City Diplomacy: An Emerging Tool to Enhance Well-being in MENA Cities

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“While it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the sake of good life,” argued Aristotle about the polis, the city-state of Ancient Greece. Today, this primal vocation of cities appears all the more difficult to fulfill. The impressive acceleration in urbanization has generated a long list of challenges in social, economic and environmental terms in urban centres worldwide. This dynamic appears particularly evident in the MENA area, whose urban population has increased from 35 percent in 1960 to 66 percent in 2020,\(^1\) a consequence of both fertility rates and internal and international migration. This increase in population has, in fact, generated growing inequalities, made manifest by informal neighbourhoods, unemployment, especially among youth, increasing pressure on infrastructure, and health risks related to the unsanitary housing conditions of a large part of the population, a primary cause of the spread of infectious diseases such as Covid-19. In addition to this, for millions of Libyan, Yemeni, Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian, and Israeli citizens come risks related to wars, conflicts and systemic violence.

Hence, it seems clear that the challenge of improving the well-being of their residents appears particularly complex for cities in the MENA region. However, an innovative tool is strengthening the capacity of such municipalities to act in this field: city diplomacy. Through the skillful use of it, in both its regional and global dimensions, municipalities obtain technical, economic and political resources through which to improve the various indicators that make up the concept of urban well-being. This article provides insight into the regional impact of this burgeoning dynamic, outlining its potential evolution.

Urban Well-being in the MENA Region

Addressing urban well-being in MENA poses a sizeable conceptual challenge. First, the region’s cities are heavily influenced by its stark political, socioeconomic and cultural diversities and contradictions. Therefore, it seems reasonable to question whether it is legitimate to consider urban centres of such different sizes, development levels and even security conditions as coherent and comparable entities. Nevertheless, in the MENA region, as in the rest of the world, cities share two main characteristics, the first stemming from their institutional identity, the second pertaining to the role they play in major transnational dynamics on both regional and global scales.

From an institutional angle, regardless of the actual powers and rules of operation assigned to them by national law, cities universally constitute the political institution closest to citizens. This allows them not only to be able to gain in-depth knowledge of local dynamics but also to engage citizens and local actors in participatory strategies. This closeness takes on its whole meaning precisely in relation to major transnational dynamics that represent predominantly urban challenges bearing severe repercussions for citizens’ well-being. From climate change to migration, from cultural diversity to uncontrolled urbanization, humanity’s major global

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challenges indeed affect MENA cities with particular harshness. They are also compounded by challenges with a particularly marked regional dimension related to the influx of displaced persons, the challenges of terrorism and administrative centralization of governance and resources, which often goes hand in hand with considerable limits in terms of spending capacity on the part of municipalities. It is precisely the awareness of sharing challenges of such urgency that has prompted a growing number of cities in the region to explore the innovative tools offered by city diplomacy.

A Diplomacy of Cities to Address Shared Challenges

The term “city diplomacy” refers to municipal governments’ practice of cross-border interaction with their peers from all over the world internationally with each other and with actors such as international organizations, development banks, NGOs and even foreign nations. Like nation-state diplomacy, city diplomacy takes the form of a series of bilateral and multilateral interactions aimed at pursuing interests or promoting values. This dynamic represents a major contribution to the evolution of how international relations work, overtaking the centuries-old order enshrined in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, under which the only legitimate actors on the international stage are countries. Launching what is now generally considered to be the (re)entry of cities on the international stage, namely the creation in 1913 of the International Union of Cities, the first international network of cities, the then-mayor of Ghent Emile Braun illustrated what persists in fact to this day as city diplomacy’s purpose and driving force: “to deliberate on the major problems that arise from the universal nature of the conditions of present-day life, which are more or less the same everywhere.”

Through knowledge exchanges and the launching of joint projects, the countless bilateral twinning and cooperation agreements and more than 300 international networks of cities have enabled them to deploy concrete solutions to their most pressing challenges. This dynamic is clearly visible in the way the United Nations has changed its interaction with municipal governments, initially categorized as mere expressions of civil society and now recognized as actors in their own right.

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As illustrated by the recent “Our Common Agenda” by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the involvement of cities is an integral part of the desired “more inclusive multilateralism.” In line with this aspiration are the many initiatives that global and regional international organizations have devoted to cities, ranging from platforms to foster their exchange of best practices and joint planning (such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, UNICEF’s Child Friendly Cities Initiative), to capacity-building activities for mayors (Asia Pacific Mayors Academy of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and UN-Habitat), and official gatherings to enable them to develop joint advocacy (Forum of Mayors of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe).

Urban Well-being and the Diplomacy of MENA Cities

Although still less widespread than in Europe or the Americas, city diplomacy represents a burgeoning dynamic in North Africa and the Middle East. In line with the global dynamic, city diplomacy in that region owes its diffusion precisely to its ability to foster a joining of forces to address shared challenges to the urban dwellers’ well-being and the sustainability of ur-
urban development. It is not surprising, then, that such action is particularly dedicated to combating the socioeconomic consequences of unregulated urbanization, climate change, the welcoming and integration of migrants, unemployment, inequalities by gender and socioeconomic group, and the often inadequate structures of municipal finance, which is highly dependent on transfers from the central government.

It is the specific characteristics of these dynamics in MENA cities that nourish the latter’s international action regarding the concept of urban well-being on a daily basis. The latter challenge is actually the consequence of the very pronounced level of centralization in the region, with only a few partial exceptions. Paradoxically, in fact, among the main drivers of the diplomacy of the region’s cities appears to be precisely the desire to overcome the constraints imposed by their respective national systems on the deployment of strategies aimed at ensuring urban welfare and sustainability. It is a challenge that unites the region’s cities and has found valuable allies in actors outside of it. Indeed, it seems clear that the spread of city diplomacy in the region is largely linked to cross-border collaboration with municipalities and networks in more decentralized countries, especially those in Europe. Countless European cities and city networks have shown a marked willingness to collaborate with counterparts in the MENA region. This is reflected in networks such as MedCities and programmes such as Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM), which are designed with a strong partnership and exchange perspective among cities in the macro-region.

Such interaction involves, with increasing frequency and intensity, even the municipalities most undermined by conditions generated by war and armed violence. This is particularly the case with Libyan municipalities, the targets of numerous capacity-building programmes by European partners such as ANCI and VNG International, the Italian and Dutch national city networks, respectively.

Quite often, foreign and international partners also play a key role in strengthening collaboration between cities in the same MENA country, involving them in projects that enable dialogue, collaboration and the exchange of best practices. For example, the National Federation of Tunisian Municipalities (FNVT) has, over the past few years, obtained support from UNDP, Cities Alliance, GIZ, VNG International and Medcities to strengthen the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Similarly, UNDP and the European Union have launched the Capacity-building Programme of Local Development Actors (CapDel) for Algerian cities, in partnership with the Ministry of Interior.

Alongside these transregional partnerships, a regional and cultural component completes the landscape of MENA city diplomacy. Examples are the activities of networks based on Arab identity (Arab Towns Organization, based in Kuwait City) and Islamic identity (Organization of Islamic Capitals and Cities, affiliated to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, whose General Secretariat is based in the city of Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Islamic urban identity has also been defined from an environmentalist perspective by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for Education, Science and Culture (ISESCO) with the recent launch of the Islamic Green City Excellence Award.

At the Maghreb scale, existing cooperation between cities has benefited from the impetus of external contributions, such as in the case of the Coopération des Villes et Municipalités au Maghreb (2016-2019) programme, sponsored by Giz with the aim of strengthening municipal leadership in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia in the field of sustainable development, or numerous technical and political meetings organized by the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF). Maghreb cities have also benefited from such support in the framework of Africa-wide activities, such as within the framework of the AIMF itself, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa (UCLGA), and thematic projects such as ASToN, a network of African cities sponsored by the French Cooperation Agency (AFD).

In summary, it is the specific characteristics of these dynamics in MENA cities that nourish the latter’s international action regarding the concept of urban well-being on a daily basis. Among the multiplicity of
areas involved to which this methodology is applied, this article directs its reflection to two of the main challenges to the well-being of MENA cities: migration and the relationship with nature.

Migration and Diplomacy in MENA Cities

Cities represent the primary destination for migrants and asylum seekers. It follows that, almost everywhere in the world, the way in which international migration is managed affects the general level of urban welfare in profound and multifaceted ways. Such management, therefore, is necessarily holistic to embrace both its manifold impact on the lives of its protagonists, that is, the welcoming and integration of the migrants themselves understood as individuals and groups, as well as what their arrival implies in terms of social, economic and cultural development on an urban scale.

While not being able to intervene in the management of migration flows or the status of migrants themselves – competencies firmly in the hands of national governments – a proactive attitude toward the reception and integration of migrants and asylum seekers is imperative for municipal governments. As a matter of fact, whenever not adequately managed on a local scale, international migration is a potential cause of socioeconomic indicators worsening related to the difficulty of absorbing an increased labour force and ensuring a peaceful coexistence among the different communities in the territory. Moreover, the fact that the influx of people requires adjustments to services such as transportation, waste management, or medical facilities to prevent them from being overburdened is generally well understood by both local decision-makers and public opinion. Finally, this is compounded by a challenge in terms of equity and decent working conditions, linked to the process of informalization that migration often generates in urban economies, with the spread of informal and underpaid labour often representing the first, if not the only employment opportunity for large segments of migrants, particularly if undocumented.

It is worth noting that, over the past decades, the relationship between MENA cities and the migration phenomenon has gradually evolved. From being almost exclusively areas of origin and transit of migration, these urban areas are now also destinations for migration. Whether it is sub-Saharan migration to cities in countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, or migration from Africa and Asia directed toward Gulf cities, a significant share of the region’s urban centres are thus confronted with the multifaceted and complex impact of incoming migration.

Indeed, such shared challenges and characteristics have prompted cities in the MENA region to initiate and join multiple multilateral urban partnerships on a global and regional scale on migration. The most celebrated actors active in the urban dimension of migration in the MENA region turn out to be the Mayors Migration Council and Cities Alliance (active on a global scale), the Africa-Europe Mayors’ Dialogue, the Mediterranean MC2CM initiative, and various bilateral programmes within the framework of relationships between national networks of cities, as well as twinning and cooperation agreements. Other major partners are international organizations and, in particular, the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The activities implemented through such partnerships are numerous and highly varied. They include peer-to-peer exchanges – often facilitated by international experts – the production of research on qualitative and quantitative aspects of migration on an urban scale, the adoption of joint agendas and strategies, and advocacy directed essentially at strengthening the voice of cities in national, as well as regional and global contexts.

The Regional and Global Challenge of Urban Environmental Policies

As a global phenomenon par excellence, climate change has a particularly catastrophic impact on cities in the MENA region, whose structural vulnerability to climate hazards increasingly and severely undermines the well-being of residents.4

The consequences for the well-being of citizens are obviously numerous, starting with the serious health risks related to both pollution and heat island phenomena, a 90 percent urban phenomenon that increasingly puts the very survival of MENA urban dwellers at risk.\(^5\)

Also notable is the impact of climate change in terms of food security. In fact, climate disruption significantly worsens a systemic problem in a region whose percentage of arable land is the lowest in the world (4.6 percent of total land, according to 2018 World Bank estimates). Increasing desertification and floods, combined with population growth, threaten to make MENA countries even more dependent on foreign food imports, exposing the population to volatile international prices.

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However, the significant differences observed in scientific studies related to the vulnerability of MENA countries to climate change make it impossible to identify a one-size-fits-all solution and underscore the need to integrate context-specific adaptation and mitigation into plans.\(^6\) The increasingly celebrated strength of international city action lies precisely in its ability to enable cooperation quickly and often informally, but effectively, according to the specific challenges, both bilaterally and within multilateral programmes and city networks.

The environmental diplomacy of MENA cities thus appears to consist of two components, mainly developed together: a branding dimension and a cooperation component.

While the purpose of branding is certainly to make the city more attractive by climbing international urban competitiveness rankings, it is increasingly the subject of joint reflection and sharing of best practices. Similar to what is happening in the field of migration, MENA cities appear to be fully and increasingly integrated into global thinking related to sustainable urban development.

A recent example is that of the 15-minute city, a concept developed by French-Colombian academic Carlos Moreno for the city of Paris and which owes much of its rapid global diffusion precisely to city diplomacy. In fact, this concept, which aims to rethink cities from the perspective of sustainability and quality of life by providing access to all essential and quality-of-life-related services (nature, arts, culture, sports), has become a major topic of discussion among a growing number of MENA cities thanks to the fact that it has been conveyed by numerous city networks with members in the region, such as ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability and C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group.

Also noted in this debate is the growing importance of cities’ interactions with international organizations, research institutions and universities based or active in the region. Indeed, these actors are increasingly playing the role of facilitators of municipal and regional government involvement in the international climate change debate.

Despite being a slogan embraced by a growing number of mayors in the region, the 15-minute city concept exemplifies the considerable obstacles in turning the environmentalist ambition of MENA mayors into a reality. Reversing dynamics such as the feeble urban density rate, limited planning of urbanization processes, and the resulting high dependence on cars will require massive investment in terms of urban interventions and infrastructure, long-term strategic planning capacity, and financial capability which, for now, most cities in the region, with the exception of those in the Gulf, do not have.

How to Unlock the Full Potential of City Diplomacy for Well-being in the Region?

The broad participation of MENA cities in countless international meetings and virtual or hybrid events,


\(^6\) NAMDAR; KARAMI and KESHAVARZ, op.cit
dedicated over the past few months to migration and combating climate change, demonstrates the existence of a regional debate to secure and improve the well-being of urban residents and their full integration into the debate on a global scale. However, it seems clear that progress on the ground remains partial in every part of the region, revealing the need for strengthening the capacity for strategic vision and concrete application of solutions needed on a large scale, moving beyond short-term and one-off pilot project-based approaches. Equally important is overcoming the obstacles associated with the already mentioned historical centralization of MENA countries, resulting in the limited autonomy of municipalities in terms of financial planning and financial resources, which are almost always inadequate in view of the magnitude of the challenges faced.

A promising response comes from the most recent, twofold evolution of city diplomacy. From the point of view of concrete actions carried out in the framework of international projects, almost all of them have been supplemented in recent years, enabling them to be streamlined and strengthened with a special emphasis on participation, impact assessment and communication. From the perspective of the long-standing obstacles related to centralization, advocacy campaigns by cities and their international and regional networks are benefitting from the increasingly convinced support in terms of both content and visibility from international organizations, which in the MENA region are headed by the UN Regional Commissions for West Asia (ESCWA) and Africa (UNECA) and UN-Habitat. Cities and international organizations are thus forging an “informal pact,” whose overt vocation is to innovate the management of well-being and sustainability according to the multilevel governance approach.

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Will cities and international organizations in the MENA region be able to develop joint advocacy capable of fully engaging national governments in such a shared effort for urban well-being? Given the urgency of what is at stake, one must hope for a prompt positive response.

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7 Kihlgren Grandi, op.cit