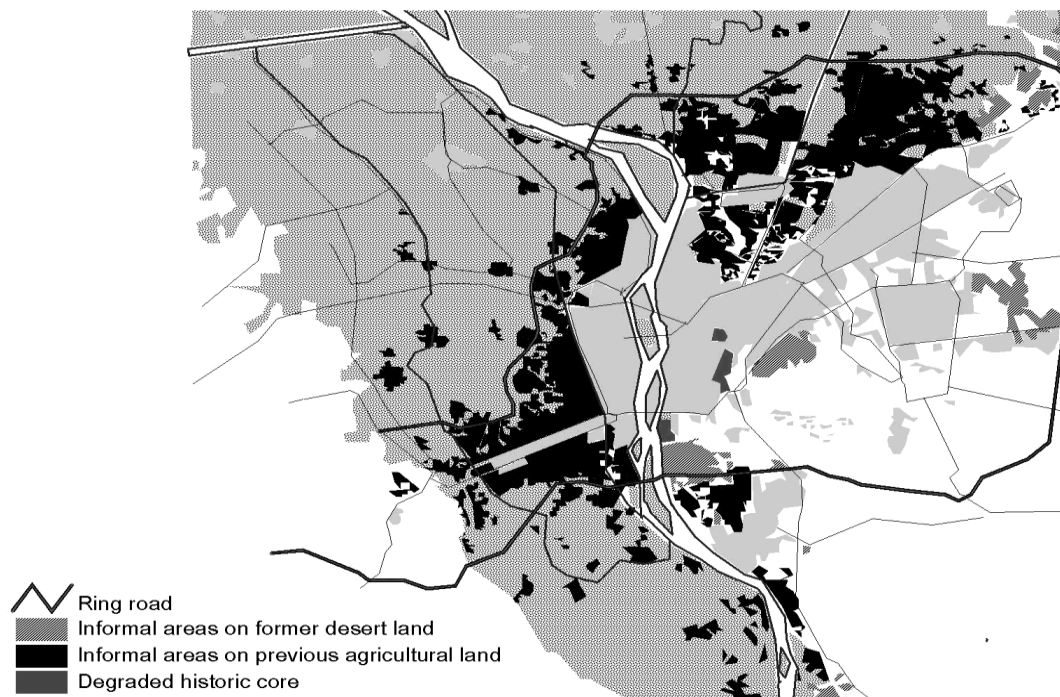


**“BEST PRACTICES” IN PRACTICE:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND PARTICIPATORY
URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN CAIRO'S INFORMAL AREAS (EGYPT)**

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Praised as the solution for emancipating poor and marginalised groups and for fostering good governance at the local level, participation has emerged in recent decades as the feature *sine qua non* of development interventions. But how feasible is it to promote participatory forms of development in authoritarian contexts such as post-Socialist Egypt, where patronage networks permeate the whole process of socio-political negotiation? Is it possible to overcome the anti-participatory attitude of governmental authorities and civil society organisations alike? Searching for an answer, this study explores a participatory urban development programme sponsored in Cairo's informal areas (Egypt) by the German Technical Cooperation (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* – henceforth GTZ). Both contextual elements connected to the Egyptian state-society relation and contingent factors linked to the planning and implementation of the programme seem to have affected negatively the success of the development initiative in its emancipating aims.



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The choice of Cairo offers interesting insights into the complexity of urban management and development. Since the 1960s, the process of urban growth in the Egyptian capital has taken place mostly informally, i.e. illegally, without any planning, guidance or enforced regulations. At present, informal areas house more than half of Cairo's residents and are still responsible for most of the city's physical expansion (Sims and Séjourné, 2008). For decades the Egyptian government, unable and unwilling to provide housing opportunities quantitatively and qualitatively adequate to the needs of the majority of the population, adopted a laissez-faire policy towards informal conversion of agricultural and desert land into residential plots. Then, in the first half of the 1990s, the threat of subversive Islamic activists who were practically ruling in some of these informal areas (Denis, 1994; Singerman, 1998) led the government to convert its policy of neglect into a more active approach to urban informality (Dorman, 2007). In the span of a few years the development of informal areas turned into a political priority in the discourses of the government, when the internationally recognised "best practice" to be adopted in dealing with irregular settlements was identified in «participatory slum upgrading programmes that include urban poverty reduction objectives» (UN-HABITAT, 2003: vii). It is in this context that GTZ was invited to assist in improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of informal areas in Cairo.

Three main sets of questions guide our analysis. First, which interpretation of the flexible concept of "participation" has been given? Secondly, has the participatory development initiative really helped the "marginalised", the "neglected" strata of the population of informal areas to raise their voices and to actively express their concerns? Finally, has the GTZ participatory development programme succeeded where most initiatives of democracy promotion fail, that is, in actively involving the population in decision-making, in pushing (local) government agencies to be more responsive and responsible and in making policies more effective?

The Participatory Urban Management Programme (PUMP) that GTZ inaugurated in Cairo in 1998 (to be implemented in Greater Cairo by GTZ and the Ministry of Planning - now Ministry of Economic Development and the governorates of Giza and Cairo as the main counterparts) aimed at providing the Egyptian government with policy advice on how to deal effectively with informal areas. Participatory methods were to be developed and tested in two pilot areas, i.e. Old Boulaq (150,000 inhabitants, in the district of Boulaq El-Dakroul - BED - Giza Governorate), and Ezbet Bekhit (40,000 inhabitants, in the district of Manshiet Nasser - MN - Cairo Governorate), chosen because they represented the main typologies of informal residential patterns in Cairo (the first being a previous cultivated area, the latter a squatter settlement on state desert land). The experiences on the ground were then to be translated into policy inputs through a Policy Advisory Unit (PAU), while a Local Initiative programme (LI) was envisaged to finance small development projects through the involvement of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Development Organizations (CDAs). In 2004, PUMP changed its name into the Participatory Development Programme (PDP) and was extended to the whole district of Boulaq El-Dakroul (about 1,000,000 inhabitants) and to most of the district of Manshiet Nasser (about 500,000 inhabitants). A new "branch" also opened in Ezbet El-Waldah and Arab El-Waldah,

in the southern industrial district of Helwan, following an official request of cooperation from the Integrated Care Society (ICS), managed by the First Lady, Suzanne Mubarak.

Participation: a vague concept?

From the project documents, the importance of participation or the forms it should take are not clear. According to the Verbal Note n. 401 (24th of August 1998), «the aim of the project is to take into consideration the needs of the citizens by carrying out urban renewal measures and/or redeveloping land for housing construction». In the Mission Paper of the Participatory Urban Management Programme, Egypt (Arab Republic of Egypt – Ministry of Planning and Federal Republic of Germany – GTZ, 1998), the «agreed purpose of the PUMP is to increase the ability of social and institutional agencies to promote participation-oriented urban development», hence «contributing to policies and mechanisms that promote positive impact on living conditions of the disadvantaged population of urban informal settlements». Finally, in “Participatory Urban Development Boulaq El-Dakroul – Project Status per October 1999”, we read that «the objective of the project is the improvement of the economic, social and environmental living conditions of the population of Boulaq El-Dakroul». The three formulations are not contradictory, but they insist on different aspects which are neither necessarily connected nor consequential and it is not clear which one was to be considered as the priority.



Inhabited rooftops, Islamic Cairo, 2008.

The project was silent also about what “participative urban management” could or should be: as a consequence, perceptions and interpretations of the staff varied significantly. In a questionnaire, 25 GTZ-PDP members were asked to indicate whether they agreed that «participatory development programmes draw previously marginalised individuals and groups into the development process»: 9 respondents agreed “quite a lot”, 7 “very much” and 3 “not much”. Whereas a respondent pointed out that «participatory development programmes draw previously marginalised groups into the decision making procedure of the development process *in a structured, institutionalised and sustainable way*» (italics in the original), another explained that participation «is not about drawing “marginalised” individual and groups, [but] it is a mere “activation” and “organisation” of roles of all concerned parts of the development process». The same respondent who was so clear about the necessity of integrating the population in the “decision making process”, in a subsequent question stated that participation and democratisation are not related: in his/her opinion, «democratisation is on national level and participation is on grassroots level; democratisation is also very political while participation can be limited to development issues (in Egypt it is counterproductive to relate them) ». Regarding the aims of the GTZ participatory programme, 6 respondents ranked first «giving people a voice to express their needs», whereas 5 privileged «persuading the concerned governmental authorities to pay attention to the marginalized communities while planning the urban management measures»; in both cases, participation doesn't necessarily affect the “choices” of the decision-makers, unless they decide to make some benevolent concession. Only 3 respondents believed that the most important aim was «achieving decision-making power for the poorest and most marginalized». Finally, when asked if the willingness to participate should be the main criteria to involve the stakeholders in the program, 3 people answered positively, 5 negatively, 9 agreed only partially and 3 agreed “totally”.

The adoption of the concept of “participation” seemed to be therefore very enthusiastic, but unfortunately also rather *dilettantesque*. As a matter of fact, the participatory approach was never at the center of any management meeting or workshop for project staff and no internal discussion was ever raised about it. As a consequence, participation was intended generically as an involvement of the “relevant stakeholders”, with no consensus about the modalities and the aims of this involvement.

The target: which “marginalised”?

The program was developed on the widespread assumption that informal areas are «the physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty» (UN-HABITAT, 2003: xxvi), the domain of socio-political exclusion and «the most visible concentrations of poor people and the worst shelter and environmental conditions» (*ibidem*). However, this is not the case of Cairo, where the aggregation of socio-economic data according to the partition formal vs. informal areas does not present any significant difference between the two groups (formal and informal) In general, because of their unplanned, haphazard construction (from which their name in Egyptian - *ashwa'iyyat*), informal areas suffer more than others from problems of accessibility, narrow streets, absence of open spaces, very high residential densities and insufficient infrastructure and services (World Bank, 2008: 26).

Nevertheless, not all informal areas are the same. Settlements built on former agricultural land show a better performance than the ones built on desert land, but also within the borders of the same informal district there are often remarkable differences between recently urbanised sectors and more consolidated ones, previously existent village nucleuses which have been incorporated and sectors built *ex-novo*, sectors closer to facilities or with good avenues of communication with formal Cairo and more isolated ones. These differences do not follow the lines of the administrative division in *shiakhat* (the smallest administrative units which in some case include more than 250.000 inhabitants) and therefore are not recorded by official statistics.

	Predicted per-capita consumption (in Egyptian Pounds per year)
Old Boulaq (Boulaq El-Dakrou)	1747
Kafr Tohormos	2058
Ezbet El-Nahl	2139
Waraq El-Arab	1753
Al-Bashateen	2013
Al-Barageel	1472
Manshiet Nasser	1638
Ezbet El-Haggana	1522
Greater Cairo	Approx. 2000 EGP.¹
Data from Population Council, 1998.	

In Greater Cairo not all poor urban dwellers reside in informal areas: there are poverty pockets also in the most exclusive and expensive areas. Conversely, informal areas do not host only the urban poor, but also young middle class, educated families, university students and public-sector employees. Informal neighbourhoods are often considered the privileged areas for deployment of informal economic activities, but official data show that many inhabitants have regular jobs in the formal sector, with some of them relying upon fair levels of regular income (see also Séjourné 2006: 192-205).

¹ Data for Greater Cairo Areas do not exist: this is an approximation calculated as the proportional average of the data about Cairo Governorate and the Urban part of Giza and Qalioubiyya Governorates.

	Illiteracy Level	University Level Education	Male Unemployment	Female Unemployment	Access to public water ²
Boulaq El-Dakrou - A	23.9	0.3	7.1	10.6	96.3
Kafr Tohormos - A	19.2	0.5	3.9	3.8	94.8
Ezbet El-Nahl - A	16.3	0.3	3.7	6.7	65.3
Waraq El-Arab - A	27.9	0.1	3	5.7	95.3
Al-Bashateen - A	29.7	0.4	4.3	4.4	91.4
Al-Barageel - A	40	0	5.1	8.3	70.6
Manshiet Nasser - B	52	0	3	9.5	38.8
Ezbet El-Haggana - B	46.8	0	2.9	12.1	54.4
Greater Cairo	29.50%	0.30%	5.9%%	10.6	86.80%
Some socio-economic indicators for informal areas in Cairo. Re-elaborated from CAPMAS 1996 data. Type A: informal areas built on former agricultural areas – Type B: squatter settlements on State desert land.					

Similarly, the residents of informal areas cannot be qualified automatically as “marginalised” and “voiceless”: there are multiple interchanges between social and state actors in the daily bargaining process through which the provision of services is negotiated via personal networks. The initial *laissez faire* policy towards informal areas is routinely encouraged at the local level by the bribes authorities receive to turn a blind eye on the building process (Deboulet, 1994). The tolerance of local authorities is further boosted by the agency of local leaders emerged in the newly built settlements: through personal connections they create with members of the bureaucracy, they can ease the access of the population to those goods and services (such as licences, connections to infrastructures, a job in the public sector and so on) which would be otherwise out of reach via “formal” procedures. Subsequently, their clienteles can be converted into political influence and local notables/natural leaders integrated into the ruling party or co-opted by politicians in search of electoral bases (Haenni, 2005): the vote of the poor is cheaper to purchase by political mediators, but is also the best way for the poor themselves to get back some of the much-needed goods and services.

Since informal areas are not the exclusive domain of “marginalised and voiceless” but comprise different levels of socio-political integration, are the individuals and groups targeted by GTZ actually the less “vocal”?

NGOs and “natural leaders”

Between 50% and 2/3 of the NGOs identified by GTZ in the pilot areas as possible partners are represented by *rawabit* (singular: *rabta*), community development associations

² In the apartment or in the building.

organised as regional leagues and catering to specific groups of migrants (in particular from Upper Egypt). Others are linked to local mosques, where alms are collected and serve to finance small charity initiatives. The activities promoted by these organisations is limited: about 70% of them are active exclusively in supporting widows and orphans, and in the distribution of clothes and meals (especially during Ramadan), in the organization of funerals and pilgrimages to Mecca. Some associations provide religious education and literacy classes; some have established kindergartens, sewing and knitting clubs for women and small medical dispensaries.

The founders and/or leaders of the NGOs incorporated into the program are those typically qualified in Egyptian as *shakhsiyyat* (“personalities”, i.e. respected people, with a high social status) or *andokum ezba* (people “with a family”, i.e. coming from a rich and influential one). These *shakhsiyyat* tend to hold their leadership positions indefinitely: in one case, the founder/leader has administered “his” organization for the past 28 years! Many of the leaders are or have been members of the Local Popular Council (the elected local body): this prevents the risk that the association will be closed by administrative decree, but it also casts doubts on NGOs' alleged role as independent collective actors able to defend the interests of the community vis-à-vis state authorities. Older, influential members gather informally to discuss the affairs of their community: they tend to monopolise the direction of the organisation and are unwilling to share responsibilities with younger ones. The habit of assuming important decisions without the approval of the members of the association/organizations is widespread; no regular meetings of the committee boards are organised and there are no formal invitations, memoranda or minutes of meetings. Overall, NGOs seem to be considered by its members more as avenues of self-promotion than as means to concretize a sincere social commitment.

The lack of women in the committees or in the organisation at all is symptomatic of a noteworthy gender imbalance, but the project staff seemed to realize the importance of women's inclusion only in 2008, ten years after the beginning of the programme. When women were finally involved in the development initiative, no considerations were made as to their social position, economic conditions, marital status, age and occupation, even though all these differentiations can radically influence the priorities a “woman” expresses.

Among the “relevant stakeholders”, there were the so called “natural leaders”, «respectable and respected people belonging neither to the Local Popular or Executive Council, nor to any NGOs nor other organization, whom the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods refer to when they need to solve a problem»³. These political agents mediate between the population and the administration (through patron-client avenues); they do not seem interested in promoting any change in those political games they benefit from. The inclusion of these personalities in an institutionalised role in the development process seems likely to reinforce (rather than challenge) existing patterns of patronage.

³ Khaled Abdelhalim, GTZ-PDP area manager for Boulaq El-Dakrou, interview, 11 May 2008, GTZ-PDP central office, Cairo.

Empowering: how?

The “empowering strategies” adopted by the project were the classic ones: “capacity building” courses for NGOs and public administration, a participatory need assessment with public debates, focus groups and open days, and a long process (about 5 years) leading to the creation of a Local Stakeholders' Council including the local administration, the Local Popular Council, NGOs and CDAs, natural leaders, women and youth. The Stakeholders' Council would be in charge of discussing, defining and transmitting to the local administration the development priorities of the local community; given that it hadn't yet met as of July 2008, its modus operandi could not be assessed by this author.

Some scepticism remains. No disempowering devices were adopted within this committee to guarantee that it would not be controlled by the very same actors that already monopolise the decisional power. The Local Stakeholders' Council seemed to be a formal super-structure imposed on pre-existing power relations, and it is quite conceivable that it will institutionalise them without generating any substantial modification.



Rinsing jars, outskirts of Giza, 2009.

Conclusions

The success of the participatory approach is highly context-sensitive: strategies and methods that are perfectly effective elsewhere might not produce the same result in Cairo, where counter-élites are virtually inexistent, civil society is permeated by opaque patronage

networks and there is no social movement willing to promote an alternative way of dealing with urban issues.

In the experience of the GTZ project in Cairo, local governmental personnel showed a lack of both motivation and capacity to deal “in a participatory way” with the issue of urban upgrading. Rising religious fundamentalism and extremism are still the main rationale for addressing social problems: as a consequence, participation is not meant by public authorities as integrating the residents into the decision-making process, but as an invitation to the “beneficiaries” and the private sector to contribute (in labour, cash or kind) in order to complement the government’s investments in infrastructures.

The chronic unavailability of resources is a major problem in Egypt and the local administrative budgeting does not include the possibility of drawing funds for integrated development projects in a specific area. Whereas governorates and districts are allocated a limited budget for daily administration purposes, the disbursement for health services, educational facilities, infrastructures etc. depends on the concerned line Ministries and is distributed accordingly through the directorates and departments. Budget requests forwarded by districts and governorates are not necessarily fulfilled: the mechanisms of participatory development individuated by GTZ are designed to work at the district level, but the decisions as for the upgrading of informal areas are still taken by the central government. The higher levels of the administration don't seem keen to support politically and financially the upgrading, unless their symbolic intervention can be marketed in front of the public opinion as a sign that “they care”. From informal conversations with GTZ staff, it appeared that what was important for the Ministries involved was to get funds which could “cover” the areas the government cannot (or does not want to) provide for. Urban development interventions are further complicated by the fact that no supervising and coordinating structure exists at any level among the many Ministries and agencies involved in urban management.

Locally, decision-making patterns have not been affected significantly by the GTZ initiative. So far, the expected bottom-up pressures for change have not materialised: none of the groups involved in the process seemed able or willing to start expressing demands to the local government in terms of increased responsiveness and accountability. This is partially due to the way the project incorporated the “local stakeholders” and tried to “empower” them. Participation was not understood as a means to promote people's emancipation but rather as a mere technique of incorporation and the absence of an internal debate about the participatory approach itself did not help. Another related problem was the tendency to focus on procedural issues while overlooking the informal processes of interaction and socio-political negotiations that actually exist among the “stakeholders”: patterns of patronage were completely disregarded in the assumption that NGOs and natural leaders would genuinely act for the interest of their communities. No global strategy was envisaged to encourage the inclusion of weaker, less visible and less vocal actors or to create spaces for unrepresented interests to emerge. Instead, the programme tended to rely upon individuals and groups who actually had no interest in a transformation of the status quo.



Street life, near Bab Zweyla (downtown Cairo), 2009.

Three lessons can be drawn from this experience. Firstly, for any organisation intending to promote participatory development it is necessary to reach an internal agreement on the meaning of “participation”. Without a clear definition of the aims and the nature of the approach, not only it is difficult for the team to pursue a consistent strategy, but it is also impossible to evaluate the success of the initiative in achieving its target.

Secondly, in neo-authoritarian contexts like Egypt, where mechanisms of procedural democracy exist but governance is based on an omnipresent patronage (and therefore is exerted by and large outside formal institutions), a deep awareness of the nature of socio-political power, of its distribution and of the competition for it is crucial for any participatory programme aiming at involving and empowering the marginalised strata of the population. Without this awareness, patterns of inclusion in (and exclusion from) the socio-political networks will be left largely unaffected and the development promoted will merely reflect the priorities of already powerful groups.

Finally, where decisions concerning local development are dependent on the central government and no responsiveness mechanism exists, the involvement of local stakeholders in the planning of development measures risks becoming a theoretical exercise with no practical outcome. A dangerous exercise, in fact, since the expectations of the population about the improvement of the situation in their neighbourhood are likely to be raised and the inertia of the administration might create social tension. In the experience of the GTZ programme, in fact, although part of the required funds were expected to be shared by the counterpart (according to the cooperation agreement), these funds did not materialise and the

GTZ team ultimately had to resort to the support of the German Bank for Reconstruction (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau) to co-finance the initiative or implementation could not have progressed. This might hinder the long-term ownership of the development process, but it appeared the only viable option in the lack of any level of decentralisation in the decision-making process and fund allocation.

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