

Cities and Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean

Working paper

“*Our Common Future*”, the report prepared in 1987 for the United Nations by the World Commission on Environment and Development, defined sustainable development as:

“a development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The formula has since gained ground, and nowadays four pillars of sustainable development are generally distinguished: economic development; reasonable management of natural resources, and especially of non-renewable ones; equitable distribution of the yield of development within the present generation; and not leaving mortgages to the future generations.

The contribution of towns to the sustainable development results essential for more than one reason, but it doesn't come on its own, as it requires a **better collective mastery of urban development**. The work carried out by the Mediterranean Commission for Sustainable Development (MCSD) since 1999 on the subject, allows for drawing up a preliminary regional vision on the stakes of urban development and environment in the Mediterranean.

URBAN DEMOGRAPHY - STABILISED IN THE NORTH, VERY DYNAMIC IN THE SOUTH

More than 64% of the population of the 22 Mediterranean riparian countries lives in towns in the year 2000. In the year 2025, the rate of urbanisation of the region as a whole could reach 72% (trend scenario).

- In the countries of the northern shore (from Spain to Greece), the urbanisation rate will grow only slightly in 25 years, from 67% to 69%. The population of the agglomerations will grow from 129 million inhabitants in the year 2000 to 135 million in the year 2025, with the urban population of the coastal regions remaining practically unchanged.
- In the countries of the southern coast (from Turkey to Morocco), in spite of a strong slowing down of demographic growth, the rate of urbanisation will grow from nearly 62% to 74%. The population of the agglomerations will grow from 145 million inhabitants in the year 2000 to 243 million in 2025, of which more than 30 million new inhabitants for the agglomerations of the coastal regions.

In the future, **94% of urban growth in the region will occur in the countries of the South**. As for the expected growth of the towns themselves, taken individually, several factors - economic, political, administrative, religious and others - influence urban dynamics within a national territory; however, within the present context of globalisation and liberalisation of economy, urban growth risks to become highly selective, concentrating on certain agglomerations, or even on certain regions, to the detriment of others. There is also the risk that the differences between towns, as well as within towns themselves, and human pressures on natural resources (water, soil, coastline ...) will become greater.

In a context characterised by disengagement of the State and weak local finances, the Mediterranean towns, and particularly those of the southern and eastern shores, are or will be faced with **management of the contradictory goals** between the aspiration to achieve integration in a globalising economy, the growing difficulties to meet the needs of the local population, and the responsibility of managing urban environment.

HIGHLY CONTRASTING URBAN CONCERNS IN THE SOUTH AND IN THE NORTH

In the South, uncontrolled urbanisation and sprawling

For several decades now, the southern Mediterranean towns have been facing a triple transformation: densification of ancient urban tissues, proliferation of spontaneous housing, and considerable urban sprawl. Simple and legible urban structures are replaced by fragmented configurations, with suburban and peri-urban spaces offering the image of a still incomplete patchwork.

Densification of ancient urban tissues. As the urban growth rate was exploding, the building stock was becoming progressively saturated leading to the densification of historic urban quarters (in Morocco, 1070 inhab./ha in the medina of Tangiers, 900 inhab./ha in the medina of Fes, with 2000-2500 inhab./ha in some quarters), over-occupation of houses (in Cairo, 2 to 11 persons per habitation unit in some ancient quarters), and under-equipped housing with only the basic urban infrastructure and services.

Peripheral sprawl and spontaneous housing¹. All over, the insufficiency of traditional (public and private) systems of housing provision contributed to the proliferation of informal quarters in the suburbs of the towns. The phenomenon gained in importance in early 1970s, reaching considerable proportions ever since, both with regard to the percentage of new housing units built annually (between 60 and 80% in Damascus, near 60% in Cairo, 40% in Tunis and 55% in other Tunisian towns, 35% in Morocco ...), and to the percentage of the total number of inhabitants (in Turkey, 30% of the population; in Egypt, 34% of the population of Great Cairo, 40% in the Governorate of Alexandria, ...).

The proliferation of informal quarters has its deep causes in the failure of national housing policies to meet the growing needs, the absence of land ownership policy, and the inability of land-use management policies to stop rural-urban migrations. However, informal housing is already equally linked to the redistribution of inhabitants within the agglomeration (in the Tunis district, 70% of households living in the peripheral informal quarters originate from the town centre).

Largely insufficient urban infrastructure and services. Faced with such uncontrolled urban expansion in the southern countries, the basic infrastructure – water supply, electricity supply, sewerage –cannot follow, or follows with considerable delay. Urban waste management becomes even more problematic in ever increasing human concentrations, requiring specific policies adapted to the socio-economic context of the southern countries. Moreover, the informal quarters are served only fortuitously by a public transport system, i.e. only in the cases when they happen to be near an existing line.

Impacts on the environment and health. Deprived of public services, some urban areas of towns in the South can face public health problems (appearance of water-borne diseases, such as cholera, for example). Furthermore, occupation of land inappropriate for urbanisation, illegal housing in exposed areas (on steep slopes, prone to flooding) result in a higher sensitivity of those urban areas to natural hazards.

Everywhere, the spreading of urbanised areas takes place at rates often exceeding that of demographic progression. It is accompanied by considerable changes in land use, with loss of agricultural land, which is particularly precious where it is scarce (problem of national importance for Syria, Egypt, Algeria ...).

1 The term spontaneous or informal housing refers to an absence of legal procedure when building and, quite often, occupation and sub-division of land.

In the North, the costs of the "car civilisation" and of urban breaking-up

In the countries of the northern shore, where urban demographic growth is rather weak, urban changes are characterised by living styles increasingly depending on cars use, and by sprawling of agglomerations. The new forms of (peri-)urbanisation, growing quickly over the past two decades, go against the urban model of the "European city" – compact, centered, dense. The urban space has enormously expanded and the city of today is as much outside the walls as within the walls.

Dependence on cars and edge city development. The motorization has offered to an ever increasing public the possibility to go everywhere and whenever they want, as well as encouraged the transfer of jobs, commerce and services towards peripheral areas. It has also enabled a greater number of persons to live in a wider space. The distance of commuting, both by cars and by public transport means, increased as the activities dispersed. The commuting by cars has grown at a rhythm unimaginable 50 years ago, while the transfers from one suburb to another have grown fastest.

Environmental, economic and social costs. If the current development of the peri-urban areas and its translation in terms of mobility brings undeniable advantages for the individual, it increases considerably the cost of the functioning of the agglomeration for the community: continuous high consumption of space and energy, difficulty in making the public equipment profitable, degradation of the quality of life (congestions, air pollution, noise, disappearance of green areas), increased greenhouse effect which adds to global warming. The OECD estimates that urban traffic congestion costs – in terms of energy, pollution and time – are, on average, 5% of the GDP of its member states.

The urban sprawl also results in unsustainable socio-economic situations for certain categories of population: spatial segregation, low value housing, urban fallow lands, violence, costs of transport exceeding those of living for some households. In France, recent studies show that the commuting costs for modest revenue households who own the property, grow from 10% of their budget when they live in urban areas, to 30% if they move to a distant periphery: in this way, the economic advantages resulting from lower property costs in peri-urban areas are cancelled by additional budget needed for transport.

Loss of liveliness in the centres. Linked to the increased car ownership, the establishment of large commercial areas in peripheral areas along the road axes, with considerable parking areas, has contributed to the degradation of town centres and made it difficult for small businesses in town centres to survive, contributing, in turn, to economic decline and devitalisation of centres.

WHAT URBAN EVOLUTION AND WHAT RESPONSE CAPACITIES IN THE FUTURE?

In spite of exceptional adaptability shown by the Mediterranean cities all throughout their history, both in the North and in the South, the volume of changes that the society and environment can absorb is not unlimited.

In the **North**, it is forecasted that during the next 30-40 years, the volume of car and lorry traffic will double in numerous European countries, where transport is already responsible for more than 20% of CO₂ emissions. Now, the commitments resulting from the Frame Convention on Climate Change (reduction of CO₂ emissions by the year 2010 to the level of 1990) will be impossible to respect if depending solely on new technologies of improved energy efficiency of motor vehicles. Therefore it becomes equally necessary to influence the mobility at the source, starting from a more appropriate town organisation.

Accordingly, recent work carried out within the European Commission, advocates a compact town model and recommends a series of intersectoral measures aimed at stopping urban sprawl: mixing land uses, land policy, and integration of physical planning tools with those of transport policy.

However, when implementing policies aiming at a sustainable development, local communities face serious difficulties, such as:

- existence of sometimes rivalling state procedures, originating in various ministries and overlapping on a site, which contributes to the fragmentation of local actions;
- sectoral organisation of services at the local level, which hinders a cross-sectoral action;
- difficulties in inter-municipality cooperation, whereas a larger geographic approach, at the level of agglomeration, district, province or department, region, would be required to deal with environmental or social development matters, which means overcoming rivalries among local communities.

For the **southern countries**, the possibilities to meet the needs of the population, and to control the impacts on the environment and health, resulting from the rapid urban growth, seem limited. Insufficient or obsolete urban infrastructure as well as the land use inadequate for urbanisation, could undoubtedly be overcome with the current urban engineering technical means, but the towns of the South have neither financial means nor institutional framework that would enable the implementation of “technological packages” proposed to them.

The state of the environment in the southern countries could further deteriorate with the implementation of the Euro-Mediterranean free trade zone, envisaged for the year 2010, unless it is accompanied by appropriate policies. With the suppression of tariff barriers, the number of cars (currently less than 30 cars/1000 inhabitants in the southern countries, as opposed to 400 in Spain, Portugal, France) will grow, with harmful environmental and health effects in the southern towns, as demonstrated in the case of Beirut (200 cars/1000 inhabitants in Lebanon).

As for the **local capacities for decision-making and management**, those are generally limited. Almost everywhere, there have been efforts towards decentralisation and transfer of competence from the state to the local communities, both with regard to town planning matters (land-use plans, issuing of building permits ...) and to managing environmental protection and other services (urban waste collection and treatment, creation of green areas ...), but it has not been followed by a corresponding transfer of resources. Therefore, the basic communities face serious difficulties in the exercise of their competencies, especially due to:

- weak administrative and technical capacities, which makes them dependant on the State technical services under the competence of sectoral directorates at higher administrative levels (governorate, province, willaya, mohafazat ...);
- modest fiscal resources of their own, which hinders the implementation of environmental management/protection measures and improvement of the living conditions.

A greater manoeuvring room at the local level appears to be indispensable, with regard to administrative, technical and financial capacities, even though none of the important problems of an agglomeration can be dealt with at a single scale any more. However, if towns should play a more important role in sustainable development, that doesn't mean that the **national authorities** should be relieved of their responsibilities. Quite the contrary: the impetus of national public authorities remains indispensable, as well as the reaffirmation of the goals of solidarity, and an important taking over of heavy infrastructure or social assistance.

WHICH CONTRIBUTION OF CITIES TO A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE MEDITERRANEAN?

The reflection work launched within the MCSDD, although able to reflect only partially the complexity and great variety of situations in both South and North, still shows some common trends and signs of unsustainable urban development on both shores of the Mediterranean.

MCSO work should lead, by end 2001, to strategic proposals showing directions for a useful regional action (Euro - Mediterranean co-operation) in a domain concerning almost 2/3 of the Mediterranean population, whose importance for sustainable development in the Mediterranean and for the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean space requires to be taken into greater consideration.

The **exchange of experience among towns** and **strengthening of local capacities** stand out as actions needing strong promotion in the Mediterranean, focusing on some common objectives to move from the present situation to a more sustainable one. To that aim, four courses of action seem to be of priority:

- On the policy level, a better connection of decision levels, and a better harmonisation of actions among the state, local communities and various partners of the civil society (enterprises, associations, the so called informal sector ...), aiming at:
 - a reduction of the gap between the existing legislation (on protecting agricultural lands, on zoning, on stopping squandering of resources) and its implementation;
 - a better combination of the different possibilities for financing urban development respectful of the environment.
- On the functional level, linking of town-planning, transport, and housing issues in order to improve the quality of life in the towns.
- On the social level, the importance of land instruments that could allow, in the South, to offer improved environmental conditions as an alternative to informal housing; and in the North, to diversify the housing supply in town centres.
- On the technological level, the need to adapt urban technologies to the specific socio-economic conditions of the southern countries.

The stake is to promote towns with more solidarity and more coherence, where the Mediterranean citizens could live well, without transferring their development costs to others (persons, generations, surrounding areas).

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