

An analytical and problem-oriented study of the missions, position, and structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran toward aligning its sectoral interests with the public interest

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Abstract

The Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, as the highest authority for land-use policy and urban development regulation, plays a crucial role in shaping urban growth through determining land uses, construction boundaries, and density regulations. This study examines which components of the Council's missions, position, and institutional structure require reconsideration to enhance its effectiveness in promoting the public interest within the urban governance system. From a paradigmatic perspective, the research is situated within an interpretive–critical framework. Methodologically, it is a qualitative, problem-oriented, explanatory–analytical study. Its reasoning logic is based on deductive, inductive, and interrogative approaches. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts and stakeholders, together with document and policy analysis, and analyzed using thematic analysis through coding, categorization, and theme extraction. Purposeful sampling was employed, and theoretical saturation was achieved at the twelfth interview. The findings indicate that the gap between the Council's mandates and its accountability mechanisms, within an institutional structuralist framework, has contributed to conflicts of interest among members and participating institutions. Through positive feedback loops and path dependence, these conflicts have reinforced sectoral and fragmented decision-making patterns, weakening the alignment of decisions with the public interest and public rights. Consequently, inefficient urban development patterns have persisted and pressure on the land market has increased. The results highlight the need for institutional restructuring and stronger conflict-of-interest control mechanisms to break reinforcing feedback cycles, improve accountability, strengthen coherence, and support transparent, effective, and public interest-oriented urban governance in planning and policymaking processes.

Keywords: Conflict of Interest, Institutional Structure, Positive Feedback Loop, Public Interest, Public Rights, Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture.

1.Introduction

In the contemporary era, the increasing complexity of urban ecosystems, evolving development patterns, and the growing diversity of stakeholders have confronted spatial governance systems with challenges in policymaking, institutional coordination, and resource allocation. Under such circumstances, spatial development is not merely the outcome of implementing physical plans or technical decisions; rather, it results from the interaction—and at times the conflict—among institutions, each pursuing its own sector-specific missions and interests. Accordingly, one of the key issues in the literature on urban planning and governance is the alignment of sectoral interests with the public interest and the design of institutional mechanisms to prevent organizational interests from prevailing over the broader objectives of development. In the urban governance and planning literature, policymaking and regulatory institutions define their ultimate mission as ensuring and safeguarding the public interest (Campbell & Fainstein, 2012). The public interest is a concept that extends beyond the simple aggregation of individual or organizational interests and, as the basis for the legitimacy of planning and policy interventions, seeks to enhance quality of life, achieve spatial justice, ensure equitable access to opportunities and resources for citizens, protect environmental resources, and promote collective well-being (Alexander, 2002). Its realization is regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the urban governance system.

In the contemporary era, the increasing complexity of urban ecosystems, changing patterns of development, and the diversity of stakeholders have confronted spatial governance systems with challenges in policymaking, institutional coordination, and resource allocation. Under such circumstances, spatial development is not merely the result of implementing physical plans or technical decisions; rather, it is the outcome of interactions, and at times conflicts, among institutions, each pursuing its own sector-specific missions and interests. Accordingly, one of the key issues in the urban planning and governance literature is the alignment of sectoral interests with the public interest and the design of institutional mechanisms to prevent organizational interests from prevailing over broader development objectives. In the urban governance and planning literature, policymaking and regulatory institutions define their ultimate mission as ensuring and safeguarding the "Public Interest" (Campbell & Fainstein, 2012). The public interest is a concept that extends beyond the simple aggregation of individual or organizational interests and, as the basis for the legitimacy of planning and policy interventions, is recognized as promoting quality of life, achieving spatial justice, ensuring equitable access to opportunities and resources for citizens, protecting environmental resources, and securing collective well-being (Alexander, 2002). Its realization is regarded as a fundamental prerequisite for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the urban governance system.

Furthermore, in the public law literature, Public Rights are understood as the normative core of the concept of the "Public Interest" and refer to the set of fundamental and collective rights of citizens to equitable access to urban assets, resources, services, and opportunities, which constitute the basis for the legitimacy of public decisions and interventions (Dworkin, 1986; Healey, 1997). Within the framework of urban governance, public rights serve as a criterion for assessing the

extent to which policies conform to or deviate from the public interest and play a significant role in evaluating the performance of policymaking and regulatory institutions. From this perspective, when institutional mechanisms fail to align sectoral interests with the requirements of public rights, organizational logic gradually prevails over public logic, thereby undermining the effectiveness and legitimacy of spatial governance (Fainstein, 2010; Moroni, 2020). Achieving such alignment requires institutions that, in addition to fostering coordination among multiple organizations, are capable of regulating and directing sectoral interests toward broader development objectives and the common good. This also demands institutional arrangements that encourage collaboration, accountability, and long-term policy coherence across different levels of governance. Otherwise, institutional conflicts of interest persist structurally, posing serious challenges to the effectiveness of public policies and the quality of spatial governance (Moroni, 2020).

From the perspective of institutional analysis, the performance of policymaking institutions is not determined solely by their statutory responsibilities but also depends on their institutional design, decision-making rules, the composition of actors, and the relationships among member organizations (North, 1990). Each organization participating in an intersectoral institution, in addition to contributing to public policymaking, is also responsible for advancing the objectives and interests of its parent organization, thereby creating the potential for conflicts between sectoral interests and the public interest (Ostrom, 2005). Under such circumstances, if institutional mechanisms fail to align the objectives of member organizations, decisions are more likely to be influenced by organizational bargaining and sectoral priorities than by the public interest (March & Olsen, 2016). Accordingly, contemporary governance literature emphasizes that the effectiveness of high-level policymaking institutions depends on policy integration, interorganizational coordination, and effective conflict-of-interest management. These conditions help prevent sectoral dominance, enabling coherent, accountable, and public interest-oriented decision-making (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016; Jordan & Lenschow, 2010).

Within Iran's urban planning system, the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture is the principal institution responsible for policymaking, approval, and oversight in the fields of urban planning and architecture. Although its origins date back to the establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning in 1966, its legal status as the highest decision-making authority in this field was formally established through the enactment of the Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran in 1972 (Publications of the Office of Her Majesty the Shahbanu, 1975; Law on the Establishment of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, 1972). According to Article (2) of this Law, the Council's principal responsibilities include formulating national urban planning policies, approving urban development plans, establishing urban planning and architectural regulations and standards, and overseeing the country's spatial development. Therefore, the Supreme Council is not merely an authority for approving urban development plans but an intersectoral institution mandated to facilitate coordination among the various organizations influencing spatial development in order to promote the public interest within the policymaking and urban planning process.

Despite the Supreme Council's legal status, the profound social, economic, and environmental transformations of recent decades—including rapid urbanization, the expansion of informal settlements, increasing spatial inequalities, the housing crisis, climate change, and the growing complexity of institutional relationships—indicate that institutional frameworks and planning instruments developed during the 1970s are no longer sufficient to address the requirements of contemporary urban governance, particularly as they struggle to respond effectively to emerging multi-scalar challenges and increasingly interconnected policy domains (Khakzad, 2013). Within this context, the Council's intersectoral nature has also exposed it to interactions and, at times, conflicts among the interests of its member organizations, particularly where overlapping mandates and competing sectoral priorities shape decision-making dynamics. While the participation of senior representatives from executive agencies provides an important capacity for policy coordination, the absence of effective mechanisms for aligning institutional interests increases the likelihood that sectoral interests will prevail over broader territorial considerations and the public interest (Masoumi, 2019).

In this regard, the composition of the Council, consisting predominantly of representatives of executive organizations, may reinforce sectoral and organizational approaches to decision-making while weakening broader territorial considerations, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflicts of interest and reducing the effectiveness of decisions, especially in cross-sectoral planning contexts (Hashemi Toghraljerdy, 2017; Iranian Parliament Research Center, 2011). From this perspective, the effectiveness of the Supreme Council depends not only on its statutory responsibilities but also on the degree of consistency among its missions, institutional position, organizational structure, and the quality of its decision-making processes in managing conflicts of interest. Together with centralized decision-making, weak enforcement of Council resolutions, and overlapping responsibilities with parallel institutions, these challenges have limited the Supreme Council's ability to fulfill its strategic role despite its prominent legal status (Iranian Parliament Research Center, 2013; Masoumi, 2019).

Research evidence indicates that the performance of the Supreme Council is confronted with numerous structural, legal, and procedural challenges. A focus on case-by-case interventions rather than strategic policymaking, weaknesses in oversight mechanisms, ambiguity regarding the scope of authority, overlapping responsibilities with parallel institutions, weak enforcement of Council resolutions, and centralized decision-making are among the most significant challenges identified in previous studies (Rostami, 2023; Hosseinpouri et al., 2023; Heydari, 2023; Mohsenian, 2022). Moreover, several studies have shown that, in some cases, the Council's decisions on issues such as high-rise development have been made without sufficient consideration of their social, cultural, and environmental consequences, while concerns related to spatial justice, the right to the city, and the public interest have not been adequately reflected in the decision-making process (Soltani, 2010; Rashidi et al., 2023; Khorsand et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the principal issue extends beyond the Council's operational deficiencies to the relationship among its missions, institutional position, organizational structure, and decision-making mechanisms in aligning sectoral interests with the public interest.

Despite the significance of this issue, a review of the literature reveals that existing studies have primarily focused on critiquing specific Council resolutions, examining legal issues, analyzing physical and spatial dimensions, or identifying deficiencies in implementation processes. Although these studies have each explained part of the reality of the Council's performance, no comprehensive and integrated study has yet examined, within a unified analytical framework, the relationship among the Council's institutional composition, its decision-making mechanisms, conflicts of interest among member organizations, and the extent to which the public interest is achieved. In other words, it remains unclear which institutional characteristics of the Council's missions, position, and structure shape the alignment or divergence of member organizations' sectoral interests with the public interest, and how these characteristics influence the Council's strategic role in the country's spatial governance system.

The central issue of this study is to examine the missions, institutional position, and organizational structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture from the perspective of their capacity to align sectoral interests with the public interest. The study aims to analyze and diagnose these dimensions and to provide a framework for institutional reconsideration in order to strengthen the alignment between organizational interests and the public interest. Accordingly, the main research question is: "Which components of the missions, position, and structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran require reconsideration to enable this institution to play a more effective role in promoting the public interest within the urban governance system?" Drawing upon institutional analysis and governance approaches, and simultaneously employing the concepts of the public interest (public rights), conflicts of interest, interorganizational coordination, and policy integration, while emphasizing that the performance of intersectoral institutions is primarily shaped by institutional design, decision-making rules, and the composition of actors, this study seeks to provide an analytical framework for redefining and enhancing the Council's missions, position, and structure in order to strengthen the alignment of sectoral interests with the public interest within the urban governance system.

2.Theoretical and Empirical Background

2.1.Theoretical Background

In the governance and complex systems literature, the relationship among institutional interests, collective interests, and public rights is primarily analyzed through feedback mechanisms. In this context, a positive feedback loop in general systems theory and cybernetics is defined as a mechanism in which the outputs of a system, rather than correcting or moderating its initial behavior, reinforce and reproduce the same behavioral patterns (Sterman, 2000; Meadows, 2008). Under such conditions, initial changes are not only left unchecked but are cumulatively amplified, leading to the consolidation of particular institutional trajectories. In contrast, negative feedback loops operate through corrective mechanisms, moderating system behavior and enabling a return to equilibrium while preventing the accumulation of institutional deviations. Overall, the fundamental distinction between these two types of feedback loops lies in their implications for institutional stability and policy adaptability in the face of path-dependent lock-in processes (Howlett & Rayner, 2013; Van der Heijden, 2022).

At the level of public policymaking, this logic is complemented by the concept of path dependence. According to the historical institutionalist perspective, institutions and policies are not merely outcomes of past decisions; they also become producers of enduring structures of interests, power, and institutional incentives (North, 1990; Pierson, 2000). Within this framework, each institutional decision may generate a set of stakeholders who perceive the continuation of the status quo as serving their interests and consequently resist structural reforms. Thus, the interaction between feedback mechanisms and path dependence gradually reproduces established policy patterns and increases the costs of institutional reform, making reforms not only technically challenging but also politically and institutionally more costly and less likely to occur, particularly where entrenched interests and institutional inertia reinforce existing governance structures over time (Howlett & Rayner, 2013).

Building on this perspective, the literature on governance and institutional change demonstrates that reinforcing mechanisms may, over time, stabilize inefficient policy patterns and cause decision-making systems to diverge from their original objectives, such that correcting these patterns requires profound and costly institutional interventions (Meadows, 2008; Van der Heijden, 2022). This issue is particularly significant in the context of urban governance because decisions related to land, housing, and urban planning are long-term, cumulative, and often irreversible in nature. Under such circumstances, physical and spatial policies gradually create networks of economic, institutional, and political interests that not only reinforce previous decisions but also constrain opportunities for structural reform. Consequently, positive feedback loops may give rise to both vicious cycles characterized by the concentration of power, inefficiency, and conflicts of interest and, where institutional design is appropriate, virtuous cycles founded on transparency, accountability, and institutional learning.

At the institutional level of analysis, these mechanisms are directly linked to the formation of organizational interests and conflicts of interest. According to historical institutionalism, institutions are not only constraints on actors' behavior but also producers of incentive structures and distributors of interests (North, 1990). From this perspective, any institutional decision may lead to the formation or reinforcement of groups of stakeholders who perceive the continuation of the status quo as serving their own interests. In this framework, Pierson (2000) demonstrates that path dependence is the result of the accumulation of past institutional decisions that stabilize current structures of power and interests while limiting the capacity for future reforms.

Building on this analysis, in governance literature, conflict of interest is defined as a situation in which an institution or actor is simultaneously placed in a decision-making position and a beneficiary position, thereby increasing the likelihood of deviation from the public interest (OECD, 2017). Under such conditions, the logic of decision-making may gradually shift away from the public interest toward the reproduction of sectoral and organizational interests. This issue is also connected to the concept of public rights in public law literature, where public rights are defined as a set of collective rights of citizens against specific institutional or group interests and serve as a basis for evaluating the legitimacy of public decisions, particularly in ensuring that administrative authority remains accountable to broader societal welfare.

In the field of multilevel governance, Ostrom (2005) emphasizes the necessity of coordination among multiple actors for achieving collective interests; however, the absence of binding coordination mechanisms may lead to fragmented decision-making, increased institutional bargaining, and intensified conflicts of interest. In interaction with feedback mechanisms, this situation facilitates the gradual stabilization of inefficient policy patterns, making their correction increasingly complex and costly over time.

Integrating these concepts, positive feedback loops operate as reinforcing mechanisms in which institutional structures, organizational interests, and policy outcomes mutually strengthen one another. The result of this process is a gradual widening gap between sectoral interests and the public interest, and in some cases, the weakening of public rights in urban decision-making processes. From this perspective, institutional analysis provides an explanatory framework for understanding how decision-making structures can systematically generate conflicts of interest and how such conflicts are reinforced and reproduced over time through feedback mechanisms.

2.2. Empirical Background

A review of the empirical literature suggests that the performance of Iran's Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture depends on its institutional position and legal mandate. Although it is the highest authority for urban planning policy, plan approval, and oversight, research highlights a gap between its formal responsibilities and actual performance, which is partly explained by path dependence and stabilized decision-making patterns.

In the field of spatial policy, research indicates that some Council resolutions, particularly those related to high-rise development and large-scale land-use changes, have been associated with significant social and environmental consequences. For example, decisions related to increased building density in metropolitan areas and zoning changes within Article 5 Commission approvals have been criticized for intensifying pressure on urban infrastructure, reducing urban livability, and weakening spatial justice; an issue also emphasized by Khorsand et al. (2024). From the theoretical perspective of this study, such decisions can be interpreted as reinforcing positive feedback loops in spatial decision-making, since their physical and economic consequences contribute to the reproduction of the same institutional interests and pressures in subsequent periods. In terms of urban rights, Rashidi et al. (2023) show that some resolutions, due to weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, conflict with the concept of the "right to the city" and reduce citizens' equitable access to urban resources and spaces; an issue that can be interpreted as a gradual weakening of public rights.

At the legal and institutional level, several studies highlight challenges arising from Article 5 Commission decisions and certain Council resolutions, some of which have been annulled by the Administrative Court of Justice. Reported cases include ad hoc land-use changes, issuance of permits inconsistent with approved master plans, and decisions outside the framework of higher-level planning regulations, all of which have weakened the coherence of the urban planning system (Hosseinpouri et al., 2023; Heydari, 2023). These cases can be interpreted through path dependence, as earlier land-use and density decisions have shaped later constraints and opportunities, creating institutional lock-in in intervention patterns.

From a structural perspective, Motahhar et al. (2026) argue that despite its central role in national spatial policymaking, the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran has drifted away from its strategic position due to structural, institutional, and governance challenges, including conflicts of interest, centralization, and weak enforcement mechanisms, and therefore requires structural reforms to enhance its effectiveness in urban governance. Masoumi (2019) identifies centralization in decision-making processes and weak participation of local institutions as key factors in the Council's inefficiency. Similarly, Rostami (2023) emphasizes the dominance of case-based decisions over strategic policymaking, a condition that, within the framework of this study, can be interpreted as reinforcing positive feedback cycles and reproducing short-term decision patterns. Mohsenian (2022) further highlights weaknesses in expert review processes and the marginalization of specialized institutions as factors reducing decision quality and strengthening sectoral logic over the public interest. These findings indicate that the urban decision-making cycle at the institutional level is characterized by a disconnection between expert knowledge, policymaking, and implementation.

In the field of urban design and spatial identity, Rusta and Ghasempour (2018) point to the limited consideration of urban design principles in Council resolutions. Soltani (2010) also identifies weak attention to socio-cultural dimensions in urban regulations as a factor reducing urban environmental quality. In addition, Hashemi Toghraljerdy (2016, 2017) shows that some resolutions face legitimacy challenges from a jurisprudential and justice-based perspective, particularly where the principle of "no harm" or spatial justice is undermined in urban decisions. From the conceptual framework of this study, these cases can be interpreted as indicators of a gradual distancing of institutional decisions from public rights and the intensification of uneven redistributive outcomes in the urban system.

At the monitoring and evaluation level, Kolabadi and Afsharnia (2016), through an examination of annulled decisions, identify weak compliance with higher-level legal frameworks as a major factor leading to intervention by the Administrative Court of Justice. Furthermore, reports by the Iranian Parliament Research Center (2011, 2013) emphasize the need for structural reform of the Council, reduction of overlapping responsibilities, and increased transparency in decision-making. This body of evidence suggests that the main issue in Iran's urban decision-making system is not merely the volume of resolutions, but rather weaknesses in accountability mechanisms, oversight, and institutional coherence, which within this study can be understood through the interaction between path dependence and positive feedback loops.

Overall, the empirical literature suggests that the problems of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran are not merely due to isolated inefficiencies, but result from the interaction of centralization, weak participation, and deficiencies in expert processes. Some decisions in land-use change, density regulation, and high-rise development have also produced legal and social consequences and, in some cases, conflicted with the public interest and public rights. However, most studies remain case-based and pay limited attention to the link between institutional structure, decision-making logic, and cumulative policy outcomes, which constitutes the main research gap of this study.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study integrates institutional structuralism, complex systems theory and feedback mechanisms, and the public interest and public rights perspective. It aims to explain how institutional structures, organizational interests, and decision-making processes shape and reproduce outcomes affecting the public interest and public rights. The framework assumes that institutional structure is not only a context for decision-making but also shapes organizational interests and behavioral patterns, influencing policy direction and quality, and through interaction with feedback mechanisms and path dependence can lead to either alignment or divergence from the public interest and public rights.

In the first step, institutional structure is considered the main independent variable. It includes components such as the degree of centralization or decentralization in decision-making, member selection and composition, transparency, accountability, and the strength of oversight mechanisms. These elements shape the distribution of decision-making power and the dominant logics of policymaking, while also providing the context for the formation of organizational or sectoral interests. Sectoral interests are defined as relatively stable institutional behaviors aimed at maintaining or increasing authority, resources, and policy influence.

In the second step, organizational interests are manifested in the policymaking process and influence the direction and content of decisions. In this framework, decision-making is not merely a technical or administrative process, but the outcome of interactions among institutional structure, power distribution, and internalized interests. The output of this interaction is reflected in resolutions, spatial policies, land-use changes, decisions related to building density, and other urban planning interventions. Accordingly, the quality and orientation of these decisions may either strengthen the public interest and public rights or, conversely, through the dominance of organizational and sectoral interests, lead to a gradual divergence from the public interest.

In the third step, the mechanism of positive feedback loops is incorporated into the model. A positive feedback loop occurs when the outcomes of decisions (for example, increased institutional resources, expanded authority, or strengthened influence of an institution) reinforce the same initial decision-making logic. In other words, system outputs are fed back into the system as inputs, thereby reinforcing it. This cycle operates iteratively and leads to the gradual stabilization of decision-making patterns. In contrast, negative feedback loops play a corrective role and mitigate deviations. In this study, the repetition of similar decision-making patterns over time (for example, continuity of specific land-use changes or density increases) is considered an empirical indicator of positive feedback loops.

In the fourth step, path dependence is introduced as a contextual and reinforcing variable in the analysis. In this study, path dependence refers to the degree of lock-in in decision-making within past patterns and the reduced capacity to change established institutional trajectories. This concept is operationally identified through the persistence of similar decision-making routines, repetition of specific policy patterns, and the difficulty of revising previous decisions. Path dependence strengthens the effects of positive feedback loops over time and increases the costs of institutional change.

Next, the concept of conflict of interest is defined as a mediating outcome variable in the model. A conflict of interest occurs when an institution or actor is simultaneously placed in both a decision-making position and a beneficiary position. Under such conditions, the likelihood of deviation from the public interest/public rights increases. In this study, the public interest and public rights are considered as a unified concept that includes spatial justice, equal access to urban resources, transparency, accountability, urban environmental quality, and compliance with higher-level planning documents. At the same time, institutional arrangements and governance structures are assumed to shape the intensity and direction of such conflicts, as they can either mitigate or reinforce conditions that allow conflicting roles and incentives to emerge.

Finally, policy alignment is considered the main dependent variable of the study, representing the extent to which decision-making processes and outcomes in the urban governance system align with the requirements of the public interest and public rights. It is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct measured through indicators such as spatial justice, transparency and accountability, control of conflicts of interest, and compliance with higher-level documents, urban development plans, and legal requirements. As these indicators deviate from the desired condition, alignment between organizational interests and the public interest weakens, leading to a decline in the protection of public interest and public rights. The theoretical framework is summarized in Figure 1 and forms the basis for analyzing the Council's mission, position, and structure and their relationship with policy alignment, defined as a causal-explanatory chain:

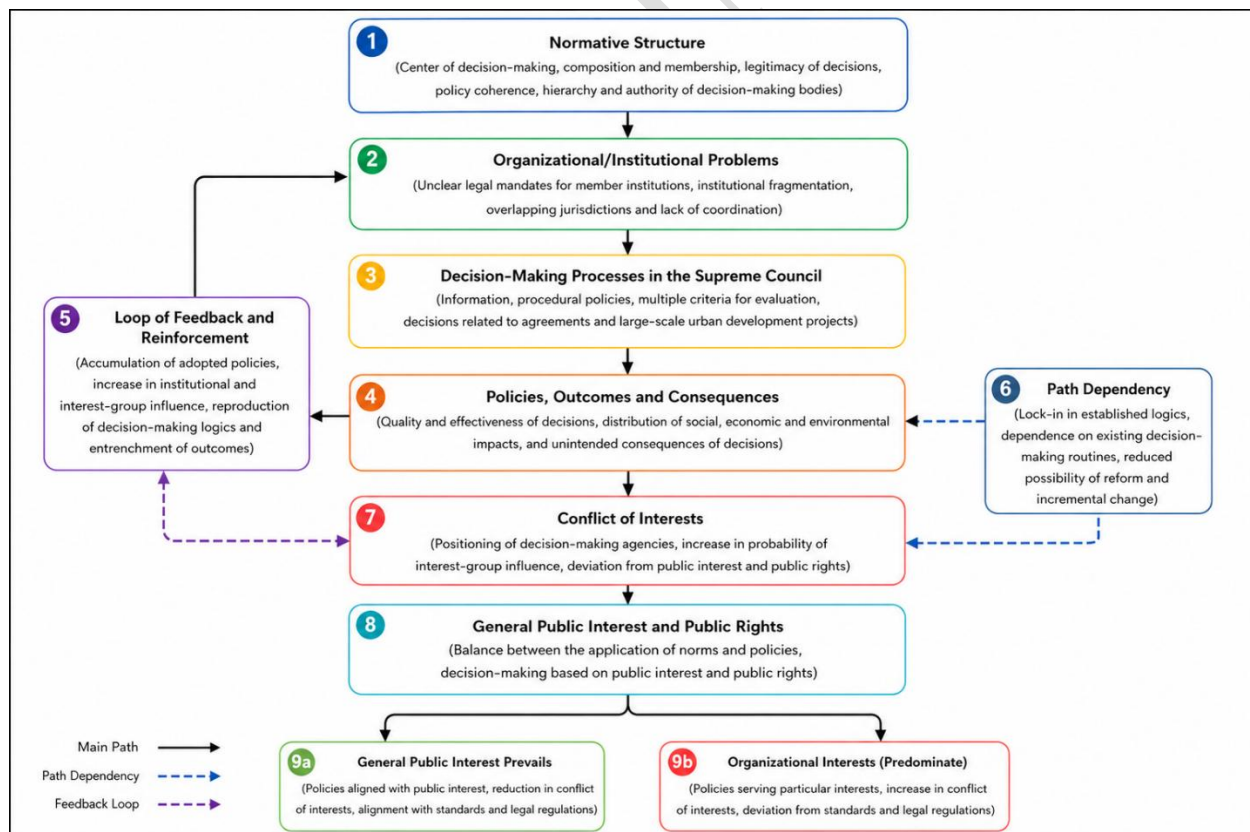


Figure 1 – Conceptual Model: Feedback mechanisms in the governance of the Supreme Council and the relationship between institutional structure, organizational interests, and the public interest and public rights.

3. Methodology

In this research, Saunders' "research onion model" is used as the methodological framework, which, through its layered structure, enables a systematic and transparent design of the research process. From a paradigmatic perspective, the study is situated within an interpretivist–critical framework. In this approach, social and institutional realities are not regarded as objective and static phenomena, but rather as constructions emerging from the interaction between actors, institutional structures, and power relations. Accordingly, a deep understanding of decision-making mechanisms, the identification of hidden institutional logics, and the critique of their consequences for the public interest and urban governance are required. In terms of nature and type, the study is classified as applied research, as its aim is to provide an analysis that can be used to reform policy processes and improve the institutional performance of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran.

In terms of reasoning logic, the research is based on a combination of inductive, deductive, and interrogative approaches. In inductive logic, data obtained from interviews and documents are used to extract patterns, concepts, and themes. In deductive logic, theoretical concepts and frameworks related to urban governance, institutional feedback, and the public interest are employed to explain and interpret the findings. In addition, interrogative logic, through critical questions about the formation of decision-making patterns and their institutional consequences, helps deepen the analysis and uncover hidden layers of the problem. Overall, this combination enables a link between empirical extraction, theoretical explanation, and critical analysis in the research process. This integrated approach enhances the robustness and depth of the overall analytical process.

This study is methodologically classified as qualitative research, as its focus is on understanding the meaning, experience, and interpretation of institutional actors rather than the quantitative measurement of variables. In this framework, data collection is conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews as well as document analysis of relevant materials, including resolutions, expert reports, and laws and regulations of the Supreme Council. Interviews are conducted with experts, former and current members of the Council, specialists in urban law, planners, and researchers in urban governance in order to extract their lived experience and expert perceptions of decision-making processes and analyze them alongside documentary data.

Sampling in this study is conducted purposively and judgmentally, and participant selection continues until theoretical saturation is reached; such that by the twelfth interview, no new concepts or codes were added to the dataset and saturation was achieved. The criteria for selecting interviewees include direct experience in urban policy-making, institutional familiarity with the mechanisms of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture, and relevant academic and professional expertise, in order to ensure coverage of diverse perspectives and dimensions of the research problem. Despite the potential influence of differences in expert experience on perceptions, selecting individuals familiar with the Council's mechanisms reduces this limitation and strengthens the credibility of the findings. This approach also enhances the reliability and validity of the qualitative findings by ensuring methodological rigor in participant selection. This contributes to improving the overall trustworthiness of the research design.

Table 1 – List of educational qualifications and organizational positions of interviewees in the present study

ID	Organizational position	Education
D1	Former Secretary of the Supreme Council and faculty member at the University of Hamedan	PhD in Urban Planning
D2	Former Deputy of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and current advisor to three committees of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture	Master's degree in Architecture
D3	Former representative of the Ministry of Energy in the Supreme Council	Master's degree in Urban Restoration
D4	Urban planning expert and unofficial member of the Supreme Council	PhD in Urban Planning
D5	Active urban studies researcher	PhD in Architecture
D6	Head of the Islamic Architecture Center of the Art Bureau	Master's degree in Architecture
D7	Secretary of the Urban Planning and Architecture Commission of Tehran City Council	PhD in Architecture
D8	Former representative of the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad in the technical committee of the Supreme Council and former deputy of the National Land Organization	PhD in Urban Planning
D9	Former mayor of Kerman and former member of the Islamic City Council of Mashhad	PhD in Telecommunications and Master's degree in Urban Management
D10	Governance researcher	Master's degree in Policy-Making
D11	Faculty member at Iran University of Science and Technology	PhD in Urban Planning
D12	Faculty member at the University of Tehran	PhD in Architecture

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving initial coding, categorization of concepts, identification of sub-themes, and ultimately extraction of main themes. The analysis in this study was conducted using a combined inductive–deductive approach; meaning that part of the themes was directly derived from field data, while others were interpreted and deepened in light of theoretical frameworks related to urban governance and institutional feedback mechanisms. In terms of purpose, the study is problem-oriented and explanatory–analytical; it first identifies and formulates the problem within the Supreme Council's decision-making structure and then seeks to analyze and explain its institutional logics and consequences. Finally, the combination of interview and documentary data provides a multi-layered picture of the Council's performance and enables the formulation of reform-oriented recommendations.

4. Findings

Findings from the interviews indicate that the decision-making process in the Supreme Council is influenced by diverse interests and motivations, which in some cases are misaligned with public goals, public rights, and urban interests. A detailed examination of interviews with D1, D2, and D3 shows that each member of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran, in line with their institutional position and professional background, follows different priorities in reviewing and approving resolutions, which directly shape how cases are evaluated. Some members emphasize economic development, attracting investment, and facilitating large-scale projects, while others prioritize urban identity and environmental, cultural, and social considerations. Although this diversity can strengthen decision-making from a multidimensional standpoint, in practice it sometimes leads to institutional conflict and delays in approval processes, as reaching consensus becomes complex when different decision-making logics are in conflict.

This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework of the study, as it shows that the institutional structure of the Council, through its membership composition and diversity of organizational roles, provides the basis for the formation of different organizational and sectoral interests, which then interact or conflict during policy decision-making. From an institutional perspective, this situation supports North (1990), who does not view institutions merely as constraints on behavior but as producers of incentive structures and organizational interests. It is also consistent with Ostrom (2005) regarding the difficulty of coordination among multiple actors in multi-level governance systems, as it shows that a lack of alignment among organizational interests challenges the achievement of decisions consistent with the public interest and public rights. From the perspective of the conceptual model of this research, this stage represents the starting point of a chain that, if similar decision-making patterns are repeated, can lead through the activation of positive feedback loops and the formation of path dependence to the institutionalization of conflict between organizational and public interests.

According to the interviews conducted with D4, D5, and D6, existing conflicts of interest within the Council sometimes lead to delays in the approval of plans and cases, as the continuous effort to reach consensus among different and sometimes conflicting viewpoints effectively prolongs meetings and increases the time required for case review. On the other hand, D7, D8, and D9 also note that in such conditions, external pressures from executive institutions, governmental bodies, and investors can influence the direction of Council decisions and intensify conflicts of interest. Together, these factors result in certain cases with stronger institutional backing or organizational and group interests being prioritized, while cases related to the public interest and public rights are delayed. Therefore, alongside the need to manage conflicts of interest within the Council, establishing mechanisms to reduce external pressure, enhance transparency, and strengthen accountability in the decision-making process is considered essential. Strengthening coordination among member institutions to improve consistency and fairness in decision outcomes.

From the perspective of the theoretical framework, this finding shows that organizational interests not only affect the content of decisions but also influence their sequencing, speed, and prioritization. Under such conditions, each decision influenced by sectoral interests can reinforce those same interests in subsequent decisions, thereby activating positive feedback loops in which decision outputs again strengthen institutional inputs and organizational interests. The continuation of this cycle gradually stabilizes decision-making patterns and facilitates path dependence, a condition in which reform becomes more difficult due to the entrenchment of interests and increased institutional and political costs. This finding is consistent with Stermann (2000) regarding the role of positive feedback loops in reproducing system behavior and Pierson (2000) regarding path dependence and institutional lock-in. Furthermore, the role of investor pressure and economic actors in shaping decisions can be explained through urban growth machine theory, which shows that coalitions between economic actors and decision-making institutions can shift policy priorities toward value-generating projects and, in the absence of effective conflict-of-interest control mechanisms, increase the gap between organizational interests and the public interest and public rights, while also reinforcing long-term institutional path dependence.

One of the key points raised in the interviews is the role of individual and institutional motivations in shaping Council decisions. As D10 notes, some members support specific projects and cases in order to strengthen their professional position, enhance personal reputation, and expand their networks. This is particularly evident in cases with economic interests, where the decision-making process tends to favor specific and group interests. At the same time, D11 and D12 emphasize that the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran currently lacks a strong, coherent, formal, and transparent mechanism for identifying and managing conflicts of interest, and this institutional gap leads to non-transparent or biased decision-making, allowing the influence of powerful individuals or groups to persist without effective control mechanisms. This situation highlights the need to establish mechanisms for effective oversight, information disclosure, and conflict-of-interest management to ensure fair, accountable, and public interest-oriented decision-making. In addition, interviews point to institutional and procedural challenges, as D2 and D3 identify the lack of transparent prioritization criteria, procedural complexity, and centralization of decision-making in certain committees as factors pushing members toward informal practices. Finally, D4 and D5 note that this situation not only reduces public trust but also negatively affects the efficiency and quality of Council decision-making.

This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework, as it shows that weaknesses in institutional structure components, particularly transparency, accountability, and oversight mechanisms, provide conditions for the formation and strengthening of organizational and sectoral interests and increase the likelihood of conflicts of interest. From an institutional perspective, this supports North (1990), who argues that institutions shape actors' incentives and behavioral patterns, meaning that in the absence of effective institutional rules, behavior gradually shifts toward the preservation or expansion of organizational interests. It is also consistent with OECD (2017), which defines conflict of interest as arising from the simultaneous presence of decision-making authority and vested interests. Within the conceptual model of this research, the continuation of such decisions can, through positive feedback loops, strengthen actor influence and sectoral interests in subsequent periods and, through path dependence, make reform of decision-making processes more difficult. Furthermore, the concentration of interests on economically valuable projects can also be explained through urban growth machine theory, which shows that when economic and institutional coalitions dominate policymaking processes, decisions gradually move away from public interest and public rights and serve the reproduction of powerful actors' interests.

One of the points repeatedly emphasized in the interviews is the impact of social and urban pressures on the decision-making process of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran. D6 and D7 state that citizens' expectations and demands, media coverage, and civil society activities sometimes push the Council toward rapid and reactive decisions, even in cases where such decisions are not fully consistent with detailed expert analyses. Furthermore, D8 and D9 add that the lack of formal and systematic tools for recording and analyzing public feedback further intensifies these external pressures, resulting in decisions that become short-term and unstable in nature.

In such conditions, D10 and D11 emphasize the need to establish mechanisms for the systematic recording, aggregation, and analysis of public feedback, enabling the Supreme Council to respond more effectively to societal needs and expectations while maintaining a strong foundation in expert evaluation and long-term planning considerations. Finally, D12 argues that the Supreme Council's decision-making should be more firmly grounded in expert analysis and long-term impact assessment in order to avoid reactive, short-term, and potentially unstable policy choices. Accordingly, a shift from fragmented and episodic decision-making toward a more systematic, forward-looking, and feedback-informed governance approach is identified as a key axis of institutional reform and enhanced policy coherence.

From the perspective of the theoretical framework, this finding indicates that the quality and institutionalization of mechanisms for receiving, interpreting, and processing social feedback play a decisive role in shaping the dynamics of feedback loops. When social feedback is systematically, transparently, and analytically integrated into decision-making processes, negative feedback loops are strengthened, thereby enabling timely policy correction, continuous institutional learning, and improved alignment with the public interest and public rights. In contrast, when such feedback is treated in a fragmented, ad hoc, or non-systematic manner, decision-making tends to become reactive and short-term oriented, which in turn reinforces positive feedback loops and contributes to the reproduction of unstable or path-dependent decision-making patterns. This interpretation is consistent with Meadows (2008) and Sterman (2000), who emphasize the regulatory or amplifying role of feedback structures in complex adaptive systems, as well as Ostrom (2005), who highlights the importance of coordination, participation, and learning mechanisms in effective multi-level governance. Within the conceptual model of this study, strengthening systems for the structured registration, aggregation, and analysis of public feedback can therefore be considered a key instrument for enhancing alignment between organizational interests and the public interest and public rights, as it facilitates continuous policy adjustment and reduces the persistent gap between institutional objectives and societal expectations.

The interviews also highlight competition among different institutions and committees as a significant challenge affecting the Council's decision-making process. According to D10 and D1, this competition—primarily over limited resources, institutional legitimacy, and influence within decision-making structures—encourages committees and their members to prioritize internal objectives and organizational interests over broader urban development goals and the public interest. In practice, this dynamic can lead to the dominance of specific committees' localized or specialized priorities in final Council decisions, thereby marginalizing considerations related to the public interest and public rights. D2 and D11 further emphasize that such internal competition may generate multiple adverse consequences, including inconsistent and at times contradictory decisions between specialized committees and the main Council, which significantly undermines coordination and weakens the effectiveness of policy implementation. Moreover, this situation contributes to inefficiencies in time and resource allocation within the Council and, over the long term, erodes stakeholders' trust in the coherence, stability, and overall efficiency of the decision-making process.

This finding aligns with the research conceptual model, as it shows that institutional structure and the distribution of power among committees and member institutions provide the basis for the formation of organizational and sectoral interests, which in turn influence the decision-making process. From an institutional perspective, this supports North (1990), who considers institutions as determinants of incentive structures and organizational behavior patterns. In such conditions, competition over authority, resources, and influence gradually strengthens organizational interests and increases the likelihood of conflicts of interest. This finding is also consistent with the urban growth machine theory, which suggests that coalitions and institutional actors in policymaking processes often act to preserve their power and institutional interests rather than pursue the public interest. If such patterns of competition and sectoral preference persist over time, they are reproduced through positive feedback loops and lead to path dependence, making institutional reform and coordination increasingly difficult. As a result, reduced inter-institutional coordination not only weakens decision-making efficiency but also decreases the alignment between organizational interests and the public interest and public rights.

The interviews also revealed a divergence, in some cases, between the organizational interests of voting members of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture and the public interest and public rights. For example, the Ministry of Energy may oppose urban expansion due to the future burden of providing water, energy, and infrastructure services, while the Ministry of Agriculture tends to prioritize the protection of peri-urban lands, even when their agricultural value is limited. As a result, each institutional actor evaluates urban development through a sectoral lens shaped by its mandates and responsibilities, which does not necessarily align with the public interest and public rights. Over time, the continuation of this pattern contributes to increased urban density, greater pressure on water resources, higher reliance on large-scale water transfer projects, and reduced potential for sustainable resource use, including greywater reuse and renewable energy development, as well as increased pressure on urban green and agricultural lands. Overall, the findings indicate that persistent sectoral decision-making can gradually misalign urban outcomes with the public interest and public rights.

These findings align with the conceptual model, showing how institutional structure and sectoral mandates shape organizational interests that are reflected in policy decisions. From an institutional perspective, this is consistent with literature that views institutions as key determinants of actors' preferences and incentives. The dominance of sectoral perspectives in collective decisions can also be interpreted through urban growth machine theory, where institutional actors tend to reinforce their organizational position within their respective mandates. This dynamic can constrain the formation of decisions that are fully aligned with the public interest and public rights. In turn, the outcomes of such decisions reinforce the initial behavioral patterns, activating positive feedback loops that generate path dependence and gradual institutional lock-in within sectoral logics. Over time, this leads to a declining alignment between organizational interests and the public interest and public rights, making long-term institutional reform increasingly challenging. To illustrate this mechanism, the following diagram presents the positive feedback cycles emerging from these conflicts.



Figure 2 – Contextual factors underlying the emergence of positive feedback loops in the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture based on interview themes.

The analysis of the research findings shows that the starting point for the formation of conflict of interest lies in the institutional structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran. The Council's decision-making structure, composed of representatives from multiple organizations with different mandates, authorities, and responsibilities, means that each member enters the decision-making process with the institutional logic and organizational requirements of their respective organization. From this perspective, institutional structure is not merely a setting for decision-making, but, through the distribution of power, composition of members, scope of legal authority, and organizational responsibilities, it produces different patterns of behavior and decision-making priorities. Therefore, as also explained in the theoretical framework of the study, institutional structure provides the basis for the formation of organizational and sectoral interests.

Within such a structure, organizational interests emerge from institutional arrangements. Interviews show that representatives, in line with their mandates, seek to preserve or expand authority, resources, and institutional influence. As a result, policy direction is shaped not only by urban development goals but also by actors' institutional logics, consistent with historical institutionalism. These interests activate positive feedback loops, forming a stable "institutional feedback loop" in which urban development decisions—such as land-use change, increased density, and expansion—raise land values and generate expectations for further development. These outcomes then create economic, social, and institutional pressures that re-enter the decision-making process through infrastructure commitments, municipal financing logic, and inter-institutional competition, reinforcing a development-oriented trajectory consistent with complex systems theory.

The continuation of these reinforcing cycles gradually produces path dependence in the decision-making system. The findings indicate that persistent patterns in Supreme Council decisions reduce the capacity for policy reform and deviation from established practices. In this context, past decisions not only shape current outcomes but also constrain future options, while shifting away from existing trajectories becomes increasingly costly due to entrenched institutional interests and political, organizational, and administrative constraints. As these patterns are reproduced, resistance to reform intensifies and the likelihood of repeating similar decision-making patterns increases. This reflects the transformation of positive feedback loops into path dependence in urban governance processes, consistent with Pierson (2000), and suggests that such dynamics make institutional reform progressively more difficult over time.

The final consequence of this process is a reduced alignment between decisions and the public interest and public rights. In this study, the public interest is empirically derived from interview data and includes outcomes such as sustainability of natural and water resources, spatial justice, protection of agricultural and garden lands, reduced environmental conflicts, improved urban environmental quality, and greater transparency, accountability, and compliance with higher-level planning documents. Accordingly, the "divergence between organizational interests and the public interest" is an analytical construct developed from the synthesis of interview findings, as respondents did not explicitly use these terms but instead described related impacts such as resource pressure, spatial inequality, institutional conflicts, and environmental and social consequences of decisions, which are interpreted within this framework.

Overall, the findings show that the challenges of the Supreme Council cannot be reduced to isolated decisions or individual behavior, but instead result from the systematic interaction of institutional structure, organizational interests, feedback loops, and path dependence. This interaction creates a cycle in which sectoral interests dominate decision-making, reinforcing feedback loops and path dependence, and widening the gap between decisions and the public interest. Accordingly, the core issue is not merely the presence of conflicts of interest in specific cases, but their institutional reproduction within the governance structure, which supports the conceptual model of the study and answers the main research question regarding how misaligned outcomes in sustainable urban development are produced.

5. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

The findings indicate that the relationship between the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran and municipalities can be analyzed as a multi-level decision-making system embedded in positive feedback loops; such that urban boundary control and containment policies, although adopted with the aim of organizing development, lead at the land market level to widening price gaps and the formation of speculative expectations in peripheral lands. This gap itself becomes a structural driver for increasing stakeholder pressure to change land use and expand urban boundaries, effectively reproducing the original policy logic. As a result, the Council, in response to these escalating pressures, is compelled to continue the same pattern of boundary-making and restrictive policies; a pattern that, rather than solving the problem, reproduces it at a more complex level. This cycle reflects a form of institutional lock-in in which conflicts of interest and land market mechanisms, in interaction with the decision-making structure, reinforce stabilized trajectories of urban development and limit policy change.

The findings show that the urban boundary line in Iran's planning system has shifted from a purely technical instrument to an institutional construct with economic and political weight, where conflicts of interest among actors are structurally embedded. From an institutionalist perspective, decision-making rules and structures themselves generate and reproduce sectoral and organizational interests, limiting the integration of public interest and public rights in a coherent way. Under such conditions, disputes over boundary changes are not isolated issues but part of a persistent institutional logic that is continuously reproduced. The findings show that the linkage between land value, council decisions, and market logic creates a positive feedback cycle, where each boundary decision generates expectations of rising land values and renewed pressure for further changes. This cycle is both an outcome of policy-making and a driver of subsequent decisions, reinforcing path dependence in spatial governance. Ultimately, this dynamic strengthens sectoral logics over the public interest and gradually widens the gap between physical planning decisions and the requirements of public rights.

In this context, the comparison between horizontal and compact development reflects structural conflicts of interest within urban governance rather than a purely technical choice. The findings indicate that each model redistributes costs and benefits among Council members and related institutions: horizontal development may reduce land price pressure and spatial concentration at the macro level, but increases financial, infrastructural, and service obligations for urban management and therefore faces resistance from certain organizational interests. In contrast, compact development, despite lower short-term infrastructure costs, intensifies pressure on the land market and activates price expectations, thereby strengthening positive feedback cycles in the land and housing system and reproducing decision-making pressures linked to land value growth. In such conditions, conflicts of interest among institutions are not exceptional but a natural outcome of the governing institutional logic. Consequently, the choice between these two models is shaped less by public interest criteria and more by institutional power balances, reinforcing feedback cycles and contributing to the persistence of stabilized development paths and difficulty of structural reform in urban governance.

The findings show that diversity of institutional interests in the Supreme Council has a dual effect. While it can improve decision quality and reduce one-sided judgments, the lack of mechanisms to align these differences leads to institutional friction, slower decision-making processes, and weaker policy coherence. The way this diversity is managed therefore becomes decisive. Overall, the key issue is not diversity itself, but the absence of effective mechanisms to convert it into a coherent and coordinated decision-making process. Therefore, the key issue is not diversity itself, but the absence of effective mechanisms to convert it into a coherent and coordinated decision-making process. From the interview data perspective, the “conflict between institutional interests and collective consequences” is not an explicitly stated or uniformly defined concept among respondents, but rather emerges through recurring narratives, sectoral pressures, and described spatial and administrative outcomes. The data consist of dispersed themes that, through coding and analysis, form a coherent conceptual pattern rather than a direct definition. Accordingly, the “public interest” in this study is an analytical construct derived from systematic synthesis of empirical findings, rather than a predefined normative concept, ensuring a clear distinction between raw data and researcher interpretation.

The findings indicate that one of the key elements for rethinking the structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran is the lack of integration in defining and measuring “public interest” in decision-making processes; such that this concept appears in interview data not as a shared criterion, but in the form of multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of urban development outcomes, resulting in the absence of a unified basis for evaluation, comparison, and prioritization of decisions. This situation can be explained within the framework of institutional structuralism, as the multi-sectoral structure of the Council leads each member institution to emphasize aspects of reality aligned with its institutional mandate, resulting in the practical reduction of public interest to an aggregation of sectoral interests. At the decision-making level, data also show that issues such as land-use change, density increase, and urban expansion are examined in a multi-institutional context in which some agencies emphasize infrastructural impacts such as water, energy, and urban services, while others focus on protection of agricultural land and control of physical expansion. This divergence in prioritization and interpretation is not an exception but a recurring institutional pattern that reinforces conflicts of interest and divergence in defining “public interest and public rights” in decision-making processes.

Finally, interview data reveal reciprocal relationships between development decisions and their economic–spatial consequences. Changes in urban boundaries, land use, and development intensity are associated with shifts in land valuation patterns and expectations about future development. These expectations feed into subsequent decision-making cycles and, by reinforcing sectoral pressures linked to land value growth, help reproduce similar policy orientations. As a result, the data show not a linear relationship but a feedback cycle in which decisions and outcomes mutually reinforce each other; a cycle consistent with institutional structuralism and conflict-of-interest dynamics, and indicating the persistence of sectoral logics over the public interest and public rights.

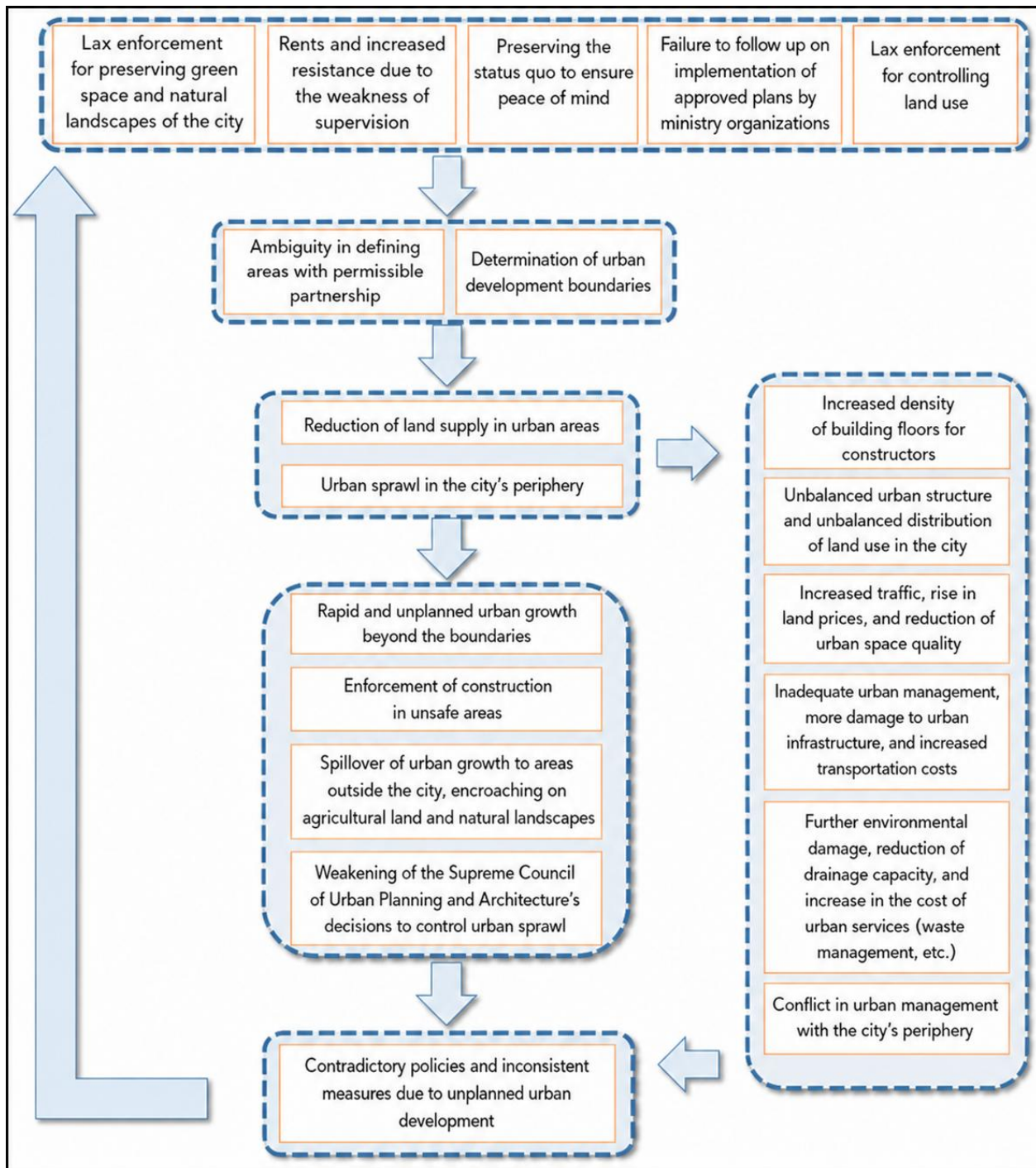


Figure 3. A positive feedback loop in the preference system of Council members (a main loop and a reinforcing loop in relation to urban management).

The findings show that while diversity of institutional interests can improve decision quality, in the absence of coordination mechanisms it leads to conflicts, fragmentation, and stronger sectoral priorities. Over time, these dynamics are reinforced through feedback loops and path dependence, turning conflicts of interest into a stable feature of governance and weakening coherence and alignment with the public interest and public rights.

Furthermore, the interpretation of the findings indicates that redesigning the relationship between institutional structure and the incentive system of members is a key component in addressing the research question. In the current situation, the link between decision-making responsibilities and the economic, social, and spatial consequences of decisions is not structured in a way that ensures sustainable alignment between decision-makers and the long-term effects of policies. As a result, some decisions are made without full internalization of social and spatial costs, which in turn reinforces short-term logics in development processes and reproduces case-by-case decision-making patterns. This situation can be explained within the framework of conflict of interest and institutional structuralism, as the current structure of the Council systematically limits the alignment of sectoral interests with the public interest and public rights. At the institutional level, the data also point to the necessity of redefining the position of the Supreme Council within the urban governance chain, as the Council currently operates simultaneously as policymaker, coordinator, and in some cases executive actor. This overlap of roles weakens its focus on its core function of guiding strategic urban development. Consequently, reduced coherence in decisions and increased reliance on case-specific considerations in plan approvals are observable outcomes of this institutional ambiguity in the data.

Overall, the findings of this section, grounded in institutional structuralism, complex systems theory, feedback mechanisms, and the public interest and public rights perspective, indicate that the main research problem arises from a multi-layered interaction between the institutional structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran, the organizational interests of its members, and the reproductive consequences of its decisions. From this perspective, the Council's institutional structure is not a neutral decision-making arena, but a mechanism that generates sectoral interests and shapes decision-making logics, which, through spatial plans and urban development policies, influence alignment or misalignment with the public interest and public rights. These dynamics are further reinforced through feedback loops and path dependence, which stabilize sectoral logics over time and gradually reduce the capacity for structural reform. As a result, decision-making outcomes become increasingly self-reinforcing, producing persistent patterns of misalignment between institutional actions and public interest objectives.

These decisions, within feedback loops, generate consequences that reinforce the initial decision-making logic of the Council, leading to the stabilization of decision patterns and the formation of path dependence, thereby reducing the possibility of institutional reform and reorientation, and progressively constraining future policy alternatives. In this context, conflicts of interest at the level of the Supreme Council, as an intermediate outcome of this structure, emerge from the simultaneity of decision-making authority and stakeholder positioning, facilitating the dominance of sectoral interests over the public interest and weakening requirements of spatial justice, transparency, and accountability. Accordingly, interest alignment within the Supreme Council emerges from the dynamic interaction between institutional structure, feedback loops, and organizational logics of action, which in the absence of effective regulatory mechanisms reduces the effectiveness of urban governance and weakens alignment with the public interest and public rights, while reinforcing existing institutional biases over time.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the missions, position, and structure of the Supreme Council of Urban Planning and Architecture of Iran and to assess the extent of its alignment with the public interest. Accordingly, the research problem was formulated as the gap between the Council's legal status and the actual realization of its functions within the urban governance system. Using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis of interview data and documents, the institutional mechanisms influencing the Council's decision-making and their consequences were analyzed.

The findings indicate that the divergence between organizational interests and the public interest and public rights in the Supreme Council is not the result of isolated conflicts, but of a stabilized form of institutional structuralism in which the Council's multi-sectoral composition and decision-making rules continuously reproduce conflicts of interest. In this framework, actors interpret urban development outcomes through their organizational mandates, and these differences shape decision-level conflicts. Through interaction with positive feedback cycles—such as land value growth and institutional pressures—these conflicts reproduce initial decision patterns, generate path dependence, and gradually widen the gap between decisions and the public interest and public rights over time.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the conceptual framework of urban governance literature by introducing the mechanism of “institutional–sectoral feedback loops.” The results show that Council decisions are not only influenced by conflicts of interest but also, through their consequences, reinforce the same interests and decision-making patterns in subsequent periods. In interaction with path dependence, this process leads to the gradual institutionalization of sectoral decision-making logics and reduces the capacity for institutional reform. Therefore, the theoretical contribution of the study lies in explaining the link between conflicts of interest, institutional feedback, and policy lock-in within high-level planning institutions.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest three main directions for reform: designing formal mechanisms to identify and manage conflicts of interest at the Council level, developing a shared operational framework to define and measure the public interest in decision-making, and strengthening institutional accountability so that the consequences of decisions are internalized across member organizations. Together, these measures can help prevent inefficient decision-making cycles and improve institutional alignment. Ultimately, the study concludes that the problem of the Supreme Council is not limited to the content of decisions, but is rooted in the structure of decision-making, member incentives, and the organization of the public interest, making institutional redesign essential for improving transparency, coherence, and alignment between sectoral and public interests in urban governance.

Regarding limitations, the qualitative nature of the study and its reliance on in-depth interview data limit the generalizability of the findings to some extent. Future research is therefore recommended to adopt mixed-method approaches (quantitative–qualitative) to empirically test the identified relationships. It is also suggested that operational and measurable indicators for the concept of public interest be developed to enable better comparison, generalization, and evaluation of institutional structures and conflict-of-interest dynamics in urban governance systems.

Authors' Contribution

Author 1: 45%; Author 2: 25%; Author 3: 15%; Author 4: 15%

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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