

Urban Development Strategies in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries: Emerging Practices versus Deep-Rooted Attitudes

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For nearly a half century, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries (SEMCs) have been experiencing major changes that will deeply shape them, and in particular their urban areas. The latter are experiencing considerable expansion and demographic growth, rapidly accompanied by imbalances to which poorly prepared national and local authorities are unable to appropriately respond. This includes the emergence of unplanned urban settlements, with the attendant exclusion and complete or near complete lack of urban infrastructure and basic social services, but also the spread of unemployment and the damage to the urban environment. The tentative answers to this situation (public housing programmes, town planning schemes and urban development plans, targeted employment programmes, etc.) have often contributed but piecemeal solutions, and their lack of consistency and comprehensiveness and their centralised nature have reduced their effectiveness.

Based on the urban development strategy practices advocated by various international institutions and already successfully applied in the North, several cities in the region have recently established their own development strategies. The results of these first experiments are naturally different and unequal, but the actors directly concerned seem unanimous in acknowledging their validity and benefits, even at this early stage.

Coinciding with a time when numerous countries in the region are experiencing unprecedented social dynamics, particularly in cities, a conference held in

Barcelona in March 2011 allowed an evaluation of the results obtained and expectations of the cities concerned. The conference organisers (see: www.csp2011bcn.org) commissioned the author of the present paper, in collaboration with Professor A. Lehzam, to draw up a report which has served as material for this paper.

Introduction

Spearheading the economies of these countries, cities have quickly attracted a peripheral or rural population seeking employment opportunities and better living conditions. In a region where the population was essentially rural only 50 years ago, the urban population will represent three quarters of the overall population by 2025, according to a forecast by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Already places of recurring difficulties, cities today reflect countries' most significant frailties, particularly on the social and environmental levels, and are increasingly serving as the stage for confrontations, at times of a brutal nature, posing major challenges for those who are in charge of planning their development and managing them. To rise to these challenges, anticipate the economic, social and spatial development of cities and complement and, at times, fill the gaps in classic urban planning practices, many countries have been engaging in more global practices in their urban development for a decade now. These strategies all aim to establish the conditions allowing cities to modernise insofar as employment, urban habitat and infrastructure, and at the same time, ensure economic growth and improve governance.

Qualitative Assessment of City Development Strategies in the SEMCs

The above-stated report discussed the experiences of the cities of Tetouan (Morocco), Sfax (Tunisia), Alexandria (Egypt), Ramallah (Palestine), Amman (Jordan), Aleppo (Syria), Tripoli (Lebanon) and Izmir (Turkey), some of them having renewed the initial exercise and updated it (Tetouan, Alexandria, Sfax).

Received with enthusiasm in many of these countries, above all by local actors, because they focus on priority urban problems and propose action plans generally in keeping with available or foreseeable budgets, City Development Strategies (CDSs) seem to offer the SEMCs a more economic solution than traditional planning, which has become too expensive, even if the architecture of this new approach is not fully developed and the term “strategic planning” can mean different things to different actors.

First of all the report acknowledges that the CDS procedure, based on consensus and a broad, participative approach, has allowed cities implementing one to project their development on the long term and, for some, to launch short and medium-term action plans as well. The fact remains that the results are unequal and the forms of carrying out these strategies and their implementation depends on the economic, social and above all institutional contexts of the countries concerned.

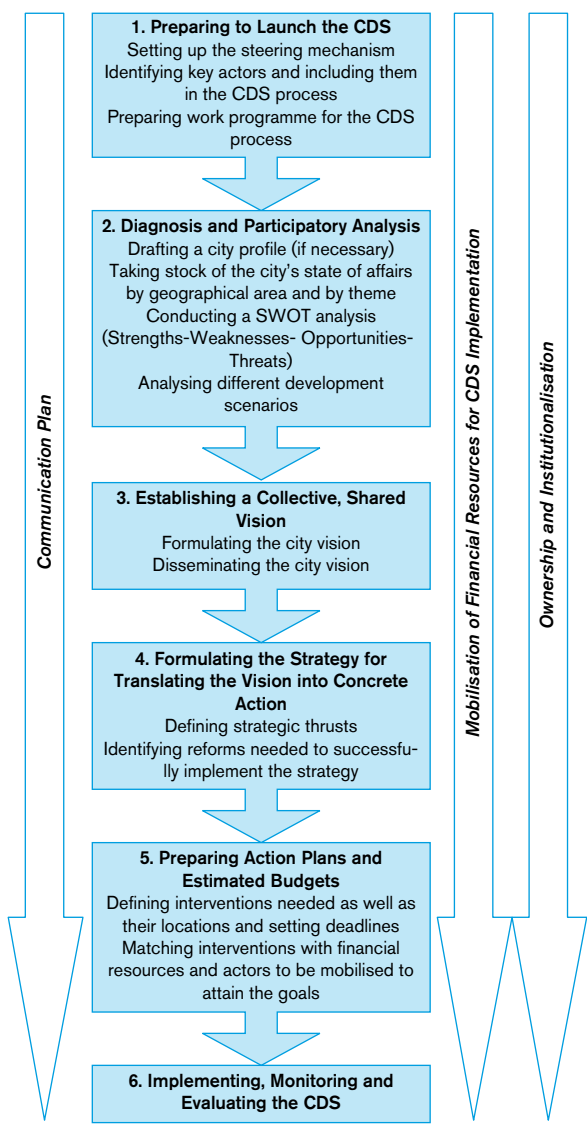
On the methodological level, all the CDSs effected were done so on the basis of the generally advocated methodology (i.e. the one advocated by the Cities Alliance), by adopting the classical stages according to which the report was structured, namely:

- Preparatory stage in which the objectives are defined, the project leadership established, actors organised and the conditions for motivation and participation created;
- Formulating the strategy itself and the action plans to support city development;
- Effectively implementing the plans and programmes, this stage remaining the least advanced in the majority of cities studied.

Preparatory Stage, Themes to Consider and the Matter of Leadership

In principle, a city’s affairs are enshrined in all regulatory texts of countries in the region as falling within

CHART 22 The Main Stages of a City Development Strategy



Source: Based on the guidebook *Towards a New Generation of Cities: Guidebook for City Development Strategies in Southern Mediterranean Countries*, A. Lehzam and F. Tebbal, 2011, p. 16

the jurisdiction of the elected local government, under the authority and coordination of a mayor. It is he or she who in principle provides the leadership in conducting the CDS in an effective and abiding manner. Although the CDSs of Tunis, Sfax, Tripoli, Aleppo, Ramallah, Amman and Izmir were thus organised, it was the governors assigned to the cities of Tetouan, Alexandria or more recently, Settat and El Jadida in Morocco that conducted the processes. In fact, in the majority of SEMCs, the city governance system is dual, comprising, on the one hand, structures designated by the central government (governors), and on the other, the elected structures pre-

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sided by mayors whose decision-making autonomy, though recognised in texts of law, has yet to be perfected in order to lend mayors, together with the city inhabitants, real decision-making authority on the city's affairs.

Beyond the nature of leadership, the issue of the continuity of decisions and of the process itself remains uncertain insofar as changes of mayor or governor have often led to a slowdown or stop in the process, as was the case in Tetouan and Alexandria after the change in governor, as well as in Amman and Tunis when new mayors were elected. The issue of leadership is not a question of semantics; the leader of the process plays a key role in personifying the strategy, mobilising the actors, lending credibility to the works and building consensus on the issues under debate. A local elected official – rather than a civil servant, though a representative of the government – is the most suited to assuming this task.

Identifying the themes around which the city development strategy should be structured did not present any particular difficulties and, quite predictably, focused almost everywhere on the same generic problems faced by cities in the region: employment (in particular youth employment and the issue of informal employment), developing the local economy, improving the conditions for the administration and financing of the city's activities, spatial development, informal habitat and shanty towns, urban environment, social infrastructure and transport. The issue of urban governance and local democracy, while an underlying theme (in particular during debates), remained discrete during the preceding decade, but is called on, due to the social upheavals the region is experiencing, to be at the heart of the debates that will fashion the development of cities just as, one would hope, the issue of genre and the role of women in Arab society. Finally, emerging issues such as climate change and the energy economy are rarely discussed, possibly indicating that these issues are far from people's daily concerns.

Collectively Devising Vision, Strategy and Action Plans

The sequences of CDS development are stages for which a participative spirit and ownership of the process are expected to be built. One of the stages consists of inviting the different actors to formulate a vision of the city for the forthcoming 15 or 20 years.

Despite the difficulty this exercise seems to have presented among the actors unaccustomed to being asked, there has often been a very strong commitment by the private sector, clearly a partner determined to play a leading role in city development, even beyond the dimension of economic development, as was the case in Sfax, Alexandria and, quite clearly, in Aleppo. Traditionally less present in the debates, the marginalised populations of the informal city often express themselves through organised, committed groups, in particular youth or women's groups (Alexandria, Aleppo, Tetouan). This stage of formulating a vision has often been a difficult exercise requiring reconciliation of conflicting positions.

By the same token, the formulation of strategic lines along which to develop the CDS as well as that of action plans have remained generic and are often an enumeration or long "wish list," which in our view reflects the authorities' desire to satisfy the demands of all social groups. In any case, the following cities are an exception: i) Alexandria, whose well-articulated action plan has enjoyed substantial funding, both national and foreign, guaranteeing the implementation of the CDS; ii) Sfax, which has the support of all the municipalities comprising the greater Sfax metropolitan area, as well as the contributions of a competent technical team; and iii) the restoration programme for the old city of Aleppo (a CDS *avant la lettre*), which has been continuously implemented and has reached a very advanced stage.

Implementation and Institutionalisation of the CDS

With the exception of the city of Aleppo, the majority of the CDSs studied in the SEMC region are either being developed or have not yet reached a level of implementation advanced enough to be able to draw any firm conclusions. It is, however, important to keep in mind that the establishment of an entity designed to render the action plans operational is generally a concern that is not considered until late in the process, which prevents an effective "handover" and above all, deprives those in charge of implementation from gaining the necessary sense of ownership of the CDS project.

One of the weak points of the CDS experience remains its low level of institutionalisation in countries in the region. In contrast to the classic master plans, for instance, which are documents of a regulatory

nature, binding on third parties and with which compliance is mandatory (at least in theory), the CDS has not yet been legally granted the power of a regulatory instrument, with the exception of Turkey or Morocco, where a strategic planning system resembling the CDS has been institutionalised.

Contributions of CDSs in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Region and their Perspectives

Despite the various shortcomings noted, it is undeniable that the exercise of leadership, participation, consensus and decision-making on the local level which a CDS obliges has already had many positive effects insofar as:

- For a certain number of cities, it is the first time that all local-level actors meet to reflect on the city's problems and its future;
- The CDS contributes to the comprehension of responsibilities on the local scale, the population becoming aware of the municipality's prerogatives and the boundaries of said prerogatives;
- For the city, it is a communication tool on the national and international levels;
- It likewise provides an opportunity for capacity-building for municipal elected officials and technicians;
- The action plans established through a CDS, even if they are not yet regulatory instruments, are often used by cities as benchmarks for projects to be effected by the authorities and national and international funding agents.

Over the course of a decade, we have observed the evolution of attitudes among local partners, who are increasingly taking the initiative of engaging in the CDS process in their respective cities, taking their cue from the experience accumulated by "pioneer" cities. A recent wave of CDS programmes have been undertaken in certain smaller cities in Jordan as well as in Sousse (Tunisia), Settat, El Jadida and a number of other cities in Morocco, Sidon (or Saida) in Lebanon, etc. This trend reveals a growing awareness that the rise in urban problems can only be addressed on the local level and on the medium and long-term perspectives.

Despite such considerable progress, much remains to be done to correct shortcomings and raise these strat-

egies to the level of success experienced in the Northern Mediterranean and elsewhere. These include shortcomings in local governance whose rectification requires central authorities to agree to delegate the necessary prerogatives to the local level, along with the powers and means to accompany them.

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In this regard, the Barcelona conference and more recent meetings, such as the one in Beirut (February 2012) of cities in the region having established a CDS (Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia), recommend:

- Reinforcing CDS ownership by including a wider representation in the decision making process;
- Promoting the institutionalisation of the CDS nationwide;
- Supporting the creation of networks of cities having established a CDS, taking advantage of existing networks or networks currently being developed (MedCities, UCLG/NA, GIZ CoMun).

It is quite likely that the changes occurring in the region and the calls for greater democratisation of public life, as well as the need to grant more decision-making power to the levels directly concerned (subsidiarity) will lend additional legitimacy to local authorities, which will make CDS a central, essential tool in their development policies.

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