13.2020

Brief

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Decentralisation, an innovative settlement model for war torn areas. Can reconstruction be the chance to rethink administrative and urban patterns?

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Abstract

FEEM Policy Brief

The upcoming processes of reconstruction in countries and territories involved in civil wars in the MENA region will necessary require new models, not only from an urban pattern standpoint but also from an administrative one. Centralised reconstruction poses the risk of further widening economic and social inequality and possibly triggering conflict recurrence, on the contrary a process of decentralisation could allow reconstruction to be tailored on the needs of each territory and work towards a long-lasting peace.

01
Decentralization in the MENA region

The theme of the relationship between rural and urban spaces and the need to find a virtuous, ethical and biological balance, today finds a possible field of application and immediate verification in the processes of reconstruction of areas affected by conflicts with particular attention to the MENA Region -Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011, was mainly fought in densely populated urban contexts: the cities of Homs, Aleppo and Raqqa and the peripheral suburbs of Damascus, such as Douma and Ghouta, were the main battle areas. The return of the war in the cities, a combat technique abandoned for strategic reasons since the end of the Second World War, has important symbolic meanings summarised in the term Urbicide (Bermann, 1996), the destruction of the city and its memory, but also significant strategic design implications for the reconstruction process.

At an administrative level, decentralisation means the transfer of responsibility from central governments to smaller entities that allows the transition from a single policy throughout the whole territory to a differentiation at the level of local territorial entities (Brosio et al, 2001). The spatial consequences of the process of administrative decentralisation and the application to the theme of reconstruction require a conceptual and design effort that allows you to imagine and implement the tools necessary for the reconstruction not only of urban areas with high population density but also of rural areas and at the same time to design innovative low density settlement processes. Thinking about decentralisation today constitutes a conceptual effort against the contemporary conventional mentality that unites the concept of development to that of high density urban development; on the other hand, it is necessary to split the two concepts to favour settlement models with variable densities.

02
Syria, a centralised and unequal development

The theme of urban centralisation in the MENA region is linked not so much to the percentage of population residing in urban centres, although some countries in the area such as Jordan and are among the places with the highest urbanisation level on the planet, as regards the difference in resources and economic factors in the management of urban and rural areas. Syria is a case of absolute interest as economic development and the considerable increase in GDP in the decade preceding the conflict have been severely unequal within the various governorates and urban and rural areas (WB, 2017). The percentage of people living in extreme poverty declined considerably in the 1997-2007 decade in urban areas while it remained practically unchanged in rural areas. The rural areas of the governorate of Aleppo and the north-east of the country were the places with the least economic development (UNDP, 2016) while the urban centres of Aleppo and Damascus and the port cities of Latakia and Tartous made the most of an economy made of wild liberalisation based on the post-Soviet model and strongly marked by clientelism (Ismail, 2018). The selection of specific parts of the population, for key tasks such as the management of ministries, on the basis of geographical origin, religious affiliation and wealth was implemented by the regime in order to maximise loyalty (perceived or real) to the government and has produced significant differences in the economic growth performance of the different groups (Nakkash, 2013). The almost perfect overlap between the areas controlled for long periods by the opposition and the areas with the highest level of poverty (Yazigi, 2016), shows the need in the reconstruction period for decentralisation policies capable of addressing the issue of economic inequality and access to services and have as a central goal the development of rural territories in light of a sustainable use of resources.

As an example in Syria, where about 2,000,000 homes have been destroyed (UNDP, 2016), self-construction can be a winning strategy only if guided by a principle of community reciprocity based on micro-financing models where the loan is guaranteed not to individuals but to groups that share at risk and support each other through the establishment of participatory assemblies on a neighbourhood scale. Bottom-up reconstruction systems such as core housing, self-help, builder's yard or incremental approach coupled with forms of micro financing such as Grameen, ROSCA, Tontine or the ZAKA digital identity system being tested in Rwanda; need to be related directly to urban forms, assembly decision-making systems and social capital because: "a society characterised by generalised reciprocity is more efficient than a society in distrust, trust is a lubricant of social life"

(Putnam, 2000). It must necessarily be taken into account that in contexts of reconstruction the ethnic or religious component can lead the resources to be distributed (in the best of cases equally at worst in a heavily unequal way) among homogeneous groups eliminating any advantage of scale in the control of the design and construction processes. The instruments of the popular assembly must be used to ensure the maximisation of social ties, especially between non-homogeneous groups, the influx of large external capitals is positive only in conditions of equal level of information and access to resources and it can instead become a reason for recurrence of the conflict in the event of heavy distribution inequalities.

Conclusion

Applied to the theme of reconstruction, decentralization must necessarily find a form of administrative management that allows spontaneous community assemblies to become the engine of the transformation processes of the city and the territory. The assembly system is struggling today to be recognised within contemporary territorial divisions, especially in countries such as Syria where the centralisation of the state is very strong and where decisions on the territorial policies of the entire state are taken vertically by the central government. On an urban and land management scale, the Syrian conflict has generated a series of spontaneous and informal administrative experiences: for example, the Kurdish cantons of Rojava in the north of the country have given themselves a federal government (Knapp et al, 2016) which overlaps without replacing it with the central one, while in the small village of Saraqib in the province of Idlib free elections were held in the middle of the conflict (Gopal, 2018). In general, all the forces in the field had to experiment with administration systems alternative to state centralisation and to understand how the often scarce resources present in specific places could be exploited. In many cases, these were overlapping and hybrid jurisdictions such as in the case of the suburb of Barzeh in which the delivery of weapons by the opposition allowed the return of basic services (water, electricity) without the complete return of the regime (Hamlo , 2015) or in the village of al-Sanamayn where the truce between oppositions and rebels occurred through a negotiation called taswiyat al-wad (problem solving) and through a process of reconciliation and public discussion (Al-Tamimi, 2017). The sum of the experiences of informal and fragmented management of the territory, and of the reconciliation processes, may perhaps constitute a patrimony for the reconstruction processes but the administrative rethinking towards decentralisation must pass from an alternative hypothesis that allows to divide the decision-making processes between several actors involved avoiding the rigid territorial division. The fragmentation of the authorities generated by the war can constitute a push towards a less centralised post-war structure and, if well organised, constitute an engine of the reconstruction processes (Hinnebusch & Imady, 2017).

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