Sustainable development, planning integration and spatial plans in Greece: from the institutional framework to planning practice

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Abstract
The notion of sustainability constitutes a core aspect of spatial planning, while planning for sustainable development has become a crucial component of all planning systems during the last two decades. In Greece, by the end of the 1990s a couple of important new Laws were issued which, on the one hand, formed an explicit hierarchy of plans from the national to the local level and, on the other, clearly adopted the notion and principles of sustainable development in all spatial levels: firstly the Urban Planning Law "Sustainable Urban Development of Cities and Towns" (Law 2508/1997) and, secondly, the Regional Planning Law "Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development" (Law 2742/99). These changes echoed an effort to keep pace with the wider Europeanization of planning policies, but also an inherent ambition that the system could smoothly move towards achieving the goals of sustainable development and planning integration at various spatial levels. The approval of the two Laws, which covered spatial development at the urban, regional and national level, apparently completed the institutional framework of the contemporary planning system in Greece. However, the relations and synergies between the various spatial levels as well as the substantial adoption and implementation of sustainability principles remain a question, which should be examined empirically in relation to the actual planning practice.

The paper discusses the way the planning system in Greece is structured after the above institutional reforms and highlights those aspects that indicate a transition from the central approach in planning to a more hierarchical and integrative approach, which at the same time incorporates notions and principles of sustainable spatial development. Drawn from empirical research on spatial planning practice in the region of Central Macedonia during the last decade, the paper argues that although the system attempted in many respects to be hierarchical with an integrative perspective, in the end planning practice is still oriented to accommodate new land for development, undermining objectives such as sustainable spatial development and spatial integration of planning. The research illustrates the considerable gaps between framework and outcome, an established feature of the Greek planning system, reflecting the longstanding deficiencies of the planning tradition in Greece.

Key words: Greek planning system, sustainable development, spatial planning, planning practice, planning integration

1. Sustainability and spatial planning systems

It is a common argument that for the last 20 years the idea of sustainability has provided a large part of the agenda of spatial planning and even its much needed "vision" (Davoudi 2000). Sustainable development has been increasingly adopted since the 1990s as a dominant policy goal in all international, national and local official policies and the public discourse in general (Rydin 2011). At the same time not only has the purpose of spatial planning become

the delivery of sustainability in a community and in a globalized urban context, but spatial planning is also considered a critical tool to manage globally driven development processes and global environmental changes in order to reach a long-term sustainable management of urban development. Moreover, the improvement of spatial planning as a tool for addressing both social and environmental externalities in urban economy has become a goal for many officially stated national and international policies (Andrikopoulou et al. 2007).

Sustainability as a vision of spatial planning brought back to the agenda the role of spatial planning as mediator and equalizer between the three corners of the "economy, environment and equity" triangle or even better between the tensions generated by three conflicts "property, resource and development" (Campbell 2003). However, planning in practice and its institutions gave emphasis primarily on the environmental aspect and more specifically on how urban growth can be managed in a sustainable manner taking into consideration the resource availability and the environmental impacts and promoting further the integration of environmental aspects into urban planning. Although there are still open questions as to what the substantive content of a sustainable spatial planning is (Naess 2000), issues such as urban form, sustainable transport, re-use of abandoned urban sites, more efficient use of sites that can be built or creation of more effective mechanisms in order to involve citizens in the planning process have gained a central position in spatial planning (Haughton and Hunter 1994, Naess 2000). In the 2000s in particular, as the issue of mitigation and adaptation to climate change has brought more and more at the top of the agenda the target of reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, regulating urban growth, and particularly urban sprawl, mobility patterns and their economic, social, environmental implications have become the core interest of spatial planning (Davoudi et al. 2009).

Achieving sustainable management of urban growth within the sustainability framework was the subject matter of the reforms of the planning systems that took place by the end of the 1990s or in the 2000s in many European countries, as did the whole system of planning and control to cover these dimensions. By and large these adaptations of formal national arrangements for planning to address common challenges of sustainability along with global competition, to which they were unsuited, provide even a measure of convergence between the European planning systems (Nadin and Stead 2008). These reforms apparently had two common features, the shift to strategic planning and the integration of sustainability into the proactive and regulatory dimensions of spatial planning.

In France, for example, the latest Law of 2000 on Urban Solidarity and Renewal reformed all basic plans, moving its emphasis from land management to planning coherence, and included instruments giving special attention to the coherence between urban planning, housing, commercial equipment and transport policies (Booth 2003). Sustainability was introduced as a key planning criterion both at the metropolitan and local level of planning. Among the main aspects of this legislation was the desire to make planning proactive and strategic, with special emphasis on the sustainability of development (Booth 2003). In England, the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, which was considered the most important review of this country's system in the last 25-30 years (Nadin 2007), seeks both politically and institutionally to promote changes that enable the planning system to become more transparent, flexible, predictable, efficient and targeted to results (the latter being the substance of sustainability policies) and to examine, in the context of globalization, how planning policy and processes can create economic development and prosperity along with the objectives of sustainable development. In the Nordic countries, where planning remains focused on managing ubran growth (Böhme 2003), policies of sustainable development have

entered the planning agenda in a very dynamic and persuasive way, although not always within a wider planning reform. In the Mediterranean countries there was a growing interest in spatial visions (Giannakourou 2005) within which sustainability was adopted as central strategy. Thus the discourse about sustainable development left no aside almost all planning systems including the Greek system which explicitly incorporated the notion of sustainablity by the end of 1990s, a time of important institutional changes, both at the local and the national level, which strengthened the interest in spatial planning (Coccossis et al. 2005).

Promoting sustainable urban development, which is a long term goal, involves two important institutional levels of spatial planning: the local, addressed in the planning system mainly by the development of land-use plans (or local development frameworks of the more recent English planning system) and the national or regional level which function as a higher level of coordination and policy guidance in the planning system. Besides, this higher level of coordination is necessary at regional, national or international scale in order to resolve the 'prisoner's dilemma' facing individual local communities in relation to global and national environmental problems whereas such planning is necessary to avoid the dispositions made to shift problems of one area to another within a region, a country or the globe (Naess 2001).

In the following sections we first examine the way the planning system in Greece is structured after the institutional reform of the second half of the 1990s and how it incorporates notions and principles of sustainable spatial development. Then, drawn from empirical research on spatial planning practice in the region of Central Macedonia during the last decade, the paper discusses how this guidance was specified in practice and more particularly by the General Development Plans.

2. Changes in the planning system in Greece: structuring a hierarchical system and incorporating the notion of sustainability

The Greek spatial planning system, as in fact the Greek decision making system, is traditionally highly centralised, thus classified in the past among the Napoleonic systems, whereas the EU Compendium of spatial planning systems and policies classified Greece to the 'urbanism' tradition, which had an architectural flavour and a strong concern in building control, with regulation being undertaken through rigid zoning and codes (EC, 1997). The multiplicity of laws and regulations, the lack of implicitly stated policy priorities and the lack of public approval of planning are some of the important characteristics of this tradition, characteristics that lead to ineffective control of development in particularly in the outskirts of all cities and towns. It has been long pointed out that the Greek system is a model of centralised and regulatory planning style, where important gaps exist between established plans and the reality (Giannakourou 1998).

In the second half of the 1990s, a period of high economic growth rates, spatial development and policy in Greece went through a phase of change, with two notable features: in the field of spatial development, the relatively high growth rates of all bigger and smaller cities were accompanied by very high rates of suburbanization and urban sprawl, rates that were intensified in the 2000s to such extent that they transformed the traditional compact model of the Greek cities (Yiannakou 2012). In the field of spatial policy, European policies were widely adopted in the public discourse becoming particularly influential and having a direct impact on the planning institutional framework. Giannakourou (1998: 8) at that time indicated three main trends of this last impact: a) the emphasis on strategic spatial planning, as a result

of the country's participation in the then on-going process for spatial co-operation in Europe and the European awareness for spatial planning issues, b) the introduction of the notion and principles of sustainable development into the Greek spatial planning approach and c) the introduction of the subsidiarity principle and of the partnership approach into the domestic spatial planning process, putting into question the centralised character of the Greek spatial planning policy and system.

In this period two important Planning Laws were issued, which on the one hand, formed an explicit hierarchy of plans from the national to the local level and, on the other, clearly adopted the notion and principles of sustainable development in all spatial levels. First of all, Law 2508/97 "Sustainable Urban Development of Cities and Towns" adopted, as its name suggests, the notion of sustainability into the institutional framework of urban planning and constituted the statutory basis to link urban planning to the principles of sustainable development. The purpose of the Law 2508/97 is the specification of the principles, preconditions, procedures and patterns of urban planning for the sustainable urban development of towns and cities. Among the main objectives that are stated in this Law are land use control in the areas surrounding all cities and towns, protection of the environment, prevention of unauthorized development and specification of criteria for development in a way that further land for development is very wisely released, improvement of the environment in the depressed areas, protection, enhancement and upgrade of city centres, etc. At the time of its enactment this new Law was widely welcome as it included principles and directions for the sustainable future development of cities and towns as well as for the improvement of the built environment, which affect "the qualitative options of every urban plan" (Aravantinos, 1997: 216).

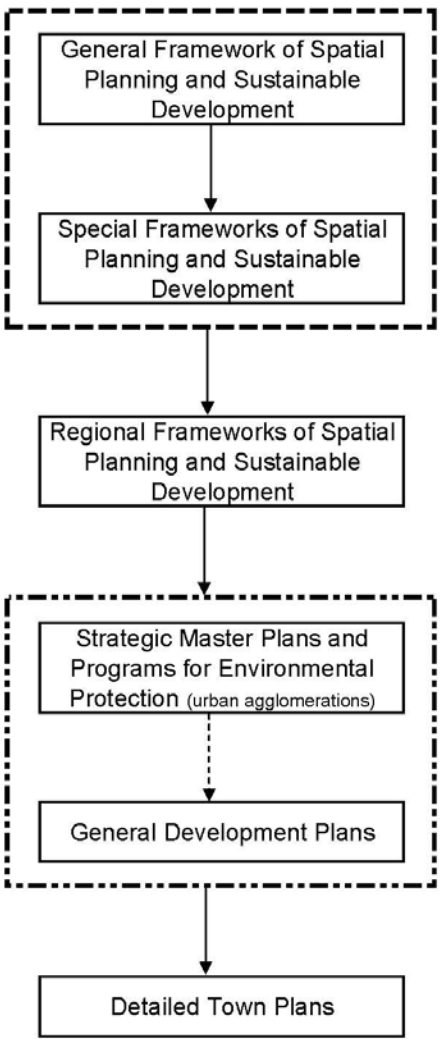
According to Law 2508/97, and following the previous Law 1337/83 with certain adaptations, urban planning is completed through the elaboration of two levels of plans: the first level which can be described as "strategic" includes a) the Master Plan and Program of Environmental Protection (Ritmistiko Sxedio) which covers the metropolitan areas and big urban agglomerations and b) the General Development Plan (*Geniko Poleodomiko Sxedio*, GPS), which is elaborated at the level of each municipality. The second level includes the detailed town plans (*Poleodomiki Meleti*) and their detailed Implementation Plan (*Praxis Efarmogis*). One of the basic statutory elements of this Law is the fact that the Master Plan and the GPS need to coincide with the principles and directions of higher level spatial planning. During the 2000s most municipalities elaborated new GPSs or revised the old GPSs along the lines of Law 2508/97, most of which have been enacted in the second half of the 2000s.

Secondly, Law 2742/99 "Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development", which was introduced two years later, initiated the notion of sustainable development - again as its' name suggests - at the level of regional and national spatial planning, a level of planning essentially enacted for the first time in the Greek planning system. The main purpose of this Law was to provide the fundamental principles and the enactment of contemporary agents, procedures and instruments of spatial planning practice, that promote sustainable balanced development, entrench production and social coherence, ensure environmental protection at the level of national territory and its different areas and strengthen the position of the country in the international and European context.

Focusing on the instruments of spatial planning at the regional and national level, Law 2742/99 enacted the elaboration of the so-called Spatial "Frameworks" apparently adopting a

more strategic and coordinative nature of these plans. At the national level, the Law introduced the General Framework of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development (General FSPSD) and the Special Frameworks of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development (Special FSPSD). The General FSPSD assesses the factors that affect long-term spatial development and structure of the national territory, evaluates the spatial impacts of international, European and national policies and defines the main priorities and strategic directions for the integrated spatial development and sustainable organization of the national territory. The first General FSPSD was enacted nine years later, in 2008. The Special FSPSDs specify and supplement the directions of the General FSPSD that concern the development and organisation of the national territory, especially regarding a) the spatial structure of specific of national importance production sectors, b) the spatial structure of technical, social and administrative networks and facilities of international magnitude and c) special areas characterised by strong environmental interest of crucial environmental, economic and social problems. Up to now, three Special FSPSDs were issued, all of them by the end of the 2000s: the Special FSPSD for Renewable Energy Resources (2008), the SFSPSD for Tourism (2009) and the SFSPSD for Industry (2009).

At the regional level, Law 2742/99 introduced the Regional Frameworks of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development (Regional FSPSD). The Regional FSPSDs assess the position, role and intra-regional functions of the Region concerned, as well as the factors that affect its development and spatial structure, evaluate the spatial impacts of European, national and regional policies and define the main priorities and strategic options for the integrated and sustainable development of the regional territory. The Regional FSPSDs should harmonize with the directions of the General FSPSD and the Special FSPSDs and specify and supplement their options. All 12 Regional FSPSDs of the country's Regions (the Region of Attica was not included) were elaborated and enacted during the first half of the 2000s, in other words before the enactment of the national Spatial Frameworks. Currently these Regional FSPSDs are revised so as to harmonize with the national level of spatial planning.



Similarly at the municipal level, as mentioned above, all GPSs should harmonize with the national and regional Spatial Frameworks, while it is clearly stated that the already approved GPSs (on the basis of the previous legislation) ought to be modified in order to harmonize with the directions of these Spatial Frameworks. Thus, both Laws seek to assure the synergy between national, regional and local spatial planning and to achieve the goals of sustainable development and planning integration at various spatial levels. On the whole, the enactment of the two Laws, of the Spatial Frameworks and the new GPSs by the end of the 1990s shows a transition to a systematic and formal hierarchy of plans, from the national to the local level, that aim to coordinate the various sectoral activities of the public sector. Figure 1 shows this hierarchy among the various plans at the various spatial levels.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of spatial plans in the Greek planning system

Focusing further on the sustainability goal, the General FSPSD states that it aims at forming a spatial pattern of development, in the context of sustainability principles that will be the outcome of a synthetic and balanced consideration of those parameters that promote the protection and enhancement of the natural and cultural environment and strengthen social and economic cohesion and competitiveness. In this context, apart from the emphasis on the enhancement of natural and cultural resources as well as on the protection of the biodiversity, the General FSPSD adopts a model of balanced – polycentric development of the country accompanied by the restriction of excessive urban growth, through the improvement of the countryside's attractiveness and the strengthening of complementarity and balance among urban centers and rural areas. The General FSPSD includes a specific provision in which it adopts the principle of compact city and suggests that it should be promoted in all levels of spatial planning. Thus, it states clearly that all new development should be justified and substantiated on the basis of what is called "objective needs" (demographic, residential and production).

The three Special FSPSDs aim primarily to achieve a more rational spatial allocation of the activities concerned, formulating policies, general regulations and criteria for the location of

these activities, again in the context of the sustainability goal. More specifically, the Special FSPSD for Renewable Energy Resources defines location criteria which will allow, on the one hand, the creation of sustainable installations of renewable energy resources and, on the other, their harmonious incorporation into the natural and built environment corresponding to the goals set by the relevant European and national policies. It is worth noting here that this Spatial Framework provides a concrete context to the authorities responsible for the planning permissions of these activities and the interested enterprises, in order to orientate their businesses to appropriate - from a spatial aspect - areas without allowing the GPS to alter these regulations. The Special FSPSD for Tourism considers the protection and enhancement of the environment a precondition for the survival and strengthening of the competitiveness of the tourism industry. It aims at creating the conditions for the promotion of sustainable and balanced development of tourism in the country, according to the physical, cultural, economic and social specificities of every area, for the qualitative environmental upgrade of tourism activity, and for the provision of the necessary directions towards the lower levels of spatial planning in order to promote tourism development within the framework of sustainable, balanced, compact and integrated management of spatial development. Moreover, it seems to promote the control of dispersed tourism activities in certain areas, such as the agricultural land and islands with massive tourism activity. The Special FSPSD for Industry states that its objective is the transformation of the spatial structure of industrial activity towards sustainable development namely protection of the environment, social equity and cohesion and economic prosperity. For this purpose, it includes specific goals to strengthen the competitiveness of industry as well as its greater economic and spatial role, though the promotion of a more rational spatial pattern. Among these goals is the promotion of a radical transformation of the current dispersed and scattered model of industrial location and the incorporation of the environmental dimension into the spatial structure of industrial activity, especially by making the location of industrial plants within planned sites compulsory and by suggesting that these sites are more preferable to be planned in areas already developed with such activities and not in open land.

Taking one Regional FSPSD as an example, that of the Central Macedonia Region, its main objective is the promotion of sustainable, balanced and continuous development of the Region based on its natural, economic and social particularities. Among others, the RFSPSD proposes a spatial development pattern for the Region, which has as its core a balanced and polycentric network of urban centres, which can function complementary to the urban agglomeration of Thessaloniki, to the adoption of the principles of compact city and limitation of urban sprawl, the wise use of natural resources etc.

On the whole, the above planning framework clearly adopted sustainability as the core objective of spatial planning which is pursued through a hierarchy of guideline Spatial Frameworks and plans at the national and regional level and more specific development plans at the metropolitan and the local (municipal) level. Although this reform was not accompanied by a hierarchical decision-making system this hierarchy of plans apparently assures that sustainability is a principle regulating planning at all levels.

3. Sustainability and planning integration in the planning practice

In order to examine how planning integration, formed by the two planning Laws and the hierarchical guidance of the Spatial Frameworks, contributed to more sustainable policies adopted by the hierarchically lower spatial plans, we focused our investigation on the way the

GPSs that were elaborated and approved during the 2000s treated basic principles related to sustainable development. As previously stated, the GPS is the proactive as well as the regulatory level of planning which by law specifies the regional and national spatial planning guidance at the municipal level, regarding land use planning and development guidelines and regulations.

By law the GPSs aim at defining the main spatial planning goals of a municipality's territory, forming the basic implementation instrument of the Frameworks of Spatial Planning and Sustainable Development, especially of the Regional ones. In this context, they specify the capacity and the needs for housing development, according to the principles of sustainable development, local needs and land use suitability, and determine the Areas of Special Protection that are not intended to be developed, the planning zones for production activities, the land use and development control zones around the cities and towns and the general land use and planning rules of the existing and proposed residential areas, defining also the areas inside the inner city parts that require regeneration interventions.

Taking into consideration the nature of the GPS on one hand and the guidelines of spatial planning laws and frameworks on the other, and based on recent research conducted by the authors, the examination focuses on three issues: a) the management of urban sprawl and the proposals for new residential areas, b) the management of dispersed industrial location and the specification of planning zones for industrial and entrepreneurial activities and c) the adoption of regeneration tools in the inner city areas.

First of all, it should be highlighted that in both Laws and in almost all Frameworks the notion of "compact city" constitutes an almost axiomatic principle of the proposed development pattern, stating at the same time some general goals regarding the limitation and the control of dispersed development (the so-called "out-of-the-town-plan" development) in the outskirts of the cities and towns. This principle though, apparently in accordance with the traditional urban model of the Greek city, was incorporated into the Greek planning framework in a period where unplanned - and in many cases unauthorized - urban development all over the outskirts of the bigger as well as of the smaller towns and the tourist areas was very extensive, thus drastically transforming the traditional compact city model (Figure 2, Yiannakou 2012).

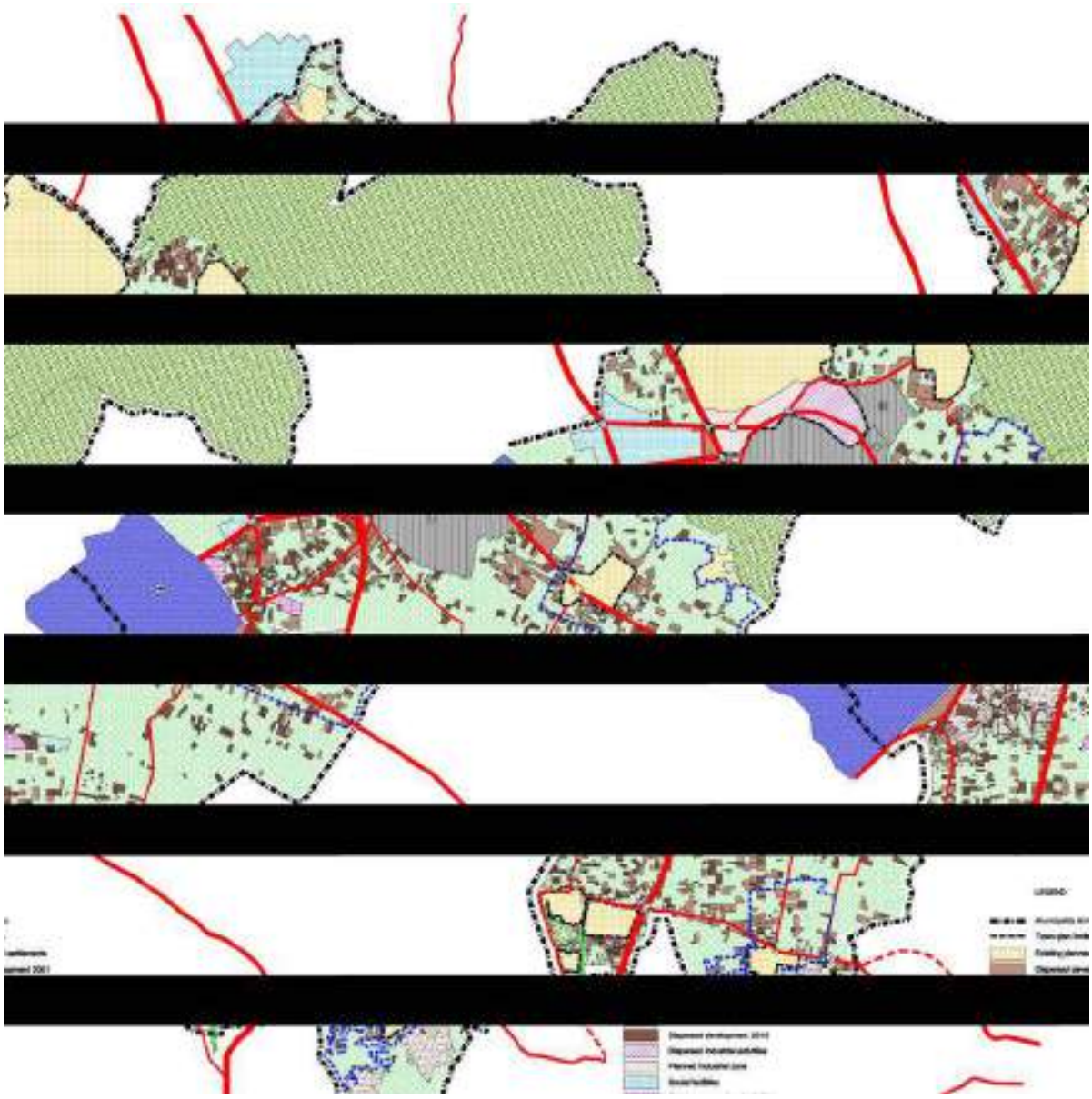


Figure 2. Dispersed development in part of the southern suburban Greater Thessaloniki Area and proposed new residential areas (Source: Yiannakou 2012)

Based on Law 2508/97 as well as its specification by a Ministerial Guidance regarding the planning and design standards that was issued in 2004, two guidelines were directly related to the goal of sustainable urban development: a) "the pursuit of the largest possible economy in new extensions of the town plan" - in other words the new areas for residential development - should be released and planned with the biggest cautiousness and b) the provision of adequate residential densities, which according to the above Ministerial Guidance should not be less than 100 inh/Ha (and not more than 400 inh/Ha), although the selection of lowest densities in soft residential and tourism areas and highest densities in large cities is not forbidden. A research conducted by Tasopoulou (2011) in 30 approved GPSs in the Region of Central

Macedonia in Northern Greece[1] showed that the new residential areas proposed by all these GPSs corresponded to more than 40% of the existing residential areas. It should be reminded here that this was not the first time that massive elaboration of GPSs took place in Greece. The first package of GPSs was elaborated between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s and by these plans a proposal was placed for 31% of extra land to be released for residential development, a size that had already been characterized as big enough (Economou, 2009). Only in the suburban area of the Greater Thessaloniki Area (GTA) approximately 5,700 Ha have been approved or are about to be approved for planning new residential areas in the 2000s by the newly enacted GPSs. For comparative reasons it should be noted that the residential area within the limits of the town plan in the compact part of the city inhabited by the 85% of the GTA's population covers an area of 5,500 Ha.

In the examined GPSs the approved plot ratios were so low that resulted in very low residential densities, inappropriate for achieving a sustainable urban planning pattern, according to the national guidelines (Tasopoulou 2011). This low-density model was selected as it was the only way to provide a reasoning of the proposed extensive new residential areas, although even in this case the anticipated housing need was far beyond any realistic future forecasts. It is worth noting at this point that the selection of low plot ratios and consequently models of development of low densities was a practice accepted and adopted by the statutory authorities in charge of the approval of these plans as a counterbalance to the mayors' pressures for as extended as possible town-plan expansions.

Regarding the management of the location of industrial and other productive activities, first it should be pointed out that in most cases it is located at the perimeter of cities and towns, usually following a linear pattern around major road axes. This location is either concentrated in certain areas or dispersed. The Special FSPSD for Industry explicitly seeks a more rational organisation of productive activities, through their aggregation into planned zones, thus avoiding their dispersed location (Evaggelidou et al. 2009). Apart from this emphasis on planned industrial zones, the Special FSPSD explicitly favours the mix of uses of the secondary and tertiary sector, even providing in some cases the possibility of coexistence of housing, naturally with certain prerequisites. An in-debt analysis conducted by the authors on GPSs currently under elaboration and after the enactment of the National Spatial Frameworks (Yiannakou and Tasopoulou forthcoming) found that in general they incorporate the guidelines of the Special FSPSD for these planned industrial zones in existing concentrations, avoiding the use of new land and promoting the mix of land uses. However, it seems that they are not fully following the Framework's provisions for restraining the dispersed industrial location and development.

This research also records some important problems that relate to the difficulties in specifying the guidelines of the National Frameworks which arise in the planning practice of the lower level plans such as the GPS. For example, the Special FSPSD for Industry includes some very useful and innovative tools for industrial organisation and development, such as the so-called "eco-zones" which nevertheless raise many questions regarding their actual application at the level of development planning. This is due to the absence of more specific guidelines, arrangements and prerequisites which the central administration should issue for the application of such tools into planning practice. Moreover, the proposed mix of uses seems to

[1] It should be noted here that most GPSs examined by this research (based on the Law 2808/97) were elaborated before the enactment of the national level Frameworks (i.e. the General and the Special FSPSD), and so the only higher-level Framework that was active at that time was the Regional FSPSD.

contribute to the solving problems that usually derive from the planning rigidity to separate the secondary from the tertiary sector uses. A second important issue is the fact that the Special FSPSD anticipates that the necessary studies and the necessary infrastructure for the creation of an industrial planning zone should be undertaken by a special agent (a municipal authority could also play this role). This kind of special planning agents (anticipated long ago in other planning instruments as well) have never before been put into practice in the Greek spatial planning practice and is always seen with suspicion by the municipal and central administration authorities involved. A third finding was the fact that even the public authorities in charge of the enactment of the GPSs hesitated to adopt these new planning tools since there was no additional guidance regarding the way these tools and mechanisms can be efficiently adopted by and implemented in the lower levels of planning. Thus, the way and even the option of using these tools and mechanisms was left to the personal believes, knowledge and perceptions of each planning consultant and/or each local administration or executive authority. Additionally, in most GPSs, dispersed development of activities is still anticipated in the areas outside the plan limits, based mainly on the already established land-uses but also affected by local interests.

Finally, one of the novelties for which Law 2508/97 was widely accepted was the fact that it included several tools for the deprived inner city areas, all under a general provision regarding urban renewal which is the nearest notion of the Greek planning system to that of regeneration, however with strong urban design flavor. The renewal of an area was defined as the directions, measures, interventions and processes of urban, social, economic and special architectural character that aim mainly at the improvement of the quality of life and the built environment, and the protection and enhancement of the cultural, historical, morphological and aesthetic elements of the specific area. According to the Law, areas that appear to have problems of degradation can be defined as “renewal zones”. Although the GPSs are the statutory plans to determine these renewal zones, it was found that in practice very few such areas have been defined in the GPSs that were approved in the Region of Central Macedonia during the 2000s (Tasopoulou, 2011). This tool has not been utilized, because of the hesitation of the public authorities (and especially the regional administration) to allow the designation of such zones. Andrikopoulou et al. (2007) argue that this deficiency is a result, on one hand, of the additional legislative requirements needed and, on the other and more substantial one, of the inherent problems of urban policy in Greece. Besides, according to the same authors, a basic feature of the Greek planning system is the great deficiencies regarding its proactive character, since there was almost no activation of other basic planning tools too that were included in the previous legislative and planning framework (the one that was initiated in the mid ‘80s).

4. Concluding remarks

Moving from a public discourse and even a legislative framework to planning practice is a difficult path, in the same way as it remains generally a difficult path to move from the theory of a very attractive notion to specific and effective strategies that make it a feasible mode of development. Most planning systems are practically at the development stage as far as the harmonization of spatial planning policies and regulations to sustainability objectives is concerned.

The reform of the Greek planning system with the introduction in the 1990s of the two Planning Laws regarding sustainable urban development and sustainable spatial planning at the national and regional level, followed in the 2000s by the enactment of the Regional Frameworks, the new GPS and by the end of 2000s the General and the Special Frameworks led, for the first time, to the formulation of a formally hierarchical spatial planning system from the national to the local level. Within this context, sustainability is adopted as a fundamental notion and the core objective of spatial planning at all levels. However, this adoption came into force in the light of no substantial understanding and assimilation of its dimensions regarding planning in practice. This planning integration concerned only the spatial instruments and not the decision-making itself, which remains centralized. In this context, it seems that the central government's role was restrained to the promotion of planning legislation without any effort to clarify and specify the directions set by the upper level frameworks and guidelines, thus leaving - as it is usually the planning practice in Greece - many of its aspects to legal interpretations which in no way function as proactive planning policies. Despite this specific planning integration, the spatial planning system does not show yet an institutional maturity including governing and learning processes that would allow for specifications and adaptations, for searching and peering into the preconditions for sustainable development in the context of the Greek urban development and for incorporating them into specific planning practices and strategies.

The principle of sustainability was introduced as a policy goal in Greece at a time of high rates of urban growth and in particular intense suburbanization and dispersed development in the outskirts of the cities and towns. The experience gained from the planning practice through the elaboration of GPSs in the Region of Central Macedonia not only shows that these development pressures along with the local communities' aspirations for further official release of land for development had a negative impact on the actual application of the sustainability principles, with planning failing to deal with sprawl dynamics in a sustainable manner and applying concepts such as that of the "compact city" (Delladetsimas 2012), but above all, it shows how strongly spatial planning is enmeshed to the development process, to specific ideologies and to a wider social model (Nadin and Stead 2008). In Greece, the new planning framework was put into force at a period of a building boom where explicit unsustainable policy and planning practices on behalf of the local and central authorities, the developers, the landowners, the professionals and the households were not simply the norm but the "life-style, building and planning" culture (Yiannakou 2012). The current crisis in the country and the deeper reasons that determined it is a new set, which should lead to a reassessment of this socio-cultural approach.

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