately 63 Km north of Jerusalem and has a population of 178,249 inhabitants including refugee camps (PCBS, 2013). It has a vital position (see Fig. 1) between Mount Ebal (940 m) and Mount Gerizim (881m), and thus it is a Palestinian commercial and cultural center. Population density in non-crowded urban areas in the city is about 211 inhabitants/Km<sup>2</sup>, but the density of the population in some urban areas has reached 733 inhabitants/Km<sup>2</sup> (PCBS, 2013). The built up area of Nablus is 8.7 Km<sup>2</sup>, which covers 30% of the total area (29 Km<sup>2</sup>) (Municipality, 2011).

Nablus Municipality is a governmental public institution that operates according to specific laws and regulations. It was established in the year of 1869 and currently it has 1600 employees and provides services to 178,249 inhabitants. It provides several types of services including the Fire Department and Rescue Service, Municipal Slaughterhouse, Energy Providence, Drinking water and Sanitation Management, Municipal’s Mechanisms, Municipal Court, the Central Vegetable Market, Environmental Aspects and Health Monitoring, Waste Collection and Disposal, Public Library and Cultural Facilities (Municipality, 2011). In 1994, a change took place in the organizational structure of the Municipality as it intended to promote the International and Public Relations department,

which became a focal point for successful contacts between the municipality and twinned cities in addition to some international organizations.

The experience in Public participation that was brought in by the international organization helped to advance Nablus City's planning process. Nablus Municipality considered the public participation definition, which indicates the involvement of the population or part of them in the political, social and economic life, including the determination of the city's general objectives, which represents an advanced level of democracy (Hammouz, 2008). Public participation in the planning of Nablus can be measured by the population enrolment in the committees and bodies that are responsible for the development plan preparation, in addition to the execution process in their different levels. This participation in order to be effectively leading to what is known as bottom-up development should focus on decentralizing the governmental role in the development sector (Hammouz, 2008).



**Fig. 1** Location of Nablus (LRC, 2005)

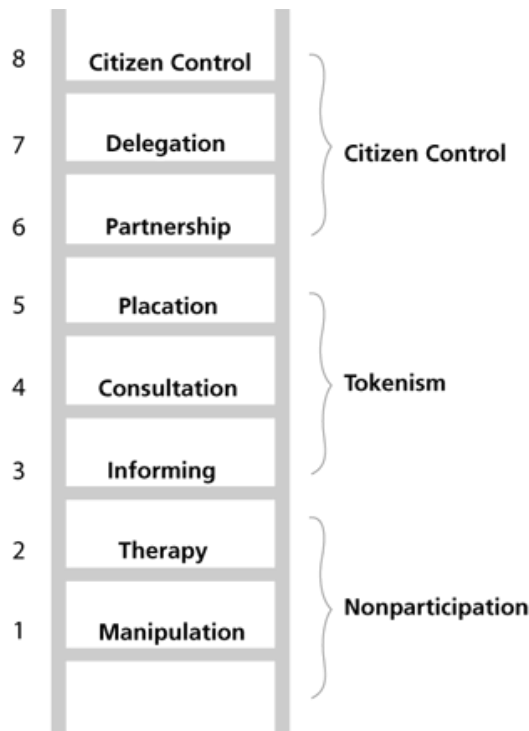
This paper describes how the planning process in Nablus City developed by the effects of public participation during the period of 1946-2012. Following a theoretical framework that is discussed in the literature review, this paper outlines mainly the political events that made influences over the planning on the city. The next section describes how the civil society was engaged in the planning process and what the result of this engagement was. Consequently, how the forums, bodies, and NGOs institutions were involved in the discussions, meetings, and seminars that convened to promote the bottom-up development. Finally, this paper illustrates the process of prioritization the development issues that became the core of the strategic plans for the city. However, it is important to mention that

all the information regarding the case of Nablus City is based on a research of the sources, which are presented in references section.

## **2 Literature Review**

Public participation (or *citizen participation*) through urban planning is considered by Maier (Maier, 2001) as a multidimensioned process. The process of involvement and empowerment has several dimensions: (1) It is a process of trial and error in which all legal parties, interest groups and individuals learn how to effectively promote their agendas in a political arena without a strong 'supreme power'. (2) It is a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes. The central government is now seeking to gradually delegate powers to regional and local subsidiaries. From the other side, local interest groups and initiatives are increasingly trying to put their own mark in the plan-making process. (3) The position of mainstream planning remains strong, while attempts for informal, community-led planning are rather marginal and dependent on external support. (4) Involvement and participation need a basic foundation in enabling legislation and greater acceptance by governmental institutions: not only new laws and policies, but first and foremost, a deep reform of government to adopt a greater openness and responsibility to the public. (5) The process of involvement is a continuous struggle. The successful inclusion of an interest group in planning and decision-making orchestrated by what can be called the 'power center' creates a snow-ball effect. (6) In the face of increasing number of and competition among particular, often irreconcilable interest groups, the legal representatives and administration can re-find their role as coordinating and ordering element that establishes effective and controllable power centers (Maier, 2001).

Earlier, Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969) proposed a ladder shows that participation ranging from high to low. This ladder is a guide to understand to which degree is the public involved in the planning process (see Fig. 2). However, O'Doherty (O'Doherty, 1996) used contingent valuation to enhance public participation in local planning. He concluded that the procedures adopted by planners are largely ineffective in allowing the general public to have a say in the shaping of their local environment. So he suggested improving these procedures based on the use of the contingent valuation method.



**Fig. 2 Degrees of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969)**

Moreover, Woltjer (Woltjer, 2002) finds that participatory planning is considered effective mainly in terms of support and acceptance. The effectiveness of participatory planning is primarily found in its ability to generate public support. Essentially, infrastructure planners in the Netherlands put participatory planning forward as some sort of ‘public support machine’. Considering a normative view-which relates to the public and political responsibilities within representative democracy- planners do not easily overstep the limits of decision-making conventions. Therefore, a pragmatic and instrumental notion also means that citizens do not always participate fully or through all stages of the plan-making process.

In contrast, Vigar and Healey (Vigar, *et al.*, 1999) discussed some of the difficulties and problems resulted from the ‘stakeholder participation’ engagement in the urban planning process. Many lobby groups thus preferred to have a debate at a more central level away from the vagaries of local politics. This tends to lead the new ‘stakeholder participation’ in planning down a corporatist route. Yet this leaves out many less organized stakeholders, particularly local environment and community development groups. Without other mechanisms to achieve a wider stakeholder involvement in territorial policy integration, the development plan and the planning system continue to play an important role in providing an opportunity for voices from outside the strong sectorial policy communities.

This means participants tend to be forced into adversarial modes of argumentation, rather than at least having an opportunity to think strategically and in an integrated way about territorial development. It also means that there is little chance of these ‘late-entry’ stakeholders developing a sense of ‘ownership’ of some of the difficult dilemmas which territorial development policy has to address (Vigar, *et al.*, 1999).

### **3 NABLUS CHANGES 1946-2013**

Throughout the period under analysis (1946-2012), Nablus City experienced six major changes, and in the same period four different administrative powers (governorates) ruled Nablus city: British Mandate, Jordanian Administration, Israeli Administration and finally, the Palestinian Authority. Until 1995, only one Master Plan was prepared for Nablus City in 1946 during the British Mandate, and was approved in 1948 (Abdelhamid, 2013). The first change was in 1948 when Israeli Occupation Forces seized about 77% of Palestine area (Nakba) and because of this three refugees' camps were found by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Nablus City occupying 5% of the total urban area in this era (8.4 Km<sup>2</sup>) (Municipality, 2011). A number of partial plans and certain detailed projects had been prepared following this expansion and development in the city (Abdelhamid, 2013).

In 1961, a General Land Use Plan was prepared by the Jordanian Government for the city, which included the subdivision and classification of lands into various uses (Abdelhamid, 2013). In 1967, the second change was the occupation of Nablus City by Israeli Occupation Forces, which decreased the population of Nablus from 53,000 in 1966 to 44,000 in 1967 (PCBS, 2013). In 1985, the Israeli Mayor of Nablus city decided to prepare a general plan for the city. However, the plan was stopped and was not approved (Abdelhamid, 2013). The third change was in 1987 when the First Palestinian Intifada (uprising) commenced; which created a challenge for Nablus Municipality.

On December 12, 1995, the fourth change was the jurisdiction over the city that was handed over to the Palestinian National Authority, as a result of the Oslo Accords Interim Agreement on the West Bank (PASSIA, 2008). Due to the urgent need for an approved master plan of the city, the Planning Department in Nablus Municipality started preparing a master plan in 1995, which was temporarily approved by the High Planning Council in 1996 (Abdelhamid, 2013). The fifth change occurred throughout the implementation of the plan, the Second Intifada (Uprising) initiated in 2000 and Nablus City was completely blockaded by Israeli Occupation Forces' checkpoints, which lasted until the beginning of 2009. Moreover, on the eve of April 3, 2002, the city was invaded by the Israeli Occupation Forces and suffered considerable damage and destruction through bombardments. Most of the destruction occurred in the two-millennia-old historic core area in central old Nablus (Abdelhamid, 2013). Israeli Occupation Forces imposed a curfew on Nablus City lasting about three months. Throughout this period, Israeli Occupation Forces divided Nablus City into two parts: eastern and western. The sixth change was in 2006, a new municipal council was elected while the political and economic situation over Nablus City was being improved. In this year

### **4 STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

As a result of this election, the Municipality started to involve the public in the planning process through the representative bodies. They arranged many seminars, workshops, and meetings to best prioritize the different components of the strategic plan (see Fig. 3). They set up five components, prioritized as follows: Human beings, the needs for a good living, economic situation, heritage and culture, and restructuring and management the Municipality in two directions: financial and functional (Ya'ish, 2012).

Once the partnership between the Nablus Municipality and Urban & Regional Planning Unit at An-Najah National University decided to engage the public on the planning process, the experts in these two institutions determined the basic concept for the process. They applied one of the classic concepts on the urban planning as a future strategy, which is Greater Nablus Area (GNA) taking into consideration the site potentials, common challenges and future expansions (Abdelhamid, 2013).

This partnership decided also to involve the public in the follow-up plans, the execution, and the monitoring of the performance. In order to achieve that, they set up a model of specialized committees. The main planning team was the responsible for integrating the result of discussions as defined strategies. However, each committee included represents for the majority of the civil institutions in Nablus that specialized in a certain development area (Municipality, 2012).



**Fig. 3 A meeting with the participation of public** (Municipality, 2012)

After several months of continuous work by the Municipality and many community institutions, experts and technicians, the strategic plan (2012-2015) for the city was approved in 2012. The consultants from An-Najah National University that included many experts in all disciplines have enriched and developed the plan. In addition, the Municipal Development Fund Office (MDFO) has had a significant advancing impact on the completion of the strategic plan (Municipality, 2012).

The process of preparing the plan went through several stages and steps: diagnosis of the City's current situation, prioritization of the developmental issues, formation of a development vision of the city, and preparation of the implementation plan to follow up the strategic development plan (Municipality, 2012).

The vision for Nablus City was identified as ‘Nablus, capital of economy, incubator of education, symbol of steadfastness, and address of authenticity’. The total cost for the strategic plan implementation is 216 million US dollars, distributed over four years from 2012-2015 (Municipality, 2012).

#### 4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ON NABLUS CITY

By tracking the history of Nablus municipality, it is hard to find any obvious evidence of public participation as a part of a comprehensive strategic planning process before the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence, following the dramatic changes witnessed in the contemporary history of the Palestinian context on the political, social and economic levels, Nablus Municipality tried to manage keeping an acceptable quality of living standards for its citizens. This has been widely reflected on the planning strategies of the municipality.

The basic change in the planning process, which is the public engagement that started in 2006, affected significantly the implementation of the plans and follow-up ones. The implementation efficiency of the strategic plan (2006-2012) was increased 20% more than the strategic plan (1995-2006). The civil society bodies adopted the strategic plan and continued the participating in monitoring of the implementation. The methodology of preparing the strategic plan was based on five classical successive stages in a full cycle, which is sketched in Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4 Stages of the planning methodology** (Municipality, 2012)

Besides the governmental representation in the planning process through various ministries, such as: Ministries of Culture, Youth & Sport and Health, Environmental Quality Affairs, and Palestine Standards Institution; several national NGOs were involved in this process. These NGOs could be divided into: industrial and commercial unions, engineering association, humanitarian associations, cultural and educational forums, artistic associations, sports clubs, women empowerments, and disabled associations. All these groups represented the stakeholders of the City.

These NGOs working together with the sectional bodies of public administration promoted the bottom-up development that Nablus so much needs. There has been involvement as much as possible of the society, at its current development stage, by its representative bodies in the decision making process. Therefore, several technical experts and specialists, businessmen, youth, and other citizens were also involved to promote a democratic approach to urban planning decision-making.

## **5 PRIORITIZED DEVELOPMENT ISSUES**

Any developmental strategic plan should focus on the most urgent, important and influential issues in local development, which are designated here as prioritized developmental issues. Those issues are treated as a guideline for the planning process and the adoption of the development goals of the city. Hence, it is necessary to determine these issues clearly at an early stage of the planning process based on realistic facts and within wide community participation. These issues reflect the weaknesses or shortages of certain areas of development. The following is an example of this prioritization process.

Seventeenth necessary developmental issues were concluded after the discussions in 2010 during the preparation of the Strategic Development and Investment Plan (SDIP) for Nablus (2012-2015). In order to determine the most important from these issues at the civil level, all the participants in Nablus Municipal's planning process used a voting procedure to prioritize them. The results of this voting procedure produced the selection of seven most important issue listed (with ranking) in Table 1.

**Table 1 Prioritized developmental issues with ranking** (Municipality, 2012)

Problematic developmental issues	Sector	Rank	Projects Allocated
Shortage of public health services quality, quantity and distribution	Health	1	4
Unsuitability of the structural plan area and the inadequacy of lands to meet inhabitants' need	Planning & Organization	2	3
Weakness of education outcomes, infrastructure, services and facilities	Education	3	5
Weakness of the investment environment, especially in tourism and the old city	Economy	3	9
Weakness of roads and transportation infrastructure and safety	Roads & Transportation	4	4
Shortage of sports, youth and cultural facilities	Culture & Sports	4	5



Scarcity of water resources, in addition to the urgency to rehabilitate wastewater networks and drainage system	Water & Sanitation	5	7
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From Table 1, one can notice that the most important issue concerns the health sector, while an issue in the planning and organization sector was voted in the second place. Moreover, the education and economy were the third important sector and the infrastructure sector was unexpectedly voted to be the least one. Albeit there are still problems in the sanitation and accessibility, the public participation process did not highlight them as priority. This could be considered as a distinctive positive effect for the new planning process since the previous strategic plan for Nablus has concentrated on the infrastructure sector's issues.

## 6 CONCLUSION

There are no doubts that the dramatic changes, especially the political and economic ones, which Nablus city witnessed during the period from 1946 to the present, were extensive. Organizational and developmental processes are complicated in such circumstances. However, the city with its citizens and municipality showed a high level of commitment to urbanization after 1995, which was represented through innovation in planning in the available financial resources. One of the most important innovations was the adaptation of the civil society engagement in the planning process. In addition, the planning team decreased the strategic plan's legal period from six (2006-2012) to three (2012-2015) years, to manage and keep it continuously updated to adequately face the political and economic challenges.

Still, verifying that Nablus Municipality has substantially involved the civil society in the planning process, the implementation, and the monitoring researchers need more time to study the consequences of the Strategic Development and Investment Plan (SDIP) for Nablus (2012-2015).

## 7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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