

Mediterranean Cities: Actors or Factors of Development?

Oriol Barba

Director

MedCities, Barcelona

The second ministerial conference of the Union of the Mediterranean on urban development, which was held in Cairo on 21 and 22 May, 2017, has brought the issue of urban development in the Mediterranean back onto the agenda. Following the Habitat III Conference last October in Quito and the establishment of a new urban agenda, the conference in Cairo could be understood as an attempt to adapt this agenda to a regional level. It seems an unlikely coincidence, however, that there were so few Mediterranean mayors in Ecuador in 2016; a fact which, beyond the physical distance, could be interpreted as the Mediterranean's shortcomings in promoting the urban agenda in the region and its considerable difficulties in projecting the concept as a coherent whole.

The Mediterranean is a territory undergoing rapid urbanization. Between 2000 and 2025, its population will have increased by more than 100 million and 90% of this increase will come from countries in the south and east of the region.¹ In recent years, however, we have seen how tackling the challenges of the region exclusively from an urban dimension means leaving out a major part of the story. The concept of territorial cohesion, which includes not just impoverished urban areas, but also *l'arrière-pays* and, even more relevantly, the interaction between these two realities has a fundamental role to play, especially in countries on the southern shore. We need not men-

tion here the territorial tensions inside cities and between cities and rural areas, which led to the uprisings that began in 2011. An assessment of the current situation, six years later, reveals how, while these tensions may have changed the contexts that frame them – and that is only the case in certain countries – they still remain very much alive and unresolved.

Local Elections as Factors that Consolidate Local Governance

2017 is an important year for Mediterranean cities, as it has been witness to a series of milestones that could have implications for the region at large. Firstly, the aforementioned ministerial conference in Cairo which, from its Declaration,² could be understood as yet another starting point rather than a space for assessing what has been carried out until now and renewing lines of action. The role of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean, after recovering from its confusing start, could be significant in developing an agenda for the Mediterranean, although much remains to be done and any optimism should be tamed by prudence.

Secondly, 2017 is an election year at the local level in two major countries: Tunisia and Jordan. In the former, these are unexpected municipal elections, the first since the 2011 revolution. They will be held on 17 December 2017, following years of waiting and three postponements. The approval of the election law and territorial partition into municipal areas, representing the municipalization of the whole of Tunisia's national territory (*découpage*) for the first

¹ CIDOB "Mediterranean Trends and Urban Challenges," *Policy Brief* 11, 2015. www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/cidob_policy_brief/mediterranean_trends_and_urban_challenges

² UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN, *Declaration on the Second Ministerial Conference of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) on Sustainable Urban Development* Cairo, 22 May 2017 <http://ufmsecretariat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/EN-FINAL-SUD-Ministerial-declaration.pdf>

time, have been excessively lengthy processes that, from the local level, have shaken the stability of the entire country. It is worth highlighting the role played by the so-called “special delegations,” or provisional municipal councils, in managing the daily workings of the cities during these years. Despite their instability and lack of democratic legitimacy, the future is likely to offer enough perspective for these municipal councils and those who formed them to be recognized as key stabilizing factors for the country’s definitive, eventual democratization.

In the case of Jordan, the municipal elections set for 15 August will be the first held under the new local administration, approved in 2015,³ which, while not completely eliminating the central government’s oversight of town councils, does grant broader powers to local authorities for developing policies.

In Jordan, the town councils have played a fundamental role in receiving refugees from Arab countries, albeit not at the same level as Lebanon, a country in which the non-existence of refugee camps has meant that dealing with those displaced by the conflict in Syria has largely fallen to the local administration. A year on, we can look back on the 2016 local elections in Lebanon as a factor that gave the country a certain level of stabilization, and which, following the extension of the Parliament’s mandate in 2013, has helped bolster democratic legitimacy. This, together with the election of President Aoun in October 2016, has contributed to ending the country’s recent political deadlock.

In light of this relative optimism regarding local governance, albeit limited to certain countries, Mediterranean cities, especially on the southern shore, now face certain challenges which will be key in determining their role in the region’s stabilization and development.

How capable Mediterranean cities are of addressing these challenges will determine whether they can serve as actors or factors of development, a long-argued debate, which, in the current context, is undergoing a period of particular transcendence. There are many challenges to which Mediterranean cities must now rise. For this article, we have chosen three which are particularly pertinent regarding cities’ roles as either actors or factors of development. According to our analysis, these challenges are fundamental, not just in themselves, as they en-

compass key areas of development, but also because they determine the role of cities in Mediterranean governance.

Territorial Cohesion and Urban Development (*aménagement*)

Municipalities’ capacity to position themselves at the centre of development in cities has been seen, in recent years, as one of the main issues of territorial development in Mediterranean countries. The existence of major urban development projects, promoted by development agencies with the backing of investment funds and international donors, and agreed upon by ministries, has demonstrated the potential viability of long-term municipal management, once these initiatives have been carried through.

Mediterranean cities now face certain challenges which will be key in determining their role in the region’s stabilization and development

The Urban Projects Finance Initiative (UPFI) is especially paradigmatic, promoted by the Union for the Mediterranean together with the French Development Agency (AFD), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). It promotes major urban projects in the different countries of the southern Mediterranean Basin. The launch of this initiative has raised questions over the role of local authorities in the development of these projects, in which they often have a less than secondary role both in their design and implementation. It has become increasingly evident that, once these major projects are set in motion, it will be down to the municipalities to manage them on a day-to-day basis, provide them with the basic services they require and, above all, integrate them with the city as a whole, which is often in a state of relative impoverishment when compared with the new developments these projects promote.

³ http://iec.jo/sites/default/files/5MunicipalitiesLaw2015EN.doc%20%281%29_0.pdf

Worth highlighting in this regard, is the conference, “Mediterranean cities facing major territorial projects” held in Tetouan on 1 December 2016 in the framework of the MedCities general assembly.

Ensuring that local governments have the capacity to rise to these challenges is fundamental for urban development to be carried out *with* cities and not just *on* them, particularly in the context of the new globalized economy, in which cities have become the playground for international financial and investment capital. This phenomenon, which is taking on new dimensions – large construction projects in the south and east, unbridled tourist developments in the north –, is common to the whole region and will determine the capacity of cities to govern their own futures. The extent to which urban development is driven by the cities will play a leading role in the influence of local authorities in the region, sustainable growth in the medium and long term being hard to imagine without the active participation of the former.

Climate Change and Environmental Challenges

The link between the day-to-day lives of cities and the environmental challenges facing the Mediterranean region have been a firm feature on the regional agenda in recent years. Beyond each city's ability to address these issues, is the collective response capacity of local authorities in the face of this common challenge. In the context of the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference, the MedCOP was held in Marseille in 2015 and Marrakesh in 2016, and focused on local responses to climate change in the Mediterranean region.

Despite the launch of numerous programmes to deal with this reality, notably including the European programmes SUDEP and CES-MED, which have enabled the development of tangible and replicable initiatives, it is worth noting the cancellation of the MEDCOP conference in 2017, scheduled for the spring in Palermo. This development confirms that the attempt to orchestrate a regional response to climate change on the local level falls perhaps too heavily to the initiative of two countries, Morocco and France, thereby generating doubts about the capacity to put together a truly collaborative response. Moreover, there is also the incipient pro-

ject of creating a Mediterranean “*maison climat*” against climate change, whose establishment in Tangier is currently under study. This may shed light on an issue whose level of local involvement still leaves a great deal to be desired.

Security and Social Inclusion

Thirdly, the link between the fight against marginalization and the security dimension of Mediterranean cities continues to be one of the main battlegrounds of development and stabilization in the region. In this area, a weak labour market and high unemployment rates, especially among youth, continue to be the main stumbling block for inclusive urban development.

The drop in tourism, as a result of the wave of terrorist attacks in Europe in recent years, has only made matters worse for the fragile local economies of most countries on the southern shore, which today are desperately trying to put together sustainable growth strategies that can give hope to the large youth populations. This continues, above all else, to be the biggest challenge cities are facing, where a lack of economic activity negatively affects local authorities' capacities to raise revenues. This, in turn, leads to spiralling stagnation, which is hard to turn around in the short term.

Conclusions

2017 has brought with it a few positive developments on a local scale. However, these have been only partial and moderate, and the region's growing fragmentation has further deepened, making it increasingly difficult to analyze from a single regulatory framework. The role of cities as actors of development is focused on three major challenges: the capacity to position themselves at the centre of local development, the fight against climate change and the difficulties in generating inclusive growth that strengthens security. Only through transversal strategies that strengthen the links between municipalities and their role in proposing regional responses to these problems will Mediterranean cities become true actors – and not just factors – in the region's development and stabilization.