

SUMMARY

Context

In order to deal with urban issues in developing countries, international organizations (the World Bank, UN agencies...) and national governments frequently define overall urban policies and special programs. Yet, they regularly end up with reproaches about the gap between intentions and results. In reality, they do not consider the people who are in charge of putting policies into practice: urban planning professionals. These persons are still considered as neutral implementers. At the same time, researchers rarely analyze the professionals in charge of urban interventions in developing countries (urban planners, urban designers, urban managers, etc.). When they examine such individuals, they generally focus on some major urban planners coming from North America and Europe, whom they use to analyze some historical aspects of the importation of urban patterns from North to South countries.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to give an overview about local town planning professionals in eastern and southern Mediterranean countries. It is based on the assumption that urban planners and designers are more than neutral technicians: they have their own references, customs, history and cultural practices, which influence decisions and actions. Six countries have been investigated in depth: Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Turkey. Information on three additional countries (Jordan, Syria and Tunisia) widens the comparison.

Methodology

The research focuses on the professionals most commonly found working in urban planning: architects, engineers, surveyors and planners proper, as well as graduates in geography, sociology, economy and demography. They are approached as a group or a mass of people in order to identify their common specificities. Four aspects guided the investigation: teaching (programs, professors, degrees...), professional organizations (professional associations, unions...), places of work (public administration, municipalities, private design offices, consultancy firms...), and practices (production of plans, urban design, consultancy...).

Findings

The local planning professionals are composed of two categories:

- town planners who work in the field of urban planning exclusively;
- professionals who realize some urban studies according to demand and market evolution. The first category

represents relatively few people. The second category gathers on average ten to thirty thousand persons in each country (for instance, 18 000 architects and engineers in Lebanon, 26 000 in Algeria, 20 000 in Egypt).

These professionals are not well structured socially, despite their long history in three countries. Some of the related fields have long been established and organized. So in Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon, the engineers' associations have been founded during the 1940s and 1950s. However, the professional associations are focused on their specific field and on the social activities that accompany it. Neither those associations nor those for architects (when separate) dedicate particular attention to urban planning. Consequently, local town planners are dispersed between several professional organizations and different established professional fields. Whereas urban planners' associations were created in Turkey (1969) and Tunisia (1985), they have a limited influence on the social organization of professionals.

In these countries, teaching urban planning is still based on international references and European or American patterns. It has very limited ties to existing local urban problems. The logics behind academic decisions that led to a proliferation of degrees and diplomas in urban design and planning do not help this situation: there is now ten institutes of urban planning in Turkey, five in Egypt, four graduate degrees in Lebanon, three in Algeria and two in Morocco. The number of graduates from local programs specialized in urban planning is increasing rapidly at the same time their professional profiles continue to shy away from local needs and challenges.

Internationalization, privatization and decentralization are increasing the changes within local urban planning professionals. Local private engineering, design and consultancy offices are more and more recruiting specialists in town planning and creating their own department in it. They tend to consider urban planning as a strategic activity (not so profitable, but one that opens other opportunities), as illustrated by Dar El Handassa (classified among the ten biggest engineering offices in the world). In Algeria, the privatized large planning offices choose the same strategy of diversification. Consequently, these offices and agencies are more demanding in their recruitment, increasingly insisting on an educational background in planning, with pedagogical consequences for the teaching of town planning. It may finally be then that urban planning is finally coming into its own as a profession in the Arab and Turkish worlds.