





Governance and Spatial Planning for Sustainable Urban and Rural Development

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1. Introduction

In an era characterized by rapid globalization and urbanization, urban and rural areas worldwide are confronting unprecedented challenges. These include, but are not limited to, stark resource allocation disparities, escalating environmental degradation, profound social inequalities, and the reshaping of places by digital flows [1–7]. These interconnected issues have triggered significant, and often irreversible, social, economic, and ecological transformations, posing substantial threats to the global sustainable development agenda. Consequently, the implementation of robust, adaptive governance strategies and the advancement in sophisticated spatial planning techniques have become imperative for steering long-term, synergistic development across the urban–rural continuum [8,9]. Sustainability, therefore, has transitioned from a peripheral concern to a central, indispensable tenet of contemporary planning and governance paradigms [10].

This Special Issue was conceived precisely to address this critical juncture. It is dedicated to exploring innovative governance modes, evaluating novel spatial planning methodologies, and critically assessing their efficacy in fostering sustainable outcomes in diverse urban and rural contexts. By soliciting and compiling cutting-edge research, this collection aims to provide profound insights derived from case studies, theoretical advancements, methodological innovations, and empirical analyses. These contributions collectively highlight successful practices, dissect persistent challenges, and distill valuable lessons learned in the pursuit of sustainable development goals through the lenses of effective governance and spatial planning. The significance of this endeavor lies in its potential to inform policy, refine practice, and stimulate further scholarly inquiry into creating more resilient, equitable, and sustainable human settlements.

2. Thematic Areas and Internal Logic

This Special Issue of the journal *Land* is entitled “Governance and Spatial Planning for Sustainable Urban and Rural Development”. The Special Issue was structured around nine interconnected themes, carefully designed to comprehensively address the multifaceted nature of sustainable governance and spatial planning. The logical flow progresses from establishing the governance imperative (Themes 1–3), to integrating core sustainability concepts into spatial planning (Themes 4–6), and finally to exploring enabling tools (Theme 7) and validating



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concepts through multi-scale empirical evidence (Themes 8–9). This structure creates a coherent narrative from theory and challenge to mechanism, application, and empirical validation. The logical progression and rationale for these themes are outlined as follows.

- Theme 1: The impact of governance on sustainable urban and rural development strategies. This theme establishes the foundational role of governance frameworks in shaping development outcomes. It recognizes that the structure, processes, and quality of governance directly influence the formulation and implementation of sustainability strategies in both urban and rural settings, setting the stage for a deeper investigation into specific governance challenges and mechanisms [11].
- Theme 2: Challenges and paths for sustainable urban and rural governance. Building on the first theme, this section delves into the practical difficulties encountered in governance, such as power dynamics, institutional fragmentation, and capacity constraints [12]. It seeks to identify viable pathways and innovative solutions to overcome these obstacles, emphasizing the need for context-specific and adaptive governance models.
- Theme 3: Theoretical frameworks and governance mechanisms for sustainable development. This theme provides the theoretical underpinning mechanism for the Special Issue. It calls for contributions that advance conceptual models and elucidate the operational mechanisms—such as cooperative governance, policy instruments, and institutional arrangements—that underpin effective sustainable development practices, linking abstract theories to tangible governance actions [13].
- Theme 4: The integration of environmental sustainability into spatial planning processes. Here, the focus shifts explicitly to the spatial dimension, highlighting the critical need to embed environmental considerations—such as ecosystem services, biodiversity, and resource efficiency—directly into the heart of spatial planning methodologies. This represents a key operationalization of sustainability principles within planning practice [14].
- Theme 5: Climate change adaptation and resilience in spatial planning. This theme addresses one of the most urgent contemporary challenges. It emphasizes the necessity for spatial plans to proactively incorporate strategies for climate adaptation and enhancing resilience, ensuring that urban and rural landscapes can withstand and recover from environmental shocks and stresses [15].
- Theme 6: The intersection of spatial planning with environmental, social, and economic sustainability. This integrative theme reinforces the holistic nature of sustainability. It examines how spatial planning acts as a nexus, mediating the often-competing demands of environmental protection, social equity (e.g., accessibility, community cohesion), and economic vitality, striving for balanced and synergistic outcomes [16].
- Theme 7: The role of technology and big data in enhancing governance and spatial planning. Acknowledging the digital transformation, this theme explores the transformative potential of emerging technologies (e.g., Blockchain, AI, and big data analytics) in improving the efficiency, transparency, inclusivity, and evidence-based nature of both governance and spatial planning decisions [17].
- Theme 8: Multi-scale governance cases for sustainable development. This theme emphasizes the importance of scale and context. It solicits empirical case studies that examine governance interactions and outcomes across different scales (local, regional, national, and transnational), providing concrete evidence of what works, what does not, and why in diverse real-world scenarios [8,18].
- Theme 9: Case studies of sustainable spatial planning initiatives. Complementing the above Theme, this final theme focuses specifically on the spatial planning dimension through detailed case studies. It showcases practical applications, innovative designs, and evaluations of spatial planning projects, offering grounded lessons and best practices for achieving sustainability goals on the ground [19–21].

As shown in Figure 1, this Special Issue is structured around the overarching goal of sustainable urban and rural development, forming a systematic research framework synergistically underpinned by two foundational pillars. The “innovative governance” pillar concentrates on the deep integration of governance theories and localized practices, exploring contextually adapted governance model innovations, while simultaneously addressing integration pathways and scalar methods to resolve multi-level governance coordination challenges and scalar restructuring strategies. Concurrently, the “advanced planning” pillar emphasizes the cutting-edge leadership of technology and data-driven planning, promoting the deep application of novel technologies like big data and artificial intelligence in spatial decision-making, and underscores the scientific basis of spatial zoning and carrying capacities, highlighting the critical role of ecological security patterns and resource-environment constraints in territorial spatial development and conservation.

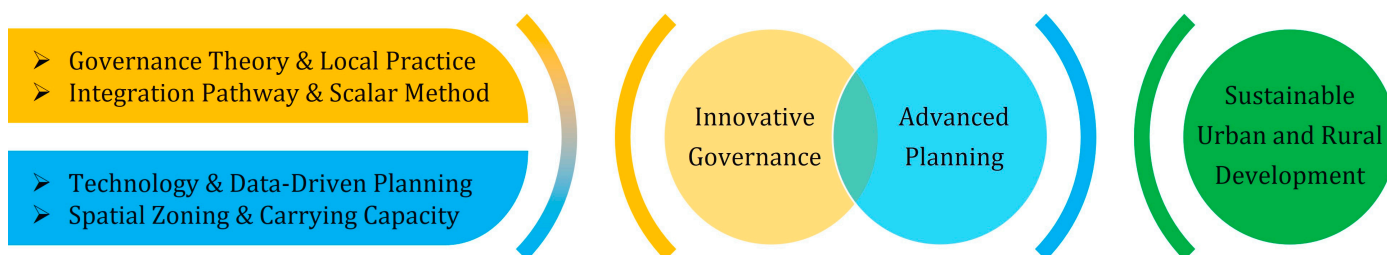


Figure 1. The relationship between governance, planning, and sustainable development (from an urban–rural perspective).

These two pillars and their four constituent research directions interpenetrate and mutually reinforce one another, collectively forming a comprehensive logical system spanning theoretical methodologies to technical applications, and macro-level frameworks to localized practices. This structure not only reflects the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary research frontiers but also provides a systematic and innovative organizational framework for the 18 articles included in this issue, profoundly elucidating the central proposition of advancing sustainable urban and rural development through synergistic governance innovation and planning technological advancement.

3. Summary and Perspectives

In conclusion, this Special Issue has successfully curated a diverse yet focused collection of research that significantly advances our understanding of the complex interplay between governance and spatial planning in achieving sustainability. The contributions, spanning multiple scales, geographical contexts, and methodological approaches, offer valuable theoretical refinements, practical tools, and policy insights. It is our hope that this collection will serve as a reference point and inspiration for continued scholarly dialogue and practical innovation in the critical field of sustainable urban and rural development. In this regard, we present snapshots of the articles published in the Special Issue and their key findings below.

How Does the Scalar Restructuring of Community Public Space Shape Community Co-Production? Evidence from the Community Centers in Shanghai by Yang et al. (List of Contributions, 1): Based on the politics of scale, this article finds that local governments actively reshape public spaces through scale reconstruction, thereby transforming power relations among participants and promoting community co-production.

How Does Social Mobilization Shape the Collective Coproduction of Urban Community Regeneration in China? by Wu et al. (List of Contributions, 2): It employs social mobilization theory to explore the key factors contributing to collective coproduction and develops a

theoretical framework that focuses on how the combination of top-down and bottom-up social mobilization shapes it.

Are Medium-Sized Cities in China Shrinking from 2010 to 2020? An Empirical Analysis with a Multi-Dimensional Model by Gao et al. (List of Contributions, 3): This paper adopts a multi-dimensional model, considering population, economy, and space dimensions to analyze shrinkage patterns in 164 Medium-Sized Cities in China from 2010 to 2020. The findings reveal that 6.1% experienced population shrinkage, and 24.4% faced shrinkage in economic or spatial dimensions.

Beyond Colonial Legacies: (Re)Conceptualising Rural Development Through the RDGI in South Africa by Sebola-Samanyanga (List of Contributions, 4): This study interrogates the intricate power dynamics between traditional leadership structures and imposed local government entities in rural development, planning, and governance processes to propose a cooperative governance framework within the South African context.

Revealing a Life-World Perspective for Urban Planning: Conceptual Reflections and Empirical Evidence from Peri-Urban Maputo (Mozambique) by Dürrnagel et al. (List of Contributions, 5): Drawing on Alfred Schütz's life-world approach, this paper brings the everyday reality of peri-urban dwellers into focus, offering a renewed planning agenda, revealing a realistic and inclusive approach grounded in the experience and social reality of the people living in the "ordinary city".

Research on Territorial Spatial Use Regulation, Land Element Allocation, and Regional Fiscal Transfer Payments: An Empirical Study of the Yangtze River Economic Belt by Zhao et al. (List of Contributions, 6): The study proposes to establish a comprehensive regional fiscal transfer compensation mechanism. When determining fiscal transfer amounts, the payment capacities of "windfall profit regions" and the incentive effects on "windfall loss regions" should be considered.

The People-Oriented Urban Planning Strategies in Digital Era—Inspiration from How Urban Amenities Shape the Distribution of Micro-Celebrities by He and Zhu (List of Contributions, 7): Taking micro-celebrities on Bilibili as an example, this paper studies the geographical distribution of digital creative talents and their relationship with urban amenities, and introduces the concept of borrowed amenities to examine the effects of amenities of surrounding cities.

The Green Blueprint: Designing Future Cities with Urban Green Infrastructure and Ecosystem Services in the UK by Butt and Rigoni (List of Contributions, 8): The study introduces the Green Blueprint to systematically embed ecosystem services into the planning, governance, and design of resilient and equitable cities in the UK. It also integrates cross-sectoral governance, multifunctional land use, and participatory planning into a coherent and scalable model for urban resilience.

Evaluating the Accessibility of Urban Public Open Spaces Based on an Improved 2SFCA Model: A Case Study Within Chengdu's Second Ring Road by Jian et al. (List of Contributions, 9): Its new model considers both the spatial attractiveness and residents' demand, significantly enhancing the accuracy of accessibility assessments. This study offers a more scientific method and framework for research on the spatial layout and supply–demand matching of Urban Public Open Spaces.

Bioenergy for Sustainable Rural Development: Elevating Government Governance with Environmental Policy in China by Li et al. (List of Contributions, 10): The results highlight the significance of bio-energy for rural development in the short and long run. Likewise, environmental policy stringency is also a vital factor in fostering short- and long-run rural development.

Spatial Distribution, Influencing Factors and Sustainable Development of Fishery Cultural Resources in the Yangtze River Basin by Li et al. (List of Contributions, 11): This study underscores the role of natural geographical conditions, aquatic biodiversity, socio-economic

factors, and historical–cultural backgrounds in the distribution and evolution of fishery cultural resources, with these factors interacting dynamically.

Practicality of Blockchain Technology for Land Registration: A Namibian Case Study by Paavo et al. (List of Contributions, 12): This study proposes a Blockchain Land Registration system as a tool for enhancing land administration in South Saharan Africa. It provides a comprehensive roadmap covering conceptualization, development, validation, and deployment within a rural–urban continuum context. It also explores practical and policy implications of blockchain in land administration within a rural–urban continuum context.

Assessing Uneven Regional Development Using Nighttime Light Satellite Data and Machine Learning Methods: Evidence from County-Level Improved HDI in China by Zhang et al. (List of Contributions, 13): This study uses a multi-dimensional approach to construct an improved Human Development Index, revealing that 50% of China’s county-level units have a development level of medium or above.

An Improved Framework of Major Function-Oriented Zoning Based on Carrying Capacity: A Case Study of the Yangtze River Delta Region by Zhang et al. (List of Contributions, 14): This paper proposes an enhanced methodological framework for major function-oriented zoning by fully integrating carrying capacity assessments, offering substantial support for territorial spatial planning in China.

Construction and Empirical Research of an Evaluation System for High-Quality Development of Small Towns in Guangxi Under the New Development Concept by Hu et al. (List of Contributions, 15): Guided by the new development concept of innovation, coordination, green, openness, and sharing, the study established a comprehensive evaluation system to assess the development levels of 70 small towns from 2005 to 2022.

The Spatio-Temporal Evolution and Sustainable Development Strategy of Huizhou’s Traditional Villages in the Xin’an River Basin by Wang et al. (List of Contributions, 16): The research selected 274 traditional Huizhou villages located in the upper basin of the Xin’an River. It examined how the four main factors—construction period, geography, ecology, and social and economic development—shape and influence each other.

Optimization of Rural Residential Areas in Flood Detention Basins Based on Dual Minimum Accumulation Resistance Model: A Case Study of Xun County in Central China by Cai et al. (List of Contributions, 17): This study established a new model that considered the dual factors of natural attributes and policy regulations to evaluate the optimization resistance of rural residential areas and determined the optimization directions and strategies accordingly.

Study on Spatial Distribution Dispersion Evaluation and Driving Forces of Rural Settlements in the Yellow River Basin by Li et al. (List of Contributions, 18): The authors focused on the discrete characteristics of rural settlements in the Yellow River Basin in 2020 at the county and city scales, providing valuable insights for policymakers and planners seeking to optimize rural settlement patterns and promote sustainable rural development.

The articles published in this Special Issue serve as a multidisciplinary resource for land studies classrooms and field studies. The Special Issue contains 18 highly regarded (peer-reviewed) articles. Together, they present 18 lessons learned from countries in the Global North, such as the UK and Germany, and from the Global South, such as China, South Africa, and Namibia. All scholars in the governance and planning fields are encouraged to read, use, and apply these lessons to their diverse roles in promoting sustainable urban and rural development.

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