Rainer Danielzyk, Martin Sondermann

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Contents

Informal planning comprises processes and instruments of spatial planning that are not legally formalised, standardised or directly legally binding and which are characterised by a high degree of flexibility, adaptability and transparency. These include the information framework, guiding principles and strategies, approaches to communication and cooperation as well as formats for steering spatial development through planning.

1   Definition and classification

Planning practice has always taken place in a complex interplay of political, administrative and social negotiation processes, which are formally or informally regulated. This includes the formal planning processes based on laws and statutory regulations (▷ *Urban planning*; ▷ *Regional planning*; ▷ *Federal state spatial planning*, *Federal state development*; ▷ *Spatially relevant sectoral planning*) with their defined objectives, tasks, instruments (▷ *Instruments of spatial planning (Raumplanung)*) and procedures as well as various forms of informal spatial planning.

Informal planning comprises, *ex negativo*, the processes and instruments of spatial planning that are not legally formalised, standardised and directly legally binding. Informal, also called 'soft' or 'persuasive', planning processes and instruments have the following characteristics (cf. Danielzyk/Knieling 2011; Danielzyk 2015; Pahl-Weber 2010; Gorsler 2002: 7):

- no or little legal standardisation;

- a high degree of flexibility thanks to a situation-appropriate focus on specific challenges and correspondingly adapted processes and instruments to cope with them;

- open, communicative negotiation processes and cooperative collaboration with different stakeholders in network-like structures;

- indirect effectiveness through stakeholders' self commitment to adhere to the informal instruments; if appropriate, implementation through concrete projects, (subsidy/incentive) programmes and measures to take into account in formal planning processes.

Informal planning is not an entirely new concept. Rather, it can be said that every formal planning process has always included (at least to a minor extent) elements of informal planning by holding consultations before, concurrently and in the implementation phase, by directly approaching the parties affected and so on. The specific significance of informal planning in and of itself became apparent for the first time during the initial phase of elaborating integrated urban development strategies in the 1970s. Since the 1990s, informal planning has clearly been gaining significance at all planning levels, which undoubtedly relates to the increasing complexity of social structures and development, but also to the deficits of formal planning.

The consideration of some informal instruments is also required by law in formal processes: at the municipal level, the implications of urban development strategies, for example, must be taken into account in the preparation of urban land-use plans (section 1(6) of the Federal Building Code *(Baugesetzbuch, BauGB)*; ▷ *Urban development measures*; ▷ *Urban land-use planning*). At the level of supra-local planning, regional development strategies and projections of future needs and demands must be taken into account in accordance with the principles of ▷ *Spatial planning* (section 2(2) no. 1 of the Federal Spatial Planning Act *(Raumordnungsgesetz, ROG)*; ▷ *Objectives, principles and other requirements of spatial planning (Raumordnung)*).

From the perspective of planning theory, informal planning plays an important role in planning methods based on communication and cooperation that reflect a certain understanding of the role of the state and of steering functions, based on the consideration that public planning agencies do not carry out planning as a sovereign function, but instead negotiate spatial development in communication with other stakeholders (cf. Selle 2007). Accordingly, spatial planning is

understood in these instances as a horizontal, network-like, dialogue-based, flexible and informal activity (▷ *Governance*). In this regard, the focus of planning practice and its reflection is less on spatial plans as products and instruments, but rather on the related negotiation processes (cf. Danielzyk/Knieling 2011: 473 et seq.).

The following first provides an overview of the approaches, instruments and formats of informal planning, which are then presented in more detail as examples of the spatial planning levels and ▷ *Regional development* and of urban and neighbourhood development.

2 An overview of the approaches, instruments and formats of informal planning

In the absence of a binding definition of informal planning, there is currently no generally acknowledged classification of its instruments. To help to structure the broad spectrum of instruments and formats of informal planning, the following distinctions are proposed (cf. in relation to what follows: *DST* [Association of German Cities] 2013: 14 et seq.; Danielzyk/ Knieling 2011; Pahl-Weber 2010; Gorsler 2002; Sinning/Scholles 2001):

• The information framework

• Guiding principles and strategies

• Approaches based on communication and cooperation

• Formats

The information framework in this sense means approaches to monitoring spatial developments (▷ *Monitoring*) and reports on ▷ *Spatial observation* as well as projections and scenarios of potential developments in the future (▷ *Forecasting*; ▷ *Future scenarios*). It may also include approaches to evaluation (▷ *Evaluation, audit*), for example as part of the space-related granting of funding. At first glance, these elements may not appear to be planning instruments in the strict sense of the term. Nevertheless, steering through communication has long been accepted as a crucial dimension of informal planning, which, in turn, relies on studies, documents and data inventories as an important reference framework. Information and discussions on the differences in structures and developments between territorial subdivisions are an important starting and reference point for both informal and formal planning. The fact that most integrated development strategies at the regional and local level include a spatial analysis at the outset, a profile of strengths and weaknesses, etc., may serve as an example. Moreover, in the run up to formal planning processes, the responsible planning agencies publish reports on urban or regional development (▷ *Reports on urban and spatial development*).

Significant and frequently used instruments of informal planning are the guiding principles and strategies which orient development in the relevant reference spaces. These may be approaches based on a more sectoral focus (e.g. a mobility strategy or plan for green spaces) or on integrative perspectives (strategies for urban or regional development). It must be stressed that it is not merely a matter of the specific document (guiding principle, strategy, etc.) as a product of a process, but that, as a rule, the process of elaborating those documents is at least as important.

External neutral moderation (▷ *Moderation, mediation*) offers the opportunity to raise the interest of a diverse range of relevant stakeholders in the development of the region or municipality, to enlist their active participation and to promote communication between them. There is now a broad spectrum of instruments available, which can be used creatively. An important aspect of these processes is that they also provide an opportunity for people to express their viewpoints, i.e. people who are frequently not involved in formal planning processes for various reasons (limited ability to articulate their concerns, lack of time and other resources, etc.). Activating the ▷ *Participation* of a large and diverse spectrum of parties in the relevant processes is particularly important, not least for reasons of the legitimacy of the entire process. On the other hand, whether a given guiding principle, strategy, etc. has – as is frequently required – been adopted by consensus is less important. Dealing with differences in a proper and reasonable manner is another essential concern of informal planning.

There is a broad range of approaches to communication and cooperation to achieve the aim of offering a most diverse range of relevant stakeholders different ways to contribute. This includes instruments such as roundtables, citizens' juries, 'Workshops on the Future', etc., in addition to the establishment of advisory councils and working groups, either to elaborate a specific development strategy or as a permanent feature.

In the more recent past, the formats for involving a broad spectrum of civil society, the private sector as well as public stakeholders have become more important, in particular through integrative, cross-sectional approaches that strive to benefit from certain characteristic features of major, large-scale events for the benefit of urban and regional development. The best known example of this form of informal planning are the International Building Exhibitions. The *REGIONALE* (structural development projects) in North Rhine-Westphalia take this format one step further. This type of informal planning instrument may also include the very broad spectrum of model projects that seek to highlight important individual aspects of spatial development in an innovative manner and that are frequently conducted in the form of competitions. Noteworthy examples are the Model Projects for Spatial Planning *(Modellvorhaben der Raumordnung, MORO)* and the Experimental Housing and Urban Development (*Experimenteller Wohnungs- und Städtebau, ExWost*) projects, as well as numerous approaches from research undertaken by ministries at the federal and state levels, e.g. Innovative municipalities (*Kommunen innovativ*) or Real life laboratories in Baden-Württemberg (*Reallabore Baden-Württemberg*).

3 Informal planning within spatial planning and regional development

At the level of ▷ *Federal spatial planning*, guiding principles in particular play an important role in providing orientation for the various stakeholders within spatial planning and spatial development. Thus, Spatial Planning Policy Guidelines were first developed in 1992 (*BMBau* [Federal Ministry of Spatial Planning, Construction and Urban Design] 1993), which contained material statements on spatial development in post-reunification Germany and expressly required that formalised regional planning be supplemented by regional initiatives and action programmes. The subsequent Framework for Action in Spatial Planning Policy of 1995 (*MKRO* [Conference of Ministers for Spatial Planning] 1995) specifically highlighted the regions as the implementation

level for spatial planning activities and called for a transparent spatial planning with an emphasis on key activities, frequently acting in a fairly informal manner. The new understanding of planning expressed in this framework is reflected in the recast Federal Spatial Planning Act of 1998 in a (new) section 13, which expressly called for informal approaches to realise spatial development plans (now section 14 of the Federal Spatial Planning Act).

After at times very heated discussions, the Conference of Ministers for Spatial Planning eventually formulated the 'Concepts and Strategies for Spatial Development in Germany' in 2006 (*MKRO* 2006). These guiding principles emphasised the competitiveness and innovative capabilities of the regions, the consequences of ▷ *Demographic change* which had to be addressed to ensure the sustainability of infrastructure (▷ Infrastructure), as well as the protection and development of cultural landscapes (▷ *Cultural landscape*). The three guiding principles of federal spatial planning at that time were revised a decade later and supplemented by a fourth guideline on climate change / the energy transition (*MKRO* 2016; ▷ *Climate, climate change*).

At the regional level, the most important instrument of informal planning is probably the regional development strategy. Regional development strategies are strategies which are not legally binding and that are elaborated by several local authorities for the coordinated, cooperative development of a region, which establish guidelines for the short or medium term with an intensity differentiated according to territorial subdivisions and key aspects of regional development (Danielzyk/Knieling 2011: 477). Regional development strategies are elaborated in extensive processes which are to involve the local authorities within a region, regional planning bodies and regional economic development aid bodies, as well as other stakeholders that are relevant to regional development. Based on a stocktaking (for example, in the form of an analysis of strengths and weaknesses), an integrative development strategy is developed for the region concerned, from which (flagship) projects and measures are derived for concrete implementation. Regional development strategies are not themselves legally binding, but derive their binding impact – like other instruments of informal planning – mainly from the self commitment of stakeholders to adhere to them.

For about three decades, regional development strategies have been of great significance as informal instruments in spatial development, especially as bases for regional structural policy and as a prerequisite for funding. At the end of the 1980s, regional conferences first elaborated regional development strategies in North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony as a basis for structural policy strategies for regions undergoing structural change (cf. Diller 2002: 76 et seq.). Aided by corresponding specifications in EU grants, regional development strategies later gained significance not only in regional policy, but also in the development of rural spaces (▷ *Rural areas*), river basins, biosphere reserves and cross-border regions. There is now an almost unmanageable range of regional development strategies for regions of various sizes and for various structural purposes. This increases the need for better coordination and potentially modular elaboration of regional development strategies.

Informal planning at the regional level also includes innovation formats for regional development (cf. Hohn/Kemming/Reimer 2014). A particularly prominent example is the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park, which took the form of a structural policy programme for the northern Ruhr area from 1989 to 1999. The International Building Exhibition Emscher Park had all the essential hallmarks of an innovative format for informal planning: set up for a limited period and geared toward certain presentation years, the organisational core

of a planning entity offered a 'bypass' around the traditional, formal system of regional (and municipal) planning, which was designed to enable innovative approaches and projects in a region particularly hard hit by structural change (cf. Häußermann/Siebel 1993; Mayer/Siebel 1998; Ibert 2003). The International Building Exhibition Emscher Park was thus seen as the manifestation of a new, cooperative and informal ▷ *Planning culture* (cf. Sieverts/Ganser 1993). Based on this example, other international architecture exhibitions were and are taking place with generally similar features as concepts for the development of regions with complex challenges, for example in the Lausitz region in Brandenburg, in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, as well as in the Basel urban region and the Stuttgart region.

The *REGIONALE* (structural development projects) in North Rhine-Westphalia are a unique instrument of informal planning and cooperative regional development, which were designed based on the experience gained with the International Building Exhibition Emscher Park. The *REGIONALE* (the invented word is composed of the components *region* and *biennale*) can be seen as regional development strategies, for which competition, cooperation and innovative capabilities are decisive aspects and thus represent a comprehensive approach to informal planning at the regional and/or intermunicipal level. Important features of the *REGIONALE* are:

- Voluntary cooperation and territorial delimitation

- Consistent realisation of the principle of competitiveness

- Clearly defined time period and focus on one presentation year

- Establishment of an independent organisational unit (*REGIONALE* agency)

The REGIONALE in North Rhine-Westphalia initially took place at two-year intervals from 2000, and at three-year intervals from 2010 to 2016. In the meantime, regions have already been selected for a *REGIONALE* in 2022 and 2025 (cf. Reimer 2012; Danielzyk/Reimer 2017). Over the course of time, the *REGIONALE* has evolved increasingly into a comprehensively designed, integrative programme based on structural policy for the regions concerned, which is characterised above all by the broad participation of the stakeholders that are critical to development in informal processes. In the meantime, a thematic focus has become customary again, in large part to enable the concentrated use of funding, for example to address demographic change, digitalisation, cooperation between the economic and academic sectors, or the development of cultural landscapes. The projects and measures of the *REGIONALE* are not funded through their own development programme, but through a combination of funds from existing programmes at various levels.

Informal planning approaches at the regional level also include city networks and associations, as well as metropolitan regions (▷ *Metropolitan region*). While the establishment of city networks and associations has been only partly successful, the 11 metropolitan regions defined by the Conference of Ministers for Spatial Planning have now gained varying but comprehensive significance for cooperation and space-related development in their respective spaces (cf. Aring 2009). Given the success of the metropolitan regions in Germany, cross-border metropolitan regions have been formed in border areas as well as 'regiopolitan' regions in regions with medium-to-large core cities.

4 Informal planning in urban and neighbourhood development

Both ▷ *Urban development* and neighbourhood development (▷ *Neighbourhood/neighbourhood development*) are characterised by a number of diverse informal planning approaches. There is no defined set of informal processes and instruments; furthermore, their designations vary greatly. In addition to the general approaches and formats of informal planning, the following specific instruments are frequently found within urban and neighbourhood development (cf. *DST* [Association of German Cities] 2013: 14 et seq.; Pahl-Weber 2010; Sinning/Scholles 2001):

- Guiding principles for urban design and urban development

- Integrated urban development strategies

- Integrated neighbourhood development strategies

- Sectoral development and action strategies (e.g. for ▷ *Housing*, ▷ *Retail trade*, urban green spaces, climate and the environment)

- Urban planning framework and master plans

These instruments and formats are used to implement normative ideals, e.g. the guiding principle of the *sustainable European city*. According to this principle, the overarching objective of sustainable development (▷ *Sustainability*) is combined with a function-oriented, urban development ideal of condensed, socially and functionally mixed urban structures (▷ *European city*). To implement this principle, Germany pursues a policy of ▷ *Integrated urban development*. This policy comprises:

- substantial integration of all socio-cultural, economic and ecological concerns by linking all sectoral planning and fields of action,

- procedural integration of all relevant stakeholders in the negotiation processes, in particular through the active involvement of the population,

- an alignment of small-scale projects with the objectives and strategies at the urban and regional levels,

- consideration of specific local problems and potentials (cf. *BMVBS/BBR* [Federal Ministry of Transport, Construction and Urban Development/Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning] 2007: 15 et seq.).

From a practical perspective, integrated urban and neighbourhood development benefits in particular from ▷ *Urban development promotion* programmes, such as the joint programme by the federal and state governments entitled *'Stadtteile mit besonderem Entwicklungsbedarf – die Soziale Stadt'* ['Urban boroughs with special developmental needs – the Socially Integrative City'] (▷ *Social Integrative City*). The corresponding measures are at the same time explicitly informal, as embedded in ▷ *Special Urban Development Law*. For example, the Federal Building Code provides that 'urban structural measures for the Socially Integrative City may be carried out in urban and municipal boroughs [...] in lieu of or in addition to other measures under this Code' (section 171e(1) of the Federal Building Code). The programmatic approach and practical

implementation of informal planning as part of the Socially Integrative City programme are characterised by:

- spatial action areas being defined with a focus on problems, meaning that actions are taken beyond administrative borders,

- integrated development strategies being drafted, continuously updated and implemented, and

- stakeholders, especially from civil society, being actively involved in the development processes.

These integrated development strategies comprise a range of fields of action within neighbourhood development, ranging from healthy environments which are worth living in to image improvement, safety, the local economy, the environment, ▷ *Mobility* and ▷ *Integration*. For the discussion, planning and implementation processes, neighbourhood management is of key importance, as it assumes numerous coordination, participation and integration tasks and responsibilities outside of the formal administrative entities (cf. Eltges/Kocks 2015).

Likewise, the promotion and development of urban green spaces (▷ *Green belt*) is a good example of the significance of informal planning as part of integrated urban and neighbourhood development, as urban green spaces are particularly multifunctional (cf. Danielzyk/Fox-Kämper/ Sondermann 2017). There are numerous guiding principles, concepts, strategies and development programmes for creating urban green spaces and for protecting and interlinking green open spaces (▷ *Open space*). Due to diverse interests in and concerns relating to their use, urban green spaces potentially compete with other types of use, e.g. affordable housing, social infrastructure or commercial locations. Both formal and informal instruments are required to ensure that the different possibilities and concerns are weighed against each other in the most integrated manner possible (cf. *BMUB* [Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Construction and Nuclear Safety] 2015; *MBWSV* [Ministry for Building, Housing, Urban Development and Transport of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia] 2014). Informal instruments for the development of urban green spaces which are important in practice are the superordinate guiding principles and objectives, such as the development of green belts and green corridors as part of a strategy to promote green infrastructure. These initially abstract concepts are then gradually combined with other sectoral instruments in integrated development strategies at the urban and territorial subdivision level and adapted in more detail for the specific local situations and needs. They are then frequently implemented as binding in terms of planning law through formal instruments (cf. Danielzyk/Fox-Kämper/Sondermann 2017; Heiland/Brenck/Gawel et al. 2016: 245 et seq.).

5   The possibilities and limits of informal planning

Informal planning processes and instruments offer many opportunities for sustainable and integrated spatial development. Informal planning allows for:

- the creation of networks (▷ *Networks, social and organisational*) and the promotion of the involvement as well as the activation of stakeholders from civil society and the private sector,

- improved legitimacy and consensus-based decision-making thanks to a broader participation of stakeholders outside of administration and policymaking (cf. Fürst/Sinning/Scholles 2001: 369 et seq.),

- a stronger identification with planning and projects through the direct participation of interested and affected stakeholders,

- the integration of different concerns at different levels and the creation of central reference systems (such as guiding principles and integrated strategies) for the everyday life of all stakeholders concerned (cf. Heiland/Brenck/Gawel et al. 2016: 220 et seq.),

- the adaptability of the acting stakeholders and collective learning processes to be strengthened (cf. Levin-Keitel/Sondermann 2014),

- situation-appropriate, flexible planning and

- the contribution of new ideas through creative methods.

At the same time, informal processes and instruments often reach their limits in the practical implementation of spatial planning and development, especially in regard to their cooperative character (cf. in relation to what follows: Danielzyk/Knieling 2011: 493 et seq.; Selle 2007). The critical aspects are:

- the thematic selectivity and preference for 'suitable' issues that are not (to the greatest extent possible) particularly conflict-prone,

- deficits in the democratic legitimacy of the processes owing to the non-representation of certain groups and/or the dominance of highly vocal stakeholders and a participation process which is inadequate, late and merely nominal,

- the failure to take concerns into account or the ineffective involvement of participants and the resulting frustration,

- an uneven distribution of human, organisational and material resources on the side of the stakeholders involved and the resulting manifestation of power imbalances,

- processes that are too complex as regards their content and organisation, as well as

- the (extensive) elaboration of informal instruments (such as development strategies), which are then insufficiently applied in planning practice.

Even though the informal instruments do not comprise direct and legally binding means of steering spatial development, they are incorporated into formal planning via the self commitment of stakeholders and the required ▷ Weighing of interests. At the same time, the greater flexibility also makes it possible to apply processes and instruments that are appropriate in view of the issues, target groups and situations concerned. In addition, it is also possible to initiate discussion processes, set up development programmes and promote specific projects and measures at short notice.

6 Conclusions

If informal planning is to be successfully used in practice, a proactive approach to the deficits outlined above is an important prerequisite. In addition, it is necessary to continuously test processes and instruments, exchange information about these experiences on a transdisciplinary level and to understand this as an open process. Even though the numerous options for shaping informal processes and instruments potentially entail (legal and procedural) uncertainties, it is precisely the lack of formalisation which also offers many opportunities to embark on new paths in spatial planning.

In view of the growing complexity and dynamics of change, legally standardised formal planning as a means of establishing legal norms is often unable to respond adequately to a given situation. In addition, it is ill-equipped to activate the cooperation of stakeholders, which is becoming an increasingly important element for a number of reasons. In light of the above, the increasing significance of informal planning and the expansion of the range of available instruments and approaches is hardly surprising. At the same time, it must be emphasised that informal planning cannot under any circumstances replace formal planning, as the latter provides indispensable contributions to the moderation and solution of space-related conflicts and to the establishment of a legally binding framework, as well as to creating a reliable framework for the actions of all stakeholders involved, including for the owners of the land.

A decisive issue in future will be whether and how the mutually complementary strengths of informal and formal planning can be used to shape spatial structures and developments adequately. The overall legitimacy of planning will in part depend on whether the strengths of informal planning are adequately taken into account.

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