How COVID Affects Decision Making in Planning? The Use of ICT in Planning Boards' Hearings

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1 ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of COVID-19 on decision-making in planning. Put differently, how the shift to video-conference meetings has influenced the processes associated with land use planning.

We discuss this issue by looking at the shift of Israeli planning boards to online meetings. Since March 2020 decision-making has changed from face-to-face meetings between planners, public officials, and stakeholders to an online mode of decisions and meetings using a range of tools including, but not limited to Zoom and Teams. The lessons learned in Israel are relevant and applicable to other countries where similar shifts to online \ virtual hearings took place in 2020.

Everywhere, and globally, state and local governments have found new ways to enable the continuation of planning hearings and meetings; these remain uninterrupted, amid new requirements for social distancing. New laws enabled planning boards at the local, regional, and national levels to make decisions without meeting face-to-face. Notably, the Israeli regulations are but one example. In other countries, such as in the US and the UK, national and local governments have introduced similar policies and guidelines that enable, or even mandate, planning boards to shift their mode of operations to include online meetings -usually through ZOOM, TEAMS, SKYPE softwares (Thomas, 2020).

COVID19 has therefore had a major impact on the way planning is conducted around the world. These new regulations are important, as they have facilitated the continuity of policymaking in the field of planning. They also enabled planning boards to cope with their workload as no meetings had been held for months due to social distancing requirements.

The shift to online decision-making was praised by the professionals and media as rather successful (Steuteville, 2020), saving time, travel costs, and making planning more accessible via the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). On the face of it, COVID19, as a crisis, also held the promise of expediting the assimilation of technology in the planning process. It was therefore an opportunity to reconsider the way in which planning is carried out and to make it better, less bureaucratic, and more transparent.

To examine these issues, we initiated a survey among practicioners who participated in online (Zoom) meetings held by planning boards. In particular we ask:

- What do participants in online decision-making think about this new mode of communication? How satisfied are they?

- Compared with face-to-face engagements, what are the major pitfalls and advantages of online decision-making in planning?

The findings suggest that attendees is online meetings acknowledge the importance and advantages of ICT in facilitating planning discussions during the pandemic. However, they also flag some problems and challenges associated with this tool.

Keywords: virtual hearings, decision making, pandemic, Covid-19, planning boards

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Goal of this paper

The focus of this study is on the effects of COVID-19 on decision-making in planning. Put differently, how does the shift to video-conference and online meetings impact processes associated with land use planning?

The stage for this review is Israel, where national legislation made it possible for planning boards to switch rapidly to online meetings in March 2020 following the outbreak of COVID19. The government has found new ways to enable the continuation of planning hearings and meetings; these remain uninterrupted, amid

new requirements for social distancing (Shahak, 2020). New laws enabled planning boards at the local, regional, and national levels to make decisions without meeting face-to-face. Notably, the Israeli regulations are but one example. In other countries, such as in the United States and the United Kingdom, national and local governments have introduced similar policies that enable, or even mandate, planning boards to shift their mode of operations to include online meetings -usually through a range of information and communication technologies (ICT) such as Zoom and Teams software (Thomas, 2020).

COVID19 has therefore had a major impact on the way planning is conducted around the world. These new regulations are important, as they have facilitated the continuity of policymaking despite the spread of the pandemic. Following, the objective of this study is to examine how COVID19 has impacted the planning bureaucracy. Specifically, its effect on the way in which decisions are discussed and reached. With respect to planning boards, the objective here is to analyze how – and if- the adoption of ICT platforms and mandatory requirements for online meetings has affected the planning process.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The death of distance

In the age of the COVID pandemic, a universal experience shared by people the world over has been the shift from commuting to workplaces and interacting in close proximity in the outside world to suddenly working remotely from home and interacting only over the internet. Prior to the pandemic, the word "Zoom" was likely only known in the business world as referring to a software used for conducting the occasional remote meeting. Nowadays, it has become synonymous with the current method of interacting, learning, and earning a living. Interestingly, while this shift from in-person to remote interaction has certainly been exemplified by the pandemic, it was foreseen as looming on the horizon as early as the 2000s.

In her seminal book, Cairncross (2001) observed that the rapid development of mass communication and the internet was bringing about a technological shift which would fundamentally alter the way we live and lead to what she termed the "death of distance".

In essence, distance would no longer be a key determinant of spatial organization in human relations and societies and would be continually rendered less significant. For example, workers gain the freedom to live farther from their employers who increasingly have to locate their services where key staff live rather than where the market is (Cairncross 2001, p.5-6). Such consequences, though still taking shape, appear to be liberating and democratizing as more and more people gain access to communications technology at a lower cost and are less restricted by distance. In this context, the proposed study intends to examine whether the death of distance can be tested in the field of land use planning (specifically- decisions made in the planning process). Moreover, we inquire whether bureaucratic shifts in decision-making ascertain and help cement the presumption about the death of distance.

3.2 COVID-19 as crisis and opportunity

Though Covid-19 has certainly thrown the world into crisis, some researchers see this as an opportunity as well. In having altered people's movements and patterns of work and leisure, scholars opine that it is time to rethink cities and the way we make decisions about them and about our land use. While existing research takes a stab at envisioning what the urban built environment post-Covid, most studies do not touch upon the way Covid has impacted planning and decision making nor the ways those decisions are made. If anything, this demonstrates the existing gap in the current state of knowledge regarding online decision-making and the way in which decision makers interact post-Covid-19. A major part of the literature such as that of Goode (2020) and Kim (2021) is concerned primarily with investigating how cities can prepare for and ensure their resilience in facing pandemics.

Lai, et al (2020) relate to COVID-19 as an opportunity for cities and urban planning. Indeed, they write, "The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up a crucial time-window of opportunity for urban scientists, planners and designers by unravelling before us the largest natural experiment in multiple aspects of urban activities and population mobility." (Lai et al, 2020 p.3). As well they also acknowledge the role of technology in the pandemic, noting that "Surveillance and contact tracing are key to fighting COVID-19 pandemic. Lai et al. however, do not tie technology to the form of decision making in planning and do not focus on how technology changed the way decision makers come together and deliberate planning matters

following the pandemics. This issue also accentuates existing knowledge gaps: key scholarly contributions (e.g. Grant 2020; Ahmadpoor & Shahab 2021) are primarily concerned with how cities can prepare and make themselves resilient in the face of pandemics. They do not relate to online decision-making nor explore the way in which decision makers interact post COVID19. This paper fills these existing gaps in the literature.

3.3 Hyper connectivity in the workplace and COVID 19

The introduction of ICT technologies has been responsible for reshaping the way people interact, collaborate, and even think. This shift was already well underway even before the Covid era and was made even more acute as a result. Prior to Covid-19, many governments worldwide were in various stages of adopting ICTs in order to pivot towards 'e-government' - the full digitization of the public sector for delivering services to citizens more efficiently and transparently, and making these services more accessible, user-driven, and proactive (OECD 2019). In this respect, Deloitte (2018) reports that as the available array of new communications tools continually expands, they stand to make workers and their workplaces more connected, efficient, and productive. Many companies have begun to use these technologies such as videoconferencing and chats to restructure horizontally into a more networked team format (Deloitte, 2018. p.81). Indeed, Deloitte presents data showing that face-to-face meetings and phone meetings are declining in favor of work collaboration platforms (Deloitte, 2018 p.82).

Indeed, Quiggin (2020) suggests that preliminary figures show the pandemic has provided as opportunity to experiment with workplace productivity from home. Given that most workers spend an hour commuting to and from work on average daily, the time saved by working remotely could add up to a significant gain in productivity for the labor force as a whole (Quiggin, 2020). This view is echoed by Maurer (2020), who reports that initial skepticism of remote working has been largely diminished. Citing a survey of over 800 employers, Maurer writes that productivity has been shown to be "the same as or higher than it was before the pandemic, even with their employees working remotely" (Maurer, 2020).

However, there is growing concern in the corporate world that these new tools may actually harm productivity by subjecting networks of teams attempting to collaborate to an unending whirlwind of constant emails, videoconferences, and messages. This is especially true as research shows that people's communications habits and tools from their personal lives are infiltrating their work lives. (Deloitte, p.81). In the same vein, the Economist Team (2020) reports that the shift towards collaborative, remotely-based working brought about by the pandemic has not been liberating for workers, but instead has only increased the amount of work and the intrusion into people's lives.

3.4 Hypotheses

The foregoing analysis suggests that planning boards may encounter difficulties and quite a few challenges while applying this mode of communication and collaboration. Thus, we make several hypotheses based on the literature. These hypotheses relate directly to the research questions listed above: Hypothesis 1: The shift to online meetings by planning boards has had both positive and negative impacts on decision-making. Hypothesis 2: Participants prefer online meetings to face-to-face meetings.

4 METHODOLOGY

Following the data gathered through exploratory interviews and the literature review, we compiled a structured survey designed to answer key questions. The survey was disseminated among decision makers and other participants in planning board meetings at the local, regional, and national tiers of government. We sent the survey to experts, consultants, landowners, and community members who have participated in online meetings. Overall, 182 respondents answered the survey's questions.

Figure 1 depicts the division of respondents' opinion of the suitability of online meetings in facilitating discussions on planning and land use issues. Here the opinion is largely (but not overwhelmingly) in favor of using online meetings for this purpose at 67% (48% responded suitable and 19% very suitable). Roughly a third of respondents were of the opinion that online meetings are unsuitable vehicles for facilitating planning discussions. It is possible to interpret these results in a variety of ways in light of the literature reviewed in this paper. On one hand, it could be said that the majority that expressed faith in the online meeting format confirms the view of researchers such as Milz & Gervich (2020) that virtual participation is a real alternative

to in-person planning boards' meetings. On the flipside, the fact that almost one-third of respondents disliked online meetings could be said to validate the warnings of Milz & Gervich who point out the negatives such as loss of visual cues and the lesser degree of sincerity and comprehensibility.
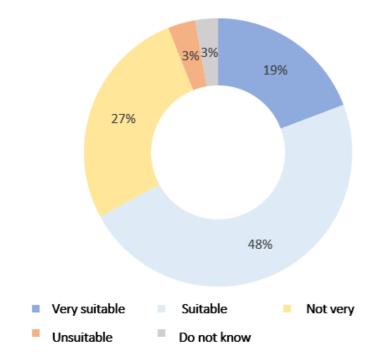

Fig. 1: Are online meetings suitable for discussions over planning and land use issues? (n=182)
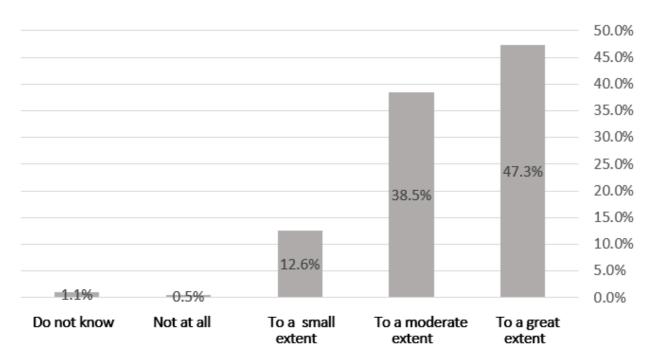

Fig. 2: Are online meetings suitable for discussions over planning and land use issues? (n=182)

Figure 2, curiously shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents (85.8%) felt satisfied that ICT can help attendees to express themselves in these virtual meetings, with a very small majority feeling they were barely or not at all able to express their views. With such a large percentage of respondents satisfied that they were able to express themselves in virtual planning meetings, it seems that such exercises in decision-making are occurring in line with the prescriptions of Sager (2018) and Davoudi (2018) for open communication, and the bringing together of many viewpoints and interests within the complex process of planning.
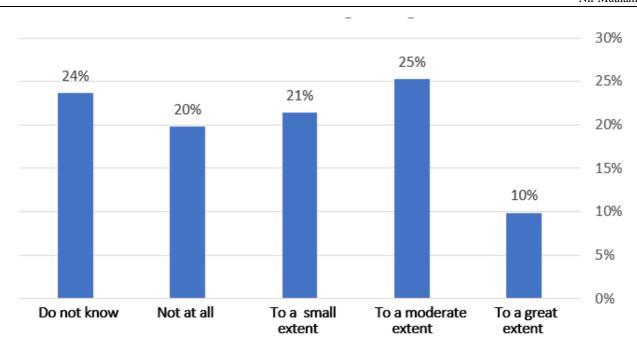
Fig. 3: To what extent did online meetings enable participants to build trust during hearings? (n=182)

The issue of trust in policy studies is quite complex. Many indicators are used in planning literature to measure trust. Survey respondents were asked about the relationship between trust building in the planning process and the use of ICT. Figure 3 displays the fact that respondents were strongly divided when it came to their opinions of the ability of virtual meetings to enable the building of interpersonal trust. This may be explained by the assertion of Willson (2000), who found that compared to face-to-face meetings, online discussion is usually rated lower by participants in several categories, among them the sincerity of the speaker. A further explanation may be the fact that according to Milz & Gervich (2021), the loss of visual communication cues in a virtual meeting may result in increased levels of disagreements and conflict. With more conflict and disputes occurring, it would be no surprise then that trust would suffer in the process.

As planning is a process involving stakeholder of varying backgrounds and interests, the idea that trust is lacking in virtual meetings is a worrying indicator for its potential to lead to facilitate virtual decision-making in land use planning.

Following, we asked respondents what are the major advantages of virtual hearings, compared with face-to-face engagements. Respondents mentions several key factors that make virtual meetings before planning boards more advantageous, including: the ability of ICT to allow more people to attend; the ability of virtual hearings to facilitate more polite discussions among participants; the ability to save time in arriving to meetings; and the ability of virtual hearings to accelerate change in government.
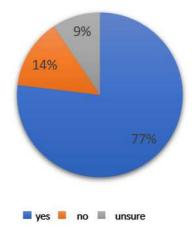

Fig. 4: Do you believe planning boards should continue using virtual meetings post pandemics? (n=182)

Respondents were also asked whether, after the pandemics, planning boards should continue utilizing ICT to facilitate online, virtual, hearings, at least as another option for deliberations. Respondents were quite adamant in their view that virtual meetings by planning boards should remain an option in the planners' toolkit (Figure 4). These findings bear out the views of several authors such as Gladovic et al (2020), Shapira & Youtie (2001), and Milz & Gervich (2021), who wrote that virtual participation vis ICT usage can be viable alternatives to face-to-face meetings given the many advantages afforded.

5 CONCLUSION

The study yields some insightful perspectives into how COVID19 has influenced planning decision-making. Results shed light on the challenges of using ICT technologies; the capacity of online decision-making to ensure the flow of planning decisions, to improve engagement and to accelerate technological change in government. In particular, the findings point to the positives and limitations of moving decision-making to online platforms.

6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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