Vision Planning: From Concept to Vocation

Hooshang Amirahmadi, Rutgers University

A Lecture Delivered at the Third Sharjah Urban Plan Symposium
Sharjah, UAE, April 18-19, 2000

I am asked by the organizers to speak about vision planning. I am delighted to do so and wish to present the discussion in terms of vision planning as a concept and as a planning vocation. Let me begin with the obvious: We live in an increasingly **globalized** and interdependent world. But the most significant phenomenon we face is not the fact of globalization and its consequent interdependency; Rather, it is the **uncertainty** that globalization entails for various spatial scales and sectorial subdivisions, including local communities and transnational firms. The sharpened **competition** for markets and resources and the growing rapid **pace of change** are two of the many factors that have contributed to the increased uncertainty about what might occur next - not a year from now but perhaps even the next day!

True, global interdependency is asymmetrical and global forces are in the lead and better prepared, but the local consequences of their actions, strategic or otherwise, are as problematic for localities as they are for the global players themselves. The result is an increased sense of **mutual vulnerability**, both real and potential. Thus, global competition in the face of the deepening impact of **information and transport technologies** has made transnational firms disloyal to their local constituencies. We witness this development in an emerging phenomenon I have termed **"localization of global polarization"**; So, packets of development and underdevelopment may be found in both developed and developing countries, while the old core-periphery relations among nation-states are becoming a subordinate phenomenon. The focus of **spatial competition** is now more on micro spatial and sectorial scales such as communities and firms.

Global forces have adopted a variety of means to cope with or co-opt their vulnerable conditions. **Strategic management**, of which technology alliances and multi-sourcing have become important aspects, is one such recent tool. A most important aspect of strategic management is setting the longer-term corporate orientation, including its goal and operational objectives, as well as implementation policies, in relation to firm's environment (domestic and international) and in correspondence with its capabilities and constraints. The corporate strategic vision also revolves around the quality of its people, the factor most responsible for competitive advantage of the firms and nations in today's globalized and interdependent world.

As is the case with most high-impact decisions, strategic management relies, as much on intuition as on analytical tools for corporate planning, of which **forecasting** is a key input. In short, strategic management involves **three** inter-related activities. First is **Strategic analysis** for positioning the firm's place and role among the competitive community. This is followed by designing **alternative** courses of action and **selecting** the

most appropriate, that is, practical, course after a careful evaluation in relation to firm's environment, capabilities and constraints. The last activity involves strategizing an **implementation** plan that is focused on the human resources of the firm and on a feedback mechanism that allows for reflection and correction.

Nation-states have also used strategic management, but largely and till recently, often for the purpose of war and defense. A more recent development relates to a **change of name and purpose**. It is now increasingly referred to, as **Vision Planning** and the target aim has been **competitive economic** development. The East Asian NIC's are most obvious examples, and the Malaysia's "Vision 2020" is perhaps the most debated among vision plans in the developing world. Broadly speaking, these nations have used long-term strategic visions to set a course of action beyond the traditional five-year plans, with a time horizon exceeding **20 years**, which would supposedly and hopefully guarantee their competitive development.

The vision reflects, it is claimed, as a **national consensus** on economic and social priorities and targets. The consensus is arrived, it is said, through **cross acceptance dialogue** among the government, business associations, and institutions of civil society. The vision is also based on realistic **forecasting and appraisal** of the external and internal potentials and limitations, policy options and trade offs, and the complex relationships between actions and outcomes. While vision planning for a nation is often developed by the public sector, recent trends indicate an increasing degree of involvement by the private sector. This is particularly the case in countries where circulation of political elite is often rapid, leading to policy instability.

Because the vision reflects a consensus, it becomes a focal point for all agents in society to understand what their newly assigned rights, expectations, and responsibilities are. In other words, the common vision increases national **transparency**, **accountability** and **cooperation**. Vision planning also helps stabilize public policy even in rapidly changing political conditions. What made the East Asian nations to increasingly attend to vision planning was the growing significance, for competitive advantage, of **human resources development, the fast pace of science and technology change, export-orientation of successful national economies**, the need for improvement in **income** generation and distribution mechanisms, and the growing concern for environmental conditions.

What is then vision planning and how it is different from our previous planning approaches? To begin with, vision planning is not a new form of planning; it has existed in different forms and at different times and places. Nor it is a form specific to corporate world or national governments. Various sectorial and spatial scales have applied the approach, even though it was not always explicitly so called in the private sector. What makes the approach more opt at present is its long-term and strategic approach as well as its wide scope in dealing with the increasing pace of change and the resultant uncertainties in the age of globalization. As implied in the terms, vision planning brings together **vision** and **planning,** that is, the ability to imagine the future with the ability to formulate actions to traverse toward that image, in a single process of **contextualization**

and **proceduralization** of development, something we planners have had to do for making theories relevant to practice.

So, in its essence, vision planning helps **pro-activate** planning subject and agency while assisting with a **better understanding** of its object and structure. But more importantly, vision planning offers a **three-prong** approach to **targeting the future as it unfolds**: conceptual, methodological, and institutional. And it is this unification of form and contents, substance and procedure, that sets vision planning apart from the rest, the traditional so-called rational, largely procedural forms; and the more substantive political economy approaches. In most recent times, new directions in planning theories have included communicative planning, urbanism, and the just-city movement. The problem with these and similar other approaches to planning is the same as with their predecessors: They can either offer substance or form, but not both at least not in a single conceptual, methodological, and institutional movement.

While, e.g., conventional planning theories (that is, theories **of** planning) are devoid of contextualizing powers, the perennial problem with political economy approach (including the so-called theories **in** Planning) has been their lack of respect for pragmatism. And both suffer from a complete disregard for institutional development. Thus, a vision planner asks questions like: What **place** can or should a system or subsystem occupy in the larger system? What **role** can or should it play; what **priorities** are to be set and why, what **opportunities** and or **obstacles** are there for the implementation of the vision, what **procedures** might the unit apply to better achieve its aims, and finally what type of **institutions** are the most required for the highway to be smoothly traveled.

Let me now introduce a sister concept to vision planning, called **National Spatial Development Planning (NSDP)**. I cannot but scratch the surface here because of the time limit, but it is nonetheless important that a discussion of vision planning is complemented by an introduction to NSDP. Specifically, NSDP provides vision planing with a most needed tool: a planning methodology that above all **helps bring sector and space together**, while assisting in a **stage-wise implementation** of concepts arrived at by the visioning process. NSDP also helps visualize future images of development systematically and comprehensively, making it easier for decision-makers to relate to particular scenarios. NSDP is predicated upon the assumption that development is a multifaceted strategic and integrative process requiring conceptualization, systematic procedures and institution building in the context of a more holistic environment.

Let's now take the case of Sharjah as an example and only an example. The NSDP methodology can help vision planning to conceptualize Sharjah's development vision as relating to three national, regional and global levels, each having four dimensions: economic, social/cultural, spatial, and institutional. Each dimension in turn is composed of sectors, sub-sectors, and development issues. It is further conceptualized that issues in these dimensions are inter-related such that they are simultaneously impact-producers and impact-receivers. This inter-connectedness is captured via a series of information matrices, task specific techniques, and conceptual models. Data gathering will be based

on pre-defined criteria and other guidelines. Newly generated information will complement existing data and are brought together in a data-bank management system.

For more concrete results, the development vision will be conceptualized at four levels. The broadest level is macro in perspective and involves scenario building and takes place in the first stage of implementing this vision. The second level, between the macro perspective and the meso-outlook, involves selecting a scenario and converting it into a long-term vision and plan for the place to be called its vision plan. The next level of conceptualization, the meso level, entails strategy building and formulation of medium-term five-year plans. Capabilities and constraints as well as competitors and complements are accounted for in setting goals and designing policies. The final level, micro-conceptualization, involves policy-building for formulation of short-term operational (one year) plans, complete with line items budgets for implementation.

NSDP, as a methodological framework, is particularly helpful in implementing vision plans. It is a procedure comprising clearly delineated stages, sequential steps, well-defined tasks, specific products, and appropriate models and techniques. For better management of the many and complex processes involved in production of the vision, they will be segmented and implemented in four stages: the preparation and scenario-building stage, the goal-setting and policy-designing stage, and operational plan-making stage. NSDP will help detail the mechanism utilized to implement each of these stages, including specific tasks performed, methods used, and products generated.

Of particular interest are models for scenario building and scenario selection. The first will place Sharjah in regional and global perspectives providing a guide as to its proper place and role on the basis of national competitive and comparative advantages. The scenario selection model, on the other hand, puts economy in the center of its attention and on that basis delineates a path that Sharjah needs to travel to maximize its capabilities and minimizes its constraints - nationally, regionally and globally. NSDP will also offer a mode for setting goal-strategy and objective policy that prevents the common confusion among them and across development dimensions. This is particularly helpful in developing countries where social and economic policies are often conflated.

Finally, development is about institution building and NSDP will help outline the main elements of an institutional framework as the entry point of the vision production. The framework will include decision-making units, coordinating units, policy-making units, planning units, and the working groups. Institutional development is key to development process and this requires taking a more strategic perspective of the many detail regulatory and administrative measures that need to be implemented before a more effective plan implementation is made possible. No wonder that more often than not, institution building is the entry point for conceptual and methodological dimensions of vision planning.

In sum, this lecture has explained vision planning as a concept and a vocation, has proposed a methodology to arrive at it, and has provided insights into its institutional requirements. Vision planning involves strategic thinking about capabilities, constraints

and competitors. How capabilities and constraints are matched to create competitive advantage is the pivot around which vision planning revolves. Understanding capabilities requires identifying, devising, mobilizing and utilizing the key assets domestically and internationally, while removal of constraints involve displacing obstacles at home and abroad. Assets here refer to human, material and spatial dimensions of development, as well as to institutional frameworks, interactive networks, and technological innovations. As complement to capabilities, national identity, function, role, place and priorities are all built into a vision plan. But they are only conceptualized in relation to obstacles, particularly the ones separating sector from space or territory from function. For arriving at a vision plan, the conceptualization of the future has to follow the formulation of purpose and basic criteria, as well as an evaluation of the current practices. The making of the plan will also require identification of specific input requirements, data processing, and the expected outputs. The key here is methodological considerations and institutional requirements.