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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Investigating the Legal Capacities of Integrated Urban Management in the Laws of Municipalities and Councils in Iran

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

Rapid urbanization and the increasing complexity of urban challenges have made urban governance one of the most critical policy issues in developing countries, including Iran. Cities are no longer merely physical spaces; rather, they are complex systems in which social, economic, environmental, and institutional dimensions are deeply intertwined. In this context, integrated urban management has emerged as a key approach to ensuring sustainable urban development, enhancing service efficiency, and improving citizens' quality of life.

In Iran, however, urban management has long been characterized by fragmentation and sectoral governance, where responsibilities related to infrastructure provision, transportation, energy, environmental management, and economic regulation are distributed among multiple national, provincial, and local institutions. This fragmentation has resulted in overlapping mandates, weak coordination, limited accountability, and ultimately, persistent urban problems such as traffic congestion, air pollution, inefficient public services, and unbalanced urban growth.

Despite these challenges, Iran possesses a long-standing legal framework for urban governance, most notably the Municipal Law of 1955 (with subsequent amendments). Historically, this law granted municipalities extensive authority over a wide range of urban functions, including water and electricity provision, public transportation, market regulation, and the establishment of public institutions. These responsibilities reflected an early recognition of the need for a comprehensive and unified approach to urban management.

Over time, however, many of these functions were transferred to sectoral ministries and specialized agencies, significantly reducing the coordinating role of municipalities. As a result, the potential of the Municipal Law to support integrated urban management has remained largely underutilized. This study argues that revisiting and reinterpreting this legal framework is essential for addressing current urban governance challenges in Iran.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the legal capacities for integrated urban management in Iran with a particular emphasis on the Municipal Law, and to examine how the erosion of these capacities has contributed to contemporary urban problems. By identifying both the latent potentials and

existing deficiencies within the legal framework, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on urban governance reform and sustainable city management.

Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach based on qualitative methods, with a primary focus on documentary and legal analysis. The core data source is the Municipal Law of Iran (1955, with amendments), which is examined article by article to identify provisions related to integrated urban management. These legal provisions are then analyzed in relation to contemporary urban governance practices and institutional arrangements.

In addition to the Municipal Law, the study draws upon relevant national legislation, policy documents, and secondary academic sources in both Persian and English. This includes scholarly literature on urban governance, integrated urban management, and sustainable urban development, as well as reports from international organizations such as UN-Habitat. The integration of domestic and international sources allows for a broader conceptual framing and facilitates comparative insights.

The analytical process consists of three main stages. First, legal provisions assigning responsibilities to municipalities in areas such as infrastructure, public services, economic regulation, and urban planning are systematically identified and categorized. Second, these provisions are compared with the current distribution of responsibilities among urban governance institutions in Iran. Third, the implications of this institutional fragmentation for urban performance—particularly in relation to traffic management, environmental quality, and service coordination—are critically assessed.

This methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how legal structures shape urban governance outcomes and provides a solid basis for proposing reforms aimed at restoring integrated urban management.

Findings

The findings of the study reveal that the Municipal Law originally established municipalities as central coordinating bodies for urban management. The law granted municipalities authority over a broad spectrum of functions, including water supply, electricity provision, energy management, public transportation, street maintenance, market supervision, and the establishment of public facilities such as schools, hospitals, and libraries. These responsibilities indicate a holistic vision of the city as a unified system requiring coordinated decision-making.

One of the most significant findings is that many of these functions, which were once integral to municipal responsibilities, have been gradually reassigned to sectoral ministries and national agencies. For example, water and electricity services are now managed primarily by the Ministry of Energy, while market regulation and price control fall under national trade authorities. Transportation planning often involves multiple institutions with overlapping jurisdictions, limiting the ability of municipalities to implement cohesive strategies.

This redistribution of responsibilities has weakened the institutional capacity of municipalities and undermined the principles of integrated urban management. The absence of a single coordinating authority has resulted in fragmented planning processes, inconsistent policy implementation, and inefficient use of resources. The study finds that these structural deficiencies are closely linked to persistent urban challenges, particularly traffic congestion and air pollution.

Traffic congestion in major Iranian cities is exacerbated by the lack of coordination between land-use planning and transportation policy. Similarly, air pollution is intensified by fragmented energy and transportation management, where municipalities have limited authority to enforce environmental regulations or promote sustainable mobility solutions. These issues demonstrate how the erosion of integrated management capacities directly affects urban sustainability.

Despite these challenges, the study also finds that the legal foundations for integrated urban management remain largely intact within the Municipal Law.

Many provisions can be reactivated or reinterpreted to enhance municipal authority and coordination. This suggests that meaningful reform does not necessarily require entirely new legislation, but rather a strategic reconfiguration of existing legal and institutional arrangements.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight a critical paradox in Iranian urban governance: while the legal framework for integrated urban management exists, its practical implementation has been significantly weakened by institutional fragmentation. The Municipal Law embodies a comprehensive vision of urban management that aligns closely with contemporary theories of integrated and sustainable urban governance. However, this vision has been overshadowed by decades of sectoral reforms and centralization.

From a theoretical perspective, the results support the argument that legal and institutional coherence is a prerequisite for effective urban governance. Integrated urban management requires not only technical capacity but also clear authority, accountability, and coordination mechanisms. The Iranian case demonstrates how the dilution of municipal authority can lead to systemic inefficiencies and persistent urban problems.

Practically, the study suggests that restoring integrated urban management in Iran requires a multi-dimensional approach. This includes reassigning certain responsibilities to municipalities, strengthening inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, and enhancing the legal status of municipalities within the national governance system. Special attention should be given to areas with high externalities, such as transportation and environmental management, where fragmented governance has the most severe consequences.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes that the Municipal Law remains a valuable yet underutilized resource for urban governance reform in Iran. By revisiting and revitalizing its provisions, policymakers can address the root causes of urban inefficiencies and move toward a more integrated, sustainable, and responsive system of urban management. The study contributes to the broader discourse on urban governance by demonstrating how legal frameworks can either constrain or enable integrated urban management, offering insights that may also be relevant to other developing countries facing similar challenges.

KEYWORDS

Integrated Urban Management, Urban Governance, Municipalities Law, Councils Law.

