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URBAN STRATEGIC PLANNING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WELL-BEING: EVALUATION OF THE HUNGARIAN PRACTICE

Abstract. The present paper evaluates Hungarian strategic urban planning from the perspective of well-being. It conceptualises well-being in line with Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA). We argue that the CA provides a meaningful concept of common good or public interest for evaluation. The open-ended nature of CA allows one to embrace the complexity of strategic planning, but it is definite enough to provide a clear normative framework for evaluation. We base our conclusions on 49 interviews with various local actors in three second-tier cities. We conclude that the CA-based evaluation can supplement the dominantly used conformance or performance-based evaluation approaches. We also found that instead of depicting an unachievable ideal state, the CA is able to provide guidance for feasible steps to further well-being.
Key words: urban strategic planning, capability approach (CA), well-being, agency, Hungary.

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning is a particular and wide-spread way to approach the development of places. Since the 1990s we have witnessed the revival of strategic orientation in spatial planning. This revival follows a former retreat from strategic planning, which was fuelled by post-modern scepticism and the neo-conservative disdain for planning (Albrechts, 2004, p. 743). But by the 1990s, the costs of the neglect of a strategic orientation became obvious (Healey, 2010). The criticism of

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land-use planning, and the acute environmental and social challenges reemphasised the need for strategic orientation (Albrechts, 2004).

Urban strategic planning has also become common in the post-socialist EU Member States. However, these countries followed a different path in this respect. Here the main challenge was to reinvent planning after the era of planned economy and amidst the EU accession process. In the 1990s planners were liberated from the ideological control of the state, which used to degrade planning into a "mere technical discipline" (Maier, 1998), but they found themselves facing new constraints. The rapid increase in the influence of investors and the new-born legitimacy of citizen participation were particularly challenging (Csanádi *et al.*, 2010; Maier, 2012). On top of that, planners also had to navigate the increased importance of EU development funds and the expectations attached to them.

An important theoretical and practical consequence of the revival of the strategic approach is the increased complexity of evaluation. The traditional and more recent evaluative approaches (e.g. conformance or performance-based evaluations) may fail to meet these challenges (Shahab *et al.*, 2019). This resulted in the quest for concepts and principles (substantive normative criteria), on which evaluation could be based (e.g. Alexander, 2002a; Albrechts, 2006). This quest also revived discussions around the concepts of the 'common good' or 'public interest'[1] (Alexander, 2002a, 2002b; Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Oliveira and Pinho, 2010; Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015). However, the 'common good' and 'public interest' are highly contested concepts. It is often considered to be difficult or impossible to assign operational meaning to them. Furthermore, they can also function as mere legitimising concepts by power holders (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015).

The present paper attempts to contribute to this discussion. We propose an approach which evaluates urban strategic planning from the perspective of well-being, where we conceptualise well-being in line with Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1993, 1999). We argue that the capability approach (CA) provides a meaningful concept of the 'public interest' for evaluation.

The capability approach has been used to analyse several local development initiatives, especially in low income settings (e.g. Frediani, 2007; Pellissery and Bergh, 2007; Schischka *et al.*, 2008; Frediani *et al.*, 2014; Gébert *et al.*, 2017). The firsts steps have also been taken in approximating the CA and the planning literature (Fainstein, 2014; Basta, 2016, 2017). As Basta (2016, p. 191) noted: "albeit implicitly, the notion of 'capability' has largely infiltrated contemporary planning discourses." However, the systematic use of the CA in evaluating strategic urban planning has not occurred yet.

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[1] In certain fields of the literature the terms 'common good' and 'public interest' have significantly different meanings. For a detailed explanation see for example Sen (1977). However, in the planning literature they are utilised more or less interchangeably (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015). In the present paper we also consider them as being synonymous.

While there are strong arguments for elaborating on a substantive normative concept, on which evaluation can be based, Newman (2008, p. 1381) reminded us that this endeavour should not result in an excessive attention on ideal solutions. He urged us to shift our attention from the apparent failure to live up to the ideals, and pay more attention to the day-to-day work of actors. This caution is highly relevant for evaluative exercises, where one can be easily tempted to contrast reality with ideals. We argue that the CA provides a promising approach in this respect as well. One of the most important contributions of the CA is indeed bringing actual social realisation in focus, instead of ideals or 'perfect institutions' (Sen, 1999, 2009).

On this basis, we formulate two research questions: (1) how can strategic urban planning in Hungary be judged from the perspective of well-being, where we understand well-being in line with the capability approach? and (2) can the capability approach actually provide guidance in the 'far-from ideal' everyday reality of actors (instead of depicting an unachievable ideal)?

The present paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we argue for the capability approach as a framework for evaluation in urban strategic planning. In section 3, we discuss the context and the methodology of our empirical analysis. We present our results in section 4. Finally, in Section 5, we link back to our research questions and provide a discussion and conclusions.

2. EVALUATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WELL-BEING

Evaluation has long been a vital issue in the theory and the practice of planning. However, it is still debated "what should be evaluated exactly" and "what criteria should serve as the basis for evaluative judgements". This issue becomes particularly difficult in the case of strategic planning due to its complexity.

According to Albrechts (2004, p. 747), strategic planning is a "socio-spatial process through which a vision, actions, and means for implementation are produced that shape and frame what a place is and may become". He argued that strategic planning is characterised by the interplay of different rationalities: value (the design of alternative futures); communicative (involving a growing number of actors in the process); instrumental (looking for the best way to solve problems), and strategic (dealing with power relationships). The endeavour of strategic planning is to provide a framework or guidelines for an integrated view on development, instead of controlling or legally binding change.

In the case of legally binding, land-use focused urban planning, the *conformance-based* evaluation of success seemed to be appropriate. Here the success is seen as a plan's ability to fulfil specified policy objectives (Faludi, 1989; Shahab *et al.*, 2019). However, this approach does not fit the complexity and the presumptions of strategic urban planning.

Mastop and Faludi (1997) argued that the *performance-based* approach is more adequate for this purpose. Strategic planning is considered to be a 'social project' (Healey, 2010), where mobilisation, empowerment of citizens and the emergence of networks amongst actors are of high importance (Albrechts, 2006). *Strategic* also implies that some decisions and actions are considered to be more important than others, therefore, much of the process lies in making tough decisions (Albrechts 2004, p. 753). On top of that, planning must face uncertainties: even conceptions about true or false and good or bad may change during the time frame of a plan (Faragó, 2005). Therefore, the success of a plan can be perceived as its ability to guide future decision-making. It is considered successful if it is frequently used or consulted in decision-making processes (Faludi, 1989; Shahab *et al.*, 2019).

However, the interplay of various rationalities, highlighted by Albrechts (2004, p. 752), makes values and power inseparable from what strategic urban planning is. Accordingly, we have witnessed an increased interest in basing evaluations on certain 'extrinsic' *normative criteria.* Various authors put forth normative requirements with regard to the what and how of strategic planning (e.g. Alexander, 2002a; Albrechts, 2006; Oliveira and Pinho, 2010). Shahab *et al.* (2019) argued that neither the conformance-based nor the performance-based criteria are sufficient for the purpose of evaluation. They supplement them by further criteria such as efficiency, equity, acceptability, and institutional arrangements (leaving the controversies of these categories largely unresolved, though).

When searching for normative criteria for evaluation, the concepts of 'public interest' and 'common good' are often emphasised and also critically assessed (e.g. Alexander, 2002b). These concepts continue to play an important role in the practice of planning (for empirical evidence see Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015) and evaluation (Oliveira and Pinho, 2010). However, it is often considered to be difficult or impossible to assign operational meaning to these concepts. Their utilitarian conceptualisation is heavily criticised in the planning literature, but several further approaches (e.g. Rawls' theory of justice or Habermas' discourse ethics) are also presented as problematic (Alexander, 2002a, 2002b; Campbell and Marshall, 2002). These considerations often lead to the conclusion that the public interest can be best discovered discursively, through participatory processes (Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Healey, 2010).

Assuming that public interest remains "the pivot around which debates concerning the role and purpose of planning must revolve" (Campbell and Marshall, 2002, p. 164), we believe that it is worth searching for a meaningful and usable understanding of this concept. Further on we argue that the capability approach of Amartya Sen has an added value in this respect:

– On the basis of the CA, planners' criticism towards the concept of public interest can be met. Actually, the CA arose very much from the criticism of utilitarian and rights-based approaches;

– Through Sen's (1977, 1999, 2009) conceptualisation of well-being and social welfare judgement, a clear substantive meaning can be assigned to the notion of public interest;

– At the same time, the open-ended nature of the CA allows one to construct an evaluative space where the various rationalities present in strategic planning can be embraced within a unified theoretical framework.

The CA is a "broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society" (Robeyns, 2005, p. 94). It is very much open-ended, and is more of an evaluative framework than a theory with exact definitions (Gasper, 2007). According to Robeyns (2006, p. 371), in contrast to other social studies that use multidimensional frameworks, the CA "offers the underpinnings of a multidimensional empirical analysis, and stresses to a far greater extent the need to integrate theory and practice, and to pay due attention to the philosophical foundations".

On the basis of the CA, an evaluation of strategic planning is similar to the exercise Sen (1977) would call a "social welfare judgement". The aim of such a judgement is to decide whether "a certain change will be better for the society, some members of which will gain from the change while others will lose" (Sen, 1977, p. 53). When comparing gains and losses, the CA builds on a multidimensional understanding of well-being, and emphasises the role of public deliberation in the process of social judgement.

Further in the article we briefly address three features of the CA that are particularly relevant for the evaluation of spatial strategic planning and where the CA may bring new insights into on-going discourses.

First, the CA makes a clear distinction between the *ends* and *means of development*. The CA focuses on human development. It conceptualises well-being as the ability to "lead a life one has a reason to value" (Sen, 1999). *Capabilities* are options, people may choose to do or be.[2] Accordingly, development is the expansion of citizens' freedom to achieve valuable "doings and beings" in life. The CA argues that utilitarian welfare theories, subjective well-being measures (e.g. happiness), and evaluations about primary goods or basic needs are built on an excessively narrow "informational basis" to be able to assess such a multidimensional phenomenon as well-being. Sen (1999) used the notion of *well-being* to indicate its difference from narrower concepts, such as welfare (a core category of the utilitarian philosophy and economics), or standard of living (embracing the material aspects of a good life). This conceptualisation of well-being highlights the inevitable value content of the concept; it shifts attention to the lives people

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[2] It is very important to note that the CA makes a distinction between choices (opportunities) and actual achievements. It argues that it is not sufficient to focus attention on the latter, since people may have a reason to value options they do not choose. Hence, the opportunity to choose is an important *element* of well-being.

can actually live (freedom to lead a life); and it connects individuals to the community (talks about reasoned concepts of valuable life).[3]

People's ability to achieve valuable doings and beings in life is poorly indicated by the means (e.g. real income, rights, infrastructure) they possess. The ability to actually utilise those means depends on a series of *conversion factors*: personal heterogeneities, environmental diversities, variations in social climate, differences in relational perspectives, and the distribution within a family (Sen, 1999). Conversion factors characterise the situation in which means are used, hence they are specific to an individual. This brings the diversity of people and their circumstances into the forefront of well-being theories.

This implies that several objectives formulated by urban development strategies (e.g. jobs, income, infrastructure) are actually the means of development from the perspective of the CA. Therefore, the fulfilment of policy objectives (conformance-based success), or a plan's ability to guide later decisions (performance-based success) may have a loose connection to well-being. Conversion factors that reflect the diversity of people and contexts may hinder citizens' ability to actually use the means in order to achieve valuable doings and beings.

Second, the CA explicitly builds on the *diversity of values* and the *diversity of citizens*. It is a pluralist approach in a dual sense (Robeyns, 2005; Gasper, 2007). On the one hand, people may deem different "doings and beings" valuable. This is the point of departure of any collective judgement on community well-being. On the other hand, people are heterogeneous regarding their ability to utilise means.

Third, *deliberative participation* and the *freedom for agency* are central issues for the CA. Agency is understood as a freedom: the freedom to *pursue* one's goals, the freedom to *lead* a life one has a reason to value (Sen, 1999). On the one hand, agency has an instrumental value: it allows actors to bring about more beneficial outcomes. On the other, it has an intrinsic value: it is a valued capability. Therefore, in the CA the process and the outcome of development are equally important for the purpose of evaluative judgements on well-being.

Deliberative participation enables actors to develop an informed opinion about valued capabilities. This is the means for broadening the informational basis of collective decisions and to make collective judgements with regard to development. And it is also the way of creating useful and valid knowledge by considering

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[3] The intention of the CA is to grasp the complexity of a phenomenon instead of reducing it to a single (or few) indicators. *Sustainability*, as something citizens may have a reason to value, can be part of the concept of well-being in the CA. However, we must note that the CA is more equipped to consider the social rather than the environmental aspects of the 'common good'. There have been attempts to better reconcile the CA with the concept of sustainability (e.g. Rauschmayer *et al.*, 2010), but this is rather considered to be a shortcoming of the CA. It is important to be aware of this, since urban strategic planning often takes (at least rhetorically) an integrated approach, where sustainability is one of the core considerations. Accordingly, in the present paper, we occasionally touch upon environmental concerns, but they are not in the focus of analysis. This can be considered as a limitation of our approach.

different sources of knowledge (Bajmócy and Gébert, 2014). Due to its attention on deliberative participation, it is very easy to connect the CA to major discourses around urban planning processes: the importance of collaborative planning, and the theoretical and practical problems around consensus building (Ploger, 2001; Healey, 2003; Hillier, 2003; Innes, 2004). The open-ended nature of the CA also enables one to consider the reality of power relations. It urges one to understand what results in the freedom (or lack thereof) to take part in the development process and directs attention to the removing of the constraints of agency.

To sum up, the CA stresses the diversity of values, objectives, citizens and contexts. Its open-ended nature enables one to embrace such complexity. Yet, it is also definite enough to provide a clear normative framework. Therefore, it has clear implications for strategic planning and evaluation. On the basis of the CA, strategic planning is judged from the perspective of capabilities: citizens' freedom to lead valuable lives. This suggests three main issues for evaluation: (1) how the objectives of strategies fit the set of capabilities deemed to be valuable in a community; (2) how citizens can actually make use of the means of well-being in order to further their ends; and (3) to what extent citizens have the freedom to act as agents during the moulding and the fulfilment of the objectives.

3. EVALUATING URBAN STRATEGIC PLANNING IN HUNGARY

In the following sections, we analyse urban strategic planning in Hungary from the perspective of well-being. We carried out qualitative (interview-based) inquiry in three Hungarian second-tier cities in 2015 and 2016. This period provided special opportunities for two reasons. First, in 2013 and 2014 all the larger cities[4] in Hungary renewed their non-regulatory plans: the urban development concepts (UDC) and the integrated urban development strategies (IUDS). Second, this coincided with the debut of the new procedural requirements of strategic urban planning.

Now we shall briefly demonstrate the context of the analysis; we shall highlight the similarities and the differences among the chosen locations. Then we shall introduce the methodology of our analysis.

3.1. The context of the analysis

We carried out analysis in three cities: Kecskemét, Szeged, and Pécs. All of them are minor cities in global terms, with populations between 110 and 160 thousand people. Regarding urban strategic planning, there are important differences among

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[4] Cities with the rights of counties. There are 23 such cities in Hungary.

the three cities, which we will briefly describe later in this section. However, our aim was not to compare the cities, but to gain a detailed understanding of the Hungarian practice. Picking cities with different features allowed us to identify certain commonalities and also helped us compile a more detailed overall picture.

The urban strategic planning in the three cities shares certain similarities that derive from the general Hungarian planning environment. After the regime change, the legal basis for municipal planning was re-created in 1997 by the Construction Act, which focused on legally binding, regulatory, land-use planning. It also mentioned a plan type, which ought to have a strategic orientation and not be focused on land use: the settlement (urban) development concept (UDC). However, the role of the UDC remained marginal. It neither provided a link towards strategic planning at higher territorial levels, nor visions to be considered by regulatory plans (Suvák, 2010).

Following the Leipzig Charter (GP 2007), a new plan type was introduced: the integrated urban development strategy (IUDS). This new plan type was expected to serve as the missing link between conceptual and regulatory planning, and to integrate the economic, social and environmental aspects of local visioning. However, they did not live up to this expectation. Environmental aspects have remained largely neglected (Suvák, 2010), projects outweigh strategies (Barta, 2009), and the potential conflicts among the economic, social and environmental aspects are not identified (Bajmócy *et al.*, 2017).

It is also important to note that in Hungary the spread of strategic orientation in planning is closely connected with the EU accession process and the utilisation of EU development funds, which prevailed among the potential financial sources. Therefore, planning has been totally and constantly funding-oriented in Hungary, which has further intensified since 2008 (Mezei, 2006; Faragó, 2012).

This phenomenon has various consequences. First, strategic planning has become a wide-spread way of approaching the development of places, but its meaning is mostly confined to planning the use of EU funds. Second, the objectives of EU funds and the national strategic reference frameworks (New Hungary Development Plan, Széchenyi, 2020 Plan) reduced the possible scope of bottom-up visioning. Faragó (2012) argued that we cannot even speak about strategic planning in the traditional sense, since the possibilities to carry forward new bottom-up ideas is strongly limited.[5] Third, the uniform EU standards (presumptions about the adequate processes, tools, and meanings attached to concepts such as space, participation, governance or strategic planning) did not necessarily have a good match with the everyday realities of Hungarian actors (Varró and Faragó, 2016). For example, in Hungary the decision-making preferences and the knowledge of urban elites are more focused on fulfilling traditional tasks (asset management,

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[5] This has also been supported by a strong re-centralisation process since 2010. However, institutional guarantees of decentralisation had always been fragile (Pálné *et al.*, 2017; Rechnitzer, 2019).

infrastructure-building and public services) and not strategic planning (Mezei, 2006; Suvák, 2010; Lux, 2015).

Apart from these similarities, the three cities represent different contexts for urban strategic planning. Szeged and Pécs are close to the southern border of Hungary. Both of them are strongly shaped by the presence of major universities and research centres, and in the case of both their populations have been shrinking since 1990. The population loss is especially significant in the case of Pécs, which used to be a centre for heavy industry in the socialist era. Kecskemét has a more central location, and its population has increased since 1990.

In case of Pécs and Kecskemét re-industrialisation and foreign direct investment (FDI) have been important elements of urban strategies. In both cases we can detect major events that had significant effect on the local visioning: the European Capital of Culture project in the case of Pécs, and the arrival of a major foreign car producing company in the case of Kecskemét. FDI and re-industrialisation did not play a major role in the case of Szeged. Visioning (but not the actual development projects) has been focused on a 'knowledge-based' economy here. Recently, the foundation of large laser-physics research facility, and the plans of a related science park gave new impetus to the knowledge-based vision. However, it is still too early to assess the effects.

In terms of the process of urban planning, Pécs differs from the other two cities. Participation in bottom-up urban visioning (though mostly confined to the urban elite) has been clearly present here, unlike in the two other cities. In the analysed period Szeged was governed by a party which was part of the opposition in the national parliament.

Based on these characteristics and the prior analysis of the UDCs, IUDSs and the Stakeholder Reconciliation Plans (SRP)[6] we expected to find significant differences in the interviewees' perceptions about the objectives and the procedure of strategic urban planning. This way we intended to gain a more detailed picture of strategic urban planning in Hungary. In the present paper we do not intend to compare the three cities. However, it is worth noting that the patterns we demonstrate in the results were surprisingly similar in all three locations.

3.2. The methodology

We conducted 49 interviews in the three cities in 2015 and 2016. The basic characteristics of the sample are indicated by Table 1. The sample was compiled in two steps. First, we mapped the actors who took part in the planning process,

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[6] In the SRP the local governments define the set of actors whom they consider partners (apart from a few public bodies, which are compulsory partners), and the ways they intend to cooperate with them. A communication strategy towards the citizens is also part of the SRP. This plan type debuted in the period of our analysis.

who were mentioned by the documents, or who were active at public discussions in connection with the recent planning process. Second, we supplemented this sample by using a 'snowball method': we contacted actors who were mentioned during the interviews or suggested by the interviewees. We attempted to compile a sample that reflected the diversity of values, interests and opinions.

Table 1. Distribution of the interviewees among cities and sectors

City	Number of interviewees	Sector of an interviewee					
		Civil society organisation (CSO)	Research	Business	Politics	Mayor's office and public sector enterprises	Planning
Kecskemét	15	9	2	4	3	2	1
Pécs	19	2	6	6	3	4	8
Szeged	15	5	1	6	4	1	4
Sum	49	16	9	16	10	7	13

Note: An interviewee may be included in more than one sector. The present table considers 'multiple identities' of the interviewees

Source: own work.

In line with our aim to map the diversity of interpretations, we used a semi-structured 'traveller' interviewing technique, where the topics are basically introduced by the interviewees. The aim was to collect stories and to get acquainted with interviewee interpretations (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The word-by-word transcripts of the interviews served as the basis for the analysis.

We carried out *qualitative content analysis* (Titscher *et al.*, 2000). We restructured the texts into categories derived from the capability approach (Fig. 1). In line with the arguments of the CA, this framework embraced both the outcomes and the process of development (what and how). With regard to the *well-being*, it builds on the distinction between the ends and means and the importance of diversity emphasised by the CA. The main categories of the CA (valuable doings and beings, means, conversion factors) were supplemented by the categories of feedback and the opportunity gap. The former reflects the iterative nature of the planning process (how the experience of former endeavours informs the development processes in the present). The latter refers to the opportunities that are valued by actors, but not brought about or removed by the development (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014).

With regard to the *process*, it unfolds the concept of agency. The category of value refers to the inevitable presence of the value choices emphasised by the CA (Sen, 1999). We used Gaventa's (2006) power cube to conceptualise actors'

freedom for bringing about change. Gaventa built both on Lukes' (2005) "three faces of power" and Hayward's (2000) attention on freedom, and highlighted the interconnections of the levels (global, national, local), forms (visible, hidden, invisible) and spaces (closed, invited, claimed) of power. The evaluation of the planning processes usually focuses on the operation of the invited spaces: whether actors have the freedom to participate effectively in that space (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Maier, 2001) or whether they have the freedom to define and to shape that space (Hayward, 1998; Gaventa, 2006). However, the key for both the constraints and the enablers of agency may be outside the invited spaces, just as it is suggested by Gaventa's (2006) power cube. The last category in our framework attempts to highlight the barriers of participation (not just formal restrictions but all those constraints that may result in the lack of freedom to take part).
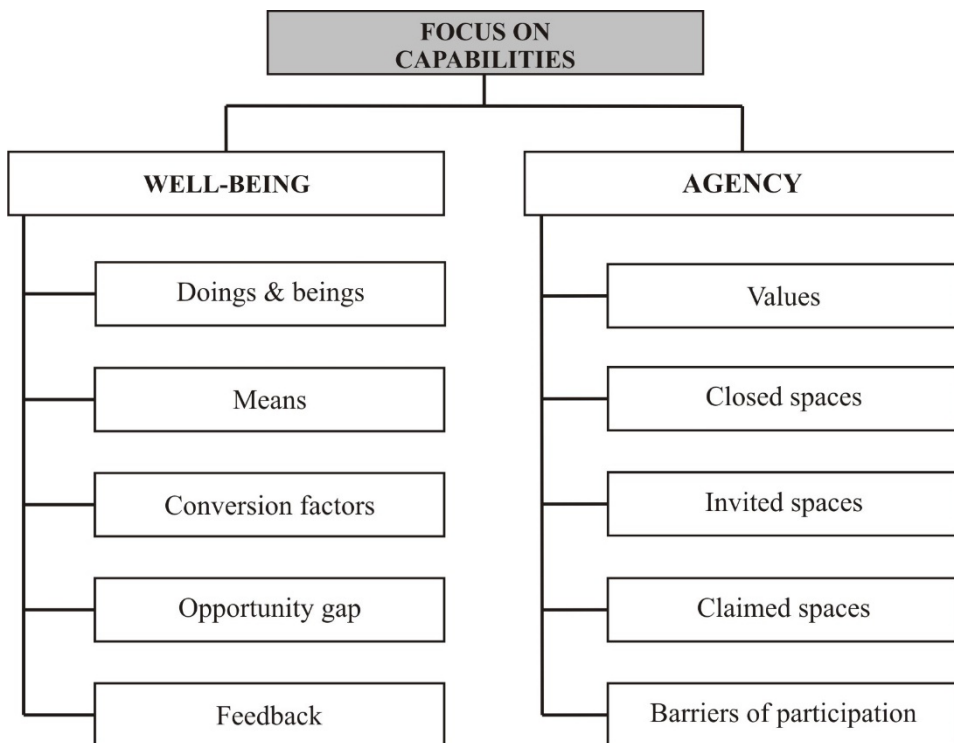

Fig. 1. The analytical framework of the analysis

Source: own work based on Sen (1999), Gaventa (2006), and Biggeri-Ferrannini (2014).

Therefore, our content analysis was primarily based on a deductive coding approach (Titscher *et al.*, 2000); our main categories came from the theory. Then we linked these broad theoretical categories to the reality suggested by the interviews

by splitting them into second and third level 'in-vivo' codes during the qualitative analysis. Each text was coded by two analysts separately, then the differences were reconciled in an iterative process.

We think that the applied method provides certain advantages: (1) the ability to gain insight into the deep structures of a text from the aspect of the CA; and (2) the ability to fill the abstract categories of the CA with context-dependent content. The method also has disadvantages: (1) the deductive logic presupposes the validity and the relevance of the CA in analysing strategic urban planning; and (2) information that does not fit the categories of the CA may remain hidden.

4. THE RESULTS

We concluded in section 2 that an evaluation based on the CA, among other potential influencing factors of well-being, surely embraces the following fields: (1) the relation of strategic aims to the valued capabilities of a community; including the opportunities of actors to actually utilise the means of well-being; and (2) the freedom for agency. In the following paragraphs, we evaluate the Hungarian practice of urban strategic planning alongside these topics.

4.1. Strategic objectives versus capabilities

We found a mismatch between the actual value basis of Hungarian urban planning and the values expected by the interviewees. We also found a mismatch between the objectives of strategic urban planning and the objectives in the sense of the CA.

Several actors criticised the value-commitments of the urban strategies. Numerous civil actors, planners, researchers and some politicians would like strategies to be built on values such as sustainability, human-centred development, social justice or the acknowledgment of local knowledge. At the same time, interviewees generally agreed that the present (and recent) development processes *do not* rely on such values. Should they appear in rhetoric (like sustainability), they are used in insubstantial and inconsistent ways.

> *"The city was thinking big, they were obsessed with large-scale projects." [26; planning]*
> *"They took the weakest definition of sustainability." [21; research]*
> *"Money was pouring to spaces where the children of the local elite spend time [...] and the kids from the block of flats: who cares!" [46; politics & CSO]*
> *"I'm not sure that in a Pécs-sized city, when you try to come up with a vision, the most important thing should be an architect having a look at the city map and dreaming big." [23; politics]*

The actual underlying values were manifold. On the one hand, there were pragmatic motivations such as the alignment with the available funds and the directions of national politics, short term political advantages, and individual interests. On the other, we could depict a dominant way of thinking: a quest for large-scale solutions, a focus on major actors, and the priority of economic growth (and competitiveness).

When talking about the objectives of development, interviewees hardly made a distinction between the means and the elements of well-being. When expressing their views on what should be the aims of the strategies, they mostly mention categories such as jobs, favourable business environment, or certain facilities and hard infrastructural elements. These are the *means* and not the *elements* of well-being in the CA. But for most of the interviewees, they seem to be an objective in themselves without considering their allocation, accessibility, or fit to the diverse values and aims of the citizens. Therefore, the belief that the possession of means automatically leads to well-being can be well detected in most of the interviews. When setting the objectives or making evaluative judgments on them, actors tend to disregard the *conversion factors*: under what circumstances do the means actually lead to valuable doings and beings?

The disregard for the conversion factor seems to be institutionalised. According to the interviewees, monitoring and evaluation of the projects did not attempt to gain any sort of information regarding the use (usability) of the end products of the projects and their effects on different local actors. In general, interviewees emphasised a lack of any systematic attempt to learn and provide *feedback* during the strategic planning process.

> *"They built the bike roads, but actually the pedestrians took possession of them and the cyclists can't really use them [...] most of the bike roads are useless." [3; CSO]*
> *"They have upgraded the entire square [...] with a pushchair its impassable, the same with a rolling luggage. Practically, they managed to create an inconvenient and useless square. [...] This could be prevented; [...] it would have come up during joint thinking and planning." [39; CSO]*
> *"The aqua park has been accomplished, it received EU funds, financial reporting was accepted, all's fine; only the citizens can't access." [49; business]*

While most of the actors did not make any explicit references to the conversion factors, they did make an implicit distinction between the means and the elements of well-being. When interviewees talked about the things they lacked or why they regarded certain development initiatives to be unsuccessful (so when they talked about the *opportunity gaps*), they mentioned *conversion factors* and *doings and beings*. They listed several examples where development projects did not lead to the expansion of capabilities (at least for certain citizens): useless bike lanes or bike stands, public spaces or playgrounds without shade, admission fees too expensive for an average citizen or disappearing cultural or natural heritage.

4.2. Freedom for agency

Apart from a few politicians, the vast majority of the interviewees (including the planners) were gravely dissatisfied with the process of urban strategic planning. Almost all the actors highlighted their limitations in acting as agents.

Actors are divided with regard to the value they assign to *participation.* However, this division always refers to the participation of 'other actors'. None of the interviewees declared that their own participation would be unnecessary or value-less. The negative attitude towards wide-range participation is always represented by actors who actively take part in the planning and implementation of development strategies (due to their political, expert or bureaucratic positions).

> *"Lay people, that's a fairy tale. Public debates, CSOs: these are all just political phrases […] That's why we have the representatives in a democracy. […] Voters must put up with what they have chosen, with what is implemented."* [43; politics]
> *"Evidently, we couldn't save the world, […] we considered [participation] to be a point of honour."* [21; planning]

In accordance with the legal requirements, invited spaces were created in all the three cities in connection with the strategic planning procedures. In Pécs, this was also preceded by a series of bottom-up visioning meetings (called the city cooperation). We found that the examination of these invited spaces is not sufficient to understand the opportunities and the barriers of agency. Diversity in value-commitments, and the interplay of different levels (global, national, local) and forms (visible, invisible, hidden) of power, as well as the operation of the formal decision making spaces, influence the freedom for agency.

Invited spaces are basically set up around the ideas of consensus-building, transparency, and the attempt to balance power among actors. However, the everyday reality of actors does not necessarily support these presumptions, therefore the operation of these spaces either becomes irrelevant or biased.

> *"We couldn't implement the principle I wanted. We simply didn't have enough time for that. We had to meet the deadline."* [20; planning]
> *"I simply didn't have the possibility for involving citizens, though, it would have been very important. This perspective was missing from the mind-set of the development agency, […] the political decision makers and also the practitioners."* [16; planning]

The framework conditions of participation, which are set by actors at the national level, are found to be inadequate by local actors (including planners): they are unpredictable, baffling, they do not leave enough time, and they restrict the opportunities for participation in many ways. At the same time, some of the local actors argued that the local power centre whole-heartedly accepted these circumstances and used them as an excuse, while they were interested neither in transparency nor in participation.

For numerous actors, invited spaces of strategic planning were irrelevant. Especially civil actors (but also some politicians, researchers, and entrepreneurs) emphasised that the discussions were narrowed down, and the basic values were pre-set so they cannot really enter the discourse. Interviewees also felt that they could make valuable contributions with their knowledge inputs, but they were only expected to negotiate their interests (and sometimes values). Probably the most severe problem with regard to the invited spaces was the loose (or non-existing) link between the strategic documents and the reality of urban development.

The more we moved towards decision making and implementation, the less importance invited spaces had. Interviewees reported that bottom-up visioning lost its importance even in Pécs. The city-cooperation was co-opted and lost its significance as the legal adoption of the strategic document was approaching. This was very similar to what happened in the preceding planning period, where the bottom-up visioning around the European Capital of Culture was overwritten by the reality of (politically more appealing) infrastructural investments.

> *"Up until now it's been always the same. The strategies have been compiled and then put in the drawer. No one knew what's in them, and just played by ear. A call was published, there came a politician, a businessman; the businessman talked to the politician; so it goes in Hungary." [20; planning]*
> *"Implementation's gonna be a total disaster. The same as it was in case of the European Cultural Capital. A civil discussion emerged there as well... and then came politics that how can we spend an enormous amount of money on huge buildings [...] and similar rubbish." [23; politics]*
> *"Passing them [the UDC and the IUDS] was just one agenda topic out of the 36." [14; politics]*
> *"I don't really come across such [UDC and IUDS] documents. I don't have time to read 50 pages long documents. Neither do my fellow members in the city council. I don't know whom they write these for." [43; politics]*

According to the interviewees, urban strategies had limited effect on the actual development processes. What seemed to matter was not the visions and the strategic goals, but the list of development projects. However, the actual project list largely depended on non-transparent deals, hidden forms of power and interventions from the national level. On top of this, the spaces of formal decision making were extremely restrictive due to specific mechanisms in place, such as the alignment to national policy lines, strong party discipline, or the restricted possibilities of gathering information. Members of the city council, according to numerous local actors and even the council members themselves, were almost totally uninformed when passing the strategic documents.

> *"Processes take place on two levels. There's a visible and there's an invisible process."*
> *[31; research & planning]*
> *"The wind evidently blows from Budapest. [...] They even add to the wind that is blowing from Brussels. And here, we have to hold on sometimes in a complete windstorm." [28; Public sector]*

"Let's revise the IUDC, cause here comes the Mercedes!" [6; planning & research]
"When Mercedes declared they come to Kecskemét, right before that a new IUDS had just been finished [...] it had to be re-written immediately." [9; CSO]
"We made an IUDS in line with the concept of sustainable development. [...] Recently, I just read in the newspaper [...] that the mayor happily announced that they listened to the needs of the experts, and they are going to build an aqua park." [31; research & planning]

Therefore, the actors thought that the influence of the strategic documents on reality was slight. Furthermore, they often encountered major development projects that did not fit the strategic objectives, or led to the re-writing of the strategy. Planners also emphasised that their mandate ended when the plans were passed. They were not commissioned to contribute during the implementation and evaluation.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section we link back to our research questions. First, we discuss how local development processes in Hungary can be judged from a well-being perspective. Then we attempt to answer the question whether the capability approach helps us build a bridge between the 'ideal' of local development and the 'far-from-ideal' everyday reality of actors.

5.1. Strategic urban planning in Hungary from the perspective of well-being

The present paper argued for the importance of evaluating urban strategic planning from a well-being perspective and evaluated Hungarian urban planning processes accordingly. We conceptualised well-being in line with Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA). In the following paragraphs we shall demonstrate the added value of an evaluation that is based on the CA.

Our results were rather critical towards the practice of strategic urban planning in Hungary. We must note that the Hungarian urban planning processes could also be severely criticised from other evaluation approaches (e.g. conformance-based or performance-based). According to our findings, the implemented projects did not necessarily lead to the fulfilment of the strategic aims of the urban plans. One of the main reasons for this was the loose connection between the two basic parts of the documents (objectives vs. the list of projects). In other words, severe criticism could be formulated based on a *conformance-based* evaluation.

From a *performance-based* perspective we could argue that the parts of the plans that refer to the visions, principles and aims do not (or hardly) guide decision-making processes, while the project lists do. But basically this means that

the approach of strategic planning is not followed in the every-day reality of urban planning. In other words, severe criticism could be formulated from a performance-based perspective as well.

The CA-based evaluation seems to be able to embrace the arguments that could have been made by conformance-based or performance-based evaluations, but it can also supplement these arguments and provide additional information.

The CA-based evaluation showed that the actual objectives of strategic urban planning in Hungary were actually the means of well-being. Without an increased attention to the actors' ability to convert *means* into *ends* (elements of well-being), the planning endeavour may fail to live up to the expectation, i.e. to "promote better conditions for the many and not just the few" (Healey, 2010, p. x). The *diversity* of actors and their values are largely overlooked. The direct concomitant is the loss of a huge set of relevant information: the specific *conversion factors* (which may result in the outcomes of development initiatives being useless or irrelevant for many actors); *values* that create diverse opportunities and willingness for participation; and the lay / context-dependent *knowledge* possessed by actors.

Our results showed that opportunities for *agency* were gravely restricted for numerous actors. Participation as an element of well-being (a potentially valued opportunity) was not realised. And participation as a means for well-being, which could have helped actors to further more beneficial outcomes, was hardly realised.

The opportunities for *agency* can be better understood when analysing the hidden forms and non-local levels of power than focusing on visible forms and the invited spaces. The main barriers of agency were related to the actors' inability to define and shape the spaces of participation. This also meant that in order to arrive at strategic planning processes that have more potential to lead to well-being and to be elements of well-being, these barriers should be first tackled.

5.2. Towards better strategic urban planning

Unlike certain other normative frameworks that have influenced planning discourses (e.g. Rawls' theory of justice or Habermas' discourse ethics), the capability approach is rooted in a comparative tradition (Sen, 2009). Instead of depicting principles and perfect institutions, it attempts to provide guidance for moving towards better solutions, for example by removing certain barriers of agency or considering additional factors of conversion.

Therefore, the CA does not require actors to act alongside certain strict ideals. This may help one avoid the risk that stems from evaluating planning from a normative stance, i.e. to contrast the always imperfect reality (Newman, 2008) to unachievable ideals. Therefore, the CA may also help one to interpret what actors actually do and provide guidance for their everyday dilemmas.

In this respect we found that the basic categories and ideas of the capability approach do have links to the everyday reality of urban strategic planning. Actors *do* refer to doings and beings and conversion factors when talking about opportunities they lack or assessing the success (or lack thereof) of development initiatives. However, the mind-sets are dominated by the means and not the elements of well-being when discussing the objectives of development. We also found that the value-commitments and the diversity of values are factors that genuinely shape the development processes.

The CA provides strong arguments in favour of deliberative participation. But instead of listing the formal requirements of an ideal process, it provides guidance for furthering well-being by the improvement of the processes. It helps focus one's attention on the factors that result in the *(un)freedom* for agency, and it urges to identify and remove barriers. According to the CA, attempts to remove these barriers would not necessarily result in an ideal process, but would surely result in a better process – one which has more potential to lead to well-being and to be an element of well-being.

This also makes it clear how the real life power relations and value debates are part of the endeavour of planning (i.e. to further the well-being of citizens). An attempt to remove the abovementioned barriers of agency, and to create an authentic dialogue (Innes, 2004) may conflict with values and interests of power holders. Nonetheless, if these circumstances are left unchanged, that might result in planning processes that effectively create legitimacy without actually serving as a space for agency. This would (and does) serve the values and interests of power holders.

The CA does not depict an ideal outcome or a process. However, according to the CA, we have a good reason to suppose that decisions that are better informed in terms of the diversity of citizens and their values (their valued capabilities), and processes that widen the freedom for agency will be better from a well-being perspective. Attempts to make such improvements in urban strategic planning are not exempt from value choices or power struggles. Therefore, they should be subject to transparency and open public debates.

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