

## CHALLENGES OF MEDITERRANEAN CITIES

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At a time when many countries in the region are still experiencing unprecedented social changes—particularly in urban centers—the expectations of local partners, specifically regarding their right to exercise their prerogatives on behalf of their citizens, their will to promote a good urban governance and the new relationships between urban actors, underline the importance and timeliness of the issues to be debated during this conference. This note wishes to contribute to this debate.

### I – The findings of the Conference on Urban Development Strategies in the Mediterranean in 2011

In March 2011 Medcities organized here in Barcelona a conference on Urban Development Strategies in the Mediterranean at a time when the MENA region was entering what has become a long period of social instability. The author and Abdellah Lezam, joint authors of a report, alerted already on the challenges that the region was facing, challenges that were suspected, rightly, to be among the causes of this instability. The report to the conference noted that within half a century, southern and eastern Mediterranean countries have experienced fast paced transformations and dramatic changes in every respect.

Indeed, since the 1950's and 60's these Mediterranean countries, some of which had just recovered their independence, launched major economic and social programs that would have a lasting and even nonreversible influence on social patterns contributing to drain more and more rural populations to **urban centers** where development was taking place. Along with this strong urban growth, disparities quickly develop and national and local authorities, unprepared to face the situation, could not provide adequate answers at the right moment.

Unplanned urban development tends to become the rule with the accompanying challenges that many cities were not sufficiently equipped to deal with including: **social exclusion**, **inadequacy** (or absence) of the most basic **urban infrastructure**, difficult access to **basic social services**, scant employment opportunities and, correlatively, **large unemployment**, stressed physical **environment**, etc. Solutions proposed through social housing programs or master plans for urban development as well as employment strategies sometimes yielded results in specific areas, but had **limited impact** due to their lack of coherence, limited scope and centralized nature.

During the last decade, to attempt a more comprehensive approach to development, some cities in the region, often supported by international organizations, have been able to engage in strategies that include all aspects of development and involve a larger array of actors, particularly from the civil society.

Indeed, during the 1990s, major international organizations remark the poor results obtained by development policies in these countries, confirming the conclusions made above, including:

- The disparities in terms of development and the population's access to essential services and goods (schools, drinking water, sanitation, housing, etc.) had not been remedied.
- Uncontrolled urbanization in a context of escalating urban growth.
- A steadily increasing concentration of the poor in urban centers.
- All the above within a framework of inadequate technical and financial resources of local authorities.

But the major concern of these organizations was the expansion and quickened pace of urbanization in developing countries.<sup>1</sup> This situation is compounded by a growing concern about the quality (or lack of) urban governance, especially in many of the MENA countries.

If **urban governance** has become so important, it is because it is framed within a situation of excessive population concentration in large cities of these countries. Confronted with these structural dynamics, local governments had to address major urban issues (exclusion, economic development, housing, infrastructure, etc.) with often very limited human and economic resources and fiscal revenue.

"Urban governance" appeared in this context as the most appropriate urban management method to deal with urbanization challenges in developing countries. Within this framework, urban institutions should:

- Control more efficiently urbanization and its consequences in terms of poverty and ecological footprint;
- Be more responsive to citizen needs and meet their needs in education, health, housing, etc.;
- **Set up new consultation mechanisms with civil society.**

The processes usually adopted to engage such **consultation** mechanisms are often using a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, a precious tool to provide information on the strengths of the city and the opportunities it may seize and exploit, as well as on the **challenges** facing the city that need to be averted, minimized, or whose impact need to be reversed.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Population Fund, "State of World Population 2007".

A review of the SWOT analyses of the different city development strategies in the cities south and east of the Mediterranean conducted for the 2011 Medcities conference and the results achieved leads to the following observations.

**First**, the strengths identified in the different city development strategies are overall very similar. In practically all CDS analyses the same strengths are put forward:

- The city's geographic location, the climate, its convenient location within road and railway networks,
- Cultural and architectural heritage
- Available infrastructure and facilities, such as an airport, a university, etc.
- Available land and industrial zones for investment projects
- The city's attractiveness for major projects and investors
- Available (albeit mostly quantitatively) human resources

**Second**, among the weaknesses, translating what is perceived as challenges, we often find:

- The city's economic base
- Problems related **to unemployment, immigration and urban poverty**
- Problems related to urban settlements and **urban sprawl**
- Problems related **to basic facilities, transport and traffic management**
- **Environmental problems**
- Problems related to **local management and qualifications of the local administration's personnel, in a word governance problems.**

Once more, it appears that challenges are widespread. It seems unrealistic to try to set priorities in these conditions. Most city development strategies did not set priorities for their strengths or weaknesses so the analysis clearly becomes less relevant, even when it was carried out by some cities with great insight and a good understanding of the different aspects of a SWOT analysis (particularly concerning the challenges).

Using the findings of this report, the author in collaboration with Abdellah Lehzam developed "City Development Strategies guidelines for south and east Mediterranean cities". The objective was to provide city decision makers and local stakeholders with a tool more appropriate to the region as well as streamlining a more realistic/focused approach.

## II- City Development Strategies guidelines for south and east Mediterranean cities in 2012

The guidelines highlight and underscore forcefully what are the characteristics of the cities of the MENA region that should be kept in mind, put at the forefront of the analysis and guide the development of the city strategy. These include:

### **A very old and rich urban system**

The city, as qualified nowadays, was born in this region, especially in the Machrek area, where Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Tyr, etc., boast thousands of years of existence, and many other cities host medinas of high heritage value. These cities, along with their cultural value could play an important social and economic role (tourism, traditional craftsmanship, traditional jobs).

### **A high urban growth rate not matched with adequate delivery of basic infrastructures**

The sectoral report of the World Bank (September 2008) states that MENA region knows one of the highest demographic growth in the world, which is taking place in priority in urban areas where the ratio of urban population has jumped from 48% in 1980 to 60% in 2000 and should be over 70% by 2015. This is translated by an urban “explosion” that affects both large cities as well as medium or small size ones which will need to accommodate over 100 million new habitants in a little bit over a decade. This will put a huge strain on city managers who will have to deliver adequate urban services and infrastructures which are already, in most of the cities, insufficient, especially in informal neighborhoods.

Furthermore, in many countries, there is a continuous trend of urban growth along coastal lines such as in Algeria and Tunisia or along the Nile river in Egypt. Along with environmental problems such as sea water intrusion), this situation puts cities under potential threats due to climate change.

### **A high percentage of informal settlements as a consequence of land unavailability**

The number of people living in slums or informal settlements could reach 20% of the total urban population despite important efforts made these countries that have not yet been able to substantially curb the trend. This situation has an impact both in terms of social environment as well as in terms of employment for populations who belong to low income groups. This is due to a number of factors, including:

- Lack of serviced urban land affordable to the poor, and complicated procedures,
- High cost of private housing,
- Inadequate housing and land policy, often ruled according to free market law which does not favor the poor,
- Lack of strategic visions of national policies that have long been directed by physical planning that often ignored the reality of informal settlements.

### **An insufficient care to environmental issues**

The region generally suffers from a strong deficit in water resources which affects the majority of cities. This situation worsens the difficulties which the poor are already facing in accessing to reliable, regular and inexpensive drinking water. Also, quality of life and pollution, are issues still far from the daily concern of the population, with the exception of

some organizations of the civil society. Finally, the issue of climate change is still rarely debated at local level.

### **A delay in the implementation of the reforms aiming at the improvement of local governance and local democracy and a still marginal role of civil society.**

The guidelines underscore that local governance is essential for the development of the city, to insure an effective participation of the populations in the fight against poverty. Furthermore, it completes good governance at central level by helping in the smooth running of local institutions. The attempts of some countries of the region to improve local governance remain still shy, the whole region being very late in terms of decentralization of prerogatives and resources at local level.

As direct corollary of this delay in the implementation of a good local governance, local democracy is today at the center of the debates in the countries of the region. As the guidelines were written, these debates were sanctioned sometimes peacefully by reforms (or promises of reforms) the effective translation of which will allow the countries of the region to catch up an important delay. In other cases, they took forms of rough questioning of the hegemony of central powers.

#### **Eight characteristics of good governance according to the UNDP:**

- Participation
- Transparency
- Responsiveness
- Consensus orientation
- Equity
- Effectiveness and efficiency
- accountability
- Strategic Vision

Here is how this centralized power in MENA region is often perceived: *“These are systems where the governor (Wali) is more important than the mayor, where western-style local democracy remains hard to adopt. So far the centralized Arab pattern of government has demonstrated some effectiveness in term of infrastructure development, but also some obvious limitations in term of environmental management<sup>2</sup>”*.

The second corollary of this delay is the still hesitating participation of the civil society in the city affairs. In spite of some attempts, the participative approach involving in a real way representatives of the various groups of citizens remains very low as well as women participation still marginal.

### **Social dynamics are in contrast with the current practices**

It is not possible to list the specificities of the MENA region without mentioning the emergence since the year 2011 of the unprecedented social dynamics which hits almost all of the countries of the region. These protest movements that burst in most countries seem to be triggering some changes in the modes of governance in these countries and announce possible deeper changes in the coming years.

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<sup>2</sup> UN-Habitat: [Arab Cities on the way to Better Urban Life – Biau. 2010](#)

## ALEPPO

### A huge hope then a dismal failure

Supported by GIZ, in 2008, the mayor and city council identified the top priorities that were to be explored for the development of the CDS process. Six focal areas have been retained for the proposed Aleppo CDS, namely:

- Local Economic Development,
- Urban Service Delivery
- Urban Environment
- Urban Spatial Development
- Administrative and Financial Modernization
- Informal settlements

**From a governance perspective**, the report points at a number of issues that need to be addressed if the performance of the Urban Service delivery is to be improved including, in terms of relationship between the highest authority and the directorates:

- the **centralization** of the decision-making process,
- a weak coordination of the services,
- an **unbalanced financial planning**,
- lack of access to training and building team capacity,
- lack of criteria for evaluating the performance and **accountability of personnel**, etc.

### **Some successes of Aleppo's CDS**

#### ***Participation and partnership:***

The CDS process demonstrated the virtue of Aleppo's approaches consisting in constituting a strong CDS team both at political level (the steering committee gave a voice to key players such as the private sector and the academia community) as well as the operational level (the working groups have been instrumental in mobilizing main stakeholders which contribution was key in formulating the vision and developing participatory action plans). Municipal ownership was excellent due to a strong involvement of key municipal officers (heads of departments) and the broad-based membership at different levels of the organizational structure of the CDS process. This was consequently instrumental in ensuring continuity of the effort despite the change that occurred during the process at the head of the municipal council.

#### ***Scaling-up:***

The CDS process in Aleppo was successful in attracting attention of different other Syrian cities that attended main fora as well central government that was considering its replication. Given current circumstances this decision is postponed.

#### ***Communication:***

A very strong communication strategy is key to the success of a CDS process, especially in order to raise awareness, attract involvement of actors, and ensure sustainability of the efforts. Developing a multifaceted communication strategy involving local media, a website, posters and direct contact with social groups has enabled Aleppo to reach out and attract populations and actors that are not usually prompt to engage with city officials.

## Saida Lebanon Fighting for local empowerment

**Role of Saida's municipality in decision making with regards to development projects within the city:** Within the current institutional and legal framework, the city's elected municipal representatives tend to play a secondary role. This is due in part to the very restricting legal framework, which hampers the financial independence and management capabilities of the municipality. This is also reflected in its socio-economic and political role as an institution in charge of local development.

**Strategic Objectives. Axes of intervention proposed include:**

- Municipal action towards the integration of marginalized groups into the city services and economic development such as poor Lebanese families and Palestinian refugees.
- The municipality coordinates its projects and works with the union of municipalities and vice versa
- The municipality organizes and structures the tax base and tax collection in the city and its surroundings in cooperation with the union of municipalities

### **Security is an additional and innovative Strategic Objective**

## III –in 2016 - Serious challenging affecting the Mediterranean space

### The analysis of CMI

At a training meeting organized by Giz, earlier this year, the director of CMI, Mourad Ezzine, gave a brief and enlightening statement on what CMI see as serious challenges affecting the Mediterranean space, mainly in the MENA region.

**First among these challenges CMI identifies the challenge of youth.** Today, 30% of MENA population is between the ages of 15 and 29, which represents a total population of 100 million youth. This segment is the most vulnerable especially in terms of access to formal jobs. The unemployment rate of this population group is often higher than 25% and might be as high as 50%.

The overall economic crisis which affects directly many of the MENA countries, including oil producing countries, is one of the reasons of this situation. Another cause is the quality of

education in these countries, which, despite being free, is of a low quality, leading to poor development outcome.

**Fragility and violence** is a second group of challenges that has emerged during the last few years. Since 2011 fragility has become the new reality in the MENA region with civil conflicts engulfing Syria, Libya, and other countries facing security concern from terrorism. Although violence expresses itself all over the country, their impact on cities, given their sounding board effect, is dramatically amplified and hits directly both the social balance as well as the economic growth. Moreover, conflict and violence are having a spillover effect in terms of migration and terrorism and disturb, sometimes violently, recipient countries (Lebanon, Turkey, ....).

This is of serious concern as peace and stability are prerequisites for development to take place.

**Climate change** appears increasingly as a major challenge in the region, at country but also at city level. Indeed, MENA is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change. As an example, 75% of MENA population is under water scarcity level. Over 2010 to 2030 period, Alexandria, Tunis and Casablanca will face individually potential cumulative economic losses of \$1billion from floods, coastal erosions, ground instability, marine inundation and water scarcity. Many other coastal cities are also under threat, such as Sfax, Gabes, Saida, Tripoli, etc. Finally, extreme heat, water scarcity, climate migration will contribute to increase **INSTABILITY** around the Mediterranean region.

Concluding his statement, the director of CMI underlined the lack of economic integration of MENA countries as an additional and serious challenge as it hampers chances for development.

#### IV - HOW ARE CITIES AND NATIONS RESPONDING TO THESE CHALLENGES?

Under the pressure of these challenges, countries in the MENA region have responded to counteract their effects so as to improve the social and economic environment. As an example, three countries of the Maghreb region are being briefly considered, especially in terms of granting more prerogatives to local authorities and voice to the populations.

**Morocco** is probably the country that has been the most proactive and engaged a number of actions and reforms often ahead of any pressing threat. As such the country has carried out a number of sustained efforts in empowering cities to root good governance practices at local level, including:

- Institutionalization of city development strategies as a tool to enshrine participatory development based on broad consultation of stakeholders.
- Implementing various and complementary programs to enhance capacities of local governments in dealing with challenges facing their city such as:

- Rationalizing energy consumption,
- Improving urban transportation systems,
- Management of solid wastes,
- Fighting urban poverty (Cities without slums program, national solidarity initiative, rehabilitation of old medinas...),
- Inter-cities cooperation and exchange programs

Many of these programs have been conducted under cooperation programs such as the CoMun program with Giz or development strategies supported by Medcities.

**Tunisia** has known a dramatic turning point after the 2011 revolution. One of the most salient actions conducted toward enshrining local democracy is embedded in the new constitution. A full chapter VII is devoted to local authority and states in its first article that: “local authority is based on decentralization”. Also, the constitution guarantees the representativeness of the youth in the Councils of local authorities and that local authorities manage freely their resources.

One important article states that “Local authorities adopt the instruments of participative democracy and the principles of open governance to insure the widest participation of citizens and civil society in the preparation of development projects, town and country planning and the follow-up of their execution”.

The new constitution has, undoubtedly, spurred the implementation of a number of programs aiming at rooting local governance and giving voice to the population. Among these programs the following ones have an important governance

- Local citizen’s offices (bureaux citoyens),
- Municipal council of youth,
- Consultation process of citizen,
- Population participation in solid waste management,
- Revision of CDS on a more participatory base,
- Etc.

GiZ, Medcities, and other international cooperation bodies assist local authorities.

**Algeria** has long been reluctant to engaging in decisive decentralization processes, despite official statements saying the contrary. Decades of bountiful resources from oil have given the different governments enough leeway to carry out centrally decided programs, leaving only scarce prerogatives to local governments, especially in terms of allocation of financial resources.

Today the government is abruptly confronted to an alarming situation of urban municipalities experiencing a serious and difficult financial situation that is already hampering the normal functioning of many of them and lack of land available to future urban development. They are entangled in a stifling bureaucracy which has paved the way to pervasive corruption practices

that destroy progressively citizens' values and threaten the very sustainability of all the system.

The recent downturn of oil market has, typically, impelled the government to accept decentralization of power to local authorities, encouraging them (and even requesting them) to play an active economic role and improve their fiscal income, as that central budget is less able to subsidize cities.

While, for many years, cooperation programs proposed by international cooperation to discuss decentralization matters have been repeatedly shunned, the recent proposal of Giz to support cities in improving infrastructure management is being favorably considered.

However, the nagging question of observers is whether the attitude of the government will not be reverted in case (not very likely) the oil market becomes more favorable in the near future.