

Checks and Balances in Planning Decentralization: Lessons from the Ontario Planning System

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Planning systems can be defined by two major scales: centralized vs. decentralized decision-making and 'hard' vs. 'soft' modes of planning, running from bottom-up decentralized flexible systems to rigid hierarchical ones. Recent discourses of planning reform have been characterized, in countries such as England and Denmark, by the erosion of traditional hierarchies. Rigid, welfare-oriented, steering roles of planning have been replaced by a facilitating role of soft planning led by decentralized partnerships of governance, promoting competitiveness and efficiency, occasionally in a context of 'soft spaces with fuzzy boundaries'.

However, decentralization reforms tend to be accompanied by counter-steps of recentralization, explained by an inherent resistance of central state politicians and bureaucrats to cede powers to local governments, by national objectives prioritized in crisis that arguably require upscaling, and arguably to achieve goals of sustainable development and social justice. The introduction of soft planning approaches has also been paradoxically accompanied by the formation of more rigid statutory forms of planning, such as the Copenhagen updated 2013 Finger Plan. These contradictory steps can either indicate conscious attempts to assure sufficient checks and balances in the system, or pluralist decision-making that can be inconsistent, reflecting diverse pressures. Understanding these explicit and implicit checks and balances is crucial in the evaluation of planning systems, and in assessing steps towards either decentralization or recentralization of planning powers.

A thorough analysis of the Ontario (Canada) planning system, consisting of a comprehensive overview and tracking four residential projects, aimed to provide insights from a 'best practice' that is far from perfect, but demonstrates checks and balances in a decentralized system that lacks a traditional 'European planning hierarchy'. These consist of:

1. an effective provincial appeal system (the Ontario Municipal Board – OMB),
2. binding provincial planning documents (mainly the Provincial Policy Statement, the Greenbelt Plan and the Growth Plan for the Toronto region),
3. high quality planning bureaucracies at the local government level (benefitting from past municipal amalgamations),
4. compulsory municipal official plans approved by the province,
5. local politics that are not infested by endemic corruption.

Mechanisms such as the OMB and the excessive use of ad-hoc planning obligations in return for densification are subjects of substantial critique. However, the Ontario system provides applicable lessons to Europe, for an approach that is in-between decentralization that lacks sufficient oversight and rigid centralized hierarchies.