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**Plan by evidence: targeting territory's talents**

Arch. Giorgio Amadei<sup>1</sup>, Arch. Davide Nicolini<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Self-employed, Italy

<sup>2</sup> MindEarth, Switzerland

**Abstract**

*Urban and rural areas characterized by weak planning regulation, lack of effective territorial governance tools and underfunded planning budgets, a condition very common in cities of developing countries, suffer disproportionately from the negative social, economic and environmental externalities of uncontrolled/unregulated development and, at the same time, are unable to benefit from their latent potentials.*

*In these contexts, the implementation of planning philosophies and methods from the Western tradition is neither desirable nor suitable as these cannot match needs, priorities, organisational structures, or financial resources. Alternative models are crucially needed to tackle cogent urban issues, including growing population, territorial extension, informal urbanisation, environmental exploitation, among others. This ambitious goal requires a massive effort, whose results on the ground will likely come to fruition in a long-term horizon. At the same time, even in the absence of more structured planning practices, practical tools capable to adapt to the specific context in which they are implemented and streamline decision-making are urgently needed for the sustainable management of urbanisation.*

*To this end, this article presents an approach for the implementation of streamlined, and practical planning tool, based on immediate evidence, specifically tailored for those countries that are lacking in more established strategies for the management of urban development or that are characterized by high-level needs and limited resources. This is based on reading of the territory as an operative instrument for urban planning at meso - and local - scales. It entails the identification, for each element constituting a given territory, of three fundamental aspects: needs, talents and vocation. These, once identified and defined within their social, economic, environmental contexts, provide the concrete evidence onto which to ground small and medium-scale urban interventions. The described method is part of a wider research aiming the urban Integration of IDP camps in Iraq commissioned by UN-Habitat.*

**Keyword:** territorial governance, IDP camps, vocation, needs, talents

**Introduction**

The author of this manuscript had the opportunity, through his professional work, to spend long periods of time in countries plagued by prologued conflict as well as in developing regions of the world typically characterised by a range of socio-economic stressors, including poverty, inequality.

In these contexts, which often present both conditions at once, a process of dissolution by stratification is underway, also due to a lack of a culture of preservation and valorisation of built heritage which can only be partly imputed to the state of crisis in which these countries find themselves.

Generally speaking, in countries like Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Syria and Afghanistan, where I first was first-hand involved in several jobs commissioned by various local public sector institutions, the theme of preservation of architectural and urban form heritage in particular, seems to be seldom applied and, when it is, limitedly to monuments and some historic buildings. In turn, the conservation and enhancement of urban and rural systems, remains largely overlooked and this is evident in the development patterns and spatial transformations occurring in many such regions through the wholesale demolition and replacement of entire neighborhoods with increasingly voluminous new buildings (Figure 1)



*Figure 1. An old neighbourhood in Erbil, Iraq, characterized by traditional brick-work houses and narrow winding streets (which were meant to keep pedestrians protected from direct sunlight and create a sort of Venturi effects) being demolished for a complete replacement.*

This process, is often driven by crude instruments for governing the territory, as most of the urban tools these countries have adopted are substantially simplified forms of zoning. By adopting similar models, these countries are rapidly obliterating their immense cultural heritage and missing out on the opportunity to reinterpret it in a contemporary key.

In Iraq, for example, there are some regulatory building tools with which builders have to comply - The Iraq Ministry of Construction & Housing has released documents such as the Urban Housing Standards Manual, and the Iraq National Housing Policy (INHP, October, 2009) -. These norms address the issue of urban development, in a large part, from a quantitative perspective by assigning minimum standards of square meters for specific functions. These tools are insufficient to support an urban planning process that should be focused on the development of land use and the environment in general.

UN-Habitat is making substantial efforts to provide local authorities with substantive analytical and technical expertise to address the challenges associated with rapid urbanization, such as the “*Old Basra conservation and development plan*” – *Local Area development program EU, 2018* (which aims to

harmonize the historical heritage with the need for new residential and productive areas). This initiative represents a vigorous attempt to support the National urban framework that, in turn, is mostly concerned with the allocation of developable lands for new neighborhoods.

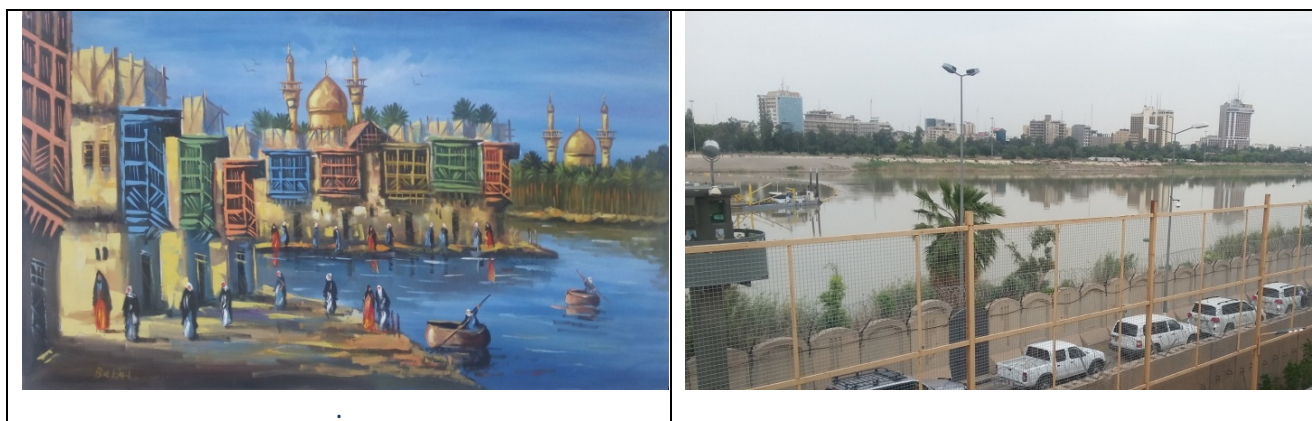


Figure 2: Left: painting depicting 1800s Baghdad featuring the colourful Mashrabiya and clearly showing the relationship of the built fabric to the surrounding water; Right: a photograph of today's Baghdad.

In line with UN-Habitat efforts, this document seeks to offer a simple and practical method for urban planning, management and upgrading geared towards the principles of sustainable urban and rural development. At the same time, the proposed approach also seeks to contribute to the protection of urbanised and rural environments in fragile and exposed contexts, and particularly in countries that, in addition to paying the high toll of protracted armed and social conflicts, are also experiencing uncontrolled and unregulated construction, supported by lack of any urban regulation, building speculation and complacent governments, all of which is bringing additional ecological devastation and social inequality.

### **Background: On the need for “simple” urbanism**

Whilst it is not within the scope of this article to offer a critique of the multifaceted concept of “development”, the proposed work nevertheless adopts a well-defined understanding of this notion, which moves away from typically Western-centred worldviews, which focus on quantification of wealth (i.e. pro-capita or GDP), but rather embraces the idea of development as symbiosis between anthropogenic activities and the territory.

After all, the idea that mainstream concepts and approaches from Western countries is “fit” for today's rapidly developing countries, particularly in the search for more sustainable development trajectories, has been openly challenged for a number of decades already (). Notably, already in 1980s, Sachs (1984) states that the very nature of the concept of “eco-development” is strongly dependent on the diversity of

ecological as well as cultural contexts and, as such, the quest for concrete strategies inspired to this concept should rest in the hands of local populations and rely on local knowledge of needs, resources, values and opportunities. Similar ideas were also strong in Fathy (1973), who warned against trying to import sophisticated systems of Western urban planning to developing countries, but invited embrace processes developed out of local conditions and enriched by subsequent experiences. These authors all agree on the need to move away from replicas and one-size-fits all approaches and, in turn, to develop proposals that are tailored for each situation and context and that are freed of the complexities and intricacies of highly bureaucratic and formalised institutions.

Having said this, the question is then: how to start building this idea of a *simple* and *local* approach to urban planning?

Broadly speaking – and with a great deal of simplification – the author of this document has identified three main (but not mutually exclusive) categories to understand a *plan* or *strategy* for the management of the territory.

- Plans primarily targeting economic capital (and profit) (Oliva, 1983);
- Plans primarily targeting ecological capital, i.e. the plans that aim to pursue the most efficient placement of human activities with a lens on sustainability;
- Plans primarily targeting social capital.

**Plans targeting economic capital** are predominantly based on considerations on land cover and land use management and are aimed at exploiting the real estate value of a territory as capital asset – that is as a set of potentially lucrative financial transactions managed by investors. In this framework, the social value of a house – i.e. a place for living or dwelling – is entirely subordinated to its economic value – i.e. a commodity to sell or rent to generate a source of income. Whilst this approach is necessarily a component of the wider development process, when the economic capital is elevated as the predominant concern, it is almost impossible not to speculate, particularly in a (global) capitalistic logic (De Gasperi, 2010). This approach makes it almost impossible to include indigenous reference models and ecological values in the urban development process – if not as mere marketing strategies, particularly if these entail forms of self-governance which could pose barriers and limits to speculative growth (Oliva, 1984).

**Plans targeting ecological capital** share a focus on the defence and valorisation of the territory, a concern on the short, medium, and long-term impact of anthropic activities on it. For this reason, they pay specific attention to the management of the local environment, be it urban, rural or natural, in a way that is at the service of communities. In this framework, the primary challenges are overcoming the concerns of political and economic stakeholders and maintaining contact with the real needs of inhabitants while promoting a

symbiosis between human societies and ecosystems through planning. Hence, in opposition to the plans targeting merely economic capital, these kind of plans require, in order to be convincing, a consistent narrative grounded on the **real needs** of the territory in question and the direct and indirect benefits envisioned action would bring to it. And it is exactly to reinforce this need for true connection with local context that urban planner and designer Bernardo Secchi reports in *“La città dei ricchi e la città dei poveri”*, the inspiring anecdote of how, in order to put together a commissioned masterplan for a Northern European city, he temporarily moved there as to better understand its needs and characteristics.

Finally, **plans targeting social capital** directly address society as a whole and from different points of view with the functional goal of the “pursuit of happiness” of its inhabitants. In this sense, strategic, planning and design actions are implemented so to ensure a good degree of community satisfaction, to improve the ability of individuals to fulfil needs, and to promote mutual exchanges among community members (Luigi Fusco Girard and Bruno Forte , aa vv "Sustainable cities and human development", Franco Angeli Editions ). As such, these plans are particularly concerned with social-economic aspects and with providing equitable structures for living, leisure, and work. They are, for example, generally focused on facilities and services of key public interest – either existing or needed– and, contextually, on ensuring that each community has adequate access to them. Another key aspect of these kind of plans is the equitable redistribution of benefits deriving from urban development among owners and residents, often through specific rules and regulations. Furthermore, regardless of the political context, these are typically developed and implemented with participatory methods, trying to grasp the latent potential of the communities of inhabitants by providing instruments for community self-reliance in urban transformation.

Each of the three approaches described earlier come with strengths and weaknesses and elements of each approach can be found in each plan, albeit in different measure and with different predominance (and interests). Hence, the present call for a “simple urbanism”, rather than favouring one approach while setting aside the others, proposes to strike a balance between them. Namely it seeks to:

- To mitigate the strive for economic competitiveness, investment and growth with locally-based, context-relevant forms of territorial governance, that work to offset uncontrolled speculation.
- To identify and interpret the concrete needs and latent potential of places, something that requires, as essential condition, a genuine symbiosis with the target context, both socially and ecologically.
- To embrace an openly socially oriented approach, which focuses on building human capital and authentic participation as a potent levers to stimulate the debate on human rights and to achieve a more just and inclusive society for all.

The fundamental goals of achieving a more just and inclusive society, of guaranteeing the right to work, of ensuring accessibility to key services for all, of protecting local ecologies, of tackling climate change, cannot longer be seen as separate issues clashing with the pursuit of short-term economic profits: these must be reconciled and integrated.

### **The need for simple urbanism in complex contexts**

Countries like Iraq and Syria have common problems: both are facing endemic situations of crisis and widespread poverty, and both are seeing a sharp increase in the demand for social services, such as health, education, mobility. Furthermore, in both contexts, as a product of these conditions the increase in the cost associated to these services remains largely unmatched by the capacity by public sector institutions to cover the costs of their delivery (i.e. through taxations), as large portions of the population struggles to secure stable employment and self-sustenance.

In addition, a contradiction seems to emerge in the new urban areas of these countries: they are connected externally with global networks while internally social groups are not always connected with each other (Castells, 1996). This segmentation, which depresses the potential of social and human capital and, consequently, the possibility of community wellbeing, is exacerbated by the absence of favourable circumstances for local aggregation.

And yet, whilst it might appear counter intuitive, it is exactly in presence of similar contingencies that the idea of “simple” urbanism would reap the greatest benefits.

Even with the best principles and intentions in mind, increasing the degree of sophistication of an urban planning model which seeks to respond to these challenges may be entirely counterproductive on the ground when applied in territories characterized by high-level needs and limited resources. Even some of the most applauded progressive and democratic urban planning initiatives implemented in Western countries may hardly be applicable to countries tried by prolonged crises (Secchi, 2013), whereas, in turn, it would be more appropriate to adopt a simpler model of urban planning that knows how to intercept the fundamental demand for social justice (Sustainable cities and human development - Strategies for encouraging the cities of justice, solidarity and beauty, AA VV).

From these considerations stems the need to devise an approach that is based on simplicity and pragmatism, that is easy to understand and communicate to the population, and that draws strength on what is evident on the ground and visible to the eye through an attentive *reading of the territory*, without overly relying on technical solutions or universal ideologies. In a nutshell, the approach described here is designed to be easily implemented on the ground even by the inhabitants themselves to facilitate participatory forms of citizens involvement in decision-making on a micro-urban scale.



Finally, the simplicity on which this model is based tries to give an answer also to another question, even if this is not examined in depth in the current manuscript: the issue of the regularisation of informal settlements which, notwithstanding the obvious legal issues, when fully included in forms of territorial planning, become part of wider process aiming at the integration and security for low-income families.

### **A practical manifesto for simple urbanism**

The proposed methodology was developed by the author when it was tasked by UN-Habitat to draft a planning vision for the upgrading and the urban integration of IDP camps in existing urban areas in Iraq. It has been drafted aiming to offer a pragmatic urbanism-oriented approach at the disposal of the Iraqis authorities and international concerned stakeholders, and as an easy-to-understand tool for urban and rural planning. Furthermore, the whole paper aimed to initiate a discussion on durable solutions for IDP camps with a focus on urbanism - the idea of proposing a viable urban planning approach for the long term urban integration of settlements created in an emergency scenario is not new, but it was exceptional in the context of IDP camps in Iraq, and it offered an occasion to reflect on the spatial structures and social environment of areas characterized by high-level needs and lack of resources. The overall goal of the original document was offering guidance to pursue the following:

- Upgrading of IDP camps and substandard settlements into residential areas, where deemed necessary;
- Avoiding IDP camps turning into substandard settlements or slums characterized by inadequate public and private spaces;
- Promoting organized forms of social cohesion.

Micro-urban planning simulations were carried out in 3 different locations to frame also the following:

- Proposing the vision of transforming, or partially transforming, the camps for a diversified use (e.g. logistic facilities) beyond the purely residential function;
- Making the best use of existing infrastructure (mostly built in an emergency context and funded by the international community) such as power, water, sewage networks;
- Selection criteria to decide which camps are best suited for urban integration

The intended public for the guidelines and strategies contained in the original document are concerned policymakers for whom it offers a planning vision which can be both complements existing national urban planning legislation, and also applicable as a stand-alone micro-urban planning tool for long underserved areas.

The challenge was not to solely offer spatial analyses, but to also identify social and collective potentials, while putting newly established (IDP) and previously present host communities at the centre of the whole process by framing guidelines for IDPs and host communities mobilization and social cohesion with a lens on urban integration. The below manifesto describes primarily the urban planning method.

The whole concept owes much to the work of Ian McHarg, Scottish researcher and writer on regional planning using natural systems and, in particular, to his seminal book “Design with Nature” (1969) where he powerfully described out an innovative concept of urban planning which sought to integrate multiple ecological as well as functional layers to determine most appropriate spatial development decisions (Figure 3).

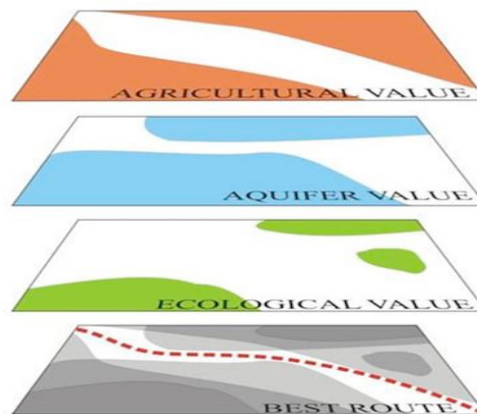


Figure 3. Mc Harg method to find, for example, the best way to lay a new road in between natural systems (<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/315603886367034303/>)

A similar approach can be used to identify needs and voids as prime places to intervene and revitalize. This entails tracking and mapping down “irregularities” in the urban fabric – for example where there are inadequate norms or building regulations, where it is observed a lack of social and physical infrastructure – and proposing specific corrective interventions where these are encountered (Balbo, 1999).

Whilst this approach maintains a degree of familiarity to the planner, insofar it maintains an element of zoning (i.e. a method of subdividing the land into areas, each of which is given a specific set of rules determining whether and how building permission may be granted), and as such easy to understand, it is far from a simple effort to prescribing uses of land as main trigger of urban development. It is rather a form of zoning by “latent qualities” primarily aimed at identifying the territory’s talents. This is based on a simple tripartite conceptual framework (Figure 4) that brings together three fundamentals qualifying criteria which can be applied of any territory:

- **Needs:** that must be satisfied by a range of actions and interventions.
- **Values:** that must be preserved or enhanced.



- **Vocation:** that an area has (i.e. in terms of specific land use or function) or that is perceived as the most appropriate or suitable to a particular land so to ensure a certain gain.



Figure 4. Zoning by “latent qualities”

Based on the three elements of *needs*, *values* and *vocation* it is then possible to read and interpret the various elements of a territory, achieving a form of planning which is inherently based on social and ecological cooperation. And, indeed, as noted by Sachs (1984), those societies that managed to maintain a long-term state of prosperity are also those that sought to pursue a lasting symbiosis between humans and the environment.

Following this logic, a forest, for example, holds, in order of importance, an ecological *value* (*as such, i.e. as a source of oxygen and biodiversity, etc.*), an environmental *vocation* (once again as such, i.e. keep the forest as it is and not make it a target for immediate economic gain) and it may *need* to be protected or restored to allow, for instance, a sustainable production of wood while avoiding its demolition. The ecological value is here the **pulling factor**, in other words it is the leading qualifying criteria around which the planning proposal is tailored while protection and environment are the **pulled factors**. Many more examples could be brought to corroborate this tri-partite conceptual structure, some of which are reported in Table 1. In this way, these three qualifying criteria – needs, vocation, values - frame a planning principle for immediate evidence and constitute the foundation for small and medium scale urban interventions in a way that this is easily applicable and understandable.

**Table 1. Table showing examples of territorial units framed by the above described criteria - in capital letters the “pulling” criteria.**

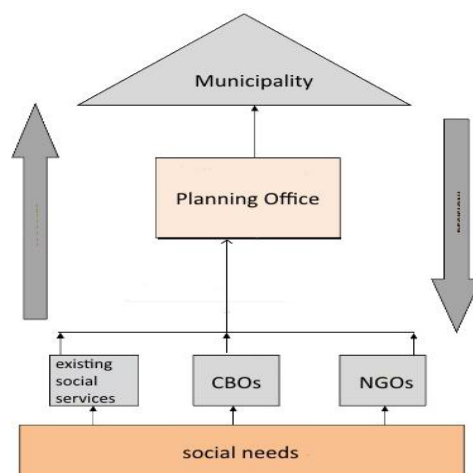
| Area – zone                           | Vocation                 | Needs         | Values          |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| River bed                             | Environmental            | Conservation  | ECOLOGICAL      |
| Open area embedded in a urban setting | URBAN PARK               | Planning      | Social          |
| Sparsely urbanized area               | Housing, infrastructures | DENSIFICATION | Urban           |
| Informal settlement                   | Uptown                   | UPGRADING     | Social cohesion |
| Disused industrial facility           | TRANSFORMATION           | Planning      | Economic        |

|   |                        |                 |                 |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| IDP camp sector (planning module normally hosting 5,000 individuals) embedded in an urban setting | Residential            | IMPROVING       | Housing         |
| IDP camp sector isolated  | Rural or environmental | DECOMMISSIONING | Stabilization   |
| Lake  | Environmental          | Conservation    | WATER RESERVOIR |

**Note:** The whole document drafted for UN-Habitat developed guidelines and methodologies with which the concerned authorities, local stakeholders and dwellers (in an organized participative setting) can set methods and develop plans on their own for the urban integration of IDP camps and substandard settlements. This has meant giving preference to strategies that take an in-depth area-based approach and ensure that the services (the complex of activities serviceable for the satisfaction of collective needs) are extended or upgraded putting the host community into the picture ensuring that their needs are also considered. It may also mean starting to consider IDPs, dwellers of substandard settlements and host communities in an inclusive manner in policy and programming.

That's why in the original document it also framed how setting up the (local) Urban Planning Office (i.e. the office in charge to implement this method), in a way to make it also the hub of the synergies among the inhabitants, the existing social and economic groups, and the institutions. This sort of new planning body should be rooted into the social reality so that to have the capability to elaborate 3 bearing elements:

1. The local governance, i.e. establishment of alliances between the local institutions and the civil society associations.
2. The methodological insights, and knowledge, i.e. the Planning Office collects, analyzes and disseminates the data and information gathered by the various local interlocutors. This knowledge is translated in plans in the form of mapping and strategizing.
3. The programming objectives, i.e. linking the local programming with the national and regional planning level (if exists), defining mechanism and objectives for social programming with a lens on endogenous development. It is essential adopt an interdisciplinary approach that includes, but not limited, the following:
  - . Rewarding elements - in form of tax alleviation, subsidies, self-planning, creation of community improvement district and other forms of participative local development;
  - . The identifications of the areas where the municipality and the community intends to direct their objectives for the revitalization of the urban environment;
  - . The type and structure of interventions aimed at ensuring optimal services endowment, with a lens on long term sustainability, in the urban area and the entire territory alike.



*Scheme of the master planning process. (CBO stands for Community Based Organization).*

### **Simple Urbanism and zoning by latent qualities: an implementation**

The zoning by latent qualities method has been proposed as a strategy for the sustainable urban integration IDP camps and urban upgrading of some towns in Iraq. This method was developed by the author as a planning vision capable to achieve both urban integration and urban upgrading of the marginalized urban areas where normally IDP camps are built. Basically, it was to find a method for city and rural planning where there is no Urban Planning (Iraq lacks of a structured urban planning framework to which adhere). It was essential that this method was easy to understand and adopt by local authorities especially for those that have a certain grade of autonomy from the central government (as it is in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

To preliminary test the method three settlements have been the object of planning simulation (pretending, for the sake of the simulation, that the participatory component was already factored in). For the sake of brevity, the next pages will illustrate the proposed method focusing on the work carried out for one of the three settlements, *Khanke village, Iraq*.

When the author visited the village and its IDP camp noticed a stimulating territory full of elements of interest: the village of Khanke is characterized by the main access road full of trades and activities, the territory is undulating (not at all monotonous) run by natural seasonal streams, it is located along a river bed and next to the artificial lake of the Mosul dam. The waters of the lake have fish, they are available for irrigation and are certainly a resource from a landscape point of view too. In addition, the village is well connected with the neighbouring villages and the town of Duhok. Nevertheless, it seemed that all this was unnoticed: an unappreciated abundance, a misunderstood wealth. The village of Hanke is incapable of dialoguing with such a gifted region, at least in urbanism terms, and there are no planning-related evidences that, in some way, it has been tried to link the growing village with the territory, and this is due to the lack of urban planning tools and visions. That's why the above-described method also tries to combine the vision with the tool.

In the proposal for Khanke village, pulling factors at the territorial and city scale (Figure 5 and Figure 6) have been mapped taking in consideration various elements such as: the distance to commercial and job hubs, distance to larger urban settings and public services, presence of territorial values (physical and geographical resources, landscape, environment etc.), the social landscape, demand for housing, land or property and the hypothetical political endorsement.

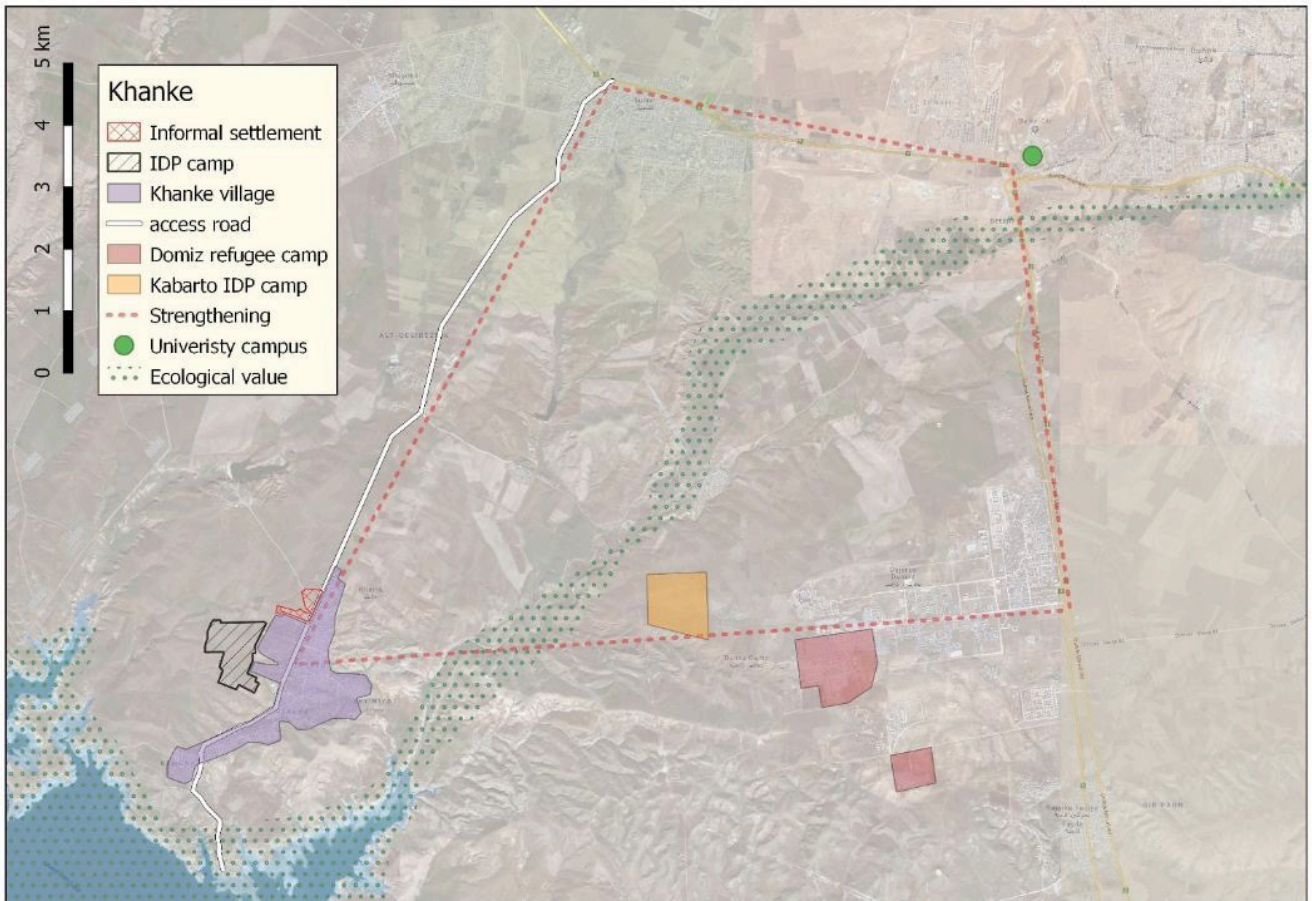


Figure 5. Khanke village, Iraq. Urban upgrading simulation - territorial scale



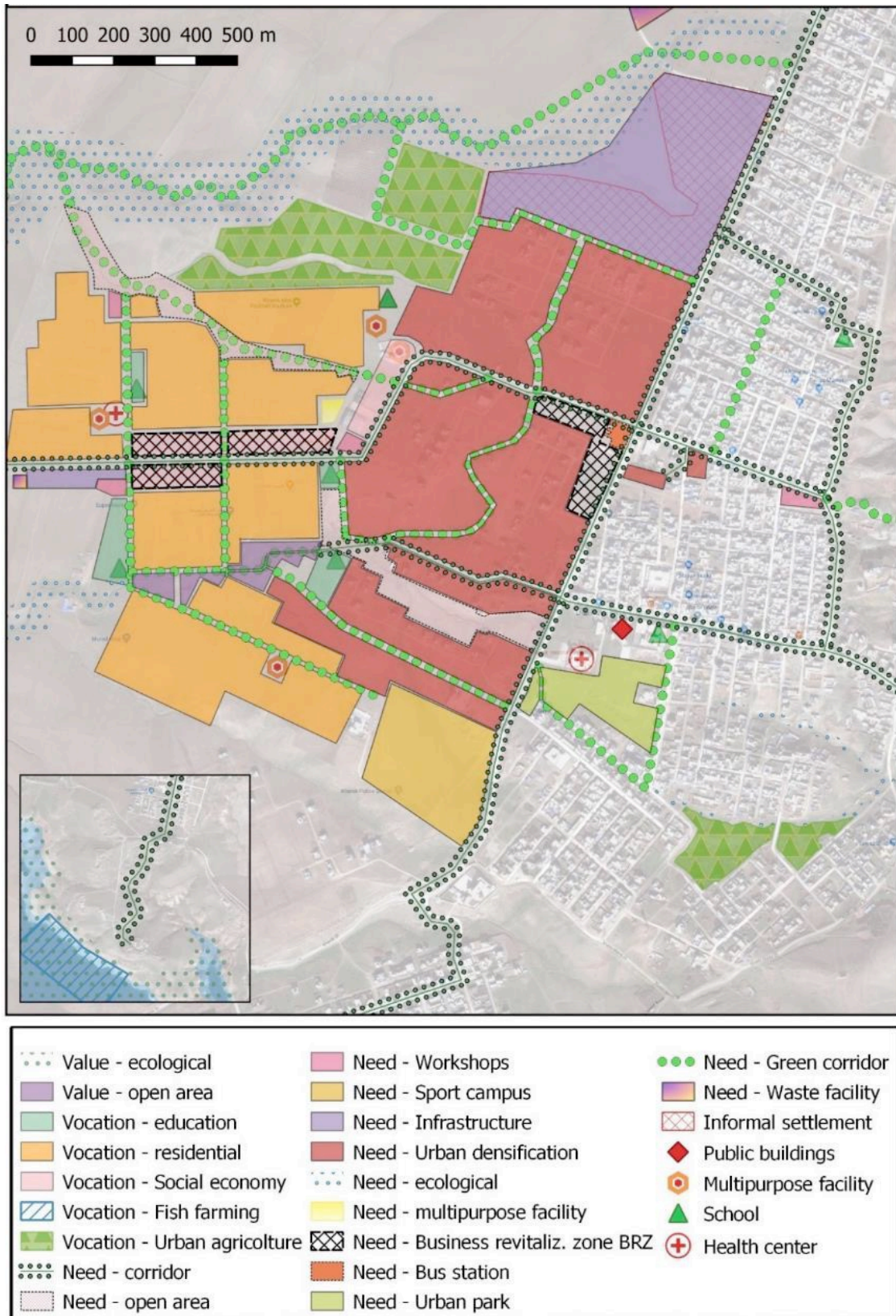


Figure 6. Khanke village, Iraq. Urban upgrading simulation. The planning pulling factors: Values, Vocations and Needs. - City scale

When this method based on needs, vocations and values was drafted, it seemed that in Iraq there were the conditions for a frank discussion with local and national stakeholders about its applicability. During the field visits conducted to develop the document for UN-Habitat, the author had the chance to meet an important

member of the Iraqi authorities who has adopted a policy of inclusion and reconciliation among families belonging to different social groups living in poor neighborhoods and IDP camps. By leveraging the most honorable tribal dynamics, he has made possible to minimize the social tensions and favor a high voluntary return rate and a sort of industrious social peace. This officer was positively impressed by the description of this method for two main reasons: it was easy to understand, and simple to put in practice. Obviously, there were differences between the author and the officer in perceiving the needs or values, but the framework was straightforward. It seemed just a matter of trying to put it in practice.

## **Conclusions**

A narrative based on the concepts of vocation, values and needs build by putting in connections planners and the citizens has made possible to promote an approach to planning able to improve self-awareness of stakeholders and community members through a process of knowledge exchange and mutual learning. Whilst the proposed approach to “latent zoning” has been tested only as a simulation, adopting a similar mindset can generate more collaboration from early stages of the decision-making process, give confidence to local actors, citizens and local institutions regarding their own assets and help capture peculiarities of places and their unique heritage. Furthermore, when coupled with a truly participatory approach it fosters a culture of planning as a process of continuous learning by concrete experience which involves not just the so-called experts, but the different parties involved – more or less directly – in the space of decision-making over different key sectors.

In a country like Iraq, plagued by a prolonged state of crisis, it was also natural trying to develop a method based on spatial cooperation rather than segmentation. And indeed, this method combines aspects linked with territorial features and dynamics of the social environment, identifying, and engaging with multiple stakeholders, such as social groups and local authorities. In this sense, by giving a recognized formal, legal status to the set of unique talents and needs of a given territory and population, it promotes empowerment of local groups and self-reliance on local resources. Of course, in the absence of a National regulatory framework, experiences such as this one would remain relegated to the will of limited experiences. Nevertheless, these could represent virtuous examples that trigger more systemic change as result of repeated implementations.

## **Acknowledgements**

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