

THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC INTEREST IN PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This review paper offers an in-depth analysis of the public interest idea in planning. It delves into several interpretations and viewpoints on the public interest within physical planning theory, encompassing planning ethics, normative planning content, planning process, and political discussions that oversee planning. The paper examines how the idea has changed over time, focusing on the impact of utilitarianism, justice-oriented methods, communication theories, and elitist perspectives. It explores several ideologies in planning theory associated with these perspectives, including the utilitarian, justice-oriented, communicative, and elitist schools. The paper emphasises the need for a broad framework that considers the various elements that pertain to public interest in planning. It also discusses the challenges and complexities in defining and operationalising the public interest, considering the diverse interests and values at play in planning processes. The review highlights the significance of serving the public good by encouraging the well-being of communities and ensuring equitable outcomes. It explores the role of Planners in promoting the public interest and the ethical considerations that guide their professional conduct. The paper examines the conflicts and compromises that Planners encounter while reconciling conflicting interests and values, emphasising the importance of inclusive and participatory decision-making. It also explores the correlation between the public interest and other planning principles, including sustainability, social justice, and democracy. The review suggests that the public interest is a complex and contested concept shaped by political, social, and cultural factors. It emphasises the need for Planners to critically reflect on their role in promoting the public interest and engage in ongoing dialogue and deliberation with stakeholders. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of public interest in planning, highlighting its complexities and challenges and emphasising the importance of inclusive and participatory decision-making processes.

Keywords: Public Interest, Public Good, Common Good, Planning Theory, Planning Practice, Concept.

1.0: INTRODUCTION

In the field of planning, the concept of public interest is intricate. It is the gold standard for evaluating and praising planning efforts and has long been central to planning theory (Heywood, 1990). Grant (2005) remarked that there has been debate on how to define the public interest. Various scholars have different views on what the public interest is. Some see it as an essential factor in public planning and decision-making (Alexander, 2002; 2010; Campbell & Marshall, 2002; Moroni, 2004; Taylor, 1998), while others see it as a meaningless term with no real substance (Pennington, 2000; Reade, 2013; Schubert, 1960). According to Campbell and Marshall (2002), Planners are primarily involved in public policymaking since the public interest is the main content and objective of planning. Acceptance or endorsement of governmental policies is another way of looking at public interest (Flathman, 1966).

Since World War II, the legitimation of planning has rested on the proposition that state intervention in land and property development is necessary to safeguard the public interest against private and sectional interests (Campbell & Marshall, 2000). Arguably, without the public interest, there is little reason for planning to exist (Grant, 2005). Without recognising that interventions in land and property contribute to a collective quality of life, those with the means could build as they wished, introducing the architect to the builder without an intermediary. This view of planning as an activity embedded in the state is consistent with the separation of state and society (Maidment, 2015). Planners are unable to take action without first forming a clear understanding of what constitutes the public interest, which is the theoretical centre of planning (Alexander, 2010; Maidment, 2015). As stated by Mazzucato (1990), “Historically, the only common standard in the different forms of planning has been the public interest,” which is the conventional justification for planning engagement based on the concept of public interest.

Before critically reviewing the concept of “public interest”, it is essential to determine which specific definition to use. The definitions attributed to the idea are intricate, varied, and inconsistent within the theoretical literature. They often lack a precise definition, making it challenging to address the different aspects of the subject and generalise them (Dadashpoor & Sheydayi, 2021). Various interpretations of the idea of public interest have rendered it ambiguous yet unavoidable (Tait, 2012; 2016). Ultimately, planning as an idea is fundamentally about pursuing collective well-being, regardless of the terminology used to frame it. Therefore, this paper provides a brief review of the complex and diverse literature on public interest in planning theory and practice, highlighting the attempts by different scholars to define the concept of public interest and its evolution in planning theory and practice.

2.0: DEFINING THE PUBLIC INTEREST

What constitutes the public interest has always been contentious. Still, its value as a legitimising concept has recently been increasingly questioned (Maidment, 2015). It is a term that has often been used to mystify rather than clarify; it is frequently used to cast an aura of legitimacy over the final resolution of policy questions where there are still significant areas of disagreement (Campbell & Marshall, 2000). Yet, despite such difficulties, the pragmatic imperative for pursuing the public interest through planning lies in the value that it is more appealing to the social nature of humans to live together in settlements rather than in isolation (Maidment, 2015). The concept of public interest, definition, and interpretation have elicited diverse responses throughout different periods and places (Dadashpoor & Sheydayi, 2021).

Zi`zek (2002) argues that Planners distinguish themselves by using ambiguous concepts like the public interest, whose definition remains unclear to everybody yet is commonly used, creating a sense of shared ignorance that unites them. Various studies conducted in the last decades by Alexander (2002), Banfield (1959), Campbell and Marshall (2002), Held (1970), Howe (1992), and Sorauf (1956) have aimed to define the public interest. However, defining the public interest based on specific concepts or typologies may not fully encompass all dimensions and approaches of the public interest definition in planning theory and practice.

Howe’s (1994) study examines how professionals define public interest and how theory’s diversity, complexity, and contradictions influence their interpretation of the idea. Howe conducted detailed discussions with 96 planners from governmental agencies, revealing that although many claim to prioritise the public interest in their work, no one has come up with a universally accepted definition. Across all definitions, the primary objective was to benefit the public. However, it is expected to find varying perspectives on how individuals obtain beneficial or valuable knowledge (Howe 1994). Howe’s research indicates that professionals interpret the word “public interest” differently, likely influenced by their connections to various theoretical and contextual backgrounds. Howe’s study’s findings have generated some fundamental questions concerning the definition of public interest. Questions, such as: What is the essence of the public interest? Who determines it? How is it defined? What is its purpose? These questions have been explored and further expanded by Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021) in search of a universally acceptable definition of the concept of public interest (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fundamental Questions in Defining the Public Interest.

Fundamental Questions	Examples
What is the nature of the public interest?	Is the public interest a unitary or plural concept? Is the public interest a subjective or objective concept? Is the public interest a moral or consequentialist concept?
Who defines the public interest?	Do state or official Planners define public interest? Do the people define public interest? Do special interest groups define public interest? Do elites define public interest?
By what process is the public interest defined?	Does a democratic and neutral process define the public interest? Does a consensus-based process define public interest? Does a conflict management process define the public interest? Does a rational decision-making process define the public interest?
What is the use of public interest?	Is the public interest defined for use in public decision-making? Is the public interest defined for use in identifying the plan's goals? Is the public interest defined for delegitimising planning decisions? Is the public interest defined for organising the planning procedure? Is the public interest defined for use in evaluating the plan?

Source: Adopted from Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021).

A qualitative content analysis of research resources was carried out by Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021) to demonstrate how this framework might be utilised to develop a comprehensive definition of public interest. The results provided concise responses to four primary questions using the new classification system. Examining the qualitative content of research materials shows that the four primary definitions of public interest in planning literature can be categorised as follows.

1. Definitions derived from ethical principles in planning.
2. Definitions derived from normative planning principles.
3. Definitions derived from the planning process.
4. Definitions derived from political discourse that governs planning.

These categories represent variations in the methods used to define something. Upon examination, it is evident that each definition provides a clear and unique response to the inquiries posed by Howe's (2004) research. The definitions in the presented categories can be separated into explicit or implicit definitions. Explicit definitions openly discuss the essence and substance of the public interest. Implicit definitions focus on defining the process of acquiring an idea rather than its content (see Table 2).

Table 2: Definitions of Public Interest from Planning Literature

Definitions				
Main Category	Category	Explicit Definitions	Implicit Definitions	References
Definition based on planning ethics	Deontological		Public interest is Planners' primary commitment to society, formulated through continuous and open debate.	Howe & Kaufmann (1979). Howe (1992). American Planning Association (2009). Jamal & Bowie (1995). Loh & Arroyo (2017). McKay, Murray, & Hui (2011). McKay (2010); Pløger (2004). Rawls (1971); Stollman (1979).
	Teleological	Public interest is the greatest happiness of the most significant number.		Bentham (1973). Meyerson & Banfield (1955). Baron, Pettit, & Slote (1997). Altshuler (1965); Held (1970). Barry & Rees (1964). Mill ([1861] 1962);
Definition based on normative planning substance	Criterion for justification	Public interest is the main purpose of planning based on global and legal values of planning and equivalent to the increased well-being in the area under planning.		Altshuler (1965); Klosterman (1980). Gaupp (1969), Alexander (2002). Booth (2002); Downs (1962). Leys & Perry (1959).
	Pluralistic aggregation	Public interest aggregates multiple and contradictory values, which reflect broad social values.		Bentham (1973); Held (1970). Meyerson & Banfield (1955). Baron, Pettit, & Slote (1997); Barry & Rees (1964). Mill ([1861] 1962); Altshuler (1965)
Definition based on the planning procedure	Neutral		Public interest results from an open and democratic dialogue process without intervention.	Habermas (1984, 1987, 1996). Rawls (1971); Dryzek (1990). Grant (1994), Barth (1992). Sandercock & Bridgman (1999)
	Consensus-based procedure		Public interest is the consensus of the various interests achieved in a communication process.	Mattila (2016, 2018). Healey (1992,1997), Innes (1995). Innes & Sager (2012). Flyvbjerg (1998).
	Conflict management-based procedure	Public interest is the compromise, reconciliation, or balance of multiple interests resulting from communication.		Hossain & Hackenbroch (2018). Murphy & Fox-Rogers (2015). Pacione (1990); Hillier (2002). Mouffe (1995); Knight (1992). Connolly (2002)
Definition based on political discourse governing planning	Welfarist	Public interest is the unitary interest of the people, determined by the political and social elites.		Oppenheim (1975); Alexander (1992); Meyerson & Banfield (1955). Schubert (1960), Ocheje (2007); Tugwell (1940).
	Liberal democracy		Public interest is the liberal government's commitment to a process that pursues social progress by maximising individual choices.	Pacione (1990), Alexander (2004). Bentham (1973), Mill ([1861] 1962). Winkler (2011); Nozick (1974)
	Neoliberalism	Public interest is the balance of competing interests achieved through bargaining.		Murphy & Fox-Rogers (2015). Sandercock & Dovey (2002). Hossain & Hackenbroch (2018). Sager (2012). Davoudi, Galland, & Stead (2020).

Source: Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021).

Previous efforts to define the public interest have focused on experimentation, research, and examination rather than a definitive definition of the term (Steele, 2020). Dadashpoor and Sheydayi (2021) provide explicit and implicit definitions. Salet (2019) and Lennon (2017; 2019) discuss the ethical participation of procedures in validating the public interest. According to Lennon (2017), ethical guidelines are based on shared moral frameworks. Salet (2019) suggests they might be guided by public standards or normative content, reflecting various approaches to the public interest. Public norms consider the public interest to be the outcome of embracing ethical frameworks that establish what is right and wrong. The public interest has not always been referred to by its current designation, as stated in planning literature. The words commonly used in planning literature include the common good, legitimacy of planning, public good, and collective interest, which are sometimes used interchangeably with the term public interest (Dadashpoor & Sheydayi, 2021).

While these terminologies all express a common idea, the specifics of this idea and the methods of conveying it vary. The common good is typically seen as a collective and indivisible entity representing society's interests. It is more closely linked to communist principles about human welfare (Grant 2005). Public interest can be associated with a collection of "private interests", resulting in a distinctive perspective (Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015). Dagger (1997) highlights the difference in meaning between the terms "Good" and "Interest", suggesting that "Public good" and "Common good" focus on shared moral values, while "Public interest" includes individual and utilitarian considerations (Alexander, Mazza, & Moroni, 2012).

Despite variations in productivity, several references consider the public interest synonymous with the public good, denoting something accessible to society (Brown, Msoka, & Dankoco, 2015; Klaufus, 2018). Society incurs costs and reaps the benefits (Hendriks, 2009; Bradley, 2019; Olsson, 2008; van der Molen, 2015). However, items that are considered public goods cannot be sold, used up, or competed for. When the terms are used interchangeably, the focus is on common understandings of what "public interest" means, which is different from "public good", which refers to the distribution of competing commodities and the supply of public goods. The concept of "ownership" can distinguish between the common good and the public good, although both terms relate to communal understandings of the public interest. Local experts understand the common good to be a community-owned asset managed by local governments. Smid Hribar et al. (2018) note that once property ownership is transferred to a public agency, such as a municipality or a ministry, it is typically considered a public benefit.

3.0: EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC INTEREST IN PLANNING

There is a clear relationship between the development of the concept of public interest in political thought and its application in planning. This is due to the fact that planning, being a rational activity, seeks the public interest within particular political contexts (Yiftachel, 1998). Republics were the original incubators of the notion of public interest (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). It persisted over the Middle Ages and resurfaced during the Renaissance as a critical objective of popular uprisings (Nagy, 2015). In the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of public interest shifted towards representing the collective interests of individuals (Alexander, 2002). Public interest as a fundamental aspect of liberal political thinking was the prevailing paradigm until the late nineteenth century. It influenced early planning movements, including the social reform tradition and physical planning (Shibata, 2006). Planning during this period was based on the concept of the public interest, which was seen as a combination of individual preferences used to assess and justify planning practices (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022).

The results of industrialisation in the 1800s and 1900s, however, called for a system that could benefit society and serve the public interest (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2002). Sheydayi and Dadashpoor (2022) argue that positivist epistemology and instrumental rationality standardise urban development by logically determining property rights and land use in their pursuit of the public interest. With regulatory and legislative action, most of society's interests would be shielded from the market's and private owners' profit-driven biases (Booth, 2002; Nagy, 2015). By instituting welfare states in numerous nations in the early 1900s, governments prioritised the public interest above all else, which allowed them to legitimately and justifiably intervene in the public domain (Alexander, 1992; Sager, 2012; Tait, 2012). The idea that the common good is a component of reality's laws and can be defined objectively is central to contemporary planning (Milroy, 1991). At the height of comprehensive planning, this view of the public interest was assumed until the middle of the twentieth century (Altshuler, 1965; Alexander, 1992).

The concept of public interest in planning theory transformed from the 1950s to the 1970s due to the rise of pluralism, a political ideology that acknowledges variety within the policy body and permits the harmonious coexistence of diverse interests (Connolly, 2017). Planning theory also enabled systemic changes to decision-

making procedures, allowing many social groups' interests to surface (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). As a result of Habermas's (1984) theory of "communicative action" and the subsequent "communicative turn" in planning theory, the public interest was conceptualised in a whole new light during the 1970s and 1980s. Normative planning content does not represent the public interest in the communicative paradigm; instead, it is the equitable standing of participatory methods that do (Forester, 2012; Healey, 1997; Innes, 1996; Mattila, 2016). Then, in the 1980s, when neoliberalism was at its height, the free market and private property were favoured over more traditional ideas of the public interest, and the government's involvement in planning was reduced (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). According to Cheyne (2015), urban institutions, development processes, and the public interest in urban governance were influenced by the neoliberal movement's ascent. Under this model, the neoliberal state is heavily involved in directing the flow of funds and private sector actors through promoting economic liberty, private sector investment, entrepreneurship, and incentives (Sager, 2011). Therefore, the neoliberal strategy upholds the public interest, but it uses a different definition to strike a compromise between opposing interests (Hendriks, 2009; Lennon, 2017).

According to Lennon (2017), in these circumstances, the public interest is no longer a solid basis for justifying planning; instead, it becomes a malleable framework for pursuing competing conceptions of what is in the public interest. Since public interest can be defined according to different theoretical frameworks and schools of thought, it has evolved significantly over the years (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). Research by several authors (e.g., Alexander, 1992; 2000, 2002; Altschuler, 1965; Chettiparamb, 2018; Connell, 2010; Klosterman, 1980) suggests that it can be used as a standard for assessing the efficacy of citywide initiatives.

Some interpret it as a utilitarian idea representing the aggregate of personal preferences or the maximum possible happiness for most individuals (e.g., Held, 1970; Lindblom, 2003; Meyerson & Banfield, 1955). Some, however, consider it as more than just a matter of personal choice; they argue that Planners and politicians have a moral duty to seek justice (for examples, see Chettiparamb, 2015; Fainstein, 2001, 2010; Heywood, 1990; Howe, 1992). Xu and Lin (2019), Booth (1996), Cullingworth and Nadin (2003), and other theorists have argued that planning laws determine the public interest. The public interest, according to modern planning paradigms (e.g., Healey, 1997; Innes, 1996; Moroni, 2018; Mattila, 2016, 2019; Murphy & Fox-Rogers, 2015), is a consensus or compromise on the many interests that emerge from a dialogue.

4.0: PUBLIC INTEREST SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN PLANNING THEORY

Through "meta-theorising in the planning literature", Sheydayi and Dadashpoor (2022) identified five schools of public interest in planning thought (see Table 3). However, due to the emerging nature of the fifth school of thought, this paper will focus on and highlight the philosophical ideologies of four out of the five schools of thought. The four schools of thought in focus are the Utilitarian, Justice-oriented, Communicative, and Elitist schools of thought. Although these schools coexist in planning theory and practice, they differ significantly in their knowledge of the public interest (the norm), their identification of the key players and the power dynamics between them (the inclusion/exclusion theory), and, most importantly, their relationship to planning theory. Conceptualising the nature of public interest in schools of thought is based on the prevalent binaries of "objective-subjective", "individual-communal", and "unitary-plural" (Alexander, 2002; Campbell & Marshall, 2002; Howe, 1992).

4.1: The Utilitarian School of Thought

Utilitarianism, the dominant moral and political theory since World War II, provided the best theoretical framework for formulating contemporary planning principles (Allison, 1975; Goldstein, 1984; Hall, 1992). The "principle of utility" was Bentham's initial publication of utilitarianism in 1781 (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). By applying the standard of "good," this principle ensures that all actions are carried out for the benefit of the general population. Shortly after half a century, in 1828, the term "utilitarianism" was introduced as a derivative of utility; it gained traction in the writings of Mill (1861) and Bentham's adherents (e.g., Brandt, 1979; Sidgwick, 1874).

According to Sheydayi and Dadashpoor (2022), the utilitarian school of thought, which takes a consequentialist stance and separates moral interpretations, views the public interest as the maximum good for the most significant number of people. According to this philosophical tradition, "right" as an ethical concept comes after "good" as a teleological concern. To be sure, "good" is the yardstick by which we measure what is decent and moral. When determining whether an activity is "good" or "righteous", the utility of individual preferences is the sole relevant factor.

According to utilitarianism, the collective good is the sum of all individual interests, contingent upon how those interests are perceived to have been advanced by various actions. The “Principles of Morals and Legislation” (1789) by Jeremy Bentham establishes pleasure and suffering as the most basic moral components, serving as the yardstick by which individuals’ acts are judged. According to Mill (1861), there is no worth apart from rational humans. He considers personal utility the foundation of happiness and upholds individuality by holding everyone to the same standards of taste, ethics, and achievement.

According to Sheydayi and Dadashpoor (2022), the utilitarian school of thought uses the public interest as a collection of human preferences, as a yardstick to judge and justify planning policies. According to this school of thinking, public interest action should aim to maximise the profit for the most significant number of persons impacted by a plan. Without passing judgment on morality or values, Bentham and his followers view the common good as the aggregate of private interests (Klosterman, 1980).

According to this school of thinking, the accumulation or “preponderance” of private interests constitutes the public interest (Held, 1970). A community's interests are equal to those of its members, as a society is defined by its members and their preferences. To understand the common good, we must first understand individual interests. If something increases someone’s overall happiness or decreases their overall suffering, then it is beneficial to them according to the utilitarian principle. Consequently, everyone’s interest in this school adds to the public interest.

4.2: The Justice-oriented School of Thought

Since the inception of contemporary planning, public interest in planning has been linked to widespread public values like social justice and has followed a comparable rationale (Chettiparamb, 2015). Because of this historical adherence, the equity of a policy and its alignment with the public interest are inherently connected. The justice-oriented school follows a deontological perspective that prioritises what is considered “right” over what is considered “good”, believing that doing what is right will lead to good outcomes.

In the justice-oriented school, the public interest is achieved by Planners’ ethical dedication to a democratic process that ensures a fair and equitable allocation of resources and services among different groups, particularly disadvantaged ones. Public interest is a universal normative standard that represents the common interest of all individuals, as described by Flathman (1966) and supported by Alexander (2002), Campbell and Marshall (2002), and Howe (1992). The public interest in this school is a deontological idea that requires persons to adhere to regulations, orders, or policies even if they conflict with their interests (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). The deontological approach prioritises regulation as the most effective method to ensure uniform, universal, and unbiased choices while safeguarding human rights.

Unlike utilitarianism, which considers individual and collective preferences and values, a unitary conception of public interest is based on the requirements of communal morality rather than on specific private interests. One of the fundamental premises upon which this definition is based is that people may erroneously identify what is in their best interest. Primary inequality, including differences in status, resources, and personal qualities, obstructs the fair allocation of public interest across all groups and individuals. A governance structure must address inequities depending on communal morality (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022).

According to this school of thinking, the public interest is a unitary, communal, and objective matter arising from planners’ ethical dedication to a democratic process that distributes resources and services fairly and equitably across interest groups (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). With the involvement of formal organisations and parties and representatives from special interest groups and marginalised groups, this school of thought seeks to ensure that all groups impacted by the plan receive a fair share of opportunities, resources, and services.

4.3: The Communicative School of Thought

According to this school of thinking, public interest is not an inherent value but develops via democratic discourse. A “common good” can be more closely attained if the players set aside their biases and engage in open discussion, which is the foundation upon which the public interest is built (Innes and Booher, 2015). Since establishing suitable decision-making procedures is in the public interest, methods to foster a genuine conversation are paramount. Focusing on the public interest’s procedural rules in an intersubjective, pluralistic, and communal manner, the normative content is specified while the normative content is omitted (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022).

Habermas' (1984) precise definition of rationality in the communicative school is fundamental for the new approach to analysing the concept of public interest (Sheydayi and Dadashpoor, 2022). He aims to establish a more comprehensive and essential type of communicative rationality central to language and discourse, encompassing values and truths (Habermas, 1984). The idea of communicative rationality links to deliberative democracy and advocates for "authentic deliberation" as the most effective method for creating valid policies (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). Authentic deliberation is characterised by the absence of power distortion among decision-makers, as Bessette (1980) outlined. This concept serves as the foundation for Habermas' theory of "communicative action" and other related theories, such as those by Healey (1997), Innes (1996), and Forester (2012). Dryzek (2002) states that these theories demonstrate that a genuinely democratic process seeks to ascertain the common good.

All people, regardless of their location or size, have the right to take part in democratic decision-making processes, and this school of thought's planning methods share an emphasis on the procedural component of the public interest. Consequently, in a democratic society, the most important thing about planning is figuring out how to manage social cooperation to figure out who gets to use resources for what, which means accurately identifying the public interest that comes from social group agreements (Slaev, 2020; Zhu & Hu, 2009). In a communicative theory-influenced democratic society, property rights are meant to boost market performance and private property provision (Slaev, 2016). However, to manage the market and come to a consensus on how to use the resources and the benefits that come from it (Moroni, 2019; Zhu & Hu, 2009), as well as to control the externalities and make sure that the agreement serves the public interest, indirect planning intervention is still needed.

4.4: The Elitist School of Thought

The elitist school of thought holds that the political elite, rather than the whole public or individual members, should decide what is in the public interest (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). This school of thought maintains that the public interest is best served when policy decisions are based on evidence and logic. Therefore, society's elites' scientific and rational reasoning in public policy and legislation establishes the public interest as objective. Considering society is essential since private and public interests are not always compatible.

Public interest refers to conceptualising, articulating, and sometimes prescribing the communal good, ultimately leading to the long-term survival and well-being of social groups identified as "public" (Bozeman, 2007). This school aims to establish legitimacy and public approval for planning and to uphold a shared standard for official acts (Sheydayi & Dadashpoor, 2022). This school's conceptual roots can be linked to two distinct streams of political thought: elitist democracy from right-oriented ideology and socialist/communist doctrines from left-oriented ideology. Although these theories have ontological and epistemological distinctions, they both consider the public interest as an objective and unified issue that must be determined by the elites for the entire society.

Like other schools of thought, the elitist school can be critiqued in several ways. One major critique is that public interest may be used as a facade to validate and explain planning measures that serve the interests of powerful parties. Viewing the public interest as a meta-ethical premise for organising action, without considering the diversity and complexity of society, is deemed insufficient for planning and intervention. The response to this criticism redirects the focus of defining and striving for the public interest onto ethical and procedural methods.

Despite their distinctions, the presented schools can be equally scrutinised in multiple ways. Typically, they are provided in abstract form and lack a concrete connection to the political and social environment in which they are offered. They also believe that they possess inherent universal importance and applicability. The communicative school, particularly in recent literature, embraces pluralism, diversity, and contextualism in communication but relies heavily on a liberal democratic institutional political framework and cannot be universally applied to various political contexts. The introduced schools are established according to the functions of governments and official democratic planning entities. The achievement of public interest relies on the political and governmental institutions that establish it as the objective of action in the public domain and offer the tools and resources for its fulfilment.

As a result of establishing a formal framework based on ethical, legal, technological, or communicative principles to define the public interest, these schools fail to address informal interests, which do not conform to these frameworks. Because these schools developed within a democratic political and institutional framework in the global North, these countries apply them according to their political, economic, and social qualities. Therefore, their definition is unlikely to be generalisable, based on the public interest and how it is applied in

the individual circumstances, as well as the various planning systems and contexts in postcolonial states and the global South.

Table 3: Schools of Public Interest in Planning Thought

Schools	Utilitarian School	Justice School	Communicative School	Elitist School	Emerging school (Southern School)
Nature of the public interest.	Subjective; Plural; Individual.	Objective; Unitary; Communal.	Inter subjective, Plural, and Communal	Objective; Unitary; Communal.	Between two Poles: Objective, Unitary, Communal and Subjective; Plural and Individual.
Definition of the public interest.	The public interest as an aggregation of individual preferences is a criterion of the evaluation and legitimacy of planning.	The public interest is the result of the moral commitment of Planners to a democratic process for the equitable distribution of resources between pluralistic and special interest groups	The public interest is the result of the debate in an open and democratic process that manifests itself in the form of consensus or compromise	The public interest is the people's overall interest, determined by the elite.	Public interest is the result of a conflict between the formal and informal poles, which is defined differently in each case based on the context
Theorists	Bentham, 1970; Bergson, 1954; Mill, 1861; Meyerson & Banfield, 1955; Barry, 1964; Lindblom, 2003.	Chambers, 1996; Heywood, 1990; Nozick, 1974; Connolly, 2007; Rawls, 1971, 1999, Sen, 1980; Nussbaum, 1988,	Habermas, 1984; Rawls, 1971; Young, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Foucault, 1984; Rorty, 1982	Burke, 1774, Weber, 1922, Schubert, 1960; Mannheim, 1940, Simon, 1940.	Roy, 2005, 2009, 2015; Watson, 2009, 2014, 2016; Robinson, 2006; MirafTAB, 2009; Holston, 2009.
The purpose of the public interest.	Increase welfare (profit) The most significant number of people affected by the plan.	Fair distribution of opportunities, resources and interests.	Achieving equitable results through an equitable process of stakeholder participation.	Giving legitimacy and public acceptance to the planning.	Between legitimising state hegemony and an attempt to survive.
Shareholders	Everyone who is affected by the plan.	Representatives of special interest groups, representatives of the interests of marginalised groups, organisations and official parties.	All stakeholders.	Elites as Members of Parliament, Political elites, Legislators, and Planners.	Formal sector; Informal Sector.
Supporting philosophical thoughts.	Utilitarianism; Welfareism; Liberalism.	Pluralism; Deontological Approaches; Distributive Justice; Theory of Justice; Capabilities Approach; Social Justice.	Deliberative Democracy; Communicative Rationality; A Theory of Justice; Foucault Power Research; Structuration Theory; (Neo) Pragmatism.	Elite Democracy; communalism; virtual representation; Instrumental Rationality; Idealism; Systems theory.	Post structuralism; Post modernism; (Neo) Pragmatism; Agonistic pluralism; Foucault Power Research.
Planning theories	Social reform tradition in planning; Pragmatic/ Incremental planning.	Advocacy Planning, Equity Planning, Aid Planning; Just City.	Collaborative Planning; Communicative Planning.	Rational/ Comprehensive Planning; Political Analysis Tradition in Planning.	Radical Planning, Insurgent Planning, Agonistic Planning.
Method of analysis.	Pluralistic aggregation; Cost-benefit analysis; Planning Balance Sheet Analysis; Community Impact Evaluation.	Stakeholder analysis; Trend analysis.	Consensus building; conflict management	Rational Counselling; Political Consultation; Technical Analysis.	Conflict Management.
The critical scale of action.	The local scale.	Multilevel scale.	Multilevel scale.	Macro Scale.	The local scale.
Role of Planner	Scientific Manager.	Advocate.	Facilitator; Bargaining.	Policy Analyst; Technician.	The interface between conflicting rationalities.

Source: Adopted Sheydayi and Dadashpoor, (2022).

5.0: THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC INTEREST REPRESENTATIVES

Various viewpoints have emerged, questioning both the portrayal of the public interest and the capacity of planning as a profession to serve the public interest. Due to the concept's varied definitions, the responses to these questions are formulated based on various approximations and choices. One example is Burk's concept of virtual representation, where Members of Parliament represent the public interest because "the people would not know what is important to them" (Nagy, 2015). He views public interest as a unified concept that includes the nation's objective interests established by reasonable deliberation (Campbell & Marshall, 2002).

The paper also discussed the Madisonian idea of liberalism in the United States, characterised by a dialogical perspective that views public interest as diverse and subjective (Alexander, 2002). It reinforces the notion that individuals are most knowledgeable about their interests. The majoritarian liberalism of the 20th century portrayed the government as an active agent in enhancing citizens' quality of life rather than as mere arbitrators of the political system (Ingersoll & Matthews, 1991).

In a pluralist political system, several groups advocate for the public interest, addressing and reconciling conflicting diverse interests while effectively addressing public concerns (Nagy, 2015). The challenge in assessing whether interest groups undermine the public interest is defining the specific "public interest" related to a given issue. Until this is resolved, every organisation will assert to advance the public interest (Rasheed, 2020). The utilitarian tradition is a third example. The concept was established in the United Kingdom with a subjective perspective of interest, differing from the approach in the United States (Nagy, 2015).

Utilitarianism posits that individuals have the most comprehensive understanding of their interests, and the most effective method to evaluate the outcomes of acts is by considering the pleasure or pain felt by those persons (Campbell & Marshall, 2002). However, this does not preclude considering other ways, such as acknowledging that the government may exceed its mandate on human rights or international development. Nevertheless, the main issue is that some public representatives may take measures or enact laws acknowledging public interest, even if some interest groups disagree with them (Methot, 2003).

6.0: CONCLUSION

Public interest has been a fundamental criterion for justifying and legitimising planning actions since the beginning, and it is at the foundation of planning theory (Heywood, 1990). Public interest is a word that is frequently disputed and has grown ambiguous but unavoidable (Tait 2012, 2016). To evaluate the concept of public interest, one must start by defining it. The definitions of the concept of public interest are complex, diverse, and inconsistent in theoretical literature, often lacking a coherent definition. The subject does not align with numerous dimensions, making generalisation problematic.

Due to theoretical efforts to tackle this issue, no comprehensive framework for all aspects and methods in planning theory and practice has been produced. This paper sets out to fill that void by thoroughly evaluating several definitions of public interest found in planning literature. This review provides a comprehensive framework and approach for identifying the public interest in planning theory and practice. Additionally, this paper offers a good framework for professionals and theorists in the planning field to determine how their understanding of the public interest plays a part in planning. It gives a clear framework for conveying their definition of the public interest.

6.0: REFERENCES

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