**Cities and climate change**

**The necessary optimisation of available water resources in the prevision of a more sustainable new urban development: a lesson that we have yet to learn**

Judith Gifreu Font

Senior Lecturer of Administrative Law, UAB

[judith.gifreu@uab.cat](mailto:judith.gifreu@uab.cat)

(For oral presentation)

As a comprehensive instrument, urban plan is conditioned by sectorial regulations (roads, coasts, housing…) with the need to guarantee, among other aspects, that the urban operations intended for a given territory are assured of the necessary natural resources, among others, the water. Climate change is an undeniable reality brought about by multiple interconnected variables, many of these anthropogenic, and the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (1992) highlighted the direct relationship between climate change and the urban phenomenon, representing a starting point for initiatives aimed at achieving a more sustainable urban environment [such as Agenda 21, Aalborg (1994), *Red Española de Ciudades por el Clima* (2005), *Programa Cambio Global España* 2020/2050, etc.]. The increase in urbanised space is a fact that cannot be overlooked in formulating a holistic strategy for combatting climate change. It is known that water is vital to ensure the survival of human life and ecosystems; it is not surprising that there are many voices that prophesy that water will be the main source of geopolitical conflicts in the 21st century. The recent Climate Change Act of 2017 approved in Catalonia is committed to guaranteeing access to water resources as a way to neutralize the vulnerability of the population to the impacts of climate change. And for this an urban model that prioritizes the rehabilitation of the urban park against the creation of new urban settlements is needed. In the same way, the EU Water Framework Directive (2000) sets out a pathway for implementing a model of sustainable management that obliges EU state members to rethink their urban policies with respect to water use.

But in spite of good intentions, Spain has continued to opt for urbanisation projects inspired on an “irrational” urbanism that simply replicates the Anglo-American model of the “extended city” (which fosters a double degree of environmental irregularity: the massive consumption of land and the implantation of a garden-city building typology, in turn increasing the demand for additional water resources). The number and scope of these projects—some of them in almost desert-like areas— was of such concern to European authorities that a resolution was passed by the European Parliament in 2009 concerning the impact of extensive urbanisation on the environment. And this despite the fact that Spanish regulations ordered that the approval of these urbanisation plans required the mandatory issuance of a report from the Hydraulic Administration, which was decisive for the plans’ Environmental Report.

Urban-planning regulations have evolved and the availability and abundance of water is now an essential requisite. Nevertheless, we are still some distance from having assimilated the importance of this natural resource. Recent rulings (2016) by the Supreme Court in places such as Santander and Vic—which have seen their General Urban Development Plans annulled through water-related issues, whether for insufficiency or for flood risks within the new urban developments—highlight the need to establish further controls on planning authorities’ room for discretion.