

## Organising Capacity for Sustainable Urban Planning

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### Abstract

For almost 25 years now *sustainable development* has been a trendy concept whose real meaning and implications are still under discussion. Namely in cities, it is widely accepted that *sustainability* refers to dealing simultaneously with economic, social and environmental issues [1] and that it requires strong organisational and integrative skills from urban planners [2].

In the realm of urban studies, van den Berg et al. (1997) proposed a framework that is a combination of several elements “designed to respond to fundamental developments and create conditions for sustainable development”: vision and strategy, formal institution and strategic networks, leadership, political support, societal support and communication [3]. However, sustainability can be placed on a *weak-strong continuum*: “the degree to which individuals are required to change their lifestyle and behaviours” [4]. Consequently, if sustainability notions among urban planners (and stakeholders) differ along this continuum, different organisational needs and outcomes may be expected. Thus, for planning theory and practice, it is an important task to assess whether or not and how the notion of organising capacity is appropriate enough to deal with different sustainability understandings.

Besides, sustainability embodies a time perspective, just as much as urban projects. In this context, it is not only reasonable to expect that a change in the project’s sustainability notion may occur, also organising capacity may change, possibly under a learning process.

Hence, the main objective of this study is to better understand the relationship between weak and strong sustainability notions and organising capacity. To do so, and after unfolding a theoretical framework combining these different literatures, this study will test a set of hypothesis in a case study about the Riverfront project in Coimbra, namely: (1) organising capacity’s framework is appropriate to deal with weak sustainability but not with strong sustainability; (2) improvements in organising capacity through time are associated with improvements from weaker to stronger sustainability notions; (3) organising capacity speeds up a project’s implementation, but is associated with weaker sustainability notions. The results may bring additional insight on key success/failure factors regarding sustainable urban planning, for instance, on public/private actor networking, on the relationship and power distribution among project players, their relation to formal institutions, decision-making leadership and political support.

The project will be analysed over a ten-year period, triangulating different data sources. The methodology adopted for this time comparative analysis is based on the *rounds model* [5], a public administration decision-making model according to which each round comprises a problem-solution combination and certain participating actors.

**Keywords:** Urban Planning, Sustainability, Organising Capacity, Urban Projects