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Dossier thématique *Villes arabes, villes durables? Enjeux, circulations et mise à l'épreuve de nouvelles politiques urbaines*. Special Issue *Arab Cities, Sustainable Cities? Challenges, movements and testing of new urban policies south of the Mediterranean.*

ARAB CITIES, SUSTAINABLE CITIES? CHALLENGES, MOVEMENTS AND TESTING OF NEW URBAN POLICIES SOUTH OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The fight against climate change, eco-responsible urban development and the control of energy consumption have emerged as pressing public issues on the southern coast of the Mediterranean over the past several decades. Politicians and public authorities as well as private actors, civil society organizations (NGOs and the voluntary sector) and international bodies present in the countries of this region have all engaged with these challenges, which are particularly pronounced in cities. As spaces, cities now account for the bulk of the population and energy consumption; and as complex systems of institutional and economic actors, they are highly sensitive loci for experiments in sustainable urban development (SUD). Subsequently, the methods, applications and adaptation measures required for meeting this new imperative have been under discussion since the early 2000s, if not earlier.

The aim of this thematic issue is to examine the activities and projects underway to promote sustainable urban development, be it at the scale of one or several cities. Thus, our focus is not to describe the environmental vulnerability of Arab cities, nor to draw up an inventory of the national institutions responsible for sustainable development. Our study takes a critical look, both theoretical and political, and from different perspectives, at the key arguments and the various forms of mobilization.

The eight contributions collected here build on ideas developed by a network of researchers from France and from southern and eastern Mediterranean countries at a colloquium held in Hammamet, Tunisia in 2010 (Barthel, Zaki 2011) and pursued through research funded primarily by the Agence universitaire de la francophonie (AUF 2010/2012-Mersi programme: Ville durable au Sud de la Méditerranée). By publishing these contributions in an issue of the *Environnement urbain* journal, we hope to widen the debate to researchers outside of this program. The selection of papers was made by the journal's editorial committee and comprises three articles which provide a kind of synthesis of the ideas of the above network, plus five others from authors from various locations reflecting the current topics of this theme.

An attempt to read across the issues tackled by the different authors identifies four themes. The first relates to the geography of sustainable urban development to the south and east of the Mediterranean. It shows a geography structured by the circulation of ideas and practices, but also marked by key spaces that can be identified at different scales. André Donzel lays stress on the fact that the Mediterranean is an area characterized by the exchange of experience, in particular between cities. These interchanges are made possible by an interwoven complex of institutions, actors and funding bodies, headed by European Union initiatives arising from the Barcelona Process. More broadly, however, they are embedded in human networks, both academic and professional, which span the two sides of the Mediterranean. Further, the analysis by Amélie Pinel of the development of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system currently being planned in Amman examines the complex process of South–South transfer, in this case from Brazil to Jordan, with the assistance of international or Western funding agencies.

Tunisia would seem to be overrepresented in this number. While this is perhaps a matter of chance, it may also be a reflection of the country's pioneering approach to environmental themes, as evidenced by the development of its policies in favour of sustainable development (Bennasr, Megdiche, Verdeil; Kahloun) and energy management (Benalouache). Nonetheless, while Tunisia has undoubtedly demonstrated a commitment to sustainability, the articles also reveal limitations, arising in particular from the State's tight political control of the actors involved as well as the now-defunct authoritarian regime's constant political exploitation of this topic.

The journal also casts an interesting light on the spatial distribution of sustainability policies. On a first reading, the articles confirm the special role of political capitals as places where such policies are implemented and tested: Amman in Jordan (Pinel), the Rabat-Casablanca conurbation, Cairo or Damascus (Barthel, Clerc, Philifert), and Tunis (Benalouache, Kahloun). Nonetheless, the other texts show that cities lower down in the urban hierarchy, such as Sfax in Tunisia (Donzel; Bennasr et al.) or Tripoli in Lebanon (Farah) are also on the sustainable urban development map, at least as regards intentions. Similarly, the findings for local Agenda 21 experiments in Tunisia (Kahloun) or municipal environmental initiatives in Lebanon (Farah) put the spotlight on small suburban localities or small and medium-sized provincial towns away from the big centres. This demonstrates, at least on the rhetorical front, but also through practical albeit modest initiatives, the genuine spread of SUD to scales sometimes neglected by research.

A second way to read this feature is to look at the measures through which SUD policies are implemented. Three in particular are identified: 1) urban planning, reinforced by strategic planning (Donzel; Bennasr et al.) or local Agenda 21 programs (Kahloun); 2) clean transport, notably with the still unfinished case of the BRT in Amman (Pinel); and 3) energy, with Tunisia's ambitious programs for power production by photovoltaic panels or for solar water heaters (Benalouache). The emergence of new building standards, sometimes within eco-neighbourhoods or "green cities," as in Cairo or in Casablanca, Rabat and Benguérir (Morocco), was also identified as a further possible measure. However, most projects initiated in this regard are either still on the drawing board or appear to serve merely token and promotional purposes (Barthel et al.). These approaches all involve standard technologies and methodologies. The selected texts give no information on initiatives or experiments on, for example, the sustainable qualities of traditional urban fabrics. The countries and cities of the region do not seem to have incubated any particular innovations. On the other hand, the oft- expressed fear (Mancebo, 2011) that the focus on SUD will eventually result in an excessive emphasis on global issues, such as climate change, to the detriment of improvements to the local environment and living conditions, should not be exaggerated. Indeed, the "small" initiatives described by Kahloun or Farah or the aspiration to reclaim the seafront at Sfax (Bennasr et al.) are well-suited to the scale of cities whose environment has long been sacrificed to rapid urbanization or industrial priorities.

A third question is how public action has been transformed by SUD. This process has raised expectations with regard to the potential development of cross-cutting public action and the emergence of more consultative, participatory, if not to say democratic, public policies. In this respect, the key role played by central government (ministries and ad hoc national agencies) in the institutionalization of SUD (Barthel et al.; Kahloun; Bennasr et al.) has instead led to a replication of existing hierarchical, top-down, expert approaches, in particular on the themes of renewable energy, clean industry and eco-construction. Nonetheless, several examples highlight the influence of municipal or metropolitan authorities in these new policies which are often supported by international partners that explicitly seek to support more decentralized public action. This is the case with the Municipality of Greater Amman (Pinel), with the Greater Sfax Development Strategy (SDGS) (Bennasr et al.), with an unprecedented intermunicipal—though non-institutional—cooperation in Tunisia (Bennasr et al.), as well as a certain number of local plan initiatives in Tunisia (Kahloun). All the same, these new approaches remain fragile in many ways and are not always sustainable in the original sense of the term. In Jordan, the lead-up process to the BRT project has run into open opposition, revealing its shortcomings in taking account of the segments of the population most in need of alternative transport provision. In Sfax, there was genuine openness on the part of civil society to engage in the development of the SDGS. However, this willingness was subtly controlled by State, which maintained its preeminence in all spheres of intervention. In many local Tunisian Agenda 21 schemes, we find a similar phenomenon, and even exploitation to the benefit of some of the former regime's local cadres. In this

respect, Daher's article develops an important argument, although his case studies ultimately relate less to strictly environment-related urban policies and more to the social and political consequences of the neoliberal shift. He nevertheless questions the "social sustainability" of the projects he examines, which is an essential facet of sustainability. Analyzing neoliberalism as a "discourse" and providing a useful analytical framework for this purpose, he highlights the extent to which the transformations of urban action reproduce the dynamics of domination and, as they are renewed, come to constitute new spheres of capitalism. While this question is not covered directly in the articles in this issue, it is obviously a key hypothesis that needs to be tested in future research.

The revolts and revolutions that have swept the Arab world since 2011 give rise to assumptions, or hypotheses, about the SUD policies explored in this issue. One is that these policies, with their tentative shift toward the new kind of public action just described, constituted the start of a change in the methods of collective action that later culminated in the upheavals that toppled the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak and that threatened the structures in place in Morocco, Jordan or Syria. This hypothesis, postulated in particular with regard to Egypt (Barthel, Monqid 2011; Barthel, Monqid eds., 2011), is a bold one and only time will tell if it is correct. Moreover, the years 2011 and 2012 were marked more by the continuation of existing processes, despite the change in political majorities across countries. Thus, mega-projects are still perceived as a major opportunity for development and employment, new towns are still seen as a solution for urban development, while the "blind" eradication of shantytowns continues in numerous forms. The new Islamist authorities ultimately seem to have done little to distance themselves from the legacy of the years before 2011. At best, as the Tunisian example suggests, the simplistic marketing of sustainable development (its "environmental boulevards" and other "avenues of urban quality") by the Ben Ali regime has been entirely abandoned. In fact, at present sustainable development seems to have dropped in priority given the many social demands made by the protests, in particular union demands relating to employment. In that context, calls for SUD seem to have become mere tokens, with draft documents most likely remaining on the drawing board, soon to be scattered and vanish (Kahloun). In this respect, SUD may well have been a red herring, even for the researchers. Yet it could also be argued that SUD activists, be it in Egypt or in Tunisia, are among those whose primary claims now include the demand for a real democratization in local public action. In this case, SUD may well have been a chrysalis that protected the growth of an unexpected fruit, a foretaste of major change in the cities of this part of the world. The new conditions undoubtedly represent an opportunity as much as a challenge for city dwellers, professionals and politicians. And for research, they represent a new incentive to relate the study of urban policies to wider societal changes.

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