

# BDC

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

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**Growing Social  
Inequalities  
and Ecological Crisis**



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Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

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## **TIMES OF CRISIS: NEW PLANNING POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON INEQUALITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN ISRAEL**

*Rani Mandelbaum, Talia Margalit, Barbara Pizzo*

### **Abstract**

In the last decades, crisis discourse became more dominant, leading to changes in Israeli planning discourse. The planning system assumes neoliberal features, which changed the power-relations within planning, enabled a rescaling of planning powers and determined the adoption of specific urban development patterns. The paper reveals how a governing coalition, using crisis discourse, promoted policy change that can deepen social inequalities and environmental unbalance. We focus on Israeli VATMAL law, enacted to ‘solve’ the housing crisis, through a shortened and centralized procedure that undermined lower planning levels. We show that the plans processed through VATMAL have serious impacts on natural areas and future housing. The article concludes that the space, shaped by current ‘housing crisis’ through the VATMAL, is increasing spatial and social inequalities in Israel.

Keywords: planning policy, crisis discourse, inequalities

## **TEMPI DI CRISI: NUOVE POLITICHE DI PIANIFICAZIONE E LORO IMPATTO SULLE DISUGUAGLIANZE E SULL’AMBIENTE IN ISRAELE**

Negli ultimi decenni, il discorso sulla crisi è divenuto predominante, apportando cambiamenti nel discorso sulla pianificazione in Israele. Il sistema di pianificazione assume caratteristiche neoliberiste, che hanno cambiato i rapporti di potere all’interno della pianificazione, consentito un ridimensionamento dei poteri e determinato l’adozione di specifici modelli di sviluppo urbano. Il presente articolo mostra come una coalizione di governo, utilizzando il discorso sulla crisi, abbia promosso un cambiamento della politica che può intensificare le disuguaglianze sociali e gli squilibri ambientali. Ci concentriamo sulla legge israeliana VATMAL, emanata per “risolvere” la crisi delle abitazioni, attraverso una procedura abbreviata e centralizzata che ha indebolito i livelli inferiori di pianificazione. Si dimostra che i piani elaborati tramite la legge VATMAL producono gravi impatti sulle aree naturali e sulle abitazioni future. L’articolo ne conclude che lo spazio, modellato dall’attuale “crisi abitativa” attraverso la legge VATMAL, sta aumentando le disuguaglianze spaziali e sociali in Israele.

Parole chiave: politica di pianificazione, discorso sulla crisi, disuguaglianze

## 1. Crisis Discourses and Policy Change

The word 'crisis' is defined as a turning point, a decisive moment (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019). Crisis discourse often promotes a clear narrative with single solution. Jessop (2013) coins the phrase 'Imagined Recoveries' to describe a collection of possible solutions, from which power elites choose the preferred solution and discard the ones that do not suit their goals. Moffitt (2015) calls the chosen solutions 'Pseudo-Solution', because they are often simplistic and do not offer an adequate answer to the more complex reality. Moreover, the offered solutions, however dramatic, often do not advocate any real and relevant change in social structure or given order (Jessop, 2013).

Crisis solutions are often extreme and drastic in comparison to other policy solutions (Milstein, 2014). They derive legitimacy from the panic of the crisis (Charney, 2017). Different scholars have shown how the use of 'Apocalyptic Imaginaries' discourses became commonplace tactics and claim that capitalist and neoliberal governance increase the appearance of crises and crisis discourse (Swyngedouw, 2010). Urban planning policy is not different. In times of crisis policymakers often obtain more easily and fastly the preferred results, weakening existing planning authorities and relaxing regulatory standards. Thus, neoliberal planning systems preserve and safeguard the continued cooperation between the government and economic elites (Ponzini, 2016).

Furthermore, neoliberal governance, and neoliberal planning in particular, can profit from structural changes in the planning system. One of the main effects of the crisis and fear discourse on actual planning systems is the rescaling of planning powers, toward decentralization, or as we will show, toward centralization (Alterman, 2002; Mualam, 2018b). Altheide (2003) explains that fear causes the public to feel helpless, and to seek help from official bodies. Consequently, the state gains legitimacy in taking greater control of government institutions.

## 2. Israeli Planning System

The Israeli planning system is framed and defined according to the Planning and Construction Law of 1965. The system is a three-level hierarchical system - national, district and local. Each planning authority plans at its own level and approve the plans of the sub-ordinate level. The district level, composed by professionals, acts as the checks and balances system of Israeli planning. The local level issues the building permits needed for implementation (Alfasi, 2003). In general, the Israeli planning system is very centralized, also due to the concentration of 93% of land in government agencies (Alterman, 2002). Significantly, in the past decades additional planning powers have moved from the district level to the national level (Feitelson, 2018).

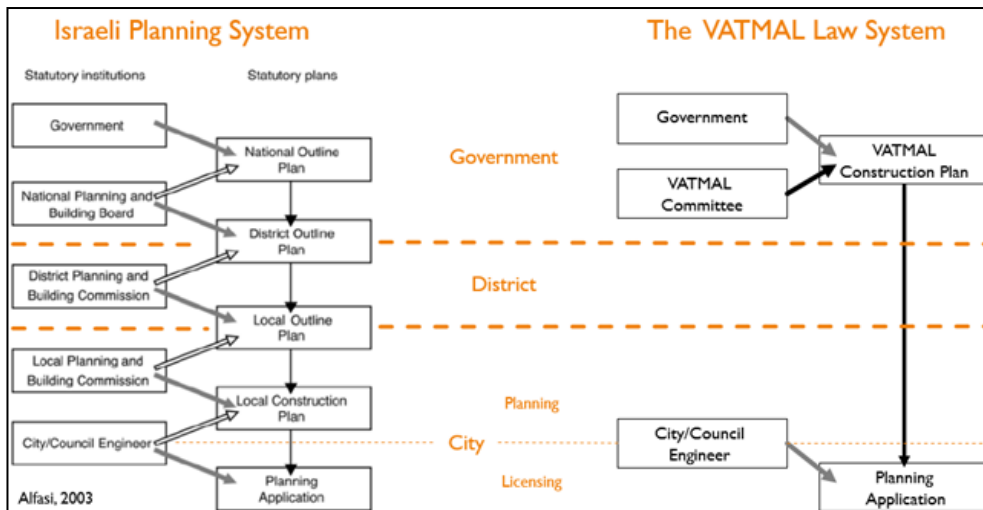
At the same time, housing prices increased. The social protest of 2011 began in opposition to these high housing prices (Yiftachel and Mandelbaum, 2017). The government blamed the planning system and declared that it was the bureaucracy that led to a housing shortage – 'Housing Crisis' – which led to price escalation. Quite differently, some researchers argue that the source of the problem is more about the drop of interest rates and the tightening of mortgages lending preconditions, that encouraged many investors to enter the housing market and lead to stronger economic speculation (Schipper, 2016; Borochoy, 2018; Mualam, 2018b). Nevertheless, the notion of a housing crisis became a leading discourse influencing many planning and policy decisions (Charney, 2017).

### 3. The VATMAL Law

This paper will focus on the major planning policy that was created in light of the housing crisis. The VATMAL Law creates a shortened procedure for the approval of particularly large plans as well as a rapid procedure to reclaim state land and multi-owned land for residential purposes. The objectives of the law are defined as follows: “To increase the supply of housing units, to create a supply of long-term rental housing units and to create a supply of long-term rental housing units at a reduced price”. The new committee was established at a national level, and the plans are regulatory detailed plans which regulate building permits. In this way, the VATMAL law enables national level committee to ‘skip’ over the municipal and district planning committees, meaning a rescaling of major planning powers towards the national level (Figure 1).

The committee itself consists of 18 members, most of them representative of pro-growth ministries (treasury, housing and more). In addition, the VATMAL has extremely broad powers, including the option to plan contrarily to most approved outline plans. The subcommittee for objections is also composed by a majority of pro-growth ministries. Accordingly, it has low rates of accepted objections, especially those submitted by the public (TSPNI, 2018). As Israeli planning democracy mostly lies in the objections and hearing processes (Margalit and Kemp, 2019), the VATMAL’s low rates of accepted objections further narrows planning democracy.

Figure 1– Israeli planning System vs. the VATMAL Law System



Mass-media acts as a main platform for communication around planning in Israel. Examination of the mass-media discourse over the last five years (October 2013 – October 2018), in 5 of Israeli’s leading on-line news portals, shows that 8,600 articles concerning planning have been published, and crisis discourse results a key issue. Words such as crisis, disaster, danger, emergency, catastrophe, destruction, etc. appear in the headers or bylines of

850 articles (almost 10% of the total articles). Moreover, content analysis of the articles dealing with the VATMAL reveals that 33% of the articles express a clear crisis discourse, mostly concerning the housing crisis. The main actors quoted in this discourse are state and municipal politicians and bureaucrats.

Analysis of the discourse in government spheres regarding the VATMAL follows the legislative process (the Knesset Committee on Internal Affairs and the Environment Protection, February - May 2014). The discourse revolves around a number of key issues – planning and land management, housing types, location and nature of planning, proprietary issues and the validity and execution of the products – made up of various arguments, some reinforcing the intent of the law and others conflicting with it.

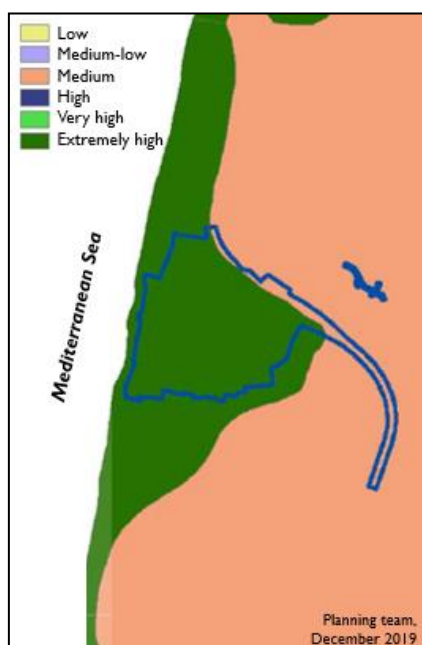
At the heart of the debate emerges the argument that high housing prices are the result of a 'housing crisis', following a severe shortage of planned housing units. This argument dictates both the objective and the solution that, according to the law's promoters, must be adopted to solve the problem. This argument is part of a crisis discourse, that includes 'cluster' of intimidation ('crisis') and a fear object ('housing', that reflects a shortage in housing units) (Marko, 2013), which serves as a justification for promoting institutional and organizational structural change. For example, Yair Lapid, then Minister of Finance said: "To solve the housing crisis in the State of Israel we must built quickly, built efficiently and build now, and this is the law that is in front of you", which continues: "The degree of aggressiveness of these measures is as the degree of severity of the crisis in the Israeli housing market".

Most responders who participated in the committee meetings were from one out of the two discourse coalitions. The governing coalition, which supported the advancement of the VATMAL law, included also government officials and representatives from Israel Builders Association (private sector). The opposing group included the government opposition, representatives of rural, 'green', social and planning organizations and local governments. The crisis discourse was formulated by the ruling coalition.

#### 4. Iris Plan

This is the 70th plan out of 140 plans promote by the VATMAL. The plan proposes building of a new neighborhood, instead of agricultural land and a national park. We will focus on two main issues.

First, the high natural value of the involved land. Israel is a small country of approximately 20,000 square kilometers with distinctive and diverse natural qualities (Abraham, 2018). However due to the high density, especially along the central coast, open and agriculture land is in deficiency (CBS, 2019). The land of the Iris plan is very close to the beach (in parts less than 300m), and has unique geological phenomena and endemic flora and fauna. The Ministry of the Protection of Nature's master plan classifies the area as land with 'extremely high' sensitivity (Figure 2) and The Planning Administration's master plan (TAMA 1) categorizes it as land of 'great importance to groundwater instillation and enrichment'. Nevertheless, the plan transforms around 428,000m<sup>2</sup>, out of 620,000m<sup>2</sup>, of agricultural and open land uses into built environment utilizations, such as residence, public buildings, roads, etc. Leaving only a strip of 191,500m<sup>2</sup> of agricultural and open land as an essential ecological corridor in the northern part of the area. Thus, the plan destroys the high natural value of the area, neutralizes the natural ability of the land to instill and enrich groundwater and minimizes agricultural land and agricultural opportunities enormously (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2 –Land Sensitivity in the Planned Area****Figure 3 – Agricultural and Open Land in the Planned Area**

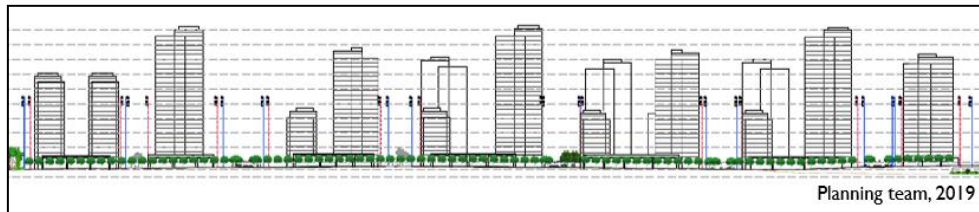
Second, the plan foresaw 3,649 new residential units. More than 77% of them will be realized in buildings higher than 9 storeys, with more than 33% in buildings of 22 storeys. Unit's average size is more than 95m<sup>2</sup>. (Figure 4). Research shows that planning of high-rise buildings encourages prestigious development. Moreover, it shows that residential units in high-rise buildings demand higher maintenance costs (Alterman, 2009; Paz Group et al., 2017; Mualam, 2018a). As the average price of an apartment in Israel is equal to 136 monthly salaries (CBS, 2019), planning of unaffordable housing in bunk narrows the housing market and the possible buyers, and therefore severely enhances inequalities in Israeli society. During the statutory planning process (VATMAL, April – May 2019), a number of reservations arose, including a request to reduce the plan's natural and visible footprint. This was countered by Ariel Yotzer, the head of VATMAL with crises rhetoric: "Where should those people live?", "This is contrary to the very essence of [this] planning institution".

**Figure 4 – Land Uses and Heights in the Iris Plan**



However, the Iris plan is not a unique case. More VATMAL plans, suffering from similar problems, can be seen in Figures 5 (Ben-Shemen plan) and 6 (Qiryat-Haluzim plan). Both plans propose to build new neighborhoods on lands that are mostly open nature and agricultural land. Moreover, both plans offer prestigious housing with high maintaining costs. Ben-Shemen plan foresaw 4,843 new residential units with average size of more than 91m<sup>2</sup>. More than 99% of them will be realized in buildings higher than 9 storeys, with more than 78% in buildings of 20-29 storeys with particularly expensive maintenance costs. Qiryat-Haluzim plan foresaw 7,962 new residential units with average size of more than 94m<sup>2</sup>. More than 86% will be realized in buildings higher than 9 storeys, with more than 50% in buildings of 20-30 storeys with particularly expensive maintenance costs.



**Figure 5 – Construction appendices of Ben-Shemen Plan****Figure 6 – Simulation of Qiryat-Haluzim Plan**

## 5. Conclusions

The VATMAL law was advertised as a mechanism to help ‘solving’ the housing crisis. It, allegedly, would reduce housing prices and make housing more accessible, by increasing the supply of housing units. However, while prices did not actually decrease, the planning proposed in the Iris plan, as in many VATMAL plans, is at least controversial. First, due to its land use pattern, uninterested in damaging nature and agriculture. Second, due to the typologies realized – prestigious housing with high maintaining cost – which hardly represent the answer to the claimed ‘housing crisis’. The VATMAL, as a ‘Pseudo-Solution’, enables us to understand: 1) how the crisis discourse is used to weaken existing planning authorities and to rescale planning powers toward centralization. The government level now embraces all the powers to authorize detailed plans, which otherwise would not necessarily be approved; 2) how the new policy, mediated by the crisis discourse, shapes the urban space and increases spatial and social inequalities, by devastating open and agricultural lands and generating unaffordable housing.

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