Exploring Key Aspects of an Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy in Greece: The Case of Thessaloniki City

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Abstract: Even though efforts have been made in recent decades to revive urban areas in the European Union (EU), the contemporary challenges that mostly large cities face require continuous support and adjustments in urban policies. Under the EU Cohesion Policy for the 2014–2020 programming period, the integrated territorial development of various specific areas is pursued by the Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI). In Greece, many of these programs concern Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategies (ISUDSs). One of these is the ISUDS of Thessaloniki, which is perhaps the most complex in terms of management and implementation in Greece, mainly due to the chosen managerial approach and the size of Thessaloniki, the second largest city in the country. Thessaloniki's ISUDS is managed by the Urban Authority (UA), which has already evolved into a separate model of metropolitan governance administration. The aim of this paper is to identify the determinants in its design and implementation, as well as the effects of the strategy on urban development through the assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and prospects of strategy through the Delphi approach.

Keywords: integrated territorial investment (ITI); integrated sustainable urban development strategy (ISUDS); urban authority (UA); metropolitan unit of Thessaloniki (MUTH); Delphi analysis; SWOT Analysis

1. Introduction

The first strategies with a territorial, spatial dimension were launched in the early 1990s as Community Initiatives. The Community Initiatives, Leader (I, II and +), Urban (I and II), and Urbact (I, II and III), referred to integrated rural and urban development, respectively. Apart from their territorial dimension, these programs could also be classified according to their design and implementation. Hence, there have been integrated local development strategies following the bottom-up approach and programs (such as PRODER and Integrated Rural Development Programs IRDP) from the top-down. Integrated urban development programs, such as the Integrated Interventions and the Urban Development Plans 2007–2013, were designed and implemented mainly through local authorities. The concept of 'localness' in all these programs was mainly concerned with interventions in homogeneous rural micro-regions or residential areas or neighborhoods. Although integrated spatial strategies and development plans did not command significant financial resources in any programming period [1–3], they were characterized by their innovation and the high demonstrability of their interventions [4]. Their success has led them either to be integrated into European policies or to become development 'models' of spatial approach [5]. In the 2014–2020 programming period, the EU moved towards broader implementation of integrated territorial development policies and adopted tools such as

the bottom-up approach and multi-budgetary funding [6], while this approach continues in the new programming period 2021–2027.

In the context of the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy, interventions are implemented under the term Integrated territorial investments (ITIs), which aim to enhance the sustainable development of larger areas to ensure synergies in investments supported by European structural and investment funds [7]. ITIs is an integrated spatial development instrument, for implementing development strategies in particular areas (sub-regional or inter-regional, rural or urban) that face specific problems or have significant development potential that needs to be addressed as a whole within a development plan. Improving the economic situation and employment, improving the daily life of citizens, and preserving the natural and built environment are key objectives [8,9]. They are characterized as multi-budgetary in their funding, multi-sectoral in their objectives, and with a local socio-economic foundation in their design. Specifically, in Greece, the framework of the ITIs includes Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategies (ISUDS) in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants and those for non-urban areas with a clear spatial and developmental direction [10,11].

The city of Thessaloniki Is the second most populous city in Greece [12], located in the northern part of the country, and belongs to the region of Central Macedonia. The city's problems are significant and have been accumulating [13], while urban interventions in the last decades could be considered limited and have been mainly funded by EU resources. For the first time, an integrated approach to the urban development of the city has been pursued through the Thessaloniki ITI-SUD Plan, designed and implemented by the Urban Authority (an intermediate management body with a metropolitan character), and funded by the Regional Operational Program (ROP) of Central Macedonia [14].

The aim of this paper is to identify the critical factors of the Thessaloniki SUD strategy through the Delphi approach, to analyze them in the framework of swot analysis, and at the same time, to describe the implementation process of the strategy. The attempted evaluation is expected to help similar strategies address potential cooperation and management problems, as well as to identify important and common factors in their implementation. The originality of the study relies not only on the data concerning the specific city and its integrated strategy, but also on the innovative management of the SUD and its metropolitan character, in a city where until recently the metropolitan unit of Thessaloniki did not have a distinct institutional role [15]. The paper is structured by presenting the literature review after the Introduction, followed by the Methods and Techniques section, the results of the research, and finally, the Discussion and Conclusions where a critical evaluation is attempted.

2. Background

2.1. Community Initiatives and Policies for Urban Regeneration

In some Southern European countries, such as Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, the need to support and regenerate urban areas was already vital before the 1980s. Post-war, in some of them, urbanization has enlarged and changed cities [16], usually where urban development has been pursued in an unregulated, ad hoc manner to meet the increased demand for housing. In some cases, this has changed the character and form of cities, while the lack of national urban policies is still evident today [17]. As around 72% of the EU population lives in urban, semi-urban, and peri-urban environments [18,19], since 1980, urban issues and problems have received political attention from the EU, and since 1998, through European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), EU policies have been continuously focused on the urban, urban-rural, and rural questions [18]. The cohesion policy in the frame of EU regional development has been helping in parallel with urban development [5,20–23]. Specifically, today, the investments that absorb 40% of the total financial resources available from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) are taking place in cities, while contemporary challenges continuously reinforce the focus on ISUDSs and on more effective support for cities [24,25].

In the 1980s, issues such as urban decline and the fair demands of EU cities to address them began to emerge [22,26,27]. Acting in urban areas through the establishment of specific instruments [28] started with the Urban Pilot Programs (UPP) in 1989, which was the first attempt at urban regeneration. These programs were a forerunner to the first URBAN Community Initiative (CI) (1994–1999), which was continued in the next programming period 2000–2006 with the Community Initiative URBAN II and URBACT I program. This was the first time that cohesion policy, and the EU in general, had allocated financial resources exclusively to confronting urban decline through urban regeneration programs. The results and impact of these programs have been positively assessed by both Member States and the stakeholders and institutions [15]. The URBAN became an instrument in designing and implementing urban regeneration programs, had a substantial impact on related cohesion policy programs that followed, and was particularly appreciated by countries that did not have an urban policy [29,30]. The importance of the URBAN 'method' or 'approach' [19,21], lies in the components and structure of an urban regeneration vision that includes the urban area of intervention, the strategy, the integrated approach, the partnership vision, the collaborative approach of local authority and government, the added value of the measures proposed and the competitiveness of the call [13,22].

The URBAN I was an integrated and territorial approach that combined urban regeneration actions, as well as actions related to the support of human resources [31,32]. The 118 programs funded, totaling 900 million euros, concerned the urban neighborhoods of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants in crisis, with a high unemployment rate, the infrastructure of poor quality, inadequate housing conditions, and a lack of social amenities. URBAN II followed in the footsteps of the previous CI by seeking to create added value through urban sustainability and through the exchange of knowledge and experience actively pursued by the URBACT program. It has funded a total of 70 programs with a budget of 730 million euros, mainly targeting small, severely disadvantaged areas, and has innovated by seeking to network and implement programs through strong partnerships at the local level.

During the 2007–2013 programming period, the URBAN was discontinued, but it prompted the Cohesion Policy to adopt 'urban integration and the principles of the initiative in Member States' operational programs [33]. Although the Member States were given the opportunity to fund the development of urban regeneration actions, both the principles of the initiative and the possibility to further support urban development faded [21] within the national strategies with some exceptions (Urban Priority Axis in Romania and Iniciativa Urbana in Spain). Thus, in most countries, the urban dimension of EU policy at the national level was lost mainly due to the inclusion of urban development actions in the regional programs [22].

In Greece, Community Initiatives (URBAN) implementation was considered successful, while their management was carried out at a central level. A total of six programs were implemented from the first URBAN (Volos—Nea Ionia, West Thessaloniki, Ermoupoli, Keratsini—Drapetsona, Patras, and Peristeri) and in URBAN II, three programs (Heraklion, Komotini, Perama). Although the experience of implementing programs within the framework of the URBAN Community Initiative in Greece was considered positive, their implementation encountered many obstacles and difficulties. The most important was a lack of cooperation between implementing bodies, coordination between the involved ministries, immaturity of many proposed projects, and fragmentation of actions [13,29]. In the framework of the Regional Operational Programs, during the programming period 2000–2006, actions were implemented for "Integrated urban development interventions in small-scale local zones", and in the programming period 2007–2013, "Integrated plans for urban and rural regeneration" with the participation of intermediate management agencies. There were problems with fragmentation of areas and projects, management inadequacy by local government organizations (OTAs), and delays in the implementation of projects remained to a significant extent [34]. However, these programs covered basic needs in urban projects, even if their actions could be characterized as piecemeal. More

generally, Greece is among those countries of the European south where there is no national urban policy, but it is also associated with a tradition of "non-planning", especially at the local level.

2.2. Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategies

In the 2014–2020 programming period, the objective of integrated territorial and urban development has been given a new impetus within the framework of a cohesion policy. The URBAN approach and the URBACT program returned afresh in the context of a cohesion policy, where the trend seemed to be to reinforce the development role of cities in relation to other territorial administrative units [35]. In this programming period, they have become the main vehicle to support urban and territorial strategies, while for urban development, more local urban-based solutions are pursued through ISUDSs, specifically designed to address local challenges and perspectives [36]. The experiences that have been gained relate to supporting urban investments in cities that manage the investments themselves, and their funding can come from different sources. The ISUD strategies at the city or metropolitan area level seek to address economic, social, demographic, environmental, and climate change challenges in a coordinated manner.

Alongside the new instruments to strengthen the urban dimension introduced by the 2014–2020 cohesion policy, a common vision for urban development was formed at the intergovernmental level, with a more active role of stakeholders in urban policymaking. The European Commission and the European Parliament 2014 launched initiatives on the urban dimension of EU policies that led to the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam on 30 May 2016, a clear political commitment to the implementation of an Urban Agenda [37]. Based on the pact, urban partnerships were created that have important urban issues as their object. In this context, 14 partnerships were created with corresponding action plans; these were implemented and contribute to the design of relevant EU legislation in 14 vital themes. Urban Agenda in the period 2016–2019 helped to better coordinate urban issues and the European Commission, after 2020, seeks to further support the initiative [38].

The "integrated character" as a concept and content of the integrated urban strategies, remains the main question for the policymakers and stakeholders. It may be that the integrated approach has been primarily linked to the sustainable and qualitative development of the dimensions of urban life (economic, environmental, social, and cultural) according to the international literature [9,22,36,39,40], but equally important is the aspect of sustainable planning and management, i.e., its link to the concept of urban governance [41] and the democratic participation of cities stakeholders.

The integrated approach to urban areas should be implemented through strong multi-level governance systems, not top-down, resulting from the voluntary participation of a variety of actors, based on new organizational and operational approaches; these aim at to design and deliver solutions through the combination of urban regeneration interventions [24,42–44]. The bottom-up approach is essential in most cases applied at all stages of integrated programs, and concerns both the managing body, their design and management, and their implementation.

In fact, under the 2014–2020 programming period and for the forthcoming period 2021–2027, territorial development is based on the ITIs and on the programs of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). The ITIs refers to the ITIs of integrated sustainable urban development strategies and to the ITIs of other territorial strategies [11]. For the period 2013–2020, they are financed by the European Social Fund (ESF), the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the Cohesion Fund, and it is foreseen (ERDF Regulation Article 7) that at least 6% of the ERDF resources allocated at the national level shall be allocated to ISUDSs. In the new programming period 2021–2027, urban development is included in the new specific policy objective 5 (a Europe closer to its citizens) of the Cohesion Policy; meanwhile, ISUDSs are financed with the contribution of all European Funds, including the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), where it is foreseen that 8% of all ERDF resources will be allocated to these strategies. [45]. In

addition, in the new programming period, the ISUDs will be financed exclusively by the Regional Operational Programs (ROPs), which are included as a priority axis, with the possibility of continuing the approved ISUDSs in the new programming period after updating. In Greece, they are implemented through the Regional Operational Programs of the Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework (ESPA) 2014–2020 and 2021–2027.

2.3. The Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of Thessaloniki

Thessaloniki is in the northern part of Greece (Macedonia) and is the second-largest urban center in the country, after Athens (Figure 1). The urban complex of Thessaloniki belongs administratively to the Metropolitan Unit of Thessaloniki of the Region of Central Macedonia (MUTH). The MUTH is an administrative sub-unit of the Region of Central Macedonia that belongs to the second tier of local government [15]. The administrative responsibilities of the ICU are relatively limited despite the great importance of the spatial and developmental role it could have [46,47]. Geographically, the metropolitan unit of Thessaloniki includes a total of 13 municipalities, of which seven are urban municipalities and form the urban complex of Thessaloniki. The total population of the MUTH is 1,019,191 inhabitants in an area of 111,703 km², while the population of the Municipality of Thessaloniki is 789,191 inhabitants, according to the 2011 census [48].
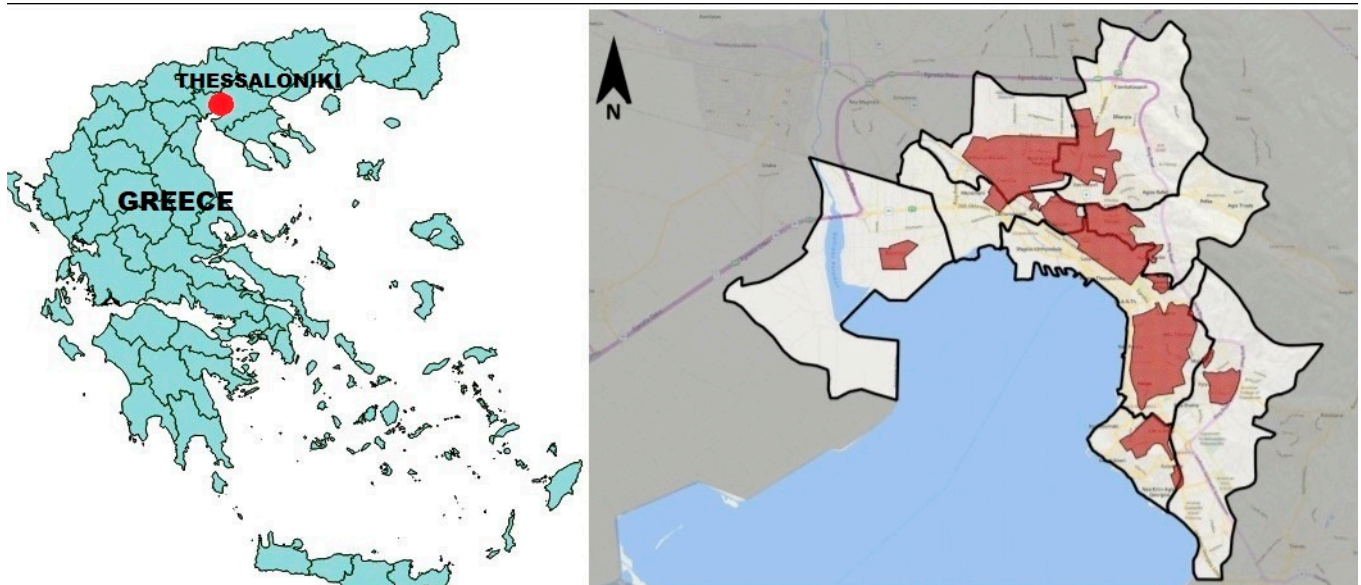
Figure 1. The Map of Greece and the intervention area of the Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of Thessaloniki; the focus areas are also included (in brown color).

In the past and in the framework of the URBAN I, a program was implemented in the city of Thessaloniki; this concerned the western districts of the city (sub-program West Thessaloniki) in an area of 1447 Ha and a population of 14,700 inhabitants. The actions implemented included the regeneration of public spaces and the site of a former army camp (Papakiriazi), and the construction of buildings (by the Municipality of Polihni and the Ithaca Rehabilitation Centre). Under URBAN II, no projects were included, but the participation of the municipalities of Thessaloniki in the URBACT networks was promoted. In addition, during the 2007–2013 programming period, limited urban development projects were implemented in the framework of integrated urban development projects, funded by the Regional Operational Programs of Central Macedonia and involving municipalities of Thessaloniki.

Nowadays, the city of Thessaloniki is facing several problems regarding its urban environment [14], but also on an economic and social level. Traffic, lack of redevelopment, deficiencies in the promotion of its cultural resources, and areas with land use conflicts are some of the problems [13]; these, combined with the country's decade-long economic

crisis, the consequences of the COVID-19 virus pandemic, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have led to economic and social underdevelopment. The significant potential and prospects of the city, due to its strategic location in Northern Greece and the Balkans, remain little or partially exploited.

To address these problems and challenges, the Metropolitan Unit of Thessaloniki, in cooperation with eight Municipalities, the city's stakeholders, and citizens, established the Urban Authority (intermediate management body), which designed, promoted, and implements the ISUDS for Thessaloniki. The aim of the strategy is to put in place an integrated action plan with the cooperation of all stakeholders, which will improve the infrastructure and the natural environment, and, at the same time, strengthen urban entrepreneurship and the social fabric of Thessaloniki. The intervention area of the strategy covers the entire area of the Municipalities of Ampelokipon—Menemenis, Thessaloniki, Kalamaria, Kordelio–Evosmos, Neapolis–Sikeon, Pavlou Mela, the municipal unit of Pylaia of the Municipality of Pylaia–Hortiatis and the municipal district of Kalochori of the Municipality of Delta. At the same time, some areas were identified where the challenges were more pronounced, and, therefore, it was planned to prioritize these areas and direct investments there to specific projects.

The Thessaloniki ISUD strategy is funded by the Regional Operational Program 2014–2020 of Central Macedonia; it has a total budget of 84.3 million euros, of which 68.3 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and 16 million from the European Social Fund (ESF), while the total private contribution amounts to €11.2 million. The Thessaloniki ITI-ISUD Strategy is developed around four priority axes, as follows:

- Axis 1: "Thessaloniki competitive and innovative".
- Through its specific objectives, it seeks to support local entrepreneurship, and attract investment, business, research, and innovation (1.1). It seeks to promote the education and skills acquisition of its human resources (1.2), promote the city as a tourist destination based on culture (1.3), and redefine the city's identity.
- Axis 2: "Cohesive Thessaloniki"
- Through its specific objectives, it seeks to address the immediate consequences of the crisis and integrate disadvantaged groups (2.1), strengthen the social economy and social services (2.2), and provide equal access to schooling (2.3).
- Axis 3: "Green and resilient Thessaloniki"
- Through its specific objectives, it seeks to enhance adaptability to the impacts of Climate Change (3.1), improve the urban environment and microclimate (3.2), and enhance sustainable urban mobility (3.3).
- Axis 4: "Effective Thessaloniki"
- Through its specific objectives, it seeks to ensure administrative efficiency and modernization of the organization of local functions (4.1), and the strengthen public administration and services (4.2).

Figure 2 presents the Axes of the Thessaloniki ISUDS and the percentage of participation of each Axis in the total public expenditure in euros. Table 1 shows in detail the distribution of funding by Priority Axis, special objective, and intervention of the ISUD Thessaloniki Strategy.

The operation of the Urban Authority (UA) in managing the strategy and in relation to the other stakeholders is shown in Figure 3; here, the various phases of planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of the strategy, a series of processes are required that functionally involve, in addition to the Urban Authority (UA), the Special Management Authority (SMA), the Planning and Evaluation Team (PET) as well as the Monitoring Committee (MC) (in which they participate all municipalities and organizations involved). At the same time, at the implementation level of the included projects, there is the involvement of various regional and municipal technicians and other services. The need for communication, cooperation, and coordination between them is evident so that the strategy is implemented without delays and with consistency in terms of options and results.
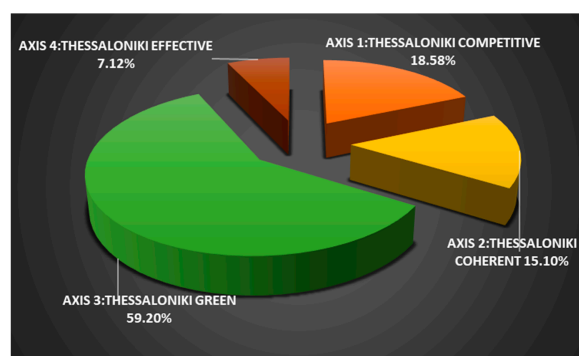
Figure 2. Budget Percentage of Public Expenditure per Priority Axis of the Thessaloniki Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy (ISUDS).

Table 1. Distribution of funding per Priority Axis, Specific Objective, and Intervention of the ISUD Strategy of Thessaloniki.

Specific Objectives	Interventions	Public Expenditure in €	Private Participation in €	Total Budget in €
PRIORITY AXIS 1. THESSALONIKI COMPETITIVE AND INNOVATIVE				
1.1. Entrepreneurship support, attracting investment & promoting innovation	1. Entrepreneurship support structures 2. Business clusters and urban excellence 3. Entrepreneurship in central areas	8.350.000,00	6.831.818,17	15.181.818,20
1.2. Development and the skills certification	1. Investor attraction and Innovation promotion 2. Urban human resource improvement via skills certification	4.700.000,00	2.203.413,54	6.903.413,54
1.3. City's promotion as a tourism destination based on culture	1. Tourist and cultural resources promotion 2. Strengthening of tourism corporations 3. Tourism human resource skills improvement 4. Support self-employment in tourism sectors	2.706.939.00	1.396.586,46	4.103.525,46
		15.756.939,00	10.431.818,18	26.188.757,18
PRIORITY AXIS 2. THESSALONIKI COHERENT				
2.1. Relief from the direct consequences of economic crisis and embodiment of the less favored groups	1. Training and Vocational embodied 2. Support actions for target groups	4.973.685,00	0,00	4.973.685,00
2.2. Social economy strengthening and supply of high-quality social services	1. Support of social economy 2. Access to social and health services	5.931.316,00	783.517,09	6.714.833,09
2.3. Equal access to school	1. Actions for volunteering activities raising 2. Small-scale improvements in schools	1.900.000,00	0,00	1.900.000,00
		12.805.001,00	783.517,09	13.588.518,1
PRIORITY AXIS 3. THESSALONIKI GREEN AND RESILIENCE				
3.1. Adaptability Improvement to the impacts of the Climate Change	1. Flood protection 2. Protection and management of the coastal front 3. Prevention and response to natural disasters	7.000.000,00	0,00	7.000.000,00
3.2. Improvement of the microclimate and the urban environment	1. Urban greenery reinforcement 2. Creation of green cores/green routes 3. Upgrading local urban green cores 4. Projects for Green Rooms/Vertical Gardens 5. Promotion of environmental volunteering	36.800.000,00	0,00	36.800.000,00
3.3. Improvement of sustainable urban mobility	1. Actions for multimodal urban transport 2. Development of bike-path systems 3. Intelligent mobility management systems	6.415.000,00	0,00	6.415.000,00
		50.215.000,00	0,00	50.215.000,00

Table 1. *Cont.*

Specific Objectives	Interventions	Public Expenditure in €	Private Participation in €	Total Budget in €
	PRIORITY AXIS 4. THESSALONIKI EFFECTIVE			
4.1. Ensuring the Administration effectiveness and functions modernization of local organizations	1. Interoperability of Municipal Information Systems 2. Digitization of historical, cultural, and tourist footprint	1.550.000,00	0,00	1.550.000,00
4.2. Public Administration Strengthening and public services improvement	1. Strengthening public governance 2. Strengthening monitoring networks and observatories for urban challenges	4.500.000,00	0,00	4.500.000,00
		6.050.000,00	0,00	6.050.000,00
TOTAL BUDGET ISUD STRATEGY		84.326.940,00	11.215.335,27	95.542.275,30
FUNDING BY ERDF	68.320.000,00			
FUNDING BY ESF	16.006.939,00			

Source: Authors' own work based on ITI—SUD of Thessaloniki, MUTH, 2020.

Figure 3. Presentation and Flowchart of the administrative system of the Integrated Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of Thessaloniki. Source: Authors' own work.

3. Methods and Techniques

3.1. Research Design

The research was carried out in three stages. The first and second stages are characterized by the "qualitative" element, while in the third stage the research was continued using the Delphi method with the output of the second stage (interviews with experts) as the main input (stage 1), as shown in Figure 4.
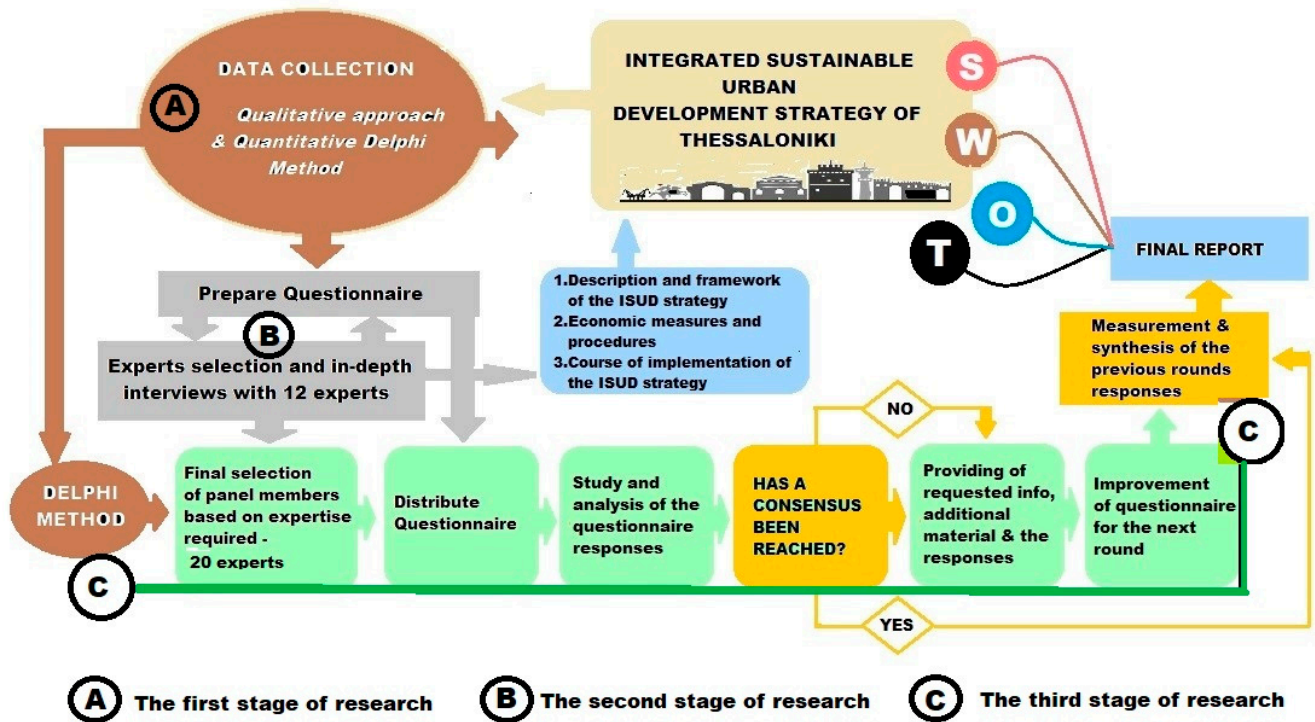
Figure 4. Chart flow of the research stages. Source: Authors' own work.

The first stage aimed to explore the ISUDS in terms of its design and implementation [49] through a qualitative approach, as new management processes and partnerships are implemented. The aim was to identify the different dimensions of the topic under study through its content, dynamics, associations, and depth [50,51]. It started with the collection and study of secondary sources related to the strategy, its key financial figures (budgets, calls, approved projects, legal commitments, absorption), and the processes of planning, management, and implementation. This information was collected mainly from stakeholders, but also from strategic documents and ITI-ISUDS archives. The operational progress of the strategy was captured through the management processes and responsibilities of the stakeholders (Figure 3), and through the evolution of the key financial indicators of the priority axes from the start of the program implementation until mid-2020.

After the collection of secondary data related to the SUD strategy, the second stage was followed by interviews with experts using a semi-structured questionnaire in order to record their views on the design, the critical points in the implementation of the strategy, and its impact on the urban space of Thessaloniki. In addition to providing important empirical data from a relatively small number of participants, these interviews in some cases lead to specific observations and recommendations [52], whose value is high [53]. Twelve experts were selected, and the interview stage lasted one month and was completed at the end of February 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the quarantine imposed in March 2020 in Greece, led to the need to modify and continue the research with the Delphi approach; in particular, a variant of the method preferred at the time was collecting data via email [54,55]. In this third stage, the results of the interviews from the previous stage were used, and a general ranking was carried out in relation to the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy, as

well as the opportunities and threats it faces. The number of experts increased from 12 to 20 in total, after the selection of those who met the requirements and characteristics of a representative Delphi group [54,56,57]. Closed-ended questionnaires were sent by email during the months of April and May 2020 to the 20 experts who formed the final sample for the evaluation of the strategy characteristics.

3.2. Delphi Method

The Delphi technique was originally introduced in the 1940s by Helmer and Dalkey, who produced what became the classical approach in the 1960s, on pages 458–467 of their paper entitled 'An experimental application of the Delphi method to the use of experts' [58]. It is a research technique aimed at reaching a consensus among members of a group of experts in the context of investigating and finding reliable predictions on specific issues. Turoff defined the Delphi approach as "an organized method for correlating views and information concerning a particular strategic policy area and allowing the participants representing them to evaluate and react to differing perceptions" [59]. Given its changes and evolution, the approach has established itself over time as an expert-based forecasting approach that uses multiple iterative questionnaires that approach the research topic in depth [54,60–62]. The Delphi consensus technique has been used by the research community as a tool to solve a wide range of problems and has been encountered more frequently in recent decades in the investigation of natural and environmental resource management issues [63].

In the international literature, there are various and diverse variants and modifications of the Delphi technique, but due to their use and their reference density, three types are distinguished: The "Classical or Conventional Delphi Technique", the "Policy Delphi Technique—PD" and the "Decision Delphi Technique—DD". In the classical approach, the first round of data collection is usually "qualitative", as it aims to identify as wide a range of opinions and experiences as possible. The nature of subsequent rounds in many cases ends up being 'quantitative', as the data is analyzed and grouped into a second questionnaire and the process is repeated until maximum consensus is reached.

As Okoli and Pawlowski suggest, the quantitative Delphi technique is characterized as a flexible method that is suitable for investigating complex research questions that require in-depth knowledge from experts with practical experience [64]. At the same time, it does not require a large number of experts, nor the need for them to physically meet each other. In our case, this technique is considered appropriate for identifying and quantifying the critical points regarding the implementation of the sustainable urban development strategy, as well as for identifying the impact it may have on urban development; for these reasons, this method was adopted for our research.

3.3. Selection of the Team of Experts

From the second stage of the research, the selection of the 12 experts was based on the procedure proposed by the literature and presented in Figure 5. In particular, the identification and inventory of experts [65], closely related to the design, implementation, management, and administration of Thessaloniki's ISUDS, was carried out. At the same time, those who were willing and 'committed' to participate and report on the subject matter of the research were identified; they possessed heterogeneity and representativeness, as defined by the relevant literature [54,66,67]. Specifically, of the initial 12 experts, six were elected local government officials (three from the participating municipalities and three from the Region of Central Macedonia) and six were high-level executives involved in the implementation of the program (three executives from the Region of Central Macedonia and three from the Special Managing Authority (SMA) of the Regional Operational Program (ROP) of Central Macedonia 2014–2020).

In March 2020, eight more experts were added to the 12 experts for reasons of representation (two executives from Urban Planning, three from academia, and three engineers from municipalities participating and supervising ISUD projects), and the research team in the third stage of the Delphi method comprised a total of 20 selected experts.

Figure 5. Experts' selection procedure. Source: Authors' own work.

The expert interviews in the second stage of the research produced initial results, observations, and descriptions of the Thessaloniki ISUDS, which were captured in sections on the implementation, the impacts, and the problems of the strategy. In the third stage, which continued with the Delphi approach through questionnaires circulated by email among the 20 experts, this list of initial results was resourcefully grouped into a SWOT analysis of the program [68], i.e., into sections on the strengths and weaknesses of the ISUDS, as well as the opportunities and threats it faces [69]. The SWOT analysis captures the context to help identify priorities, operational objectives, and prospects for further successful achievement of the strategy.

In the third stage of the research, the list was sent to a heterogeneous group of more than 20 experts to validate the appropriateness of clustering of responses from the interviews in the SWOT analysis sections. Each expert was then asked to rank, hierarchically, the elements of the strategy contained in the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats [70]. In a subsequent step, the experts quantified, in terms of their significance (on a scale from 0—completely disagree to 7—completely agree), the most important of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the strategy that emerged from the previous step. In this context, the experts were able to change their choices if they so wished (now knowing the mean and standard deviation of the others per section) to reduce the standard deviation and achieve as much consensus as possible. This final step was repeated twice until the consensus condition (standard deviation of all <25% of the mean of the items contained in each section of the analysis) was reached.

4. Results

4.1. Course of the ISUD Strategy

As shown in Figure 6, the Regional Operational Program (ROP) of Central Macedonia issued a Call for Proposals to the Metropolitan Unit of Thessaloniki (MUTH) for the submission of an ISUD strategy for Thessaloniki in September 2016. The design of both the strategy and the action plan on behalf of the MUTH followed a bottom-up approach, through a participatory process of spatially involved municipalities and stakeholders

and open consultation. The strategy was submitted by the MUTH in February 2017 and approved on 26 June 2017 [14]. The Thessaloniki ITI-ISUDS is part of the broader strategy of the ROP of Central Macedonia, and 10% of the total public expenditure of the ROP Central Macedonia was allocated for its implementation. The Urban Authority was appointed as an intermediate body in July 2017, headed by the Vice-Regional Head of MUTH for the governance and management of the strategy.
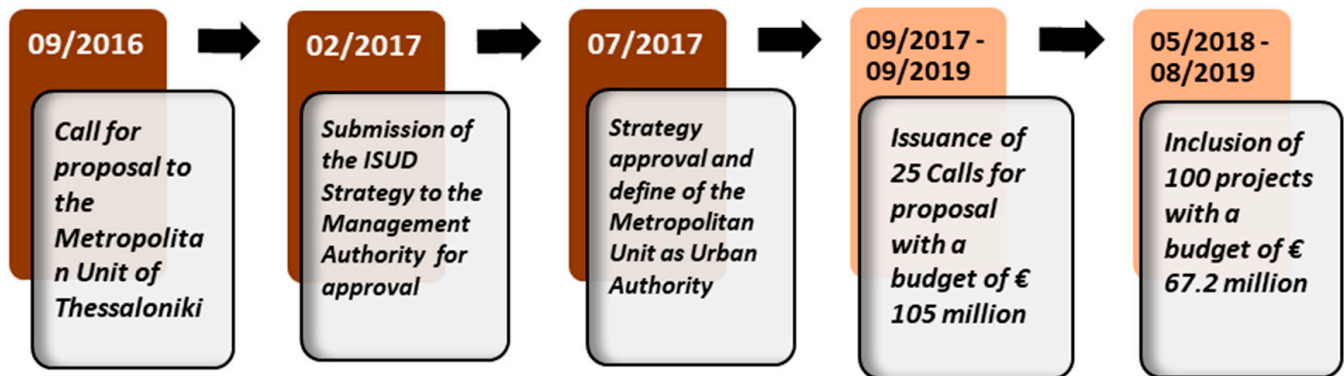
Figure 6. Schedule of implementation of Thessaloniki SUD Strategy. Source: Authors' own work based on ITI—SUD of Thessaloniki, MUTH, 2020.

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

From September 2017 to mid-2020, the Urban Authority activated all the Axes of the Operational Plan for the ISUDS of Thessaloniki, with 25 Calls for Proposals addressed to the beneficiaries (Figure 6), with a total budget of more than 105 million euros (>110% of the total budget). It included, in the same period, 100 projects worth 67 million (Table 2), while it signed project contracts worth approximately 5.5 million euros (Figure 7). In the first quarter of 2020, the strategy's progress was halted due to the COVID-19 response measures, mainly in terms of contracting and project implementation.

Table 2. Projects inclusion in the ISUDS of Thessaloniki per Beneficiary (2020).

Municipality or Other Beneficiaries	Number of Projects	Budget (€)
Thessaloniki	19	8.509.131,00
Ambelokipoi–Menemeni	12	4.775.416,00
Neapoli–Sykeon	8	4.904.480,00
Kalamaria	14	3.645.003,00
Kordelio–Evosmos	4	766.023,00
Pavlou Mela	9	24.303.590,00
Pylea–Chortiatis	7	4.199.362,00
Delta	2	244.214,00
Others	25	15.900.768,00
TOTAL	100	67.247.987,00

Source: ITI—SUD of Thessaloniki, MUTH, April 2020.

Among the important projects that are included in the ISUDS of Thessaloniki, are the environmental upgrade and performance in the common use of the Pavlos Melas Metropolitan Park, the sanitation and restoration of the subsoil and underground water in the wider area of the Municipalities of Thessaloniki, Ampelokipi—Menemeni and Delta, the creation of green spaces and the construction of parks in all Municipalities, the regeneration of the area of the Hippocrates Hospital, the restoration of Byzantine Walls, the pocket parks of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, the planted roofs and the green schoolyards, the Civil Protection equipment of Municipalities, and the expansion of the National Air Pollution Monitoring Network in the urban planning complex of Thessaloniki,

etc. Many of these projects already have been implemented in 2022 and they are used by the Thessaloniki citizens.
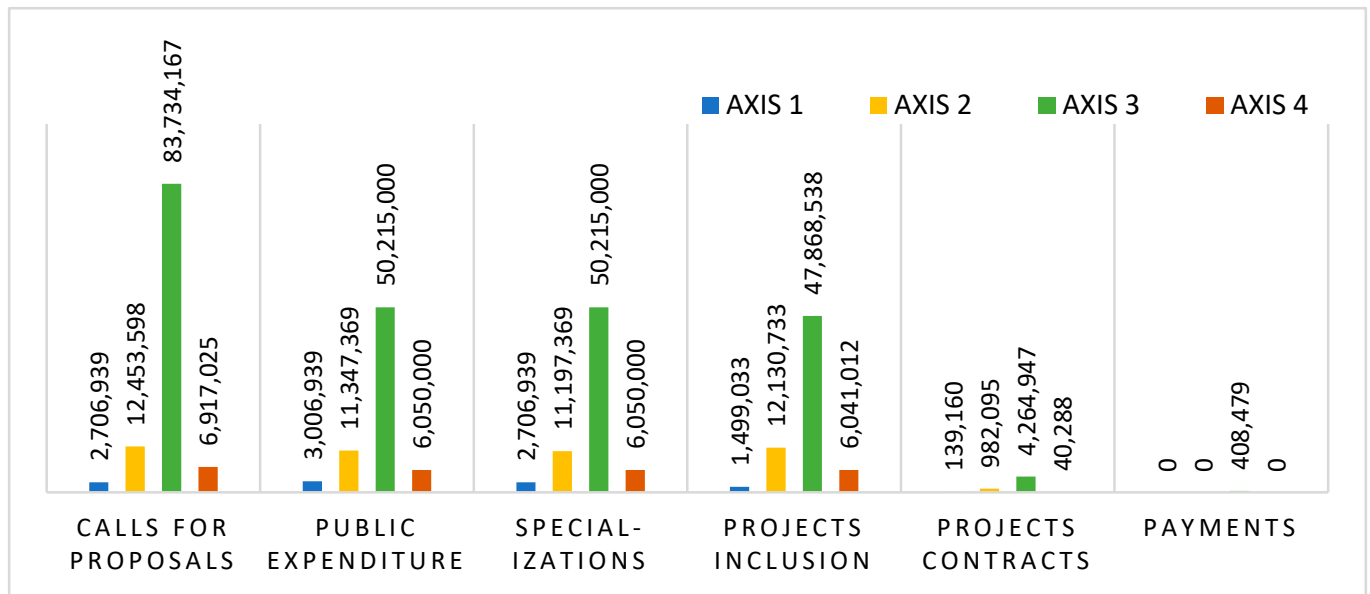
Figure 7. The course of economic measures of the ISUDS Thessaloniki Axes until 2020. Source: Authors' own work based on data from UA, ISUDS of Thessaloniki, April 2020.

One might observe, from the structure of the strategy (Table 1), that it is missing the axis of the Thessaloniki smart city and the relevant projects. The city, after a long period with a lack of critical projects, through the ISUDS, has the chance to improve the needed infrastructures and to implement projects that will improve citizens' ways of life. That was the main reason, according to the experts' opinion, why many projects regarding a smart city were not included (or a separate relative axis in the strategy). However, among the projects that have been included in the strategy of the ISUD Thessaloniki, are the intelligent integrated traffic management system, the integration of the traffic control centers, and the electric vehicles, but their participation in the whole strategy is limited.

Despite the repeated lockdowns in 2020 due to the pandemic, the good progress of the program continued and as a result, at the beginning of 2021, the total budget of the ISUD strategy from the Operational Program 2014–2020 of the region of Central Macedonia was increased by 15 million euros, reaching a total of 100 million euros of public expenditure.

4.2. SWOT Analysis

All experts consider that the course of the Thessaloniki ISUDS until early 2020 has been very successful, while all experts expressed concern about the continuation of the program due to the delays that the COVID-19 pandemic may cause in the near future. The two-year period since the activation of the program was fully utilized by the Planning Authority, the beneficiaries, and those involved in its implementation. Subsequently, the quarantine imposed in March 2020 halted this momentum due to the suspension of work, both in the implementation of projects and in their management by the executives of the Municipalities, the Urban Authority, and the Special Management Authority of the ROP of Central Macedonia.

From the analysis of the questionnaires in the context of the Delphi approach, the SWOT analysis of the main strengths, weaknesses, needs, opportunities, and threats to the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy of Thessaloniki emerged.

4.2.1. Strengths and Weaknesses

From the initial in-depth interviews, and subsequent consensus circles that took place among the experts, there was absolute agreement on the strength of the Thessaloniki ISUDS, which was the program management model. Meanwhile, a high level of agreement was also reached on the expertise of the human resources involved in the implementation of the technical and development programs. The integrated nature of the strategy, as well as the "green" projects included, were also highlighted as strengths. The purely urban and socio-economic projects included in the strategy were ranked among the strengths of the strategy, but with less weight by the experts.

As shown in Figure 8, the most important weakness highlighted was the low budget of the Thessaloniki SUD strategy, given the very high project needs of the region, followed by the implementation time and bureaucracy. Among the weaknesses, also to a lesser extent but equally important, the institutional/legislative framework and the fragmentation of responsibilities in implementation (many stakeholders and departments involved in the implementation of projects) were identified by the experts.
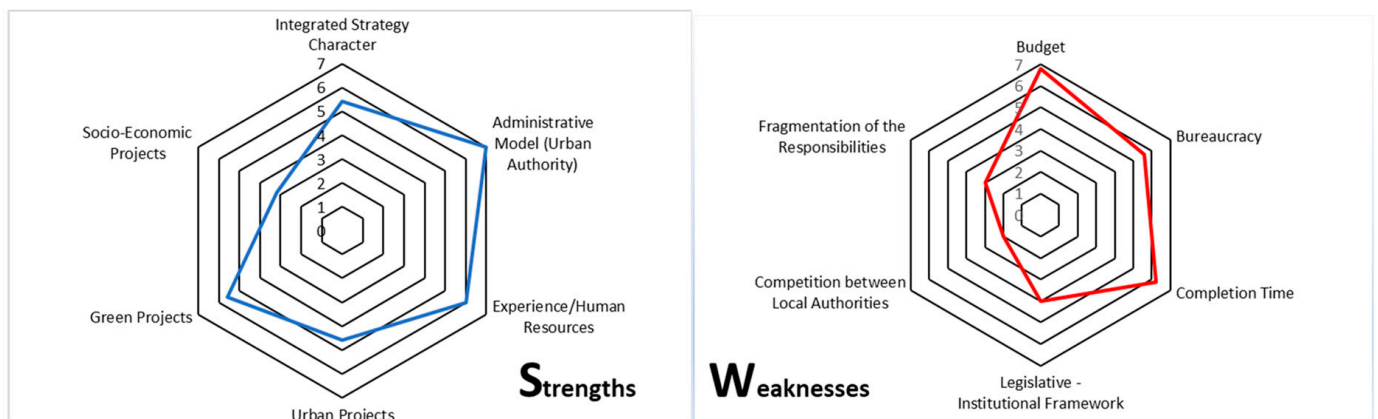
Figure 8. Strengths, and Weaknesses of Thessaloniki ISUD strategy.

4.2.2. Opportunities and Threats

From the results of the survey, and as shown in Figure 9, the most important opportunities recorded in relation to the Thessaloniki SDS are the trends presented internationally for the empowerment of cities in the direction of green and 'human' conditions, as well as the institutional and economic empowerment of local authorities (a continuous effort in the Greek territory during the last decades). The research also highlighted, as important opportunities, the continuation of co-funded programs and the flow of Community and national resources, the strategic geographical location of the city of Thessaloniki in the Balkans, especially as a transit and trading center, and, finally, the tourism development that the country has been experiencing in the last decade and the willingness to recover its economy after the financial crisis that preceded it in the period 2008–2019.

The experts identified the COVID-19 pandemic as the most important threat in relation to the strategy, followed by the economic crisis and climate change, which appear to be equally important threats to the sustainable urban development of the city. The continuous increase in problems in the city (traffic etc.), the unstable institutional framework in Greece, and finally the dependence on private developers for the implementation of public works (mainly national or local contractors' companies who are few in number and, for this reason, indirectly impose their terms), were also identified as important threats to the strategy of Thessaloniki's urban development.
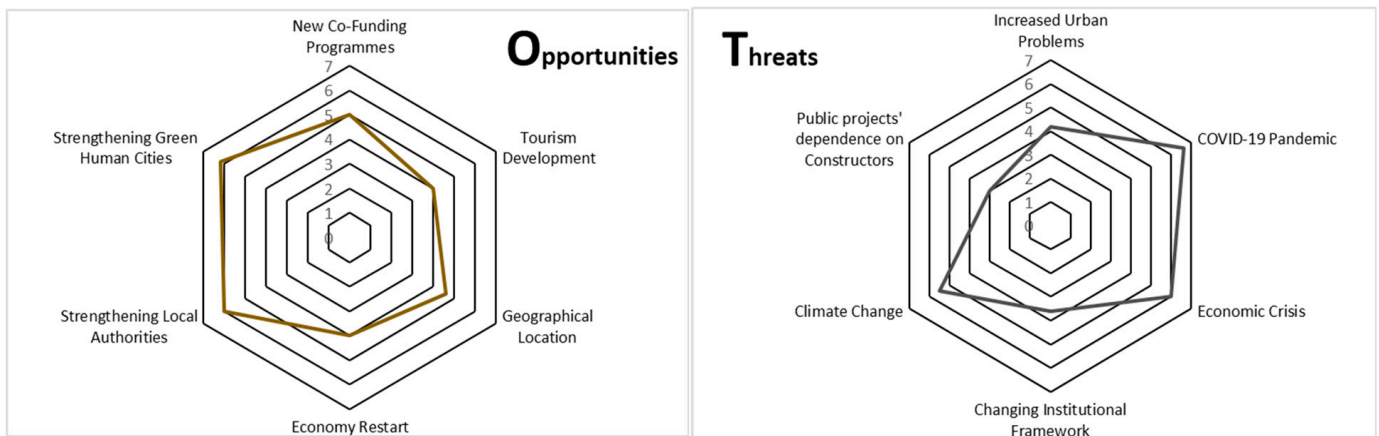
Figure 9. Opportunities and Threats of Thessaloniki ISUD strategy.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The Thessaloniki ISUDS is a comprehensive plan that fills an important gap, as there has been no institutionalized development strategy for the Thessaloniki region (either as an urban complex or as a set of urban municipalities) that addresses the economic, social, demographic, and environmental challenges in an integrated way. The ISUDS has filled an important gap concerning the existence of a holistic all-inclusive plan for the development of the city of Thessaloniki. Whatever approaches have been taken so far through, for example, regulatory plans, master urban plans, or operational plans of municipalities, have not met the requirements of an integrated strategy due to their focused nature, limited spatial scope, and lack of synergies.

The beginning of the implementation of this strategy could be described as being dynamic, although the available financial resources are very limited compared to the economic, environmental, and social needs of the city, which is in line with the findings of similar studies [1,9,27]. The design of the strategy followed organizational rules and approaches that yielded its integrated character, unlike similar programs of previous programming periods that were described by informants (mostly officials) as fragmented and confusing. The successful and rapid activation of the program is mainly due to the efficient operation of the Urban Authority and the considerable experience of the departments involved in the implementation of co-financed projects in the Region of Central Macedonia (SMA, technical and programming departments).

The design and implementation of the ITI-ISUD strategy required the consensus and cooperation of different local and regional government agencies, which was successfully achieved under the metropolitan umbrella [71]. In the words of the Deputy Mayor of the Metropolitan Unit of Thessaloniki and President of the Urban Authority during the interview: "*all mayors from the beginning were impeccable and fully cooperative and, in all processes, and meetings they showed willingness and consensus*", and those of the Technical Services Director General of the Region of Central Macedonia, who added that this was unprecedented and that he does not remember anything similar in his long professional career. The mayors involved in recent years have possibly been facing more intense pressure from the pressing problems of their municipalities; pressure may also come from their citizens, who are urging for solutions and the improvement of urban conditions, which leads to a consensual attitude on their part and a willingness to use every available financial resource for urban regeneration.

There is a widespread agreement that the most important aspect of the strategy appears to be the cooperation (regardless of the motives for achieving it) within the Urban Authority and the creation of a model of metropolitan management of the program, and possibly a model of independent metropolitan administration in the future [46,47,72]. Through the strategy implementation, and the creation of an innovative and effective urban authority that relies on the cooperation between urban municipalities and the metropolitan unit of

Thessaloniki, there seems to be a substantial gain for the urban area [73,74]. Moreover, the recognition of the innovative character of the Thessaloniki Urban Authority as a model of metropolitan management/governance has already taken place; it has already won international awards, praised as a model of good practice and administration in the framework of European programs and projects (Bravo Governance Award, INTERREG EUROPE REFORM program, European Platform (Eltis) for Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans) [75,76]. In effect, this new "metropolitan" management administration respects Article 4 of the 'Kallikrates' reform plan [17]; at the same time, it gives coordination and development content to the Metropolitan Unit of Thessaloniki, while introducing new management practices and standards for future use. During the implementation of Thessaloniki's integrated urban development strategy, the management model, despite its complicated structure, has worked effectively and efficiently as an Urban Authority. The Thessaloniki metropolitan unit, although by law has restricted powers, coordinated the municipalities involved and gave the Urban Authority an entity for its work. The SWOT analysis that has been based on the opinions and experience of experts, and has shown that, in addition to the innovative model of governance and the integrated character of the operational program, this was an equally important positive aspect of Thessaloniki's ISUD strategy. The integrated character was based on the four axes of the business plan, which were called to face the city's economic, social and environmental direct needs in the context of the limited economic resources of the strategy. Although, according to experts, the absence of an extra axis for a smart city was obvious and could contain important projects which would be aimed at upgrading and modernizing Thessaloniki city, a limited number of projects for the smart city were in fact implemented in the context of the 4th axis, mainly concerning the effectiveness of public administration. Among the axes, the axis of the environment (Green Thessaloniki) was highlighted as the most important axis by the experts, and this shows that unlike other strategies [34], it has been given particular importance to urban green during design. Climate change, but also extreme weather events that have hit the city over the last decade, combined with the great need for green spaces apparently, has led to the reinforcement of the Green Axis with a significant proportion of the overall ISUDS budget; however, they have also given special importance to this axis in the context of strategy. Positive aspects of the strategy also included the axes related to the construction of infrastructures for Thessaloniki, as well as socio-economic support for vulnerable groups and citizens. The lack of important infrastructures and entrepreneurship support in the city has been evident in the recent decades, either through the operational problems that arose, or from the constant degradation of the city's productive base. The 12 -year financial crisis has led to business closures, inadequate staffing, and unemployment, particularly high for the city of Thessaloniki. According to experts, the strategy was a first step in the integrated treatment of urban problems and against the threats of the Thessaloniki urban complex.

In order to implement the strategy, according to the experts, chronic problems plaguing the Greek public administration and self-government had to be overcome. Bureaucracy, inconsistency in meeting timetables, an unstable institutional environment, and the division of responsibilities between different levels of government and agencies were identified by the research as the main problems, combined with the small budget of the strategy and the lack of cooperation between the stakeholders. In reality, none of these weaknesses have managed to stop the good progress of the implementation of the strategy, not even the threat of the COVID-19 virus pandemic; despite initially creating reasonable delays, the pandemic did not seem to prevent the ISUDS project's completion within the stipulated time limits.

At the same time, the city's growing problems continued to exist as the pandemic was followed by the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the energy crisis, and the spike in inflation, that resulted in a rapid increase in construction costs; this was at a time when a large part of the strategy's projects had already been implemented. From the external environment, the most significant threats to the strategy were also assessed by the experts to be climate change and the extreme phenomena with which it is related,

the constantly changing institutional framework, and the attitude of local and national construction companies toward public works, which usually exert pressure due to their limited number and the power they have in the construction sector.

Despite the weaknesses of the strategy and the threats from the external environment, the opportunities from the external environment related to the strengthening of the levels of local government during the last decade in Greece worked positively; this was also thanks to the continuous inflow of financial resources for co-financed programs from the EU. The international trend in favor of green cities also influenced the project and worked positively in shaping Thessaloniki's urban development strategy. At the same time, at the national level, there was optimism for the restart of the economy after the economic crisis, but also from the positive results recorded by the tourism activity in the country. Thessaloniki and the city's port are in a strategic geographical position in relation to the Balkan countries. It has prospects to develop into both an important transit center and trade center; in this case, it is necessary to upgrade the city both in infrastructure and in projects that will make it attractive and sustainable. According to the experts, the ISUD Thessaloniki strategy seems to be an 'example' and a 'model', and it is estimated that it will continue with a second phase in the programming period 2021–2027, enriched with an appropriate budget and a new operational program that will cover more urban needs.

5.1. Policies Suggestions

In the context of proposals for urban development policies, the role of the metropolitan units in the two major cities of Greece must be upgraded, both at the level of legislation and the level of responsibilities. Metropolitan units should act as an umbrella for inter-municipal projects and programs to ensure their broader character.

Generally, in EU countries, cities should seek the existence and functioning of a metropolitan level of governance, to formulate a metropolitan "vision" for their region and create a strategic and coordinating body that will promote projects of inter-municipal scope.

The signing of development cooperation pacts between different levels of government and civil society can solve a host of urban problems between authorities, save resources through economies of scale, and promote collaborations that will benefit all cooperating administrative, social agencies, NGOs, and groups of citizens.

The planning of urban development strategies should follow the bottom-up approach and be the result of a consensus, but also an integrated approach. The cases of integrated sustainable urban development strategies, based on the present research findings, show that it can be a 'model' for the implementation of 'complex' and demanding integrated urban business plans.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Perspectives

The research was launched at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was showing its first results worldwide, while Greece was entering its first lockdown after a short period of time. This fact was the major limitation that compelled the research to change methodologically and adopt the Delphi approach, remotely. Regarding the implementation of the integrated urban development strategy of Thessaloniki, the research was carried out at a stage where its positive course had already been charted and traced, but had not been completed, in order to make a first assessment of its impact on the urban space. Future research will seek to capture the impact of the strategy on the city and its residents through a survey of residents using a questionnaire and an ex-post evaluation. Future research will also try to explore the management framework and implementation of a typical integrated spatial investment in another territory (outside the urban area) in Greece, in order to capture both the differences in relation to the implementation of the ISUD strategy and the specific conditions outside the urban area.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, F.C. and A.K.; methodology, F.C.; software, A.K.; validation, A.K., K.M. and S.K.; formal analysis, F.C. and S.K; investigation, F.C. and S.K.; data curation, A.K., S.K. and F.C.; writing—original draft preparation, K.M. and F.C.; writing—review and editing, A.K.; visualization, K.M.; supervision, F.C.; project administration, F.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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