

LINKING RELIEF, REHABILITATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (LRRD) IN AFGHANISTAN

From the spreading of the Pakistani architecture to the urban expansion of Kabul into the surrounding hills, what will Kabul look like in the near future?

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July 2006

Whilst Kabul's population is increasing on a daily basis, local officials seem unable to move ahead with the process of reconstruction. Authorities are unable to assume their responsibility and address urgent issues such as housing for the poor, water and electricity supply, drainage, roads, traffic congestion and general planning issues. There also seems to be little control over how the city's boundaries are expanding.

This study looks at the current realities in Kabul today, and consequently how to best to deal with Kabul's priorities? We have tried to identify sustainable dynamics and potential polarities, the sensitive spots and difficult topics.

Kabul is the symbol of a country getting back on its feet. Kabul has an aura of intense activity, buildings are being built everywhere. One's first impression of Kabul is often that of anarchical development. Rules are not respected, indeed the government and the municipality do not have the power to implement these rules. Standards and building regulations exist but are no longer taken into account. Likewise parts of the infrastructure network are still in place but are not functioning: they need to be rehabilitated. One of the most striking elements of Kabul today is its physical diversity. The contrasts are huge. Refugees are still living in tents or in destroyed buildings, sometimes alongside tall modern buildings.

When it comes to assess the urbanisation process Kabul turns out to be in a transitional phase where emergency, rehabilitation and

development phases are co-existing. These different timeframes need to be taken into account in order to foresee and rebuild Kabul's future urban policy.

The spread of informal settlements

Kabul has experienced massive growth. Its population has grown at a rate of 17% per year from between 1999 and 2002. It is assumed that growth will remain at about 5% per annum over the next few years. As a result Kabul needs to provide 20,000 households per year in order to deal with the 150,000 new migrants¹. The informal settlements located on the hillsides probably represent one of the most challenging issues for Kabul.

This spread of new houses on the hills surrounding Kabul is the direct aftermath of the war. The inhabitants are mainly returnees from abroad or people coming from rural areas with the hope to find better living conditions in the capital city. They build good quality mud houses. The main issue remains public infrastructure, especially access to water.

This is even more challenging since the institutional urban stakeholders seem to lack the proper tools to deal with these issues in Kabul. The Kabul municipality (KM) is still dealing with urban issues on the basis of a 1978 master plan which is completely out of date. This plan was designed for a population of 1 million whereas today more than 3 million people are settled in Kabul city. Consequently informal land represents 70% of all residential

¹ World Bank, 2005

areas and provides shelter to 80% of the population².

On this issue, the Kabul municipality and the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MUDH) have differing opinions. International donors share the same viewpoint as the MUDH. The municipality totally disagrees with the proposal put forward by the MUDH and international donors to move towards the legalisation of these settlements before upgrading them. The municipality's plan is to purchase land in order to distribute it to former "squatters", whilst simultaneously setting up the necessary social services and basic facilities. But this will take at least ten years. The municipality wants to establish green areas on the hills.

The legalisation of informal settlements is a general problem in Kabul, but it is especially true for the informal settlements surrounding Kabul city. Roughly 12% of the total residential population falls into this category of housing³. The decision to settle on the hillsides is strategic. In fact, they are close to the city centre and to the major employment zones. Although more and more people are settled here, the KM still wants to build green areas on the hills. It appears that the KM is in denial which is causing major problems for development in Kabul. Indeed if they legalised the informal settlements, local authorities would then be able to address all the issues linked to the development of informal settlements. For example they could bring tenure security to the people by legalising the property titles. Likewise they would be able to develop infrastructure that are severely lacking in these areas.

Legalisation of the informal settlements is a means of dealing with the reality of the situation in Kabul and accepting that these people are settled there and are not going to leave.

What the priorities in the reconstruction process?

Two main priorities are commonly identified today in Kabul: firstly, the lack of infrastructure and secondly the need for capacity building in the MUDH and KM.

The lack of infrastructure is the logical conclusion of 25 years of war. 60% of Kabul roads are destroyed. Only 30% of the population has access to water. Only 50% of

solid waste is collected. The majority of network services still exist but are out of service.

Capacity building in the KM and MUDH. The mandates of the main institutions working on urban issues (MUDH, KM, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Interior) are unclear, which explains the difficulties they are facing in clarifying their respective roles. The Ministry of Interior coordinates the management of all the municipalities in the country, except for the Kabul municipality. The KM is directly accountable to the cabinet of the President. The mayor is not elected but appointed by the President.

Disagreements between the KM and the MUDH have emerged. The latter is clearly in favour of instigating an upgrading scheme for the informal houses as the government does not have the financial capacity to acquire land and resettle people. On the other hand, the KM does not want to legalise the informal settlements claiming that it will attract more people who will try to take advantage of this change in legislation. Besides, the KM does not recognise the MUDH's mandate. As a result these two institutions are not functioning in an optimal manner. It is difficult to know who is accountable to who. Theoretically the MUDH decides and the KM implements but at the field level, things become a little more complicated. As a matter of fact, coordination between the MUDH and KM is extremely poor and they barely communicate.

Moreover there is some kind of ideological gap between these two institutions. Commonly the KM is perceived as reproducing the Soviet way of managing urban issues, whereas the MUDH is more modern and the direct interlocutors of the international donors. As a result the political and technical management of the city is not functioning smoothly at present. Thus, there is no institution which has the capacity to coordinate the activities of all the urban stakeholders.

Another important aspect is the lack of updated legal administrative and technical framework (standards, plans). Refusing to admit that the master plan is out of date is a perfect example of this. One has the feeling the KM is far removed from reality in Kabul and does not really take into account the huge gap that exist between the 1978 master plan and the city's layout today.

² World Bank, 2005

³ op.cit

Finally the KM and MUDH's failure to function are also part of the difficulty in managing urban policy correctly. The lack of unaccountability is probably one of the main concerns regarding reconstruction. This may be linked to the growing influence of the private sector.

The uncontrolled private sector or the development of a mushroom city

At present, the KM and MUDH do not have the capacity to control and monitor private sector activities. Therefore many companies are building what they want, where they want, regardless of public spaces. There is a growing gap between the public and private sector. The public sector is not developing as fast as the private sector.

Yet, it should also be pointed out that the private sector is definitely responsible for speeding things up and invests the most in Kabul's reconstruction while the KM and the MUDH are unable to provide enough houses. As a result the private sector alone is capable of responding to the need for more housing. However if one is looking for sustainability in housing provision, the priority in the short term should be to develop and organise a legal framework that facilitates land development inside and on the outskirts of the city. Moreover, in the long term the public sector also needs to focus on providing social housing.

Where do the most vulnerable fit in?

Only 0.5% of the Kabul population do not live in permanent housing structures⁴, including 10,000 people living in tents and 5,000 living in the ruins of destroyed buildings⁵, and yet their future poses a challenge for Kabul's development. This is even more true since the population of Kabul keeps on increasing whereas there is already a shortage of housing. Should damaged buildings be rehabilitated or should the inhabitants be moved? Yet since the government does not provide social housing, the chances of these people finding a house are very low.

What is the best way of improving the city's capacity to accommodate new migrants? Should the city expand or get denser?

In 2003-2004, the KM designed a strategic plan for the north of Kabul. The aim is to create a new city and a surface area of 500km² has been already designated to double the size of the city. It is designed for 2 million of Kabulis, with modern architecture, facilities and

services. Yet this plan has been implemented in full.

The city is currently expanding horizontally (to the north and the west), requiring huge levels of investment. However the area developed is not provided with infrastructure. Surely it would be more relevant and less expensive to upgrade existing areas, including informal ones, so that more people can live there? These informal settlements are part of the reality in Kabul today. They are proof of the dynamics of a private economy. Indeed the World Bank has estimated the cost of these houses at US\$1.3 million⁶. In this respect, the government should take advantage of this situation since they do not have the capacity to provide many houses. It may be worthwhile to compare the cost of developing the suburbs and of upgrading settlements in the hills. More to the point, the hills are part of Kabul's physical image. The hills, once upgraded, could give a positive image of the city (in direct comparison with the negative image produced by slums on an international level). One should highlight the positive dynamics and good quality of these integrated constructions in the centre of the city that were developed autonomously by the people themselves. The World Bank has a US\$25 million project for Kabul on stand by and is refusing to fund the building of any new city. According to them this is not a solution. The priority should be to upgrade current buildings rather than build new ones. Indeed the building of new cities requires huge investment.

Obviously Kabul today is drastically changing. It may be too soon to assess the current process of urbanisation as the city is in a transitional phase. Yet what needs to be highlighted is that Kabul should take advantage of its strong private reconstruction dynamics that could be used to promote the development of a better urban policy. In this respect one can even assume that Kabul's situation is not so bad compared with other capital cities in Asia. Yet problems should also be identified such as coordination issues, updating issues within the legal framework, over occupancy of houses, and the management of international aid and technical expertise. These are due to inadequate management, unrealistic promises and an absence of plans for the city.

⁴ World Bank, 2005

⁵ World bank 2005

⁶ op.cit