



Economy and
the environment

Social and climate justice

in the context of urban planning
in the Arab region

Nadine Bekdache
designer and urbanist, co-founder of Public Works
Studio, Lebanon

Layla Riahi
Researcher and activist, member of the Tunisian
Platform of Alternatives, professor at the National
School of Architecture and Urbanism, Tunisia

Introduction:

Urban planning or urbanization is a term currently used in relation to construction engineering, hence restricting it to buildings. However, this term encompasses several other aspects such as the relationship with the environment, economic systems, forms of organization, and the management of public affairs. For Ibn Khaldun, urbanization is the development of a given place through agriculture, industry, trade, population growth, and civilization¹. It is a semi-organic social and economic dynamic based on cooperation between individuals and groups linked together through solidarity and a common goal of prosperity. Urbanization is founded on the three “natural” economic activities: agriculture, subsistence crafts (industry), and trade. Governance and architecture come next as the components that give urbanization a special character and form. According to Ibn Khaldun, this dynamic aims at improving living conditions and enhancing cooperation between individuals and groups in a way that allows all members of the community to make a living and earn money. For him, making a living and earning money should be linked to work while easy money whether through monopoly or economic rent is seen as an aspect of corruption and injustice that portend the destruction of urbanization.

Six centuries have passed since Ibn Khaldun formulated his theories on urbanization, but these theories are still pertinent to our understanding of the close relationship between urbanization, justice, and the environment and help in posing questions about why certain parts of the world failed to maintain such relationship. In the past few decades, capitalism had a substantial impact on urbanization with encouraging the accumulation of wealth through monopoly or speculation and undermining local economic, social, and environmental balances. The gap between the public and the private widened as industrialized areas that aim at integrating into the global market were created, hence subjecting the rest of urban space as well as rural areas to marginalization, impoverishment, and exploitation. This transformation was accompanied by the creation of illegitimate spaces that imposed themselves on cities in an attempt to coerce their inhabitants into adopting a unified lifestyle that suits capitalist objectives. Reshaping city spaces to overvalue assets and resources renders the city a sheer container whose job is to absorb and adapt to investment surplus. According to Henri Lefebvre, the state dominates urban spaces through division, unification, and hierarchical categorization. This requires the marginalization of spaces, activities, and communities that do not adopt capitalist ideologies. The new spaces become equipped to receive real estate developers and release products that attract particular segments of society or are only suitable for particular activities, hence creating a gap between citizens. In this case, the state gives up its duty to develop the city and assigns this role to developers while only focusing on resulting revenues. The more of those spaces the

¹ Ibn Khaldun. *Book of Lessons, Record of Beginnings and Events in the History of the Arabs and the Berbers and Their Powerful Contemporaries*, 1377.

state adds, the more deeply rooted this model becomes and the less the state performs its original duties.

Segments of the population that are not included in these procedures do not find the channels through which they can voice different opinions, especially that the official discourse is promoted as representative of all the population in order to endow it with legitimacy. Even though those activities imposed by the state are often legalized, they are detrimental to nature, society, and economic and cultural networks. That is why they are always met with popular discontent. However, the effectiveness of resistance to those practices differs from one place to another. It is noteworthy that capitalist urban policies do not only affect current inhabitants but also extend to future generations. This is because resources that are used up to increase profits and accumulate wealth cannot be reproduced and because capitalist practices are always accompanied by violent measures such as evacuating locals from lands and houses, encroaching on forests, and dredging coastlines under the pretext of development and economic growth. Despite the dominance of official discourses that promise prosperity and improvement of living standards, locals come to see the stark contrast between those promises and reality on the ground and realize that promoted development models are far from sustainable. This is particularly the case in the Arab region as will be seen in this paper that focuses on the cases of Lebanon, Tunisia, and Egypt.

First: The multi-faceted Gulf of Gabes disaster in Tunisia:

Gabes is a seaside oasis that is distinguished by its ecological agricultural systems, which is mainly demonstrated in three-layer farming². Gabes offers an ideal example of a comprehensive system based on fair distribution of spring water, communal ownership of infrastructure and buildings, and shared resources and knowledge. Gabes consists of several oases lined across the Mediterranean Sea and together they form the Gulf of Gabes, which is home to a wide variety of marine species. These oases are surrounded from the north, west, and south with rocky mountains, dry lands, and desert.

Gabes has been populated since ancient times and has since the Amazigh civilization been prosperous through the utilization of natural resources and its strategic location in trade routes. It witnessed the emergence of unique urban models that skillfully coped with the topographic and climate features of the area and utilized available resources such as rocks, clay, gypsum, wood, and others. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Gabes was comprised of urban clusters of similar sizes, all connected with strong economic and social ties. Some of those clusters were located in the oases³ and others in the mountains⁴ and together they formed the city of Gabes. The city provided an ideal example of Bedouin urban planning on the agricultural, commercial, and cultural levels. It was also home to different ethnic groups including Berbers, Arabs, Jews,

² Palm trees shade henna and pomegranate trees that, in turn, protect crops that are cultivated horizontally such as vegetables, legumes, and grains from the sun.

³ Such as Jara, Menzel, Chenini, Ghannoush, Bouchama, El Hamma, and Métouia

⁴ Such as Matmata and Tujan

and Blacks. When the French colonized Tunisia, the region was militarized, and lands were expropriated. This led to a decline in grazing and trade activities and signaled the beginning of urban encroachment upon the oases, especially with consecutive waves of forced migration.

The "new" economic model:

Following independence, there were hopes that confiscated lands would be returned, essential economic activities would resume, and people would once more have equal access to natural resources. However, the state adopted a totally different policy under the pretext of "modernizing" the economy.

The most prominent features of post-independence economy in Tunisia were as follows:

- State expropriation of all lands controlled by the occupation
- Doubling the number of state employees while reducing wages
- Forced creation of agricultural and commercial cooperatives under state supervision (this was the case during the time of Ahmed ben Saleh⁵ then the cooperative experiment was abandoned)
- More focus on extractive and transformative industries in the public sector
- The liberalization of the economy and reliance on the comparative advantage approach (during the time of Prime Minister Hédi Nouira⁶)

Based on the above, a new development plan set new criteria for production and reconsidered the use of land. This plan was accompanied by a legal and institutional system through which the state monopolizes the use of resources and directs the economic process. The new developmental pattern mainly relied on funding from international financial institutions and northern countries.

The economic model adopted during the time of Bourguiba was not new, for it constituted a continuation of French occupation policies that focused on channeling production towards catering to the needs of French markets. True, Bourguiba took control of resources and production modes that were previously dominated by the French, yet he adopted the same approach through a segment of the population that played a major role in the new economic and social equation: civil servants and workers.

⁵ A trade union leader to whom Bourguiba assigned key economic ministerial positions in the 1960s and was dismissed in 1969.
⁶ Governor of the central bank in the post-independence era, appointed prime minister by Bourguiba in 1979, the orchestrator of economic liberalization

The impact of the new economic model:

The new economic model had a substantial impact on the structure, economy, and urban planning. Farmers were impoverished due to lack of access to land and resources and reduced pricing of their products in addition to the fact that they were forced to change their production modes⁷. Traditional craftsmanship declined as imported commodities invaded local markets and cross-border commerce deteriorated. The new model widened the gap between coastal and inland areas and between cities and the countryside. The case of Gabes demonstrates the disastrous effects of the new model as a result of environmental violations in the region and their social and economic repercussions.

In 1962, a decree was issued to establish an industrial zone around the Gulf of Gabes on a religious endowment estate⁸ to include an industrial harbor and a chemical laboratory to transform phosphate extracted from the mining basin and export it. Work in the industrial zone started in 1972 and signaled the beginning of an environmental disaster that expanded through railway lines to include 44 chemical factories and more than 1,000 companies, most of which pollute the environment. The Tunisian chemical complex is a closed industrial-military zone that spans over 828 hectares and is a national company with a labor force estimated at 6,500, ranging between workers, employees, and handlers. It is the fifth largest exporter of phosphate in the world.

Recent economic analyses reveal that the social and environmental cost of the project exceeds its revenue⁹ and has now become the center of several debates about health, environment, marine life, water, and land. Factories located in the complex have been releasing toxic waste for the past 40 years, pumping 6,000 tons of phosphogypsum into the sea, and burying solid waste under the ground or just dumping it above the ground. Since the industry requires large amounts of water, those factories depleted underground water, hence destroying the ecosystem in the oases. All this had a grave impact on locals from different sectors, including farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, small traders, and workers in the service sector¹⁰. The chemical complex is the major source of work in the area. That is why it has been the target of several protests especially by youths who demand jobs at the complex or with its handlers and at times can bring production to a standstill to force local and national authorities to respond to their demands¹¹.

Because of the growing labor force at the industrial zone, residential communities started sprawling in the area at the expense of the oases. For example, the village

⁷ This raised production cost and led to subordination to global markets.

⁸ Property donated for charitable or religious purposes

⁹ Etude de l'impact de la pollution industrielle dans la région de Gabes ; Commission européenne ; 2018: <https://bit.ly/3slPDmu>

¹⁰ De l'anthropocène à l'écozoïque. Reconquérir et habiter la zone industrielle de Gabès. Achref Gharib. Mémoire de fin d'étude. Ecole Nationale d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme; 2020.

¹¹2018, 2019, 2020.

of Ghannoush grew ten times its original size from 1951 till 2020. The villages of Chenini and Bouchama expanded until they became adjacent to each other. Jara, Menzel, Nahal, and Old Gabes were crushed by the environmental and urban disaster now called the city of Gabes. The housing program launched by the state did not respond to the new demographic demands of the area. Despite utilizing modern construction techniques, including the use of cement, iron, bricks, and asphalt, the program was still incapable of addressing the urban growth that resulted from the doubling of the population. Lack of adequate infrastructure and the deterioration of public services led to the rise of informal housing both inside and outside the oases and traditional urban communities were eaten up by concrete structures. Farming deteriorated, traditional lifestyles changed, and household waste witnessed a remarkable increase that it turned into a serious environmental hazard.



Social and environmental justice:

It is not possible to achieve social justice if environmental justice is absent. The case of Gabes constitutes a perfect example of drastic economic policies adopted in Tunisia and their role in destroying existing urban and environmental systems, hence disrupting the social and economic balance in the areas in which those policies are implemented. Since the establishment of the chemical complex in Gabes, almost all fishing activities ground to a halt due to the contamination of the sea. Farming and crafts witnessed a remarkable decline due to the depletion of water resources. Air, soil, and water contamination caused numerous environmental and health problems that were aggravated by the drastic population growth, lack of adequate of utilities, and informal

housing. The complex also poses a grave threat to the life and safety of locals¹² since a disaster similar to the Beirut Harbor explosion, or even worse, is likely to take place in Gabes.

On the socioeconomic level, the industrial complex resulted in:

- The development of industrial activities that are detrimental to other sectors
- The exploitation of an already fragile labor force through minimum wages and inadequate working conditions
- Appropriating the local value added through state monopoly of the industry and channeling revenues towards the center
- Adopting the approach of overemployment, which increases the burden on the state without actually improving its performance or increasing its revenues

Second: The environmental and social cost of New Alamein City in Egypt:



Construction of towers in New Alamein City

The Egyptian state is focusing, now more than ever before, on real estate investment. This approach has, however, been adopted for several decades as the period between 1970 and 2015 witnessed the creation of 23 new cities, hence remarkably expanding the real estate business in the country. The new cities are designed to include hundreds of thousands of residential units located in housing projects or lands for private investment. Some of these cities are even designed to house millions. Many of the new cities failed

¹² The Beirut Harbor explosion is likely to take place in Gabes.

to attract targeted numbers as occupancy reached minimum levels, hence defeating the purpose of expansion, which is housing as many people as possible¹³. Despite that, the state introduced the concept of fourth generation cities¹⁴ that include 20 new cities which aim at attracting 30 million people and which are to be inaugurated in the coming few years¹⁵. This puts into question the viability of adding more cities when already-existing ones have failed to attract people, which means that there will be a surplus of urban areas. The question of the impact of new cities on society and the environment also becomes inevitable.

Environmental impact:

"Cities alone account for 78% of anthropogenic carbon emissions."¹⁶

Fourth generation cities fall under two categories: cities resulting from the urban expansion of already-existing cities and cities aimed at luxury real estate investment. The New Capital in the outskirts of Cairo and New Alamein City on the North Coast are examples of the latter. New Alamein City, located on the Mediterranean coast, aims at housing two million people and is marketed as the first eco-city in the country¹⁷ because it contains solar energy and water treatment plants in addition to being investment-oriented cities that contain hotels, resorts, entertainment facilities, and luxury residential and office towers¹⁸. Despite its seemingly promising future, environmental and climate experts raised concerns about rising sea levels that might eventually lead to the sinking of the northern Nile Delta¹⁹. This, in turn, puts into question the economic feasibility of the project.

The proposed plan of New Alamein City also raises several environmental concerns. These include the effect of the construction of skyscrapers and other urban facilities in close proximity to the sea on biodiversity especially as a result of dredging. The proposed architecture in this city as well as other new cities is not suitable for the hot climate in this area since most buildings, whether currently constructed or depicted in the city layout, are glass-fronted, which makes them hotter, hence contributing to the

¹³ Amr Adli, 2016.

¹⁴ According to a 2108 statement by Egyptian Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouli, fourth generation cities are based on sustainable planning and the utilization of modern technologies. These cities, which are devoid of all forms of informal housing, aim at attracting investments to Egypt, linking development centers with production zones, and encouraging development outside the Nile Valley.

¹⁵ According to the New Urban Communities Authority, 2018.

¹⁶ Stern N., 2009. "A Blueprint for a Safer Planet: How to Manage Climate Change and Create a New Era of Progress and Prosperity". London: Bodley Head

¹⁷ "Eco-cities" is a relatively new term coined by the World Bank to help developing countries on the environmental, social, and economic levels.

Dabayeh, M. Mahdy, D. Maguid, D, 2018. "Towards Adaptive Design Strategies for Zero Carbon Eco Cities in Egypt. Sustainable Cities: Authenticity, Ambition and Dream". *IntechOpen*.

¹⁸ Moustafa Madbouli, 2018. Op. Cit.

¹⁹ Underwood, E., 2018. "How fast is the Nile Delta sinking?" *Eos*, 99: <https://doi.org/10.1029/2018EO097325>

El Deberky, Y. 2011. "Coastal adaptation to sea level rise along the Nile delta, Egypt." *Coastal Processes*, Volume 149.

Hereher, M. 2010. "Vulnerability of the Nile Delta to sea level rise: An assessment using remote sensing." *Geomatics, Natural Hazards and Risk Natural Hazards and Risk* (4):315-321

increase of carbon emissions. Another concern is related to the energy required for the operation of those buildings in terms of air conditioning and heating as well as the effect of urban concentration on water resources.



Proposed architecture of New Alamein City

Economic cost:

The budget of New Alamein City was seven billion Egyptian pounds in 2019 then reached 31 billion in 2021 for the completion of 15 residential towers, up to 41 floors each. Construction costs are estimated at 12 billion while finishing work and glass facades are estimated at 18 billion²⁰. The towers are expected to be home to upscale offices and residential units. The city is considered an extension of luxury resorts along the North Coast. This means that lower income segments will have no place in the city except for providing services.

New Alamein City is not the only case in Egypt, for similar projects are implemented in the New Capital in east Cairo, Central Park in Sheikh Zayed City in west Cairo, Maspero Triangle in downtown Cairo, and New Sphinx City in West Cairo, which means that the state is competing with itself. Also, there is no guarantee that all units in new cities will be occupied since it is not clear whether the number of investors in Egypt, whether Egyptian or foreign, requires the construction of all those towers and the same applies to buyers of residential units. This means that many of those units might end up vacant, hence creating surplus property.

²⁰ "Finishing work for coastal towers in New Alamein City reach 18 billion pounds [Arabic]." *Al Mal Newspaper*, July 27, 2020: <https://bit.ly/2NgCnGI>

Social cost:

New Alamein City and similar new cities are marketed as investment projects and a means to accumulate wealth and an entire city might be offered in the stock market. This means turning housing from a basic right into a commodity, hence changing the idea of the city, dividing urban communities based on socio-economic status, and making adequate housing a privilege of the rich. The construction of fancy towers in New Alamein City and similar project constitutes an encroachment upon low-income citizens, many of whom become impoverished because of deteriorating living standards and lack of adequate services as a result of the prioritization of spending on investment projects. In many cases, citizens are evacuated from their homes, which are replaced with luxury commercial and residential towers. New cities are created at the expense of old ones, and like this was the case with Cairo and the New Capital, it is also the case with Alexandria and New Alamein City where the discrepancy between the quality of projects implemented inside the old city and those in the new ones is striking. This demonstrates that the state prioritizes cities in which investment projects are implemented, hence is expected to house the rich, over older cities with a substantial percentage of lower income citizens. State resources are, therefore, mostly allocated to higher income citizens who have the ability to buy units in new cities.

Third: The impact of the cement sector on land and the population in Lebanon:

The construction sector is a main component of the Lebanese economy. This sector requires the extraction of a minimum of three million cubic meters of gravel and sand every year, which means transforming 50 hectares of land into quarries²¹. Such transformation is accompanied by serious damages for both the environment and local communities. This process has for a long time relied on policies and legislations that prioritize the interests of investors who control the sector and that secure highest profit margins in both local and international markets. This also comes at the expense of developing productive sectors.

²¹ Dar Al Handasah- l'Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région d'Île-de-France (IAURIF). "National Physical Master Plan for the Lebanese Territory" Council for Development and Reconstruction, 2005.

The status of cement companies:

In 1931, the Maronite Patriarchate partnered with a French company to create the first cement factory in Lebanon, then called Société des Ciments Libanais²² and now known as Holcim Lebanon. The company is located in the coastal towns of Chekka and Heri. Two decades after the creation of the company, another cement factory was established on the coast of Chekka by influential families in the area and became affiliated to the Cimenterie Nationale. At the time, the Ministry of Planning did not exist neither did laws that regulate the use of land. The Société des Ciments Libanais was, in fact, created when Lebanon was under the French mandate, which means it was designed to serve the interests of Europeans and their local allies. The only legislations that existed at the time of establishing the two companies were only linked to quarries and crushers (1935) and the cement industry (1938)²³, but no laws regulated the establishment of industrial facilities and the use of land.

The expansion of cement factories was made possible through a number of practices that were permitted by the Lebanese government, such as licenses for transporting cement in violation of the 1938 law. The construction of factories on public property was also in violation of the 1952 law on the use of public space. Commercial harbors were created to allow exporting cement and water resources from both the Jaouz River and the Jaradi Spring were used by the factory, hence depriving locals of them²⁴. Cement factories gradually started to attract farmers and fishermen who were promised a stable job and income. This led to the deterioration of farming and fishing in the area and to the emergence of a support base for the factories, especially as workers encouraged their families to follow in their footsteps and choose the factories over other traditional activities. In the early 1990s, several laws were issued to regulate the use of land along the Koura coast, where the factories are located, yet these were not enough to monitor the expansion of cement factories, especially that they were supported by state policies that contributed to this expansion in the first place.

Cement industry:

The Lebanese government adopted import and export policies that gave precedence to the cement sector over other production sectors such as agriculture. In 1993, the government banned the import of cement from abroad, which remarkably increased the price per ton. Cement factories also received constant political support, which was particularly demonstrated in the relationship the two factories have with the Maronite

²² Boulos Sfeir. *A history of Bakirki (1703- 1990)*[Arabic]. Institute of History, Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, 1990.

²³ Public Works Studio. "Koura's land: From fertile resource to raw material for cement factories." Legal Agenda, January 19, 2019. English translation: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38475>

²⁴ Public Works Studio. "Beyond cement: Towards an alternative vision for Chekka and surrounding towns [Arabic]." https://publicworksstudio.com/sites/default/files/beyond_cement_0.pdf

Patriarchate and political powers in Zgharta²⁵. Added to that is the relationship SIBLINE Cement has with other political powers such as Walid Jumblatt and Saad El Hariri.

Currently, three cement companies monopolize the cement industry in Lebanon: Cimenterie Nationale (3 million tons, 43% of the market), Holcim (2.2 million tons, 38% of the market), and SIBLINE (1.3 million tons, 19% of the market)²⁶. The expansion of cement factories is closely linked to reconstruction and investment projects in Lebanon. With every crisis that obstructs the sale of cement production, new projects are created to save the cement sector. For example, local purchases of cement did not drop in 2018 after housing loans were suspended and foreign investment declined but were rather channeled in a different direction. Since 2015, the cement sector was quick to benefit from the garbage crisis, which led to the emergence of toxic landfills along the coast. The cement sector is also expected to benefit from the CEDRE (the international conference in support of Lebanon development and reforms projects) as well as other controversial infrastructure projects such as tunnels and dams²⁷.

National Physical Master Plan for the Lebanese Territory:

The National Physical Master Plan for the Lebanese Territory, endorsed by the Council of Minister in 2009, is a substantial document on planning and sustainable development in the country and aims at attracting major investments while maintaining balanced development and protecting resources. However, the authorities have been overlooking the plan till the present moment. In fact, since the plan was approved, 42 land-use plans were released and another 69 modified, and only five of them mentioned the plan²⁸. Decrees linked to natural resources, strategic agricultural lands, and areas threatened by the contamination of underground water did not use it as a reference. It is noteworthy that the plan acknowledged the importance of the northern part of the Lebanese coast, where cement factories are located, and proposed strict measures to protect it.

²⁵ Information on the political context was obtained through interviews with Koura locals in 2018, especially with an engineer called fares Nassif. It is noteworthy that there is a conflict between the Marada Movement and the Kataeb Party over cement revenues according to Abdullah Al Haj Hassan's book *Lebanon's Resistance History: 1900-2000*, issued in Arabic in 2008 by Dar Al Walaa for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution.

²⁶ David wood, Jacob Boswall, Yasmine Minkara. "Unfair game: Lebanon's rigged markets are killing competition." *Triangle*, November 2020

²⁷ Public Works Studio. "Beyond cement: Towards an alternative vision for Chekka and surrounding towns [Arabic]." Op. Cit.

²⁸ Public works Studio. "Master-Planning in Lebanon: Manufacturing Landscapes of Inequality." *Legal Agenda*. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/master-planning-in-lebanon-manufacturing-landscapes-of-inequality/>

Controlling land and institutions:

Cement factories on the north coast of Lebanon purchased properties in the area to expand their facilities and build quarries as an initial step towards controlling the land and its resources. Both the government and political factions turn a blind eye to the fact that the construction of quarries in the area violates a number of laws, especially that no official permits are obtained. This led cement factories to consolidate their power in the region and use the land as they see fit even if illegally. In fact, the Cimenterie Nationale filed a lawsuit against the Lebanese state when the latter tried to regulate the former's activities in the town of Bedbahoun, which sustained major damages as a result of the construction of quarries, and the factory won^{29 30}

Urban planning in Lebanon has become a major target of political and sectarian factions as well as profit-seeking real estate developers. This means that planning only caters to the needs of the minority and in many cases lack of planning serves the interests of this minority. It is noteworthy that the use of 85% of Lebanese lands is still not regulated, which makes room for interest networks to use those lands as they please without any form of accountability.

Facing urban planning injustices:

Since the French mandate and up till now, urban planning in Lebanon has been substantially influenced by the French system. While France witnessed remarkable improvements in the field of urban planning, Lebanon still adopts traditional systems that are not as efficient as they were in the past. The current planning system in Lebanon relies on land-use plans that only focus on the classification of lands without taking into consideration social, economic, and environmental aspects. It is, therefore, a form a planning that is not accompanied by development. Land use plans are also designed in an ambiguous way, hence become open to the interpretation of political powers and the private sector and give more room for maneuvers. Those plans are also marketed as objective references whereas they need to be part of a social and political process in which all locals affected by a given change in their community should take part.

²⁹ For more info on the case of Bedbahoun see "Koura's land: From fertile resource to raw material for cement factories." Op. cit.

³⁰ In May 1997, the Council of Ministers issued an unprecedented decree allowing the use of land in the town of Bedbahoun for quarries for 10 years. At the time, Bedbahoun was an unplanned city and no maps to regulate the use of land in it had been released. The decree was renewed in 2007 for two more years. This drove the Higher Council for Urban Planning to issue a decree that regulates the use of land in Bedbahoun and neighboring towns such as Zakroun, Bargoun, and Qalhat for the first time in their history. The council released land-use plans in 2011 and declared Bedbahoun a protected area in an attempt to alleviate the damages caused by quarries. A few months later, the Cimenterie Nationale filed a complaint with the State Council against the Ministry of Transportation and Public Works and called for the annulment of the decree. The State Council annulled the decree in a flagrant example of the power wielded by cement factories in Lebanon.

Not only does the civil planning law in Lebanon not require the participation of civil society or affected parties, but also the Higher Council for Urban Planning does not allow involved factories to consult the people. Municipal councils are the only entities represented in the process of urban planning, yet they lack the necessary resources and the ability to represent the locals in their areas, especially ones that are not registered voters and do not own property. With the absence of segments of the population that are most affected by investment projects implemented in their hometowns, decision-makers gave themselves the right to use lands as befits their interests and those of investors allied with them.

Currently, service and rent sectors constitute 77% of the Lebanese economy³¹. This economy is mainly based in the capital and caters to its needs, hence marginalizing other sectors and areas. It is necessary to take the nature and specificity of each area into consideration to choose the economic activities that best suit them. However, the exact opposite happened. Many productive sectors such as agriculture, fishing, and domestic tourism were undermined while people's health and lives were endangered under the pretext of development and job opportunities offered by service and rent sectors. This led to the impoverishment and marginalization of areas that do not serve this goal. That is why it is not possible to achieve real economic development without securing people's right to a dignified life, adequate public services, a clean environment, and decent working conditions.

³¹ Report by the Central Administration of Statistics, 2016.

Conclusion: What if urban planning for?

"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." Jane Jacobs, 1993

With the growing threats of climate change, the importance of environmental justice has remarkably increased. Environmental justice mainly revolves around acknowledging everybody's right in equal and sufficient protection and makes sure that no segment of the population would bear the brunt of environmental threats more than another. Researchers and activists warn governments of continuing to adopt policies that give precedence to their version of development that relies on investment projects while not taking people into consideration. It is necessary to replace traditional concepts of urban planning with new ones that address the needs and cultural traits of local communities and that involves people in the decision-making process. Dealing with the city as a map does not make this possible since this strategy involves forcing different communities with different needs and cultures to become part of one unified model that is not sensitive to such differences.

Looking at the reality of cities and the countryside in the Arab region makes the question of what urban planning is for pressing. In other words, is it possible to call investment projects that focus on real estate development urban planning even though they damage people and the environment? Such projects commodified land and housing and made average citizens incapable of living in the environments that best suit their needs and lifestyles. While the three countries subject of this paper are not the same, they have one thing in common: the role of corruption, nepotism, and oppression in defeating the purpose of urban planning. In the three cases, urban planning becomes an investment project that prioritizes profit and that is supported by state policies, which also give precedence to profit over people's interests and rights. In the three countries, land is misused, and resources are depleted in order to serve the interests of the rich in the absence of laws that protect the people from the negative impact of investment projects. This proves that the current situation constitutes an extension of colonial policies that stripped people of their lands and resources. Post-independence states only modified such policies in a way that benefits them and their allies instead of attempting to right the wrongs of colonial powers. This led to the marginalization of more areas and the impoverishment of more people, hence making the achievement of a real development impossible.