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ANTI-THESIS

Arab Sustainable Urbanism: Worlding Strategies, Local Struggles

Eric Verdeil

Unlike many metropolises that use green urbanism as a worlding strategy, Arab cities seem reluctant to embark on ambitious schemes addressing sustainability issues. To explain this situation, the article highlights three arguments. Firstly, as state-led governance prioritizes social stability, existing green plans have been scrapped in the face of political threats. Second, large, allegedly sustainable projects such as Masdar should not hide ongoing unsustainable urbanization features. Thirdly, the dominant framings of sustainability tend to focus on global issues (greenhouse gas emissions and low carbon energy), hence neglecting local claims for sustainability that do not fit into global environmental narratives.

Keywords: Green Urbanism; Climate Change; Megaprojects; Rentier States; Arab Cities

Record-breaking summer temperatures in Kuwait in 2016, or in Ouargla in 2018, have made their way to the headlines of the international press. They are echoing frightening predictions by scientists of dramatic climate change making life in Arab and Middle Eastern Cities more difficult or almost impossible in the face of expected burning summers and sea-level rise in maritime cities such as Alexandria.

However, despite such warnings, many clues suggest that Arab national and urban agendas have not really addressed these issues (yet?). It is true, as Elsheshtawy recently pointed, that Arab governments have endorsed the commitment of the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda, with its twofold sustainability understanding of environmental preservation and social inclusion. All have also ratified the 2015 C21 Paris Agreement. However, at the urban level, it is hard to find strategies explicitly focusing on urban sustainability and concrete policies and projects to implement them. For instance, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group includes only three Arab cities: Cairo, Amman, and Dubai. Out of more than 1500 members, the Local Governments for Sustainability Network includes only ten from the Middle East and North Africa, five of them being Turkish.[1] Metropolitan energy and environ-

mental transition initiatives do not seem to abound in Arab cities. How to understand this seemingly paradoxical fact?

Research on urban sustainability around the world has shown that climate change concerns have triggered major changes in urban governance for at least the last fifteen years. This came both as an answer to global calls to implement ecological transitions and as a way to protect and boost metropolitan economies in a time of increased competition and environmental pressures. This encompasses a set of strategies, experiments, and projects whose diversity cannot be discussed here, some of which can be labeled green or sustainable urbanism (Hodson and Marvin; Bulkeley et al.). This is clearly part of worlding practices aiming to draw attention to cities, as well as investments such as megaprojects, big international events, etc. Beier (this issue), following on the work of Roy and Ong, argues that MENA urbanization needs to be understood along these lines, too. But then, why does green urbanism in MENA countries seem to be underdeveloped when in other places, such as Singapore or Cape Town for example, they are at the core of this worlding process?

Answering these questions leads to developing two lines of reasoning. The notion of worlding puts the emphasis on policy transfers and city marketing in a world of metropolises, driven by strong states stressing their economic emergence. Despite international calls for greening policies, I make the hypothesis that in Arab cities, beyond their diversity, a specific urban governance gives precedence to rentier or semi-rentier states' concerns for social stability in return for modern forms of consumption made possible by the distribution of hydrocarbon-based rents. This has undermined attempts at implementing the environmental policies governments adopted to conform to international pressures—with of course some nuances between oil-rich and energy-dependent countries. In addition, it is also necessary to highlight the contradictions among those worlding cities' practices, such as resource-intensive megaprojects and resource-saving policies. In recent years, the Arab Spring mobilizations in many countries have called into question environmental concerns and resulted in postponing them.

As a second point, it is also essential to critically examine the bias of the ecological and energy transition agendas, with their emphasis on climate change mitigation, pushed by international and Western powers (funding agencies for instance). Indeed, they do not acknowledge other ways of constructing and framing policy challenges, where citizens and local governments are more concerned with local constraints and issues than global ones hailed by international conferences (the 2015 C21 Paris Agreement on Climate Change for instance, with its focus on carbon emissions). Defining sustainability is a hugely contested process.

To make both arguments, the article briefly reviews two strands of research that have addressed sustainable urban strategies in several Arab cities. The first is a set of works by Francophone researchers, led by Pierre-Arnaud Barthel, that have collectively explored a series of urban sustainable development experiments in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (Barthel and Zaki; Barthel and Verdeil). Modest and diverse, these experiments have mostly stalled in the wake of the Arab Spring. The second set of literature approaches urban sustainability through flagship megaprojects, the most famous being Masdar City. It has highlighted that beyond strong and greatly mediatized environmental ambitions, such projects illustrate a move toward post-oil economic diversification without overcoming the

contradictions regarding urban sustainability.

A short-lived urban sustainable policies moment

The collective research Pierre-Arnaud Barthel shepherded at the start of the 2010s has brought precious inputs about sustainability in Arab Mediterranean cities (rather than on the Gulf). Researchers addressed urban sustainability as the result of policy transfers involving international aid agencies, aiming at replicating, if not mimicking, the environmental turn of planning policies in (Northern) Europe. However, in contrast to Europe, the states, not the local authorities, took the initiative to introduce sustainability in the local policies. In so doing, they were seeking legitimacy in the eyes of their international partners, and securing grants and loans. They sometimes overplayed the success of their projects locally. Several analyses of Tunisian projects have documented the limits or even contradictions in the implementation of projects deemed sustainable but de facto destroying fragile milieus in the name of enhancing urbanization or tourism (Barthel; Barthel et al.).

At the local level, projects encompassed variegated objects and tools: city development strategies emphasizing sustainable objectives, such as in Sfax (Tunisia) or in Tripoli (Lebanon); introduction of sustainable measures in the building codes and new environmental labels; or eco-neighborhoods or sustainable new tows, for instance in Morocco. The projects were not limited to building and planning; they also included sustainable collective transportation schemes (tramways in Rabat, Casablanca; Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in Amman) as well as policies aiming to save energy and to promote renewable energy (Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco).

These projects have faced a number of issues and triggered resistance. In a context of underdeveloped national legislation, ecobuilding projects implementation in Morocco revealed the over-reliance on imported environmental labels rather than adapting the norms to the local environment and better identifying the needs of the population. As elsewhere, these innovative projects proved difficult for the local administrations to appropriate and to efficiently integrate into wider planning policies. Overall, they remained isolated and limited initiatives, far from representing an alternative approach to ordinary planning and building practices.

The so-called "Arab Spring" protests and uprisings have represented an opportunity for increased resistance to these sustainable projects. As the governments were in a defensive mood against mobilizations targeting them in the name of corruption, authoritarianism, and rising inequalities, they did not hesitate to scrap sustainable projects, at least temporarily, in order to cool the situation. For instance, in Sfax, the closure of a heavily polluting phosphate plant, planned by Ben Ali in response to calls by environmental organizations, has been repeatedly suspended because the local union section rejected the job losses or displacements that would have resulted from the measure (Bennasr et al.). The movements also resulted in a shortening of funds for sustainable projects, both private investments and aid, at a time where social priorities appeared of utmost importance. This explains the stalling of several initiatives. Eventually, political shifts and violence also shelved projects that had been advertised as sustainable, such as in Cairo's West- and Easttown, and all the more in Damascus, where eco-neighborhoods were planned in 2009 (Barthel et al.).

Sustainability in the Masdar-stage of urban development

Other research focused on Gulf sustainable megaprojects and primarily investigated the case of Masdar, the famous

carbon-neutral city in the suburbs of Abu Dhabi, designed by Norman Foster. Launched in 2008, the ecocity Masdar uses brand new technologies in building design, energy management, renewable energy, and water and waste management, as well as innovative transportation technologies. It is intended to become first a lab and then a model for future urbanism in the region and beyond (Reiche). The project indeed became a showroom, as Abu Dhabi also managed to attract the headquarters of the International Renewable Agency and to develop spectacular solar projects connected to the neighborhood. However, the real estate crisis of 2008-09 administered a blow to the project. It was downsized and reprofiled as a more classical real estate project. It did not fulfill its ambitious technological promises, even if the project already represents a strong departure from ordinary planning practices in the region. Altogether the project appears as an element of a wider strategy of economic diversification in the post-oil era, where clean techs and real estate stand at the core of the new green capitalism that has unfolded. Elsheshtawy even dubs the project as "greenwashing" (Elsheshtawy 3).

The contradictions and the limits of the sustainable goals heralded in the policy discourse surrounding Masdar City can be tracked at several levels. Despite comprehensive master plans, such as Abu Dhabi 2030, that include collective transportation and promises of building according to green labels, the massive urbanization that is envisioned remains car-centric and privileges individual sprawling housing for the nationals, both of which can only thrive thanks to massive energy and resources consumption and environmental losses (Elsheshtawy). The political stability of the regime rests on the generous access to resources and a right to individual housing. As Laurence Crot puts it, "the social contract between Abu Dhabi's rulers and the local population constitutes a challenging context for the pursuit of environmental sustainability" (2809).

These critical reflections about the seminal case of Masdar apply to various other similar urban projects, such as in Dubai, Doha, Kuwait City, and Saudi Arabia, with KAEC (Moser et al.) or the latest Neom (Aly, this issue), despite their specificities. Urbanization by mega-projects has spread far beyond the Gulf and oil-rich countries. Mediterranean Arab capitals all have their project(s), sometimes enrobed in sustainable rhetoric, inspired and largely funded by Gulf money (Wippel et al.). New towns in Morocco and in Egypt, with the new Cairo projects (Loewert and Steiner, this issue), illustrate that trend. These sustainable discourses do not hide the capitalist quest to cater to the desires of the upper class, at the expense of the advertised sustainability.

Challenging the framing of urban sustainability

The review of past research on the governance of urban sustainability in this region shows, overall, a lack of ecological concern among policy makers who promote these strategies and projects. Even if the rhetoric of climate change is used in international arenas, this issue is not a strong claim in most cases. Rather, the concerns that drive these strategies and projects relate to the will to address local energy pressures that can be caused by an external vulnerability (for instance, the gas supply threatened by terrorist attacks between Egypt and Jordan after 2011) or internal, because of the strong energy demand everywhere, sometimes met with rolling power cuts (Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria…). This leads to promoting energy efficiency or renewable energy, but also other less sustainable sources (natural gas, nuclear projects, and even oil shale for electricity generation) (Verdeil). The recent drive to

cut subsidies to basic services such as electricity, water, or gasoline can of course serve a sustainable agenda, and it is sold as such to international bodies. However, such moves remain limited (El-Katiri and Fattouh) and reflect more the fiscal constraints these countries are facing than a concern for the environment. In many cases, local issues, such as pollution or congestion, can lead to sustainable strategies or projects that are neither motivated by international calls for ecological transitions, even if they can help to get funding, nor inspired by a worlding strategy. For instance, the sustainable strategy of the city of Sfax in Tunisia owed much to local mobilization against industrial pollution of the coast and the air. Despite its endorsement, its implementation to date has been slow (Bennasr et al.).

In Arab cities, not unlike other emerging economies, states remain everywhere in control of urban governance, leaving at best a minor role to municipal authorities. This applies to urban sustainability governance as well. State power is deployed through infrastructural national utilities and specific agencies created to control urban changes, specifically mega-projects, including so-called sustainable ones (Bogaert). They also increasingly empower private local and foreign investors, while they leave civic and grassroots actors at the periphery of the game. Noteworthy is the weakness of green and environmentalist parties in urban governance, which comes in stark contrast to metropolitan green coalitions in Europe for instance.

In contrast to the high-tech and exclusive understanding of sustainability promoted by private and state-led coalitions, dissenting groups try to push alternative conceptions of what could be termed urban sustainability—albeit sometimes without using this word. Firstly, urban activists, at times supported by scholars and aid agencies such as GIZ or AFD, have advocated for considering the usually overlooked and disdained sustainability of ordinary urban practices. Cairo is a case in point (Barthel and Monqid) with the emergence of alternative discourses and actions that emphasized the sustainable qualities of informal settlements. Built densely, and thus not wasting land and infrastructural cost-saving, they are often close to the city center and suited for walking. Their dwellers often develop cheap and low-tech solutions for a range of issues. For instance, they use informal collective transport instead of individual cars, saving transportation costs and CO2 emissions. The activists call for in situ rehabilitation and upgrading instead of destruction and removal to the outskirts (Deboulet).

NGOs, aid agencies, and innumerable academic works dealing with the zabbaleen communities and the recycling of waste in Cairo have particularly emphasized the efficiency of local, informal waste management systems (Florin and Debout). But the Egyptian government has strongly destabilized the system with its privatization policy and the slaughter of pigs in 2009 that the local Christian Coptic population of the zabbaleen areas raised. In many other places, protests over deficient waste management systems confirm this is a primary concern for urban citizens, and activists claim the implementation of alternative policies, for instance in Lebanon, shattered by the huge failure of the waste treatment infrastructure since 2015 (Harb).

Sustainability has become a slogan for international agendas and an option among other worlding strategies that big metropolises and their networks such as the C40 can appropriate and operationally translate. But in Arab cities, the question is rather to understand why such strategies are absent or very limited. At best, high-tech flagships cannot hide the contradictions of the sprawling cities of oil-

Eric Verdeil

is professor of Geography and Urban Studies at Sciences Po, Centre for International Studies (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France. His research deals with the political ecology of urban infrastructure – more precisely energy and waste management. His main ground of fieldwork is Lebanon.
email: eric.verdeil@sciencespo.fr

rich countries or of the aspiring upper middle class elsewhere. We need to turn to specific factors like the political economy of (semi-)rentier states and their fragile social contracts. Focusing on global and high-tech oriented sustainability as a worlding strategy might also lead to overlooking claims for local and ordinary sustainable policies that care for the provision of essential services to the majority of urban citizens, at affordable prices, in order to improve everyday life.

Notes

[1] See: http://www.c40.org/cities; http://www.iclei.org/iclei-members/iclei-members.html?memberlistRegion=North+Africa%2C+Middle+East%2C+West+Asia.

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