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Development Plan Strategies of Old Aleppo City and Sustainable Development Goals: Between Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The Old City of Aleppo, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, has been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1986. In the early 1990s the Aleppo municipality initiated the project for the Rehabilitation of the Old City with the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) as a partner. As part of the process, a Development Plan was issued as a general framework including ten strategies for upgrading the historical urban fabric in line with the sustainable development. Despite implementation of these strategies, the physical fabric of the Old City has continued to deteriorate, and the demographic transition has continued to increase until the escalation of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The paper analyses the development plan's strategies in the Old City of Aleppo, mainly those related to housing aspects. It evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies based on the concept of good urban governance that intersects with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aiming to overcome the administrative gaps to rebuild the Old City more sustainably after the Syrian Civil War.

Keywords

Old Aleppo City; development plan strategies; housing; sustainable development; urban governance.

1   INTRODUCTION

In Rio de Janeiro in 1992, countries of the world, as well as Syria, adopted the Agenda 21, the signatory governments were obliged to work with their local communities to develop national plans in the field of environment and sustainable development called Local Agenda 21 (MLAE, 2007). In this context, Aleppo started creating its Local Agenda 21 within the framework of Municipal Administration Modernization (MAM) Project in Syria with a focus on actions, continuous improvement and indicators related to the preservation of the Old City (MLAE, 2008). The relationship between urban governance and sustainable development has been highlighted by Agenda 21 since 1992. Different chapters emphasised the role of governance in achievement of sustainable development. This includes the necessity of broad public participation in decision-making (United Nations Conference on Environment & Development - AGENDA 21, 1992). Similarly, every development project will not be sustainable unless it is governed properly and supported sufficiently by concerned institutions (Rogers et al., 2008).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development obviously has a strong commitment to good governance through its goals (United Nations UN, 2015). In fact, good governance requires the relationship between the state and the people and rests on the two core values of inclusiveness and accountability (Development, 2003). Besides, it is measured by the factors of participation, transparency, responsiveness, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, and accountability, etc.

Likewise there are four basic steps for getting started with SDG's implementation in cities 1) Initiate an inclusive and participatory process, 2) Adapt the global SDGs into a local agenda, 3) Set up a goal-based planning that adopts a long-term, multi-sectoral perspective, supported by adequate implementation capacity and financial resources, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, and 4) Set up a local monitoring and evaluation system (Kanuri et al., 2016) (Krellenberg et al., 2019).
In 2019 the International Cooperation and Planning Institution in Syria launched the First National Report for the Sustainable Development. Despite the limited resources, difficulties and the huge destruction left by the Syrian Civil war, Syria is committed to realize a sustainable development and its universal goals for 2030 (Eyon, 2019). Generally, in developing countries, the strategy to empower local communities to respond to the inability of governments to improve the conditions of informal settlements and poor neighbourhoods has emerged as a practical application of the relationship between governance and sustainable development (UN-Habitat, 2003). In post-war UNESCO World Heritage Cities, UNESCO focuses on engaging communities and local governance at every point of the recovery process, using financial models that align immediate/short-term needs with medium/long-term development timeframes in reconstruction plans, and ensuring successful management of the reconstruction process by balancing people's basic needs and preserving the historic character of a city: it is especially hard to balance the need for people to quickly rebuild their damaged homes with the need to direct reconstruction in the sense of cultural heritage (UNESCO; World Bank Group, 2018).

2   METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The research described in this paper has the aim of understanding the city's residential neighbourhoods, in order to restore heritage sites while improving living conditions. The study began with a literature review on the concept of relationship between urban governance and sustainable development. An additional data study was carried out to analyse previous experiences and actions, mainly the rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo project with respect to the housing issues as a main research focus, to expose the weaknesses and inabilities of the government to promote the objectives of sustainable development. The research works are based on government legislation and policies, mainly development plan (Windelberg et al, 2001) and the reliable dissertations at master's level in Aleppo University (Knefaty, 2015). Besides, based on author's prior experience, knowledge and field work from 2010 till 2012. The paper established an analytical framework by combining a) the parties and core values of good urban governance and b) the basic steps for getting started with SDG implementation in cities, and relating them particularly to housing and social development strategy. At the first level of the analytical framework the description of the residential circumstances in the Old City of Aleppo show the urban system as a product of social, physical, economic, ecological, political, cultural and historical factors. This makes it possible to identify key social, environmental, and economic sustainability challenges to be part of the analysis in level 2.

3 PREVIOUS LOCAL EXPERIENCE IN REHABILITATING THE OLD CITY OF ALEPPO

The Municipality of Aleppo initiative, in collaboration with the GTZ project 'Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo' in 1992, was supporting the inhabitants in ameliorating the deterioration of their residential neighbourhoods with a housing fund. Within the framework of this project this fund was also supported by the association 'Friends of the Old City of Aleppo'. Quantitative and qualitative documentation surveys and studies were conducted during this period, and a comprehensive development plan was carried out as a general framework including ten strategies for upgrading the historical urban fabric in the line with the sustainable development (Chibli, 2002) (Fig. 1).
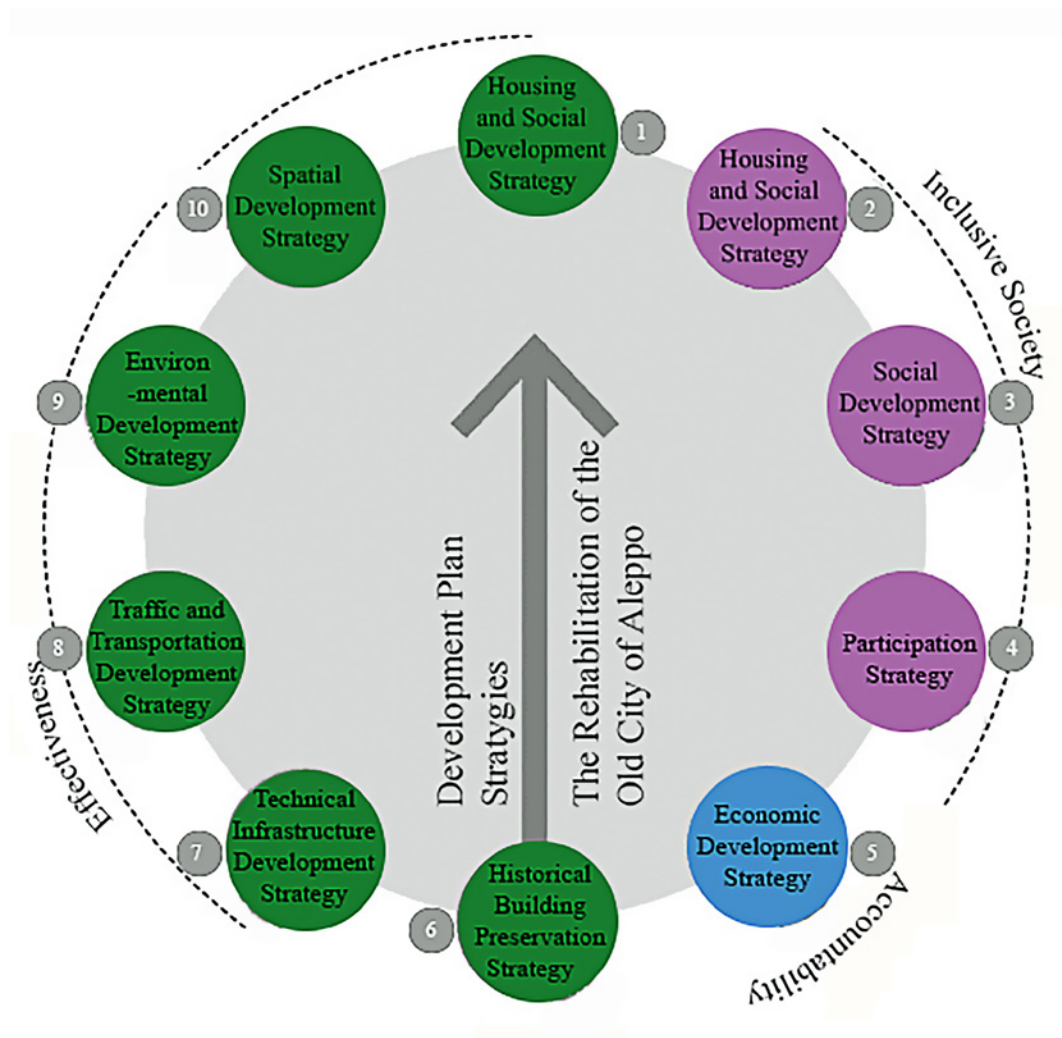

FIG. 1 Development plan strategies and their relationship with the sustainable development dimensions and the indicators of good urban governance. Green; environmental dimension, violet; social dimension and blue; economic dimension. Source: authors.

Unfortunately, these surveys took a long time and the actual achievements were negligible compared to the size of the Old City and its population. An important aspect that has been accomplished is the infrastructure. In organisational terms a special administration structure 'Directorate of the Old City' has been established. Further, the first action area was identified as a pilot project 'the Bab Qansreen neighbourhood', which covers an area of 6.5 hectares or 1.8% of the total area of the old city, and includes 130 houses with a population of about 1,300 (about 200 families). Highlights of what has been achieved are land use schemes and amendments to the urban system (Fig. 2). Plans were developed for projects aiming at reforming the region at all levels and making it more attractive to the population, through: (1) the typical renovation of an area of commercial character and containing important historical buildings; (2) the typical renovation of a residential area; and (3) the completion of restoration studies for several historic buildings and others owned by government institutions.
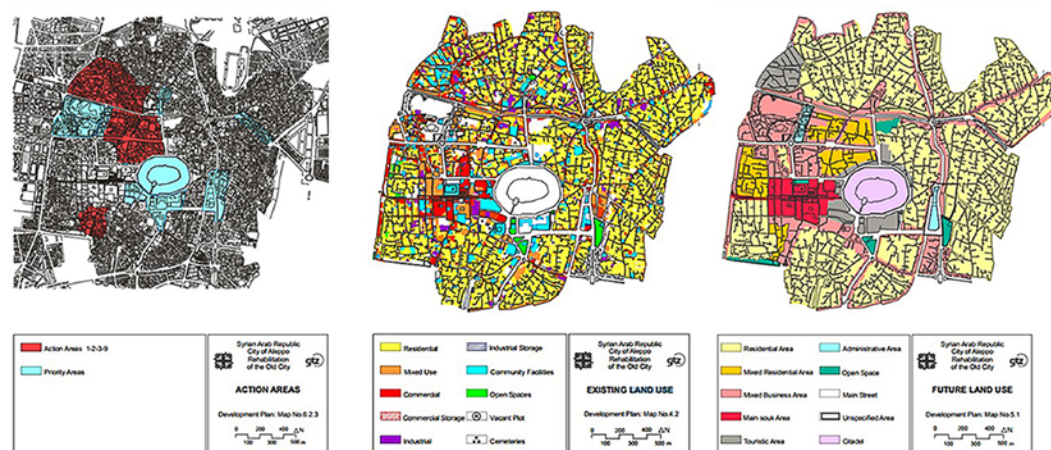

FIG. 2 Action areas, existing land use and future land use was proposed by the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo project; (left to right). Source: Windelberg et al, 2001.

4   HOUSING AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

This strategy was suggested to improve the condition of the housing stock in the Old City of Aleppo and operated on two levels 1) improvement of residences and 2) improvement of residential neighbourhoods assuming that rehabilitating the housing stock is an important element of urban conservation and development. The strategy improves living conditions and can help to reverse trends of emigration and to contribute to preserving the residential function of historical neighbourhoods (Fischer, 2012). The objectives of this strategy target the environmental and the social dimensions of sustainable development in terms of density of residential zones, architecture and urban form, and social structure (Tab. 1).

OBJECTIVES / FACTORS	DENSITY OF RESIDENTIAL ZONES	ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN FORM	SOCIAL STRUCTURE
Strategy sub-objectives	Reduce the general density in residential areas to create space for social services and recreational activities in the Old City	Strengthen the traditional pattern of living in courtyard houses with a maximum of two floors	Encourage upper-level income groups to buy, renovate houses and relocate into the Old City Provide soft loans to lower-income house owners for renovation and modernization
Tactics	Manage the spatial distribution pattern of population indirectly	Propose some revisions of existing regulations	Promote the emergency and rehabilitation fund
Dimensions	Social dimensions	Environmental dimensions	Social dimensions
Good urban governance indicators	Inclusiveness, participation and equality	Accountability, transparency, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency.	Inclusiveness, participation and equality
Governance parties	Administrative system, economic system and civil society	Administrative system, economic system and civil society	Administrative system, economic system and civil society
SDG 's implementation guideline	Inclusiveness, Participation	Multi-stakeholder partner-ships, local monitoring and evaluation syastem Adapt the global SDGs into a local agenda Financial resources	Inclusiveness, Participation Financial resources

TABLE 1 Table 1: In this matrix the objectives are arranged in columns and the factors to analyse and evaluate them are arranged in rows. The key to using this matrix is to realize that all of the intersections are more or less simultaneous foundations for sustainable development in cities. Source: authors.

4.1 IMPROVEMENT OF RESIDENCES – ANALYTICAL STUDY AND DISCUSSION

This level of the stratgy is related to the environmental dimension of sustainable development. It included a continuous maintenance program and the support to residents for technical and construction level restoration. Particularly, in the most endangered areas. That needed a legal base and therefore some revisions of existing regulations were proposed. In this context, in 1998 the amendment of the Old City Construction Code was proposed to make it more flexible to deal with maintenance, restoration, rehabilitation, and the addition of new elements to the historical buildings. From a financial point of view, it was necessary to assess the capacity and willingness to pay for renovation and maintenance in parallel to the application of further promotion of the Emergency and Rehabilitation Fund.

In 2004 both funds were merged into one single 'Housing Fund' and its area extended to the entire Old City while the 'Emergency Fund' was in high and the 'Rehabilitation Fund' remained nearly unused. This led to severe financial shortages in the Emergency Fund, slowing down its performance and, in return, the speed of house renovation. The strategy also proposed that the engineers and architects working for the Project of the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo can be placed at branch offices distributed through out the city. These branch offices can act as liaison offices among the residents and the various authorities responsible for the Old City (Municipality, Antiquities Dept., utilities services etc.). The encouragement of trade union housing cooperatives to adopt traditional housing at sites provided for future residential cooperatives. The repair and maintenance of old houses will improve traditional housing as well as introduce new social strata into the Old City.

4.1.1 Administrative system – Local legislation and implementation

The lack of detailed studies made it impossible to address building anomalies, and the permits were limited to restoration; with the availability of the emergency and rehabilitation fund, and not to build in keeping with the traditional model recommended by the project. Therfore, random change in the urban environment to a worse degree happened and reduced the impact of the administration's achievements. The role of the administration in developing a stable legislative and legal environment that allows for controlled and focused reforms has been inefficient, as the administration was unable to provide licensing and settlement mechanisms for homes and residential properties that meet the demands and needs of the community. At the same time, the principle of maintaining housing has led to a continued divide and the continuation of architectural anomalies and changes in functions. Nevertheless, in 1999 the Licensing, Emergency and Surveillance Department was established, but in the light of the weak institutional management system and its monitoring methods, oversight and accountability mechanisms, the levels of infringement and change in the architectural and urban structure have continued to escalate.

4.1.2 Economic system – Funding

From 1994 to 2006 the administration was able to secure financial resources by providing funding for restoration through emergency and rehabilitation loans obtained in the context of the project, with local and international support and grants from a number of organizations in the form of donations rather than investments. Nevertheless, these donations lasted for a limited period of time and the funding ceased without any initiatives encouraging private business interest to invest in this field. However, the private sector and housing associations have made no commitment to building on the traditional model and promoting development in the old city and maintaining the existing urban fabric.

4.1.3 Civil society – Participation

Activating the commitment and involvement of the community in this initiative of preservation of the traditional model was absolutely absent. Neither the inhabitants nor the beneficiaries of the urban fabric of the Old City had any will or incentive to demolish their new houses, and rebuild them according to the traditional model. This was due to many factors, the most important of which was the lack of the legal, technological and financial environment that promotes it, which is an administrative task, for instance, studies, facilities for investment procedures, tax exemption, labor

and contracts, etc. However, residential building owners and tenants were somewhat inconsistent with the concept of maintaing the traditional model, and restoration and reuse guidelines governed by strict legislation. Besides, the lack of detailed studies promoted the continuation of uncontrolled interventions and changes in functions e.g. from housing to warehouses or workshops. Therefore this strategy has lost its effectiveness (Figs. 3, 4).

FIG. 3 Architectural anomalies and changes in functions made by inhabitants before the Syrian Civil War: adding rooms on the first floor, adding additional floors and changing the residential functions to commercial one, and adding a toilet and a bathroom in the courtyard (left to right).
Source: author – field work 2010.

FIG. 4 Samples of destroyed built environments and traditional courtyard housing illustrate the extent to which the conservation task ahead is challenging (left to right).
Source: author – field work December 2016 and July 2018

4.2 IMPROVEMENT OF RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS – ANALYTICAL STUDY AND DISCUSSION

This level of the strategy is related to the social dimension of sustainable development. It included periodic maintenance of public utilities and provision of public services near the residential neighbourhoods such as educational facilities and health centers, etc. While safeguarding of the residential fabric from the intrusion of harmful commercial and industrial activities. Besides, it identified the Action Areas for the short-term improvement of housing stock, Action Area-1, Action Area-2 and Action Area-3 (Fig. 2 left).

4.2.1 Administrative system – local legislation and implementation

Before the Syrian civil war, the administration was relatively able to maintain the population within the urban fabric of the old city of Aleppo and this is a positive indicator to achieve one of the main objectives in the project, which is that the city center remains populated. However, the administration's

efforts were ineffective in terms of providing civil and urban services and achieving a lifestyle and living conditions in the Old City equivalent to modern neighborhoods at various levels, such as transport superstructure, infrastructure and social attraction facilities, etc. It was not able to encourage the opposite migration of upper-level income people from Great Aleppo to the Old City in order to raise the educational level of the Old City residents and improve the social and cultural structure. In contrast, the Old City continued to attract the poor and nuclear families that lived in the divided houses. Therefore, the population density remained high and the residential areas continued to deteriorate.

4.2.2   Economic system – Funding

The private sector investments in cultural sector to raise the education level of the Old City residents through establishing kindergartens, literacy and cultural centers that were completely absent. However, the administration succeeded in securing restoration and renovation loans, but it did not provide similar loans to finance small projects that raise the social, cultural and qualification levels of women, youth and all population groups.

4.2.3   Civil society – Participation

Contribution and participation of the local community as well as organizations and NGOs such as the Women's Union and Trade Unions, etc. were ineffective in the field of population development in terms of awareness campaigns, donations and volunteerism. And they did not prepare inhabitants to be more effective participants.

5   THE REASONS BEHIND INEFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

The following points summarise some of the reasoning behind ineffective strategies:

— Despite loan program used and provided to low-income homeowners, it was restricted to cases that present building risks, and therefore would not protect all buildings and inhabitants.
— Despite certain free exemptions, facilities and studies, implementation belongs to the owner and this affected the quality and standard of the work performed.
— There is no specific strategy to tackle ownership and the lack of a mechanism to resolve the related multi-ownership issues.
— There is no definition or strategy for coping with the problem of large´s houses division, overcrowding, and redistribution.
— The lack of a mechanism to deal with landlords and tenants, and the rent standard.
— Lack of a clear view of the scope and scale of interference by the project-based body, or to what extent local laws regulate internal interventions were made by inhabitants.

6   CONCLUSION

The good urban governance is compatible with the sustainable development dimensions; environmental, social, economic and culture. Therefore, it would be an effective analytical method for sustainable development management. The administration was inefficient in securing the suitable

needs for improving the citizen's living conditions in a formal and legal manner, which contributed to the promotion of the concept and culture of violation, and the continued uncontrolled change of the residential architecture, this was promoted by the absence of detailed studies, which in turn led to ineffectiveness of the housing and social development strategy. In the future, in the reconstruction phase, the local administration of the Old City of Aleppo must work to implement the good urban governance process to ensure that its performance is directed towards achieving sustainable development goals. It is necessary to reconsider the application of new concepts of participatory urban planning, flexibility, cohesion, and equal opportunities to ensure greater effectiveness of the housing and social development strategy of the Old City of Aleppo. More precisely, for current administration, this paper recommends an overhaul of the legislative framework in terms of detailed studies, procedures and implementation. Consideration should be given to amending the formulation of housing and social development strategy so that it is easier for those responsible for its implementation to differentiate between objectives, strategies and activities. The paper proposes that all targeted bodies, including local communities, academic authorities, unions and the private sector, be given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process as a matter of urgency so as to ensure that they serve all and guarantee people's desires and needs while maintaining the city's historic character.

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