



Urban development - from plans to planning

Syria's high birth rates and accelerating urbanisation may result in a doubling of the populations of cities within the next 15 years. Their urban areas will grow even faster. With 40 % of the population now below 15 years old the demand for jobs will be huge. Economic growth would further intensify the pressure of urban development.

Cities will have to cope with these developments more effectively than in the past, when the urban planning system was not able to keep up with development and the growth of informal settlements could not be controlled. If sustainable cities are the goal, change is imperative. Improvements will be proposed and tested, emphasising implementation involving all stakeholders including the private sector and coordination and cooperation between diverse authorities.

MAM is proposing a series of urban development projects designed to develop better understanding and performance at municipal level. These could cover subjects as diverse as solving parking problems, the improvement of old neighbourhoods or the development of new tourism areas - but some actions are clearly mandatory, such as development of the old cities and informal settlements.

Priding itself on being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, the Old City of Damascus is a World Heritage Site worthy of special attention. Development pressures threaten its historic value, its role as a vibrant centre of the country's capital and its qualities as a living environment for its inhabitants. MAM will support the creation of a Strategic Development Plan for the Old City and assist in its implementation. It will also give some assistance to the old cities in other pilot municipalities.

It is estimated that more than a third of Syria's population now lives in what are called informal settlements. Legislation has not been able to prevent or slow down this spontaneous urbanization process, which is undesirable for government and inhabitants alike. MAM will propose a special decree, making it possible to guide urban development through an interactive negotiation planning approach with public authorities, the private sector and residents in selected settlements in the project cities. The experience gained may provide building blocks for improved national policy.

Modern GIS Systems can be of great help for better urban planning and management. For example, the precise identification and location of properties is necessary for property tax. Linking GIS to property and personnel databases creates the pre-conditions for a modern property tax system. MAM will take action to facilitate the development of modern GIS in Syria at the municipal level.

Financial resources management - paying taxes is a must

The Government has reduced the rates and fees which were a source of revenue for local authorities. This increases the need to find other, more robust, sources of revenue for local authorities and to improve the collection of revenue and financial management. Ninety percent of local authority income is received from central government. However, assigned revenues from central government are based on the number of registered inhabitants, regardless of actual population size. This creates inequities.

There is no attempt at resource equalisation. The collection process is manual or relies on