

FORMAL AND INFORMAL PLANNING INSTRUMENTS AS CATALYST FOR URBAN ATTRACTIVENESS. ENHANCING TOWN ATTRACTIVENESS IN THE LAND OF BEIUȘ, ROMANIA

PAUL EMIL OLĂU¹, LUMINIȚA FILIMON²

ABSTRACT – We are once again witnessing a directional change in urban studies. This simple and concise statement comes out from a brief analysis of both the latest interests of different scholars and the discourses of urban, regional, and governmental actors. The change we are talking about refers to a slight interest drop in environmental issues and an ever-increasing attention paid to the economic and social aspects of urban life. The conceptual shift from *sustainable development* to *smart growth* is a good example, and the fact that the recent European Union papers (EU 2020 strategy, EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020) have adopted it ensures its liability. Coming to urban planning, which is primarily conceived as sets of regulatory measures, one can notice that in order to achieve the latest standards it has to develop and implement new methods and instruments which will eventually lead to *smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. Knowing that urban plans look to specific urban issues as zoning, layout and design, which are usually regulated by legally approved national guidelines, this new tasks fall into the charge of informal planning. In Romania, informal planning refers to *local development strategies, local action plans* as well as the *Local Agenda 21*, which was implemented throughout the world. Admitting that municipalities worldwide are in a sharp competition for inhabitants, investors and capital (from trade, tourism, exhibitions, etc.), we realize that small and medium-sized towns have to ensure that all of their valuable characteristics are as visible and as marketable as possible. In order to do this, they have to enhance their attractiveness through different actions, using different methods and instruments. The present paper highlights the ways that local actors in four small cities in Bihor County, Romania are trying to market their municipalities. The chosen cities organically fit into one of the most representative mental space in Romania, the Land of Beiuș. The Romanian lands are distinct areas, with high identical features, somehow isolated, hence in need for suitable management measures. The paper's outline consists in an empirical attractiveness measurement of two of the four towns, what are the actual measures that local stakeholders are using to enhance their town attractiveness and finally some recommendations based on examples of good practices and successful stories from abroad.

Keywords: smart growth, town attractiveness, planning instruments, Land of Beiuș

INTRODUCTION

As part of a broader study concerning the “land”-type structures in Romania, this paper is addressing the sharp problem of local development efforts for small towns in deeply rural areas. More precisely, the study tries to give a close look at the planning instruments that are or should be employed in order to achieve what we presently call the conceptual shift from sustainable development, which is *smart growth*. Another interest of the paper regards town attractiveness as one of the best indicators of the success of the aforementioned efforts throughout formal and informal planning instruments. All these theoretical aspects are discussed in the first chapter of the paper. The following chapter shows a quite comprehensive example related to town attractiveness measurements,

¹ Lecturer, Ph.D., Faculty of Geography, Tourism and Sports, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania.
E-mail: palelumi@yahoo.com

² Teaching Assistant, Ph.D., Faculty of Geography, Tourism and Sports, University of Oradea, Oradea, Romania.
E-mail: emilolau@yahoo.com

and how measuring a town attractiveness can influence the future governing actions. The last chapter lists the main features of the local planning instruments in two of the four urban municipalities within the Land of Beiuș and then conducts an empirical assessment of the measures they applied. Discussions at the end of the paper show some of the main drawbacks regarding the attractiveness of the two towns and launch three more questions that could make the subject of a future study.

FROM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO SMART GROWTH

We are once again witnessing a directional change in urban studies. The change we are talking about refers to a slight interest drop in environmental issues and an ever-increasing attention paid to the economic and social aspects of urban life. *Smart growth* is a good example, and the fact that the recent European Union papers (EU 2020 strategy, EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020) have adopted it ensures its liability. The term itself shows that we are facing an important change in urban studies and practice, as even the new EU 2020 strategy is called *A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth* (2010). More than a glossology change, the new approach brings in the importance of economic and social progress using terms like productivity and social market economy for all EU members. The strategy puts forward three mutually reinforcing priorities:

- *Smart growth*: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation;
- *Sustainable growth*: promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy;
- *Inclusive growth*: fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.

One can see that putting knowledge and innovation economy first means that EU is struggling to overcome the drawbacks of the economic and financial crisis. However, the two following priorities are still centred on economy: resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy for *sustainable growth* and high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion for *inclusive growth*. Furthermore, the strategy is charging: “all national, regional, and local authorities should implement the partnership, closely associating parliaments, as well as social partners and representatives of civil society, contributing to the elaboration of national reform programmes as well as to its implementation”.

Originating from the American literature, “smart growth” is defined as a response to urban sprawl, throughout various measures such as:

- placing limits on the outward extension of future growth
- financing the additional infrastructure needed to deal with growth and maintain existing systems properly
- reducing dependency on private automotive vehicles, especially one-person cars
- promoting compact, mixed-used development
- creating significant financial incentives for local governments to adopt “smart growth” planning within ground rules laid out by the state government
- adopting fiscal resource sharing among localities
- deciding who should control land-use decisions
- adopting faster project application approval processes, providing developers with greater certainty and lower project carrying costs
- creating more affordable housing in outlying new-growth areas
- developing a public-private consensus-building process
- preserving large amounts of open space and protecting the quality of the environment
- redeveloping inner-core areas and developing infill sites
- removing barriers to urban design innovation in both cities and new suburban areas
- creating a greater sense of community within individual localities and neighbourhoods and a greater recognition of regional interdependence and solidarity (Downs, 2001).

URBAN ATTRACTIVENESS AS SUCCESS INDICATOR FOR SMART PLANNING INSTRUMENTS

Competition among territories is not a nowadays fact, but a quite historical one. People have been migrating from poorer and less attractive territories to richer, sufficient ones from ancient times, without necessarily becoming aware of the attractiveness of places. However, recent studies showed that trying to understand people's needs can significantly improve town attractiveness, making thus the study of the subject a must for the decision making process at both local and central level.

Shimomura and Matsumoto (2010) state that we are facing a profound change in the mode a city is governed, triggered by competition among cities. The authors are describing the change as a "shift from a managerial mode of governance, which had been primarily concerned with provision of social welfare services and control of private activities, to that of entrepreneurialism, strongly characterized by a pro-economic growth strategic approach".

The first to be interested in this subject were the sociologists and the geographers, trying to identify the causes for different societal issues and demographical trends. Later on, economists showed that place attractiveness is a major factor for an investment's success or failure. Recently, scholars and practitioners in town and country planning launched an in-depth analysis on the subject, looking at several factors that define town attractiveness such as environmental and aesthetic issues, demographical and social issues and, last but not least, economic and political issues. Identifying all the variables and trying to quantify them seems to be the aim of different studies reaching the subject. However, one should admit that it might be very difficult to classify a town as attractive or unattractive from all points of view and for all demographical categories.

As far back as 1992, the *European Urban Charter* describes an ideal city as "one which succeeds in reconciling the various sectors and activities that take place (traffic, living working and leisure requirements); which safeguards civic rights; which ensures the best possible living conditions; which reflects and is responsive to the lifestyles and attitudes of its inhabitants; where full account is taken of all those who use it, who work or trade there, who visit it, who seek entertainment, culture, information, knowledge, who study there".

According to Park (2005), urban attractiveness designates "cities' competition to attract industries and capital investments to improve their local economic situations by creating employment and tax income for city".

The papers of the *International Symposium "Enhancing City Attractiveness for the Future"* (2005) define city attractiveness as the "ability to attract factors necessary for economic development" and treat it as "an important indicator of its potential for future economic success".

According to van der Berg et al. (1999), "an attractive city is composed of basic elements and distinguishing elements. To the first category belong such qualities as a clean and respectable environment, a varied and high quality housing supply a good internal accessibility. Basic elements are the indispensable ingredients for an attractive city. Distinguishing elements determine the city's position and status. Unusual buildings (so-called landmarks), museums and attractions serve as such".

Another study on the subject, *Concept, Directions and Practice of City Attractiveness Improvement* (Sinkienė, Kromalcas, 2010), shows that urban attractiveness is not the same for different subjects and it depends on their specific needs and activities. However, the authors are highlighting the importance for a city to understand and decide which group needs what measures before any action is taken. Municipalities seeking to manage their attractiveness have to set its target groups in order to achieve its long-term socio-economic growth and higher competitiveness

Table 1. *The four main target markets according to Sinkienė and Kromalcas, 2010*

Target group	Sub-groups
Visitors	Business visitors (attending a business meeting or convention, checking out a site, coming to buy or sell something) Non-business visitors
Residents and employees	Professionals (scientists, physicians, etc.) Skilled workers Wealthy individuals Investors Entrepreneurs Unskilled workers (domestic, migrants, etc.)
Business and industry	Heavy industry “Clean” industry (assembly, high-tech, service companies, etc.) Entrepreneurs
Export markets	Other localities within domestic markets International markets

MEASURING CITY ATTRACTIVENESS. WHAT METHODES, WHAT INSTRUMENTS?

One of the most impressive attempts to measure the world’s cities attractiveness is definitely the “Global Power City Index” (2009), a study issued by the Institute for Urban Strategies and the Mori Memorial Foundation. The work was called “the first Japan-based comprehensive ranking of the world’s major cities” and its objective is to show people the features of 35 major cities around the world in order to encourage them to reconsider city attractiveness. Another goal of the research is to serve as a tool for establishing urban strategies for Tokyo and the other 34 cities. Subsequently, a scenario analysis was applied for Tokyo in order to see a future ranking assuming that the city managed to overcome its weaknesses highlighted in its new urban strategies.

The research was conducted upon two major perspectives: function-specific ranking and actors-specific ranking. The first perspective is listing 69 indicators (Figure 1) related to six main functions of each 35 cities such as Economy, Research & Development, Cultural Interaction, Livability, Ecology and Natural Environment, and Accessibility. The second perspective is listing different expectations and priorities of five major urban actors such as Managers, Researchers, Artists, Visitors, and Residents. Seen that each actor has different priorities based on occupation, defined as *factors* (33 identified), when merging the 69 indicators with the 33 factors under a matrix, we have a final score for the actors-specific ranking for each of the 35 cities.

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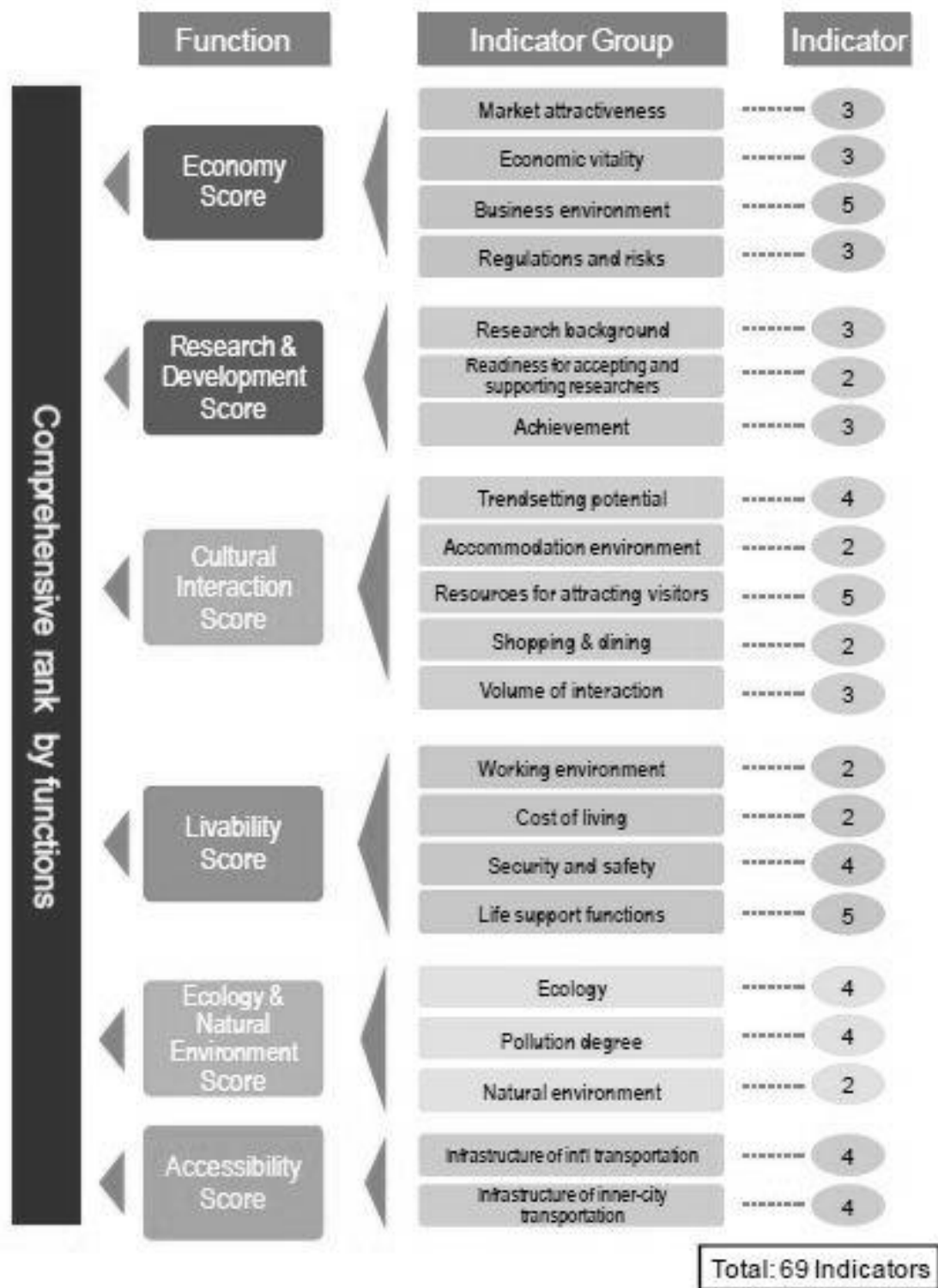


Figure 1. The comprehensive ranking scheme by functions
Source: Global Power City Index, 2009

FORMAL AND INFORMAL PLANNING INSTRUMENTS. WHICH ONE TO USE IN ORDER TO ENHANCE TOWN ATTRACTIVENESS IN THE LAND OF BEIUȘ?

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Trying to analyze the problem of formal planning instruments, one has to understand that it is very difficult for practitioners to work “smart” with only these inflexible, stiff tools. Land use plans have little if at all proactive, strategic features, yet they have the capacity to designate important changes within our built environment. These changes will eventually trigger social and economic changes, affecting though an entire neighbourhood or local community. In fact, they are transmitting certain political decisions, without showing the decision process or the involved decision factors. Complying with general and particular guidelines, the law provides that plans be subject to public opinion. However, the rude public is not fully aware of both the rationale behind the changes that a plan shows, and the effects that the changes are about to trigger.

The case of Nucet and Vașcău, two of the four urban municipalities in the Land of Beiuș, shows the fully obsolete character of the aforementioned formal planning instruments. Both Nucet and Vașcău have a long-standing industrial history. The first one was known by the Romans for its gold and silver ores 20 centuries ago; the second one was an important medieval Bourg. Being located in a mountain area, both towns had no or little agricultural resources, fact that only prompted the communist regime to reinforce their industrial character, through the forced industrialization process. The collapse of the heavy industry units that they built proved that the communists did not really look at the sustainability of their endeavour when transforming the picturesque, mountainous area into an industrial site. The four-decade time span of mono-industrial activity left behind masses of unemployed, high-qualified workers coming from the insolvent industrial units at the fall of the communism. Even now, more than two decades after the events, things are evolving very slowly, partly due to the limited resources of the two towns, partly to the inappropriate or insufficient measures that were taken by the policymakers (Prasca, 2013). According to PDR Nord-Vest³ 2007-2013, the two towns are designated regional poverty poles within the Apuseni Mountains area.

Coming back to the formal planning instruments, one should admit that the physical shape, together with the actual uses of a town’s land, is accountable for the different generated landscapes. Although the landscape itself is one of the factors influencing the town attractiveness, “it speaks” a lot about other aspects such as economic vitality, accommodation environment and resources for attracting visitors, working environment, and security and safety, natural environment and infrastructure facilities, etc. Figure 2 gives us some hints about some of the factors that affect the attractiveness of Vașcău. The pictures aside the aerial image are snapshots of some of the town’s most eloquent landscapes, successfully depicting factors that we have to consider when conducting an attractiveness assessment. Without getting more into details, the images are giving us a quite clear idea of what land use planning measures can or should do for these towns.

The informal planning instruments, on the other hand, are represented here by the local development strategies of the two towns. Our analysis consisted in looking at several aspects related to the target groups showed in Table 1, namely if they were considered by the strategies and what measures were there taken to meet each target group’s requirement.

The local development strategy of Nucet is listing eight strategic directions: (1) developing and updating the local infrastructure, (2) creating an investor-friendly environment, (3) drafting and implementing the town branding strategy, (4) raising public engagement in the town’s life, (5) fostering the fund attracting process, (6) modernizing public services, (7) initiating town twinning

³ Regional Development Plan of the North-West Development Region.

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projects, and (8) cultivating the civic spirit among citizens. Unfortunately, we could not see a set of “smart” objectives and measures, neither any financial tool to be used in order to implement the objectives. Thus, the strategy has no *action plan*, which is the part of a strategy where aspects like actions to be taken, the timetable, and the funding sources are displayed.



Figure 2. *Specific landscapes in the town of Vașcău*
Source: Prasca, 2013

The analysis of the matrix showing the target groups and the strategic directions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *The target group/strategic direction matrix for Nucet town*

Target group	Sub-group	Strategic directions								Total/target group
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Visitors	Business visitors	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	-	6
	Non-business visitors	x	-	x	-	x	x	x	-	5
Residents and employees	Professionals	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	7
	Skilled workers	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	7
	Wealthy individuals	x	-	x	x	x	x	-	x	6
	Investors	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	8
	Entrepreneurs	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	7
	Unskilled workers	x	-	-	x	x	x	-	x	5
Business and industry	Heavy industry	x	x	x	-	x	-	-	-	4
	Clean industry	x	x	x	-	x	-	-	-	4
	Entrepreneurs	x	x	x	-	x	x	-	-	5
Export markets	Domestic markets	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	-	4
	International markets	-	x	x	-	x	-	x	-	4
Total/strategic direction		11	10	12	6	13	9	5	6	

One can notice that only one of the eight strategic directions is found interesting by all groups and sub-groups, namely fostering the fund attracting process. The less important for the majority of actors is strategic direction 7, initiating town twinning projects. On the other hand, when looking at the target groups, investors seem to be interested by all of the strategic directions designated by the local development strategy. Oppositely, industry and export markets seem to be directly affected only by a few of the municipality's strategic directions.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If large cities engaged in the sharp competition triggered by globalization are gaining more and more citizens, tourists, investments, and students, small towns have to fight back hard in order to keep the ones they have.

It is obvious that young people will leave small town for larger ones, with higher education facilities, but how to convince the graduates to return as professionals and skilled workers and contribute to the local "smart growth" should be a high priority on every town's agenda. Generally, a city/town has to meet all family members' expectations (affordable housing, jobs, leisure, education, urban amenities, and public services) in order to be attractive to residents. The residents of the two towns are definitely expecting cleaner and safer environments, a better access to employment, high quality education and medical service, and high quality cultural activities, too.

Investors, on the other hand, are looking for good accessibility, acceptable land prices, sufficient and skilled workforce, legal and financial incentives and, of course, new customers, suppliers and partners. As highly industrialized towns, both Nucet and especially Vașcău have important industrial land resources, which can be developed for production or services purposes. Coming to labour force, the ex-industrial workers are probably not a first choice for services but could work for the clean industry sector.

Visitors will first look at accommodation facilities (quality, price, accessibility), and depending on their travel reason, will be interested in the business environment or the natural or man-made landmarks. Architecture, culture, restaurants, and travel and parking facilities could become important features for the town attractiveness, too. With an outstanding natural environment, Nucet has developed a trippery ski resort – Vârtopeț holiday village. Vașcău, on the other hand, has more cultural objectives to show, such as old wooden churches and ancient crafts like chalk making. The

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latest authorities' measure to promote tourism within the area is to create two info points in each of the two towns.

However, the most important thing for the two towns seems to be the development of a deep understanding of their assets, values, identity features, and cultural heritage. Only after that, they will be able to forge a distinctive new image of their places, and start attracting residents, businesses and visitors.

Meanwhile, enhancing the two towns' attractiveness should be the result of public debates between all the community members, from politicians to private and to civil society, whether organized or not as NGOs.

Without pretending that the subject is entirely clarified, the three questions arising from the Shimomura and Matsumoto's paper (2010) could be addressed to the two municipalities:

(1) How to give stakeholders incentive to contribute to the enhancement of physical urban environment?

(2) How to mobilise urban assets and resources strategically and achieve synergetic effects to the enhancement of physical urban environment?

(3) How to reduce social costs associated with public intervention to enhance urban environment?

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