The Greater Port Harcourt City Development: Planning Experience and Politics Interaction

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Abstract

This paper examined the development of the Greater Port Harcourt City and its interaction with politics. planning and politics have common feature which has to do with 'decision making' whose outcome have varying implications on the welfare of the people. There appears to be constant symbiotic relationship cum interaction between planning and politics. As planning prescriptions are determined by the political-environment in which such planning is domiciled, so also is planning a veritable tool for achieving the political ideals of any society. Thus the interaction between planning and Politics most times are so interwoven that any attempt at separating them seems difficult. In sum, planning and politics connotes all approaches and means to realize the socio-economic and political ideals of a social system.

Keyword: planning; politics; interaction; socio-economic development; conflict resolution.

Introduction

One of the features of planning is that its outcome has the capacity to affect whether positively or negatively a large number of people including the choices they make in the use of space. Again, planners in performance of their statutory duties often times are in constant   interaction with the political elites. This inherent attributes most times throws up the question as to whether planning and politics are the same, or are at least related. Generally, speaking, planning may be seen as involving the process of conflict resolution within a social system especially with respect to the use of space, while politics on the other hand, refers to the decision making process of who gets 'what' and 'how'.

Seen from the above it could be said that, planning and politics have common feature which has to do with 'decision making' whose outcome have varying implications on the welfare of the people. One of the ways in which these interactions between planning and politics is easily noticeable is the fact that, the political-environment in which planning takes place to some extent determines the form or style of planning of such society, while planning, remains veritable tool to enhancing the political ideals of such society.

Thus while political prescriptions influences planning; planning is a sure vehicle for delivering political promises to the electorates.

As changes in political paradigm the world over tend towards democracy and representative governance, so also has planning witnessed changes in both theory and practice to reflect the exiting political milieu especially at the local level. The interdependence between planners and the politicians produces a corresponding change in the planning profession often leading the way to new and varied forms of planning designed to respond to structural adjustments in the political scene. In view of the constant interaction between planning and politics, one is forced to ask, is planning synonymous with politics? How does politics influence planning proposal and implementation? Does the existing planning structure of any society reflect the prevailing political ideals of such system? This chapter focuses on providing answers to the above questions and more. It will seek to x-ray the planning experience of Greater Port Harcourt City Development in Rivers State and its interaction with politics. The paper examines the dynamics in the city's development effort vis-a-vis the various contestations of politics with a view to examining the possible areas of interaction between planning and politics in the area.

Planning and Politics: A Conceptual Overview

Planning has been defined differently by different authors. To some, planning is an activity, while to others it is a process. Planning refers to the process through which the society induces change to itself (Omuta and Onokerhoraye, 1994). Planning (or land-use planning) connotes a decision making process with respect to the ordering and regulating of land use in an efficient and ethical way, and preventing conflicts among land-use

Urban planning is a technical and political process concerned with the development and use of land, planning permission, protection and use of the environment, public welfare, and the design of the of the urban environment, including air, water, and the infrastructure, passing into and out of urban areas, such as transportation, communications, and distribution networks. Planning can be referred to as a set of methods designed to prepare information in such a way that decisions can be made more rationally (Friedmann & Hudson,1974:8 in Marios,1979). Nigel Taylor opines that planning can significantly affect the lives of large numbers of people, and since different individuals and groups may hold different views about how the environment should be planned, based on different values and interests, it is therefore also a political activity.

Lars (2011) argues that Planning is a critical method for achieving political goals, which of course makes urban planning, and its practices, such as urban governance and urban design, inherently political instruments and partly a means of politics.   Lars (op cit) went   further to argue that 'even though it is often said that planning also generates goals for politics, these goals can hardly be accepted as politics unless politically sanctioned. And even if such sanctioning in planning practice often is circumvented, this must surely be seen as a flaw in planning rather than a formative characteristic thus, planning clearly is political but cannot, or rather should not, be understood as politics'

Politics on the other hand is the process of making decisions that apply to members of a group. It refers to achieving and exercising positions of governance — organized control over a human community, particularly a state. Basically, politics is concerned with the economic structure of a social system. Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. It involves policy making process and exists within a changing and highly volatile context. It is complex, and different players intervene, each with their own interests and motivations. Given the complexity and different interest in a society, Planning will vary according to the type of organization and the decision making environment.

A closer look at the two concepts: planning 'and 'politics' will shed light to the fact that both processes have something in common which is 'decision making' Thus the interaction between planning and Politics most times are so interwoven that any attempt at separating them seems difficult. In sum, planning and politics connotes all approaches and means to realize the socio-economic and political ideals of a social system.

Planning and Politics: A Theoretical/Philosophical Overview

A review of literature indicates that planning as a profession has indeed progressed from a technical and neutral activity, to a more inclusive process in which the planner is considered an active agent in the planning preparation process. The changing philosophy and/or paradigm in planning are in response to the changing socio-political milieu in which planning is conducted.
The rational comprehensive theory is one of the major models in planning theory that has since been developed. It is based on a normative model which values higher rationality in the face of multiple organizational and political pressures. (Grant, 1985)

Development of Rational Comprehensive (Synoptic) theory can be traced back to Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte applied the methods of observation and experimentation to the field of sociology and believed that persistent social problems might be solved by the application of certain hierarchical rules and that with the aid of science of sociology mankind would progress towards a superior state of civilization. (Raine, 2005)
Comte's ideas were later developed by Max Webber who argued that the process of rationalization, once unleashed upon the world, transformed social life forever and for the better and that rationalization led to new practices that were chosen based on their efficiency. (Lippman.S and Aldric.H, 2002).

In the traditional 'rational' model planning, is seen as a linear process of problem identification, research option, analysis and then decision-making based on an apolitical analysis of facts. This idea of value-free and non-political has since changed to the perspective where planners are actively involved in the decision and implementation of policies that have diverse implications on the welfare of the people.

Further development on the comprehensive theory were made in the early 1970s by Faludi (1973) who viewed planning as a 'decision making process aimed at solving some of the varied problems which society face' He argued that planning should be rational by evaluating comprehensively all possible action in the light of their consequences; and ensuring that these considerations include alternative goals and that planning should also respond flexibly to new situations.

Inherent in the foregoing argument is the fact that all activities directed towards allocation and reallocation of scarce resources are essentially political. Rational decision making model tend to ignore this dimension of social planning. Decisions in the political arena are influenced far more by the perception of the situation than by any rational concept of objective reality (Raine, 2005). Critics argue that the lack of political interest and commitment to implement policies, challenges the planner's agenda of rationality in planning. In this scenario, planners are no longer seen as an unbiased technocrat with no interest attached. This is because planning as activity is emotionally laden hence the planner may not be completely separated from the society that he operates in.

The interaction between planning and politics is evident in the fact that the planning environment provides the basis for the form of planning style of such society. For example, Faludi (1973) examined the relationship between planning environment in Britain and America and observed a variation in planning style between the two countries. According to him, 'one may characterize the American style as a process-driven, disjointed incrementalism and yet relatively more normative than the British one which is blue-print oriented, politically comprehensive but effectively functional'

There has also been contrasting views as to whether decision choice should follow rational choice or be predicated on political ideals and which should take precedent over the other. Contributing, Faludi (op cit) opines that since planning decisions are made to promote human growth, it is the political process that transforms planning decisions into fruition through the willingness of the former to take the risks' involved in every assumption leading to action. For him, neither planning nor politics should claim supremacy, but must remain in constant interaction by identifying what each one ought to contribute to the growth of the society.

One of the earliest attempts which x-rayed the interactions between planning and politics was done by Friedmann (1966). In a paper he titled 'decision environment', Friedmann argued that there is an institutional context to planning in every country which:

> *'refers to characteristic condition of choice behavior such as the relative* ignorance of the deciders, the extent of their uncertainty about the future, the number of relevant interests and the need for recognizing them, and the ability of the deciders *to influence the decisions and actions of others…these describes the social con*text of *decisions'*

Implicit in Friedmann's (1966) view is the fact the emergence of distinct planning style or form corresponding to the particular social context which influences the substantive content of plans and that planners must understand this 'decision environment' in other to function maximally.

By the 1980s and early 1990s, a new community of scholars came with a radically different idea of what planning and its roles are. These theorists, known as the communicative planning (CP) theorists, challenged the rational model of planning in favour of the communicative approach. For them, the role of planning research is to understand social phenomena and that planners are not experts called to solve problems, but are just like other stakeholders in diverse problems, usually deeply entwined in the problems themselves (Habermas, 1984).
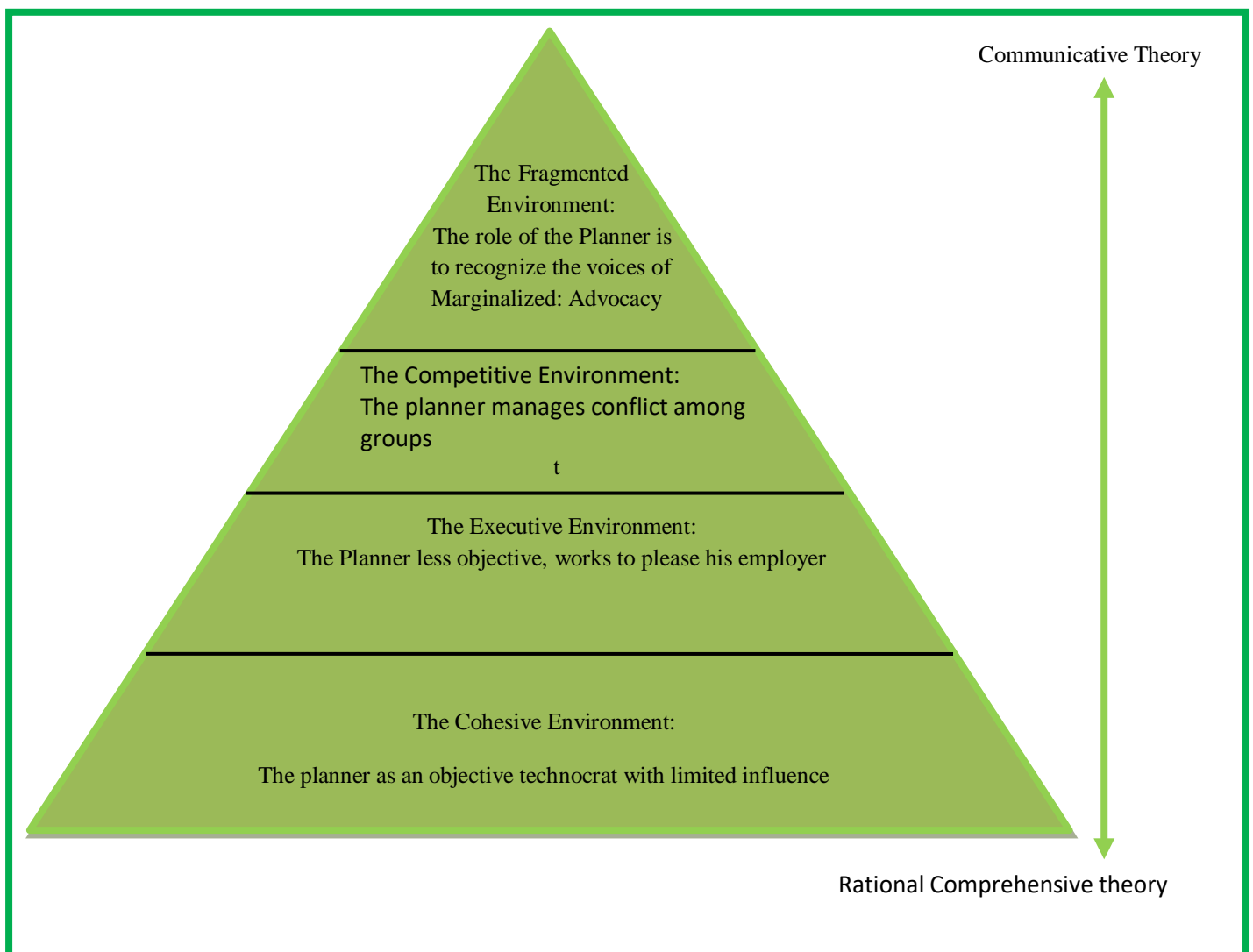
One of the greatest influences on CP theorists was the Frankfurt School of social theorists, particularly the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas In his theory of communicative rationality, Habermas   proposed that reality existed, but was hidden under socially constructed understanding, language, and action. These socially-constructed meanings reinforced the power relationships of certain groups that had initially constructed this 'knowledge', and therefore reinforced the distorted understanding of the issue. It was Forester (1989) who first brought Habermas' (op cit) theories to the fore in planning, demonstrating in his case study that planners were not neutral participants in a problem, and they were not just harmlessly transmitting knowledge. Instead, information was being distorted in the choice of words and communication styles that planners were using, and they were reinforcing their power, even if they were not aware of it.

In trying to examine the seeming interaction between planning and the socio-political environment, some theorizations have been attempted. Rabinovitz (1969) using the local planning environment in the United states came up with the 'power pyramid' theory of decision making. According to the theory, decision-making mimics the 'Hunter community' power structure where only the elites constituting of a few business men made all the important decisions. Robinovitz (1969) identified four distinct planning environments corresponding to different planning theories yet stipulates the different changing roles of planner at each epoch as shown in table 1 below.

Further improvement explaining the relationship between politics and the planning environment was made by Dahl (1961) who came up with 'Yale poly-archaic power theory' this theory describes how different interest groups exact overbearing influence when it wants to do so in the decision –making process. Using the above models, Faludi (1973) came up with the 'variable-pattern model' which was a hybrid of the previous models.

The exposition made from the outset of this work shows the very intimate albeit, intricate nature of relationship between planning and politics which also takes expression in diverse ways. One of the ways in which the relationship between planning and politics is easily seen has to do with the political contestation between the ruling and opposition party which severely undermined planning and its contribution towards coordinated development in cities. Again, planners often succumb to the politics of patronage at the expense of urban residents and town planning principles, as the integrity and credibility of planning is seemingly under constant threat from political actors.

From the analysis made thus far, our surmise is that uncontested politics can distort the intentions of a sound planning system through advancing political interests of politicians. The relationship between planning and politics is interesting and fascinating and planners must try to understand this in other to remain relevant in the political chess-board.

Communicative Theory

The Fragmented Environment:
The role of the Planner is to recognize the voices of Marginalized: Advocacy

The Competitive Environment:
The planner manages conflict among groups

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The Executive Environment:
The Planner less objective, works to please his employer

The Cohesive Environment:

The planner as an objective technocrat with limited influence

Rational Comprehensive theory

The rapid influx in both human and socio-economic activities into the area resulted in the city's expansion and growth albeit uncoordinated putting strains on the existing infrastructure and making them inadequate for the burgeoning urban population. The city's growth has come under the influence of various planning instruments dating back to the colonial era. For example, the Township Ordinance no. 29 of 1917 placed the city of Port Harcourt as a second class city. By this classification, the city's development came under the purview of the colonial administration who gave guidelines for the construction of buildings, control of development and finance of land (Oyesiku, 1997:43). Following the introduction of the federal structure, the 1946 Town and Country Planning Ordinance (cap 155) was adopted and called Town and Country planning Law of Eastern region1963 as applicable in Rivers State.
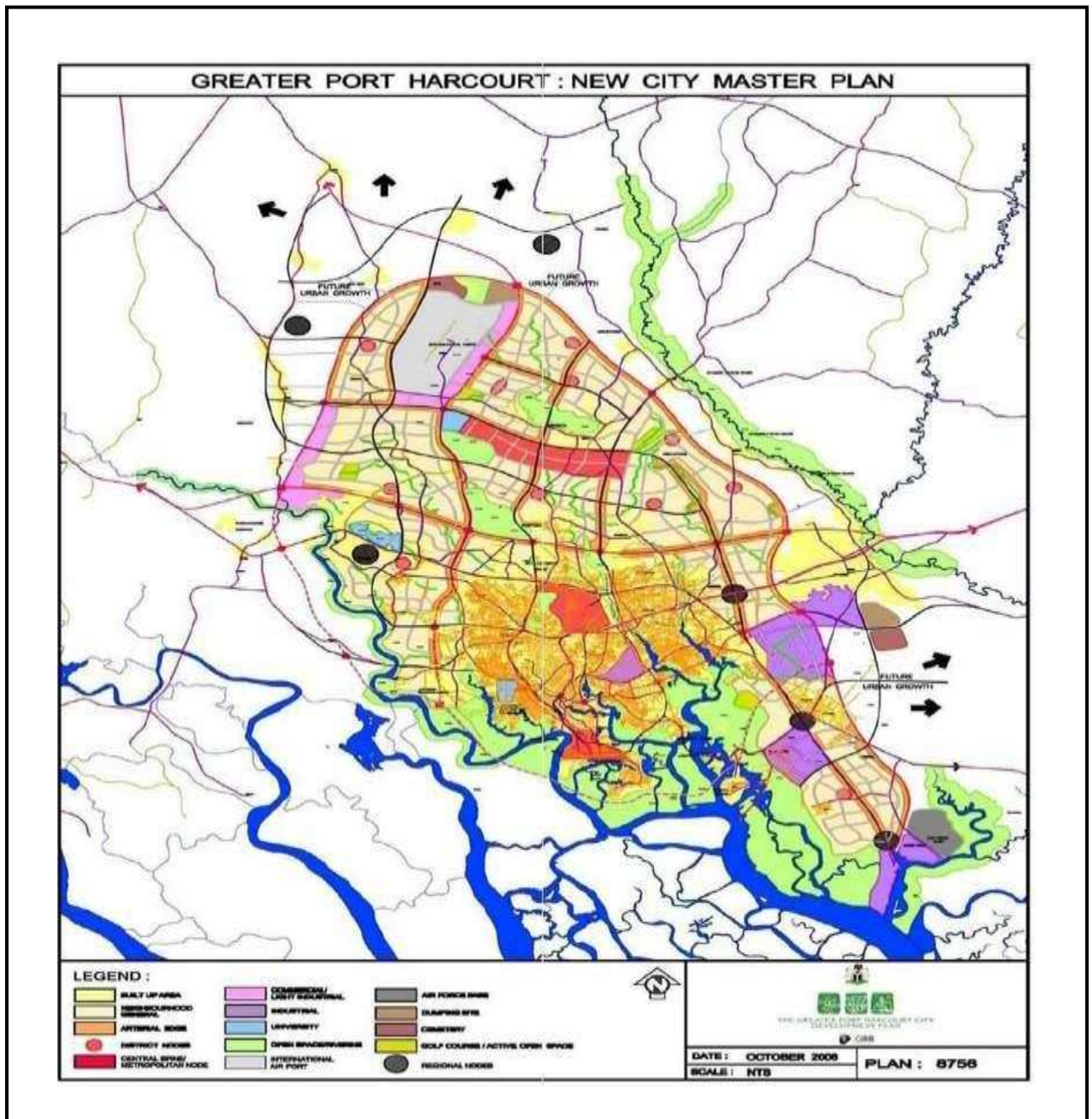
Further effort at enhancing the city's development was done through the production of development plans for port Harcourt drawn in 1959 (Port Harcourt Master Plan,1975) which was later replaced by the 1975 Master plan prepared by 'Specialist Consult' a planning firm based in Sweden. The 1975 plan covered an area of about 180,000 hectares comprising of the existing administrative divisions of Port Harcourt, Obio and parts of Okirika, Ikwerre, Kalabari, Tai/Eleme and Etche (Port Harcourt Master Plan, 1975).

In 2009, the planning area was increased to cover about eight (8) Local Government Areas (LGAs) with the sole objective of building a well planned city, through the implementation and enforcement of policies that will ensure the provision of first rate infrastructure and delivery of quality services in line with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (GPHCDA,Master plan, 2008). The new plan specifically covers approximately 40,000 hectares of land with a projected population of 2 million people. The new city will embrace the fresh city to include Port Harcourt City, and parts of Oyigbo, Okrika, Ogu-Bolo, Obio/Akpor, Ikwerre, Etche and Eleme Local Government Areas.

The design concept is via strategic planning and densification of the old city, whilst gradually integrating both cities into a single unit (GPHCDA, op cit). The proposed development is expected to proceed in phases as the phase 1A of the project is currently been implemented. The phase one 1A is located approximately between latitude $4^042'16.42$ N and $5^06'55.02$ and longitudes $6^047'48.9$E and 7^0 $12'43.66$ E North ward of the old city. It is bordered by Owerri-Port Harcourt road to the north, Igwuruta to the East, Professor Tam David-west road to the west and Rukpokwo town to the south (see fig.2)

The new city is expected to be funded by the Rivers State Government and by public private partnership initiatives. The intention is to allow for urban growth through strategic planning, and the densification the old city, whilst gradually integrating both cities as one single unit. While not attempting an evaluation of the Greater Port-Harcourt City Project (as doing so may be premature) one may want to opine that politics have an over bearing influence on the overall development of the city. How real this has been will be the focus of the subsequent sections of this work.

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Figure 2: Greater Port Harcourt Master Plan
Source: GPHCDA, Master Plan, (2008)

The Growth of Port Harcourt and Politics Interaction

In the past twenty years, the study of urban politics has shifted from a predominant concern with political culture and ethos to a preoccupation with political economy, particularly that of urban development. Recognizing that cities are shaped by forces beyond their control, planners are beginning to pay more attention in other to understand some of these exogenous forces with far reaching implications on plan and plan implementation. Following from this has emerged the views that cities are clearly engaged in economic competition; that market processes are shaped by national policy decisions, sometimes intentionally and sometimes inadvertently; and that the costs and benefits of economic growth are unevenly distributed. All these shows the powerful influence of politics on planning outcome

As noted above, Port Harcourt has had a range of planning experiences with different physical development plans drawn to guide its growth. These plans are variously aimed at coordinating development of the city and to encourage the development of growth-poles as 'counter magnets' to redistribute development evenly across space. Experience has however shown that these plan most often do not receive adequate implementation making Port Harcourt the only city in the entire Rivers State. The reason for the above may not be unconnected to the influence of politics.

The 1975 development plan made provision for creation of development centres northwards of the current city given is endowment with good developable land space. These areas including Igwuruta, Isiokpo, Etche,Ahoada, Bori, Degama among others were supposed to act as growth-poles dispersing development away from the city centre.

A review of the implementation of the said plan shows that the plan was not taken seriously due to political consideration. Our surmise is that failures in the implementation of the various development plans in Port-Harcourt may be connected to the divergent political contestations in the area. Geographically speaking, Rivers State can be bifurcated into upland and riverine communities. Whereas the riverine areas pose some challenges in terms of physical development potentials, the upland areas are more advantaged in terms of land space needed for development extension.

The upland-riverine dichotomy which has since taken serious political twist in the State may be responsible for the non realization of the goals of the various development plans. In the mist of this heated argument has been the question of who is to benefit from the planning outcome. The import of this is that development plans after been drawn receives low patronage in terms of implementation since doing so will result in the development of the upland area as against the riverine communities. In the mist of this political contestation, each development plan drawn for the city is either jettisoned or haphazardly implemented.

Related to the above has to do with instability in the political setting that takes expression through frequent intervention in urban planning process as politicians try to achieve their personal objective or their constituencies/parties interest/manifesto. There have been situations in which the political class mounts pressures on the urban planner to propose an activity in his area of interest even when that activity is not compatible at that particular location. In case of physical development in Port Harcourt, there have been distortions in the land zoning arrangements. It is not unlikely to find large commercial and religious developments with planning approvals in the Government Reserved Areas (GRAs) in Port-Harcourt.

This development is due mainly to the fact that planners have resulted in doing the biddings of the political class in project approval processes just to save their jobs thus compromising the integrity development plans. Again, as politicians often make promises to their constituency during campaign period without actually knowing how those promises can be fulfilled, this has a way of affecting planning outcomes. More so, since every government has tenure of office, incoming government may not be willing to continue the projects of a previous one. In Port Harcourt for example, the 2009 general election in Nigeria brought to power the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as the ruling party in the state. The party among other things introduced the Greater Port Harcourt City project covering about eight Local Government Areas. This tenure saw the production of the Greater Port Harcourt Master Plan and the setting up the Greater Port Harcourt City Development Authority (GPHCDA) to implement the Master Plan.

The implementation of the plan received political attention as activities including the compulsory acquisition of land and compensation, construction of internal roads within the new City, provision of infrastructure and other ancillary services for the take-off of the project. In 2015, however the incumbent Governor's Party (now The All Progressive Congress) lost out in the general elections to the opposition political party the PDP. Personal observation shows that the Greater Port Harcourt City project is not receiving commensurate attention as it did in the last administration.

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All these have raised some questions from residents as to whether the Greater Port Harcourt project has been abandoned. The picture presented here lays support to the fact that if a political party's interest does not tally with that of the previous administration; they tend to stop any developmental programs that are in place and propose new concept and approach which in turn disturb the ongoing project.

More so, every plan has some financial implications and the source of funding is usually through fiscal instrument usually provided by the political class. Thus, even when plans have the approval of the political class, the funding component are also determined by them given the legitimacy bestowed on them by the electorates. So, depending on the political disposition of the political class with respect to any plan, approved plans may or may not receive their sanction as is currently the case in the implementation of the Greater Port Harcourt City Master Plan in Rivers State.

Conclusion

Within any planning setting, there exists this continuous interaction between planning and politics which in any case are in continuous state of flux depending on the socio-economic-political milieu in which planning is taking place. Planning and its activities are both technical and political in nature yet, planning cannot be equated to mean the same thing as politics. As Planning serves as veritable tools in achieving political goals, so also is political legitimacy absolutely essential in achieving planning ideals. Given this synergistic relationship, planning activities must be organized in such a way that its activities must be carried out in such a way that the mutual relationship between it and politics is harnessed. This is important against the background of the fact that every planning endeavor must receive political authority for it to see the light of the day.

So for planning and planners to remain relevant they must learn how to continue to interact with the political class without losing sight of their professional integrity and calling. This interaction is important since, for plans to be approved and sanctioned, the planner needs the political administrators approval for it to become a binding document, while the political administrators also needs planners and planning instruments to deliver on their electioneering promises and manifestos to their electorates.

Awareness of the political context and the over-arching influence of planning outcome can be of help to planners in framing any planning proposals. Since politics determines what planning policies/ proposals that are practicable in any setting, our understanding of the seeming interactions between planning and the socio-political environment is relevant to planners in gauging what planning programs are practicable in any political environment.

Agreed that the decision making process is unquestionably the prerogative of the politicians; this does not mean that they (politicians) should dominate the entire process of decision making. Planners and politicians ought to cooperate in the collaborative exercise to which both have different but equally decisive and complementary contributions to make (Faludi, 1973). This is imperative such that while the politicians as representatives of the people legitimizes planning actions by accepting the risks associated with the pursuit of a course of planning action, planners must complement this role by providing the basis for analyzing the risks of political-decisions. Here in lies the place of constant interaction between planners and politicians.

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