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Position paper on urban development in Albania and methodologies used by Co-PLAN/IHS to forge improvements

Introduction

Since 1995 Co-PLAN, Center for Habitat Development, has been effectively involved in habitat development in the rapidly urbanising peripheral and inner city areas of Tirana. It is doing this with increased collaboration with the Institute for Housing and Urban Development (IHS) of Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The working methodologies of both organisations focus on bringing about realistically and doable neighbourhood and urban development in the rapidly changing urban setting of Albania. They provide contemporary solutions for managing urban change, taking into consideration the limitations that municipalities bear.

This paper intends to sketch the activity focus of both organisations and operating environment. It will argue that civil society development is a proceeding that involves besides the public authorities and democratically elected representatives, also very much the citizens and private sector. It expresses the important link that exists between urban development, management, good governance, and civil society strengthening, in which the co-operation of all actors with their interest is essential for a development that is supported, desirable and sustainable.

Urban growth and resulting challenges

In one decade Tirana¹ and surrounding municipalities experienced a doubling of its residency, creating a number of serious constraints to sustainable development. Without going to the causes, as collapse of the dictatorial regime and widespread immigration patterns, we want to stress here the main effects on the society.

The most obvious is the failing public service delivery. Public governance was not able to adequately react to this fast growing demands and the new arrivals were (and still are) blamed for all the problems with water, electricity, telephone delivery and sewerage and solid waste disposal. Secondly, considerable social and economic problems evolved due to the collapse of the production capacity resulting in high unemployment. The real magnitude of this crisis is masked

¹ Tirana is used as an example for urban development in Albania. The problems of cities differ since there are growing but also declining cities, but methodologies used are applicable to both situations.

by the present employment the construction industry offers, but when the construction boom will be over, then serious social problems might be expected for a great part of the (urban) population. Connected to this is the demography of the population that shows a high portion of youth who are, and soon will be, available for the labour market. Thirdly, environmental pollution is having a longer-term impact on the health of the population. Increasing densities and increased consumption create the right conditions for visible and non-visible pollution. Fourthly, the decentralisation of power to lower levels of governance or the private sector takes place, but local capacity for managing these new tasks are still limited and hampered by politicising of development issues. Strongly connected to this is the fifth effect, which is a result of the global interest of decentralisation and the call for democratisation in the former east bloc countries. Democratisation requires a strong civil society that is emancipated and knows its rights and duties. At this moment there is a no sense for civic virtue² and neither is there a structure in place that wants to develop this. The effects of globalisation, among others, lead to a strong focus on changes towards a market economy in which local governments and service providers have an independent role to play.

The issues

It is in this environment that Co-PLAN is operating, to bring about changes that directly effect the living environment of the populace. Co-PLAN does that through applying the Community Based Urban Development methodology that integrates citizenry and local government into the discussion on how neighbourhood development should take place. Citizenry and local government become partners in executing commonly agreed objectives. Residents are addressed on their responsibility to participate in public development by either paying in cash or in kind or in delivering land for public use. Authorities are addressed on their responsibility to deliver services, not because of particularism, but because they have the duty to do so.

This is in the given circumstances of an ex-communist country in transition a rather progressive approach, and many of the day-to-day problems that Co-PLAN experiences are related to this paradigm. We believe that for creating a quality living environment not only the process of prioritising and delivering services is important, but also the affordability, maintenance and proper use. In order to forge such a sustaining system, a convincing management of the public service is needed. It is in this area that Co-PLAN is presently involved, together with IHS, in developing such system in the fastest growing municipality of Albania.

It may be evident that this is only the first step towards creating a sustainable living environment. Continuous elaboration, adaptation, and vision development are needed to keep on track with the needs of the society. Civil society development is a very important prerequisite to reach and further develop this.

The challenges

At this moment the urban challenges in Albania focus on improving local governance's management capacity to deliver services including economic pricing of these; adequately determine demand for services now and in the future and adjust the planning and executive capacity towards this demand; and, explicate, through citizen's participation, the sectors and areas for municipal development and develop realistic and doable plans for implementation.

The latter emphasises that problems are more comprehensive than the question for services only. Here we come to the points as expressed in the introduction that attention is to be geared also towards the social, economic, and environmental problematique that Albania faces. Co-PLAN and IHS promote an urban management approach to adequately address the complexity of urban

² The complexity is emphasised by the fact that the big population movements caused a rather heterogeneous society

development. To reach this, organisational changes are needed including developing and involving civil society in directing and integrating those changes. To prevent exclusion and make the whole population share in development. All in all, a rather ambitious set of changes, but we believe that by piloting and setting good examples authorities as well as the citizenry can be convinced that development can be planned, implemented, and sustained.

Effective intervening

Bathore neighbourhood was not existing in 1992, while it is now inhabited by thousands of families who 'escaped' from the north of the country where they were not able to sustain themselves. These immigrants came to Tirana to find a better future for themselves and their children. Settling was initially done illegally and therefore the authorities decided to remove them without giving alternative solutions. The residents organised themselves and were able to resist eviction. Hereafter the authorities ignored and accused them of all the failing services and crime in the city, a view widely shared by the 'old' residents of Tirana.

Because of this ignorance and collapsing services the residents were deprived from basic services as water and sanitation, electricity, drainage, roads, schools and security. They experienced high unemployment and no incentives to start with any business to gather for income. They also had to cope with the changing and 'dangerous' urban living situation, and as a result fell back to the traditional culture that controls especially the girls and women in society. Living was determined by individual (family) interest and no efforts were made to communally improve their living environment. The national resistance against anything that had the word co-operation in it, and that reminded them of the repressive Communist past enforced the latter.

In 1997 Co-PLAN started with organising and training of community groups and trained a local CBO. Intensive meetings were held with residents to determine their main priorities for development and finally objectives for development were set. Opening of public space was seen as the first step towards a neighbourhood that would ultimately receive the blessings of a modern society as water, electricity, drainage, sewers, collection of waste, schools, police posts, health services etc. Providing public space meant giving up private space and this process of convincing even the most unwilling families created the basis for further neighbourhood development. Now the main road spaces have been set and base layers provided, water has been provided to certain areas, and a waste collection system has started. Residents are now discussing further developments needed, as education, security, and health. The concept of citizens' participation and co-operation with local government is now a recognised practice, and thanks to this articulating of citizens' demand and the discussion on development direction to follow, civil society is strengthened.

A municipal wide extension of this project has now been made in co-operation with IHS. Focus is given to the role to play by authorities. Transparency of development processes and inclusion of all groups is a main objective for forging development in the municipality of Kamza, and the Bathore project serves as the example that shows how residents can have influence on the quality of their living environment.

One of the main reasons for success of the Co-PLAN projects was the fact that we could combine the theory of civil participation with tangible improvements in the living environment of the neighbourhoods. Real improvements could be seen and touched, and this created the right environment for people to participate and change their original rather individualistic attitude towards a more communal interest. Interventions focused on development priorities set by these residents and as a result – often for the first time – experienced that community co-operation meant something in which they had a real influence. For this reason we believe that the Community Based Urban Development approach is effective, and more importantly, that direct linkages between physical improvements are a prerequisite for genuine civil society strengthening.

The latter, although one of the main instruments to gain success, is also a point of concern to us since many donors do not support the idea of partly financing physical improvements. To us it is clear that such financing should follow as much as possible the normal channels of local or central government with partly beneficiary contribution. However, alternative and appropriate financing systems should also be included in developing activities. We do this by working towards

establishing economic user fees systems and the introduction of taxation that will enable local government to address development, rather than the present situation in which only salary cost are covered. Transparency of such development processes is extremely important and much attention is given on introducing clear guidelines for process development and decision making.

Fields and methodology of interventions

The main fields for Co-PLAN and IHS interventions are to initiate integrated approaches in municipalities that combine (i) good urban governance including participatory decision making, (ii) service delivery in an economic viable way, (iii) sound financial public management; (iv) and capacity to address and direct social, economic and environmental development with foresight. This all refers to “the complex set of values, norms, processes and institutions by which cities are managed”.³

Co-PLAN has been working with this fundamental principle in neighbourhoods, and together with IHS at overall municipal level. Generally the methodology for physical upgrading and service delivery⁴ is as follows. First, attention is always given to the demands and the role to play by the residents in improving their environment. This mostly leads to establishing and training of neighbourhood committees, either on a specific issue or more broadly. Training focuses on the fundamental process of democracy and how this works for their specific environment and what conditions are set for this. Thereafter, development demands are inventoried and prioritised in which all residents are participating. Authorities are included to comment, advice, and ensure public support. Sectoral agencies are asked to advice and private sector companies make designs for interventions. Finally, agreements are made on the various responsibilities, roles to play and contributions to be made during implementation and maintenance.

The strategy followed is not always the same. Some interventions require more concentration on strengthening the local government structure as for example for the economic and social interventions. Effectiveness depends often on measures, incentives, and regulations that authorities undertake in order to boost a certain sector. In this case training and sensitising of local administration and decision-makers is very important. Next to improving skills and knowledge on directing development, also giving an open attitude and involving of the population are important aspects of such training. Finally, we want to establish a developmental focus within municipalities, with inclusion of all actors. Not by concentrating on Master plans and long term studies, but by strategic and action planning in which realistically and doable improvements with and for the residents can be made, which are financially viable and attend the real needs of the society.

Another methodology to reach bigger groups is the organising of urban forums and focused television programmes. Through this Co-PLAN is disseminating contemporary knowledge on urban development issues to professionals, decision-makers and the public. We believe that this methodology is effective seen the increased attention of the media for urban issues since we began with these transmissions.

The organisations

Finally we would like to say something more on the organisations and the people working in the above-described projects. Co-Plan was officially established in 1997 as a non-profit social organisation, emerging from the successful Breglumasi project. Its staff is young and energetic from the fields of architecture/planning, engineering, economy, and social sciences, and presently we have a total of thirteen staff members. Over the years Co-PLAN created a good reputation

³ UNCHS Bulletin 1999, Vol.5, No.4)

⁴ It concerns often basic services' delivery from which people are deprived and which can be societal health hazards.

with its Albanian and international partners operating in Albania, and has build a reputable network of urban development expertise.

The IHS is one of the largest institutes in the world specialising in housing, urban environment and urban management. It was established in 1958 and has forty experts working in the above-described fields. Since 1997 IHS has been co-operating with Co-PLAN on either training programmes or in technical consultancy support for urban rehabilitation or development projects. In 1999 a formal co-operation agreement was signed between the two organisations stating the mutual expertise exchange of expertise for projects and programmes in Albania. The present co-operation between the two organisations covers a three-year development programme that aims to empower local governance and community based initiatives in the Kamza municipality.

Relationship with the Netherlands

There is a particular comprehensive relation between the Netherlands and Co-PLAN, which has been built-up from the very start of the organisation. A relation that is based on co-operation in the real meaning of the word.

The most direct relation concerns the input of the first Dutch manager/initiator of the organisation between 1995-1999, and the input of the present Dutch adviser from 1999 until the end of 2001. Both experts had/have a working contract with Co-PLAN via COV⁵ mediation, and PSO⁶ salary supplementing. Another important Dutch connection is of course the medium-term assistance offered by Cordaid in establishing the organisation through capacity building and project funding, while also NOVIB funded several development projects. Then, five of our Co-PLAN staff were trained via short (three months) courses, and one Master course in IHS, and six Co-PLAN staff followed one or other type of management training at the MDF⁷. Other Albanians have attended also courses in The Netherlands after recommendations by Co-PLAN. Recently, a proposal for Nuffic funding for a training of Albanian municipal staff by IHS/Co-PLAN has been submitted. All this training is an indication of a significant Dutch interest to develop a sustainable human capacity in Albania.

Co-PLAN had also a good co-operation with the SNV, VNG, and AEDAS through various partnerships. Emphasis was on the development of a Structure plan for Kruja municipality and logistical and development assistance given by Co-PLAN during the Kosovo conflict. Another example of the relation are the many contacts that exist between the Dutch media and Co-PLAN.

Project-wise there is a dedicated development co-operation between Co-PLAN and the Netherlands, which is in the first place emphasised by the projects executed. Main focus concern the strengthening of civil society and good governance, which are important development objectives for The Netherlands, as well as for Co-PLAN. This is getting more and more reinforced by the further collaboration between the recently (1999) established Dutch Embassy and Co-PLAN. An example of this collaboration is the services that Co-PLAN delivers to the Embassy in regard to their request for building an information network and conceptual understanding of the Albanian situation. While, the Embassy assists Co-PLAN in extending its international network, and helps in 'urging' local decision makers in giving attention to urban development issues that are set on the agenda by Co-PLAN. Collaboration between Co-PLAN and The Netherlands, via the Embassy, has a significant potential for further extending, since the Tirana Mayor regards Co-PLAN as one of the few serious NGOs and professional organisations that can enhance the further development of this fast expanding city. It is obvious that the Embassy, and Dutch expertise can play an important role in this respect, and for this regular contacts between the Embassy and Co-PLAN ensure an up-to-date follow-up of the developments.

⁵ Centrum Ontmoeting der Volkeren (Centre for the Meeting of Peoples), a Dutch NGO in Cadier and Keer, The Netherlands

⁶ Vereniging voor personele samenwerking met ontwikkelingslanden (Association for personnel co-operation in developing countries), a Dutch government financed NGO in The Hague, The Netherlands

⁷ Management Development Foundation, a Dutch management training institute in Ede, The Netherlands

It should be pointed out that besides the mentioned interest of the Tirana Mayor and planning staff for the upgrading of the city and introducing contemporary planning, there is also at present an interesting development going on regarding the political sensitive issue of legalisation. A need exist for planning and planning laws adjustment, as well as for land and property legalisation that will affect many residents. Co-PLAN is working to link the interest of residents with the requirement to get laws approved that fit in the European system of property rights and urban development, including the dire need for an improved environmental legal framework, and implementation. And it is also in these fields Co-PLAN sees possibilities for a future co-operation with The Netherlands.

All the above indicate a rather strong co-operation between The Netherlands and Co-PLAN. Co-PLAN regards the special relation with IHS, Cordaid, the Embassy and others as beneficial from a number of perspectives. The most important however is that Co-PLAN finds in the Dutch partners a serious associate in forwarding a development model that is based on mutual respect and mutual agreement on the approach to follow. Because of these reasons Co-PLAN is seriously interested to continue on this path and will do its utmost to be a reliable and professional partner in development.

Concluding remarks

We appreciate the complexity of urban development and the special problems that Albanian municipalities face, and we realise that city competition and regional and sectoral development are influencing factors in how cities develop. We also are strongly convinced that cities do have their own "organic growth" as decided by the residents themselves, which has been for centuries the usual pattern for development. But, we are also convinced that the quality of life - which is in this era strongly economically determined – depends strongly on the changes that individuals have in being part of a civil society that sets the agenda. We recognise that Albania is presently facing several huge tasks, not only at the local level, but also at national and regional level. Winds of change go over the Balkans and issues to address are wide and varied. We understand that globalisation demands a strong market oriented focus, but we see also that this country needs to invest in development of democracy at the lowest level, while this seems even difficult at the highest level of governance. We can rightly say that the present period is a period of transition, but we also believe that we can play our modest but important role by giving examples and by learning by doing.