

# Towards a Mediterranean urban agenda

## The governance struggle

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Illustrator: [Carole Hénaff](#)

The centrality of urban matters in the Mediterranean is today before questioning. The roadmaps of the main institutions and agendas driving development in the region dedicate considerable attention to urban development, such as the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development [1] and the Union for the Mediterranean [2] [3].

This might sound as obvious for those recently incorporated into Euro-Mediterranean studies. However, in not so remote periods, the urban question was almost inexistent in the regional agenda. Twenty-five years after the Barcelona Declaration, it is rather astonishing that the text adopted in November 1995 did not include the word “urban” in any part of the text. Even though urbanisation had already started as a global phenomenon, and particularly in the Mediterranean area, cities were still ignored at the moment of conceiving the future of the region. The word “city” appeared only once at the end of the annex and only to stress the importance of “city and regional representatives” as actors of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation ecosystem [4].

## 2008-2018: the urban decade

As indicated, the origins of the Barcelona Process essentially ignored the urban question, both in terms of agenda setting and agency. The so-called three baskets did not include the urban dimension neither as a priority topic in itself nor as a transversal question to be tackled. Cities were not seen neither as actors nor as factors for development. Territoriality was not as important as nowadays, and the distribution of population in cities, towns and villages and the existing interaction among them was not considered as a trigger towards prosperity and stability in the region. Moreover, local and regional authorities did not play a significant role in promoting the partnership and did not even try neither to gather nor to establish and promote their priorities before nation states.

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The re-launching of the Barcelona Process in 2008, with the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean, and the implicit recognition that the division into three baskets had not been successful, allowed for a flourishing of a proto-urban agenda in the region. The “union of projects” approach [5] considered that regional integration could only be tackled through useful, pragmatic, visible and important regional projects [6]. This was a spark that triggered what we can call the urban decade in the Mediterranean (2008-2018). As I will describe below, significant advances in terms of agenda setting and agency took place during that decade in which the urban question turned to be an intrinsic element of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

In terms of agenda setting, urban development gained significant importance during that period. First, by appearing at the Paris Declaration (2008) that gave birth to the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Subsequently, this was confirmed by the structuring of the Secretariat of the UfM around six priorities or divisions, one of them being Transports and Urban Development. Here it is important to highlight how at the very first stage the area was intended to be named only “Transports” but several voices calling for the inclusion of urban aspects succeeded in including urban development as one of the six main areas around which the future of the organisation was structured. A major boost for the urban agenda in the Mediterranean was the First UfM Ministerial Conference held in Strasbourg in November 2011, which gave a clear mandate to the UfM Secretariat to further develop an urban agenda in the region by tackling four issues:

1. Elaborating a guidance framework for sustainable cities and territories
2. Promoting a pipeline of urban projects to be labelled [7] by the UfM
3. The creation of an award of recognition of sustainable practices

4. The preliminary study for the creation of an urban agency in the region [8].

Despite unequal results of those four priorities, it is beyond doubt that the clear mandate issued by the Ministerial Conference had a huge impact in the urban agenda, allowing to align the different stakeholders and generating momentum for higher cooperation on urban aspects.

One of the most significant results of this process was the creation of the Urban Projects Finance Initiative (UPFI), a joint strategy developed by the UfM Secretariat and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), namely the *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), to create a pipeline of urban projects to be labelled, and thus, promoted for funding, across the region. This, combined with the creation of an urban experts group and the development of a Mediterranean urban strategy for the region, became the guiding lines for action in urban matters for the following years, placing the urban question at the core of the main challenges to be tackled in the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation scheme.

The UfM was not the sole regional institution in putting urban questions at the core of its work programme. Another institution arising from the Paris Summit in 2008 was the Centre for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) established by the World Bank in Marseille. The CMI rapidly placed urban development at the core of its programmes. One of the main initiatives was the creation of the Urban Hub (2012-2018), a collaborative platform that gathered together the main actors working on urban development in the region to exchange practices and promote joint actions. The Urban Hub articulated under one umbrella networks of cities, cooperation agencies, international organisations and financial institutions, promoting the complementarity of its actions.

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The third regional institution in putting urban development at the core of its actions was the United Nations Environmental Program and its Mediterranean Action Plan. After four decades of action, UNEP MAP developed a thorough strategy for sustainable development in the region through an extensive participatory process which led to the approval of the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development (MSSD) for the period 2016-2025 [9]. This strategy was structured in six main chapters, one of them being sustainable cities. This chapter included a set of priorities, projects and flagship initiatives with a great consensus of the main stakeholders.

This process culminated with the global urban events of 2016 with the Conference on

Housing and Sustainable Urban Development organised by United Nations in Quito (Habitat III), which together with the 4th World Congress of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) organised in Bogota demonstrated how the urban arising in the Mediterranean was part of a broader global process putting urban development at the core of the development strategies of our times.

## Urban development without cities?

The events described above show to what extent what happened in cities was increasingly gaining relevance in the Mediterranean agenda. But what was the role of local authorities in this process? Although this question will be tackled in the second part of this article, it is now worth noting that in terms of agency, the “urban decade” witnessed a significant increase in the role of city leaders in Mediterranean cooperation. In 2008, two weeks before the Paris Summit that was the origin of the Union for the Mediterranean, Marseille hosted the 1st Forum of Local and Regional Authorities in the Mediterranean (FALRM) organised by the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG. The Forum was an occasion to gather a plural voice of local and regional representatives, for the first time claiming for a greater involvement of subnational authorities in the Barcelona Process. The Forum held three more editions (Barcelona 2010, Marseille 2013 [10] and Sousse 2016). The second edition, organised in Barcelona under the Spanish Presidency of the EU and only weeks after the official opening of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean, made a clear sign that the agenda of local and regional leaders was there to stay and that it was intrinsically linked to the political process started in Barcelona in 1995 and relaunched in Paris in 2008. The extinction of the Mediterranean Commission of UCLG in 2017 put an end—at least until now—to this forum and contributed to the numerous question marks around the urban agenda in the Mediterranean that exist today.

Two years after the 1st FALRM, in 2010, the EU Committee of the Regions promoted the creation of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), launched in Barcelona, at the Palace of Pedralbes, venue of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean. The Assembly gathers 80 representatives, 40 from Mediterranean Partner Countries and 40 from the EU member states. The latter are members of the EU Committee of the Regions and representatives of networks of regions and municipalities. The ARLEM, which was granted observer status in the Union for the Mediterranean, culminated the institutionalisation of local and regional authorities within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Since 2010, it has met yearly and passed several reports on numerous topics, raising the voice of subnational entities in the region.

## An urban agenda: the governance struggle

It is indisputable nowadays that what occurs in cities has a very notable impact in the development of the region. Cities are clearly ground for development in the region, although their role as main actors remain blurry. The urban question is now central, not only for those at the front of local institutions, businesses and organisations but also of ministries and global actors. An important indicator of this is that, in recent years, the main

international agencies and donors have given a significant urban orientation approach in their programmes addressed to the Mediterranean. An example is the European Commission, and the different programmes tackling urban questions developed in recent years: the Partnership for Cities' call for projects (Europaid), the Clima-Med initiative or the Mediterranean City-to-city Migration project are only some examples of this trend. Other actors such as MedCities, Agency for Sustainable Mediterranean Cities and Territories (AVITEM), the AFD or Cities Alliance have reinforced their programmes addressed to Mediterranean cities.

The thorny issue today is not anymore whether cities are a game board of Mediterranean development but what is the composition of their role as actors for development. To put it simple, who is behind the word "cities" when we state that "cities are at the core of development in the Mediterranean region"? Are we talking about local authorities, urban population, SMEs, multi-national companies, universities, a mix of all of them? Can we assess the increasing role of cities in Mediterranean relations without checking its composition, and focusing on what impacts this increase has on the balance of power and its possible effects on income and power distribution?

At the outskirts of the third decade of the twentieth century, the debate on the rise of cities in the Mediterranean is intrinsically linked to a governance struggle. Who is in control of what is going on in urban territories? Are public —and in particular local— authorities in the position to guarantee a balanced growth and fair distribution of welfare and to guarantee a sustainable development of its population? Or are cities being target of income extraction by global actors operating as networks such as multinational companies and global investment funds?

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Despite the cities rising, local authorities continue to have a minor role as development driving forces. Nevertheless, some countries have experienced a significant improvement, such as Tunisia, which finally held its first ever democratic local elections in May 2018, seven years after the revolution and after several postponements. The elections were held after the approval of a new code of local authorities, which allocated more powers to the local level [11]. It is still to be seen what the real effects of this process will be, but at least symbolic milestones have been achieved such as the election of the first woman mayor in an Arab capital, Ms Souad Ben Abderrahim, Mayor of Tunis.

In other countries, like Jordan, a new decentralisation law was passed in 2015 [12].

Although a long path is still to be undertaken to achieve a GDP expenditure share made by local authorities similar to their European peers, the role of municipalities in leading local development has gained momentum. In Lebanon, no major advances were made in recent years, although the local elections of 2016, in a moment where the national parliament was blocked and legislative elections were repeatedly postponed, can be seen as a sign that the local level was the one most resilient amidst the Lebanese turmoil.

In the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, cities face increasing challenges that hinder its sustainability and the capacity to be resilient to global trends. The rise of real estate prices, partly because of the impact of massive tourism; the explosion of the gig economy under supposedly collaborative platforms, and seasonality are tensioning the social fabrics of Mediterranean cities. The latter, combined with the enormous question mark that climate change introduces, the effect of displaced population and the increase of inequalities, bears enormous socioeconomic imbalances in urban territories in the region.

If there was one, Mediterranean cities no longer speak with a single voice. Since power and economic weight has been progressively concentrated in cities, following a global trend that foresees an urban population of 68% in 2050 (vs 43% in 1990) [13], the cacophony of interests inside cities has widened. The more cities become central in Mediterranean development, the more different interests arise and make it hard to understand who is behind this concept, what consequences the rise of cities will have and, to put it simple, who are the winners and losers of urbanization.

## Towards an urban agenda in the Mediterranean

Having made this clear, it is undisputable that Mediterranean cities are at the crossroads of several global challenges. The Mediterranean region is no exception to the global trends. This was already noted during the second UfM ministerial conference on urban development, held in Cairo in May 2017, which identified the main lines for an urban agenda in the Mediterranean [14]. Despite little advances since then, except a high level conference held in Brussels that year that had little follow-up, the conclusions of the conference still remain valid, if not urgent.

The three main instruments for a sound and sustainable development in Mediterranean cities identified during the conference were capacity-building, data and financing. These weaknesses explain the lack of capacity of cities to be responsive to their daily challenges. First, the lack of access to data impedes to plan successful investments that revert in distributed well-being among citizens. This is also hampered by the difficulties faced by local authorities in order to access funding, particularly loans at the international market. Finally, even if those two obstacles could be overcome, solid capacity-building programmes aimed at local authorities are needed to ensure that the potential investments will be correctly integrated with the rest of the city, and will be managed sustainably. This vicious circle shall be urgently addressed with tangible programmes involving local authorities from the very beginning in the transformative projects that affect their territory. This, which may seem obvious, is far from being a reality. In most Mediterranean countries,

urban planning is made without local administrations' participation in its design, planning and implementation. An interesting exception is the Medinatouna project, promoted by Cities Alliance in Tunisia, with interesting results at the level of local planning and broad participatory processes [15].

As for the priority topics, the 2017 ministerial declaration recognised the central role of cities in the fight against climate change, which takes different and urgent shapes at urban level: waste management, sustainable urban transport, energy transition and land-sea interaction, linked to the increase of sea pollution. Moreover, the declaration recognises for the first time the central role of cities in migration management and acknowledges cities as central spaces in which socioeconomic gaps can be successfully addressed.

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Despite a correct identification of thematic priorities, three years after the declaration the Gordian knot of urban development continues to be the means cities have to make solutions effective. The vicious circle described above shows, at the same time, that data, finance and capacity building are totally interlinked. Tackling this circle is definitely a top priority and this has to be done with a correct design on the governance challenge at local level. Local authorities need to be put at the centre of urban development, leaving behind the long lasting tradition of thinking local development without strong local institutions. For once, thematic priorities shall be put at a second level, to focus on reinforcing the capacity of local actors to correctly articulate around the priorities collectively identified. Without tackling the governance struggle, cities will not be able to align towards a sustainable programme for development at local level at the service of their citizens' wellbeing.

## An uncertain future

This article is being finished in a very uncertain time. The emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has placed an enormous question mark on the solid grounds of many aspects of our society. The role of cities in the Mediterranean is not an exception to this global context. We lack the sufficient perspective to make an accurate analysis of what the impact of such pandemic can be in terms of population distribution. What appears clear is that populated cities have been especially vulnerable to the effects of this crisis and that, for the first time in decades, the unstoppable trend towards urbanisation can be questioned. Moreover, the unprecedented sudden stop of the economy and, in particular, tourism, one of the sectors prevailing in Mediterranean cities, adds uncertainty to the current context.

If that was not enough, the exceptional blast that destroyed a significant part of Beirut in

August came at a moment in which agglomeration of population in a few squared kilometres was increasingly seen with suspicion by the pandemic. It is beyond doubt that cities allow for a major efficiency of resource management and foster the promotion of innovation, knowledge and integration. However, the recent crisis has brought shadows to the Mediterranean urban landscape. In the meantime, addressing the governance question at local level, and reinforcing the role of local authorities to make them successfully partner with economic and social actors, is essential to achieve a sound and sustainable development in the region.

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