4. North African Cities: Actors for Sustainable Development or Sites of Imported Urban Visions?

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The cities of North Africa have been the locus of human development in this unique region. As human settlements on the edge of the Sahara and on the banks of the Nile, they emerged in the few locations that provided enough water and biological capacity, and enjoyed a more moderate climate. Some of them capitalized on maritime trade on the Mediterranean while others benefited from trade links with sub-Saharan Africa.

Today, North Africa is an urban region, but its cities lack much of the economic, environmental, and social benefits that urbanization typically provides. Efforts to transform their urban form and infrastructure to become more sustainable have only just begun and are hindered by the slow pace of decentralization reforms; the efforts are, however, supported by the emerging political role of cities globally as a major actor for sustainable development.

Alongside these internal urban dynamics, powerful global forces are at play in the region, influencing its development model and shaping how some of its cities are evolving. These include African continental and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, city associations, and partnerships with China under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

These competing dynamics raise the question as to whether North African cities are in the process of becoming actors

driving sustainable development with their own transnational agency, or whether they are instead becoming sites for great power struggles and imported urban visions.

North African Urbanization Processes

There are two major urban clusters dominating North Africa: the Nile River cluster, a narrow linear strip of cities along the banks of the Nile River and within its delta in the section between Aswan, near the border with Sudan, and the Mediterranean coast; and the North Africa cluster, which includes cities and towns within the northern coastal strip extending from the Tunisian cities of Tunis and Sfax in the east to the Moroccan cities of Casablanca and Agadir in the west.

By the 1960s, the urban population in North Africa was estimated to be 34% of the total regional population, according to World Bank data. By 2019, it had grown by almost two-thirds to 56%, approximately the same level of urbanization as the global average.[1]

Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia all experienced a steady increase in urbanization levels between 1960 and 2019, rising from a range of 29% to 37% to a range of 63% to 73%. Egypt and Libya, on the other hand, experienced a different trajectory in that period, according to United Nations (UN) Population Division data sets. Egypt's urbanization seems to have stalled since the late 1970s; Libya experienced rapid urbanization until 1984.[2]

The growth rate of the North African urban population has been consistently falling over the past six decades. The rate has been as high as 6.5% in Algeria and Libya, and as low as 2.5%

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[1] World Bank, "Urban Population (% of Total Population)", using data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Population Division, "World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision", accessed May 20, 2021.

[2] Ibid.

in Tunisia in 1960, according to World Bank data;[3] from 2015 to 2020, the rates in Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia fell to 2.46%, 1.68%, and 1.53%, respectively. The average rate, which stood at 2.19% from 2015 to 2020, is expected to continue falling according to projections by the UN Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), with the average rate dropping below 2% between 2025 and 2030.[4]

These regional urban population-growth rates consistently surpass the region's overall population growth rate. This confirms that the urban population growth has not been limited to natural demographic increases, but also was affected by the influx of rural-to-urban migrants.[5]

As a result, the number of agglomerations grew in all the countries of North Africa during the period between 1960 and 2015. In Libya, urban agglomerations grew from twenty-five to forty-six; in Tunisia, from twenty-four to eighty-nine; in Algeria, from seventy-two to 476; and in Morocco, from forty-nine to 167.[6] In Egypt, while the number of agglomerations grew from 284 to 1,061 during the same period, there are discrepancies in the tally of urban vs. rural due to Egypt's approach to designating urban areas according to their administrative status.[7]

As the number of agglomerations increased, the average distance between them shrank in almost all of the region's countries, falling from 40 km to 19 km in Algeria between

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[3] World Bank, "Urban Population Growth (Annual %)", using World Bank staff estimates based on data from the UN DESA, Population Division, "World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision".

[4] UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization*, Nairobi, 2020.

[5] K. Elgendy and N. Abaza, "Urbanization in the MENA Region: A Benefit or a Curse?", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung website, February 10, 2020.

[6] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)/Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC), *Africa's Urbanization Dynamics 2020: Africapolis, Mapping a New Urban Geography*, West African Studies, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2020

[7] P. Beaumont, G. Blake, and J.M. Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*, London, Routledge, 2016.

1960 and 2015, from 8 km to 5 km in Egypt (with the same caveat about Egypt's administrative designations applying here), from 42 km to 29 km in Morocco, and from 35 km to 20 km in Tunisia. Uniquely, Libya experienced the opposite, with average distances increasing from 45 km to 63 km during the same period.[8]

Urbanization is highly centralized in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya with approximately one-fifth of the population residing in the capital city of each country. The Cairo metropolitan area is North Africa's only primate city,[9] with 47% of the urban population residing in the capital. In Tunisia, 28.5% of the urban population lives in Tunis, while 22.3% of Libya's urban population lives in Tripoli.[10] The primacy of the largest cities continues despite government efforts to steer urban development to smaller cities, and it creates an imbalance in the urban hierarchy and biases urban development toward larger cities.

In Algeria and Morocco, centralization is less pronounced. Algiers comprises 6.4% of Algeria's population, while the four major cities in Morocco (Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier, and Fès) combined represent 21.7% of the national population.[11]

North Africa's urbanization levels appear to be halfway between the levels of its neighbors, the European Union (EU) and sub-Saharan Africa. While the urban share of population in North Africa increased from 34% to 56% over the last six decades, the urban share of population in sub-Saharan Africa – the least urbanized region in the world[12] – went from less than

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[8] OECD/SWAC (2020).

[9] According to the UN DESA, Population Division, a city will be considered to be the primate city of a country when it accounts for at least 40% of the urban population in a particular year. For information on primate cities see: UN DESA, Population Division, "World Urbanization Prospects: 2018 Revision"…, cit. For data see: UN Economic and Social Affairs, *The World's Cities in 2018: Data Booklet*, 2018.

[10] UN Economic and Social Affairs (2018).

[11] Ibid.

[12] This comparison includes North America, South America/Caribbean, Europe,

15% of total population to approximately 41%, and its urban population continues to grow at an average rate of 2.6%. The highly urbanized EU, on the other hand, has augmented its urban population, which was 56% of the population in 1960, to 74% in 2019. However, the EU's urban population growth fell to less than 0.2% in the late 1990s and has remained at this low level of growth since then, with the exception of 2011, when its urban population shrank.[13]

The Potential Benefits of Urbanization and Barriers to Urban Sustainability

The spatial concentration of material flows, resources, energy and water in cities is today widely recognized as a powerful driver of the transition to sustainable development.[14] Cities have the potential to deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to their residents, created by agglomeration, economies of scale, and the network effect. For example, the proximity of city residents to each other and to workplaces and services (created by agglomeration) supports and creates the conditions for efficient energy use and lower mobility costs. Similarly, economies of scale produce cost advantages for products and services provided in cities, which support higher economic efficiency. The network effect keeps attracting financial and human capital.[15]

Some of these benefits have materialized in North Africa. In the region's cities, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is

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Oceania, and Asia. See World Bank, "Urban Population (% of population)", based on UN DESA, Population Division…, cit., accessed August 11, 2021.

[13] World Bank, "Urban Population (% of Total Population)"…, cit; and World Bank, "Urban Population Growth"…, cit.

[14] S. Parnell, "Defining a Global Urban Development Agenda", *World Development*, vol. 78, 2016, pp. 529-40.

[15] K. Elgendy, *Post-Oil Cities in the MENA Region: Lessons from Doha*, Commentary, Notes from the Field series, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 18, 2021.

generally higher than the respective national average. Though these cities have been providing basic services to residents, the region has high levels of housing shortages, especially for middle- and low-income earners.[16] Egypt has the largest housing backlog, at 3.5 million units, followed by Algeria, with a shortfall of a 1.2 million units.[17] In addition, a substantial percentage of the region's urban population continues to live in slums, despite significant improvements in housing. In Morocco and Tunisia, the portion of urban populations living in slums is 9% and 8%, respectively.[18]

So far, cities of North Africa have failed to capitalize on and benefit from the potential of urbanization – despite their natural resource scarcity and the evident need to improve resource efficiency.[19] Many have instead developed what Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim described as "urbanization without urbanism", a condition where the urban qualities of the city do not increase at the same rate as its size.[20]

The limited ability of North African cities to reap the benefits of urbanization is related to other trends that undermine the potential of urbanization. Rapid urbanization is partly responsible for some of these trends, such as the concentration of populations in one or two major cities, the growth of informal areas and urban systems, and the tendency of new migrants from rural areas to concentrate in city enclaves or "urban villages". Other trends are unrelated to rapid urbanization and can instead be attributed to the process of urban dedensification, where the city's urban footprint expands

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[16] Z. Sayed, *2019 Housing Finance Yearbook: North Africa Regional Profile*, Center for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa, 2019.

[17] E.-h. Bah, I. Faye, and Z.F. Geh, *Housing Market Dynamics in Africa*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p. 6.

[18] UN-Habitat (2020).

[19] Elgendy (2021).

[20] S.E.M. Ibrahim, "Over-Urbanization and Under-Urbanism: The Case of the Arab World", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1975, pp. 29-45.

at a faster rate than its population.[21] Despite North African cities currently having a good overall density of almost nine thousand persons per square kilometer (or ninety persons per hectare), which is a good basis for sustainable urbanism, their urban extents have on average grown by an annual rate of 4.5%. This rate significantly exceeded their annual population growth rate of 3.1% and resulted in an overall reduction in urban density, including in large cities such as Cairo, Marrakech, Algiers, and Alexandria.[22] Added to this are highly centralized administrations and incomplete decentralization reforms that have hampered local capacity building, and efforts to address urban expansion and rising demands for services, especially water, energy, and waste management.

Weak urban planning and infrastructure

The cities of North Africa face several infrastructure challenges that hinder their ability to transition toward environmental sustainability. Of these, transportation networks have the largest environmental impact and repercussions. They are designed for personal vehicles, largely lack comprehensive, accessible, and reliable public transportation, and mostly do not allow for active mobility such as walking and cycling.

The availability of public transportation varies widely among North African countries. The average proportion of urban population living within convenient walking distance of public transport (based on available data) in Morocco is 48%, the highest in the region, followed by Algeria, with an average of 37%, and Tunisia, 33.8%. Egypt, on the other hand, has a much lower proportion of urban population with easy access to public transport, with the average estimated at 21.8%. No

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[21] Elgendy (2021).

[22] UN-Habitat (2020); and "The Atlas of Urban Expansion" (data), (website of) Monitoring Global Urban Expansion Program, an initiative of New York University's Marron Institute of Urban Management and Stern School of Business, in partnership with UN-Habitat, and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

data about the availability of public-transportation networks in Libya were available.[23]

Among these cities, the highest proportion within convenient walking distance of public transport is in Marrakech (74.8%), followed by Casablanca (66.5%), Tunis (48.5%), Algiers (48%), Oran (45%), Fès (39.1%), Alexandria (36%), and Cairo (21.2%). By comparison, no city in the United Kingdom or France has a proportion less than 85%, while in London and Paris it is estimated at 94.8% and 97.7%, respectively.

Poor urban transportation networks, the lack of nonmotorized mobility, and increased use of private vehicles have all resulted in increased energy usage per trip, carbon emissions, air pollution, and traffic congestion. Having said that, car ownership in cities of North Africa remains low, with 315 vehicles per one thousand persons in Algiers, 220 vehicles in Constantine, 215 in Casablanca, 106 in Cairo, and seventy-three in Alexandria.[24]

This challenge is compounded by other urban trends that reduce walking and cycling, such as the growth of the average urban block size in cities such as Alexandria, Cairo, Marrakech, and Algiers.[25] It also is made worse by the poor provision of open public space as a percentage of total urban area. The share of urban area allocated to open public space is 3.6% in Tunisia, 2.66% in Algeria, 2.1% in Morocco, and 1.3% in Egypt.[26] To put this into perspective, it compares to an average of 12% in European cities.[27]

Notably, national governments have been enacting legislation and developing regulations to improve energy efficiency in the built environment across the region. This activity includes mandatory energy-efficiency regulations for buildings in

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[23] UN-Habitat (2020).

[24] International Association of Public Transport (UITP), *MENA Transportation Report 2019*, UITP, 2019.

[25] "The Atlas of Urban Expansion"…, cit.

[26] No data are available for Libya; source: UN-Habitat (2020).

[27] UN-Habitat data cited in "Public Spaces in the Middle East: No Bed of Roses", *The Economist*, June 11, 2016.

Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia; voluntary energy-efficiency regulations in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia; and the development of green building certification systems as market transformation tools across the region. These systems include locally developed ones such as TARSHEED in Egypt, as well as international ones such as Haute Qualité Environnementale (HQE), Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), and EDGE. It also includes the development of fuel-efficiency standards for light duty vehicles in Algeria (equivalent to the €3 standard) and Egypt (below €3 level), as well as fuel-efficiency standards for buses in Tunisia and Egypt (at €3 levels).[28]

National governments and cities also have been increasingly investing in new public transportation networks to improve their energy efficiency, reduce air pollution, and cut carbon emissions. Electric buses were introduced in Alexandria and Tunis, while electric bus rapid transit (BRT) was introduced in Marrakech. Bike-sharing schemes have been introduced in Gouna in Egypt, as well as Marrakech. There are projects to develop metro networks in Cairo and Oran; tram networks in Casablanca, Rabat-Salé, Oran, Constantine, Tunis, Sfax, and Alexandria; and BRT systems in Agadir, Casablanca, Algiers, Sfax, and Cairo.[29]

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[28] Euro emission standards are progressively stringent exhaust pollution standards for new vehicles sold in the EU and European Economic Area (EEA) countries (i.e., Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway plus the EU members). They set limits on the emission of nitrogen oxides (NOx), total hydrocarbon (THC), nonmethane hydrocarbons (NMHC), carbon monoxide (CO) and particulate matter (PM). The latest standard, €6, was first used in September 2015 and reduces some pollutants by 96% compared to the 1992 limits, while €3 came into effect in January 2001.

[29] UITP (2019).

The long, hard road toward
a new socioeconomic contract

As the region's centers of economic growth, cities provide opportunities for social mobility and continue to attract rural populations seeking employment. According to McKinsey & Company data, GDP per capita is generally higher in cities of North Africa than the corresponding national average. In some cases, the difference is significant: the GDP per capita in Tunis is twice that of Tunisia, and the same applies for Tripoli compared to Libya, and for Cairo compared to Egypt. The GDP per capita in Casablanca is more than twice that of Morocco.[30]

Yet, overall, the relationship between urbanization and economic growth per capita in the region is below what could be expected based on the world average.[31] One reason for this is the spatial fragmentation of North African cities.[32] Low-density development and developed areas separated by areas of underdeveloped land have only impeded access to infrastructure and services, and widened the distance between where people live and where jobs are available. Urban fragmentation also increases segregation and reproduces inequality by, for example, increasing the privatization of public space and process of gentrification while reducing the ability of the urban poor to access public transport to seek education, economic opportunities, and healthcare.[33]

The socioeconomic discontent that spurred the Arab Spring revolts of 2011 emerged in urban centers where people had suffered the negative consequences of unsustainable patterns of urbanization for over two decades. Several factors drove the

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[30] *Urban World*, iOS version 1.6, McKinsey Global Institute, 2017.

[31] World Bank, *Convergence: Five Critical Steps toward Integrating Lagging and Leading Areas in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, DC, World Bank, 2020.

[32] Ibid.

[33] In Egypt and Morocco, for example, postneonatal mortality in informal settlements (i.e., slums) is twice that in nonslum areas. See UN-Habitat, "The State of North African Cities", chapter two in *The State of African Cities 2010: Governance, Inequality and Urban Land Markets*, UN-Habitat, 2010.

collective call for political reform including what some have called the "urbanization of poverty", associated high levels of urban unemployment, and inequality.[34] Yet while Tunisia, Libya and Egypt witnessed the unraveling of their tired socioeconomic contracts, in which a dominant public sector stifled economic growth and social mobility, only Tunisia and to some degree Morocco saw a more just social compact begin to emerge in the aftermath, with unknown durability. Unsurprisingly, this lack of change and improvement in living conditions in many parts of North Africa has resulted in low life-satisfaction levels.[35]

Today, North African cities are far from achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth critical to improving living standards for all by creating decent work opportunities with a fair income, security in the workplace, and social protection. Unemployment and poverty levels remain high across urban centers, especially among youth, women, and rural-to-urban migrants; the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse in oil prices has further aggravated the economic situation in many of the region's cities. While low life satisfaction was one of the main drivers of the 2011 civic movements, life satisfaction today is estimated to be at an even lower level than it was a decade ago.[36]

Incomplete decentralization reforms

Decentralization reforms over the past decade promised more competencies, resources, and capacity at the city level to enhance social services that can foster inclusion and provide better urban planning that promotes density and spatial connectedness.

In the aftermath of the Arab revolts, the new and old regimes in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt initiated reforms to

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[34] S.I. Bergh, "Decentralisation and Local Governance in the MENA Region", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2010*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2010, p. 254.

[35] F. Belhaj and N. Mohammed, "MENA: The Time to Act Is Now", World Bank (blog), October 15, 2020.

[36] Ibid.

promote decentralization in an effort to address the dwindling confidence in state-society relations and respond to two of the protesters' principal demands: "more participative governance and more efficient and accountable public services".[37] By contrast, Algeria, where no protests took place in 2011, maintained a highly centralized state.

Some governments are only slowly and partially implementing decentralization reforms. They are enshrined in the new constitutions of Tunisia (2014), Libya (2012), and Egypt (2014), and in the constitutional reforms introduced in Morocco (2011). In Egypt and war-torn Libya, despite constitutional language, no such reform is in the works. In Egypt, for example, election laws for local authorities have not been enacted, and local elections have not been held since 2008. In addition, local capacity building and decision-making is often hampered by what Silvia I. Bergh describes as "a deconcentrated rather than decentralized governance system".[38] This type of system consists of unfunded mandates, weak fiscal capacity, high dependence on transfers from central governments, and municipalities that serve administrative functions without having any real involvement in political decision-making.

Decentralization is a long-term process that not only requires changes in laws and government systems, but also a new political culture and societal self-understanding. Local trust in democracies is not an automatic consequence of decentralization; trust must be nurtured through a commitment to transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.[39] In

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[37] A. Houdret and A. Harnisch, "Decentralisation in Morocco: A Solution to the 'Arab Spring?'", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 2018, pp. 953-60.

[38] S.I. Bergh, *Building a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with, not for, Cities*, CIDOB Briefings 24, Barcelona, Centre for International Affairs (website), 2020.

[39] V.E. Arkorful, B.K. Lugu, A. Hammond, and I. Basiru, "Decentralization and Citizens' Participation in Local Governance: Does Trust and Transparency Matter? – An Empirical Study", *Forum for Development Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 199-223.

Tunisia and Morocco, some local authorities are experimenting with new governance arrangements that provide more opportunities for engagement and transparency. A successful example is the Municipal Cooperation for Local Participatory Governance in the Maghreb Region (CoMun) project, led by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ, the German development agency), from 2016-19, and which supported municipalities in both countries in developing mechanisms to strengthen local democracy.[40] However, oftentimes the new participatory infrastructure created by municipalities is "cosmetic" and based on nonbinding consultation rules.[41] While trust in local authorities is increasing in some parts of Morocco and Tunisia, in most of the region, local governments continue to lack legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens.

The Emerging International Political Role of Cities

Over the past two decades, global urbanization has bestowed unprecedented relevance on cities in world politics.[42] While North African cities have moved on the margins of this trend, they are showing signs of emerging transnational political agency. This new role is manifesting particularly in the context of international development agendas that recognize the opportunities of urbanization and support North African cities' socioeconomic and infrastructure development.

On the one hand, there are the global agreements adopted in the wake of the UN 2030 Agenda, which have promoted

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[40] *Strengthening Local Development and Democracy, Maghreb*, GIZ, accessed July 28, 2021.

[41] See Bergh (2020).

[42] M. Acuto, *Global Cities, Governance, and Diplomacy: The Urban Link*, Milton Park (UK), Routledge, 2013; S. Curtis (ed.), *The Power of Cities in International Relations*, Milton Park (UK), Routledge, 2014; and H. Abdullah (ed.), *Cities in World Politics: Local Responses to Global Challenges*, Barcelona, CIDOB, 2019.

an "urban turn" in sustainable development,[43] and advocate for urbanization as a force of positive transformation that can accelerate change across the various dimensions of development and in dialogue with citizens.[44] African continental public policy discourses and cooperation frameworks between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), significantly contributed to formulating this approach. In their regional forums and programs they have subsequently sought to provide a greater role for North African local governments and urban stakeholders.

More recently, North African cities also have become important actors in a second, alternative development approach driven by China's ambitious BRI, first announced in 2013. The BRI route, if realized as promoted, positions North Africa as a nodal region connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe. Large-scale urban infrastructure projects are a major pillar of this endeavor. In contrast to the holistic logic of the UN paradigm of sustainable urban development, the BRI's infrastructural approach is primarily geared toward turning North African cities into trading and economic hubs on China's modern-day Silk Road.

Both agendas influence how North Africa is tackling its urban development challenges, but they represent competing urban visions. The coming decade will be vital in determining how North African cities emerge from these contrasting conceptions and associated geopolitical contestations. Will they become mere sites of great power struggles and imported urban visions and forms? Or will these cities be able to assert their own transnational agency and sustainable urban-development logic?

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[43] These agreements include the New Urban Agenda (on housing and sustainable urban development, adopted October 2016 in Quito, Ecuador), the Paris Agreement (on climate change, December 2015), and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risks, March 2015 in Japan).

[44] Parnell (2016).

Toward a new urban agenda for North Africa

The increasing urbanization in Africa has led to a "southern rethinking of cities".[45] While most African governments were in denial about urbanization until the turn of the XXI century, policy makers today widely view the continent's urban transition as critical for a prosperous and sustainable African future. The African Union's (AU) long-term strategic vision for the continent, Agenda 2063 – which was published in draft form in 2013 and served as a direct input to the UN's 2015 Sustainable Development Summit – marks a turning point in this regard.[46] Exemplifying the new African urban optimism, the agenda seeks to transform the continent's cities into "hubs of cultural and economic activities, with modernized infrastructure, [where] people have access to all the basic necessities of life including shelter, water, sanitation, energy, public transport, and ICT", referring to information and communications technology.[47]

Similar to the AU, the EU and the UfM, an intergovernmental organization of forty-two member states from Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, have placed a focus on sustainable urban development in North Africa and the EU's wider southern neighborhood over the past two decades. However, the EU and UfM have gone a step further, recognizing cities not only as strategic sites of development intervention, but increasingly as transnational actors and cooperation partners. Both the EU and UfM have made efforts to give local authorities a greater role in Euro-Mediterranean cooperation by strengthening multilevel governance mechanisms. For example, in 2010 the European Committee of the Regions launched the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), through which

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[45] E. Pieterse, S. Parnell, and G. Haysom, "African Dreams: Locating Urban Infrastructure in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda", *Area Development and Policy*, 2018, pp. 149-69.

[46] E. Pieterse, "Embedding National and Urban Policies in Africa," in H. Abdullah (ed.), *Cities in World Politics*, Barcellona, CIDOB, 2019.

[47] African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*, popular version, second edition (Addis Ababa: African Union, 2015).

subnational authorities from both shores can engage in political dialogue with the EU and UfM.[48] Building on this and other initiatives, the UfM in 2017 adopted an Urban Agenda, its first roadmap to establish a more integrated approach to policies concerning sustainable urban development in Mediterranean countries and to give local governments a greater role in policy design and implementation.

However, the political voice and leverage of cities in forums for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation is still limited. This is partly due to the intergovernmental setup of the UfM and related cooperation frameworks, which impede effective multilevel processes and decision-making. Unfortunately, platforms like ARLEM and the UfM Urban Agenda have changed little in this regard. Another reason is that urban cooperation projects are all too often relegated to technical portfolios, impeding the recognition that urbanization today impacts all dimensions of Euro-Mediterranean relations and should be treated as a transversal political challenge.

By contrast, North African cities are taking on a more active role in subnational channels of cooperation for sustainable development. Compared with the stagnant Euro-Mediterranean intergovernmental process, cooperation at the city level has been growing.[49] Fostering this are regional associations of local governments like MedCities, the network of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) representatives involved in the Cities Alliance global partnership, the city-level work of the World Bank's Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI), as well as European national development agencies operating in North Africa, like Germany's GIZ, which have all expanded over the past decade. They are proving that city-level cooperation can address many of the above-discussed barriers to urban

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[48] Bergh (2020).

[49] H. Abdullah, "How Can Cooperation between and through Cities Revive Euro-Mediterranean Relations?", in H. Amirah-Fernández, C. Descamps, and E. Soler i Lecha (eds.), *Creating Euro-Mediterranean Bonds that Deliver*, Madrid, Friedrich Nauman Foundation, 2021.

sustainability, tackling issues ranging from energy efficiency to urban transport and local democracy.

North Africa's Belt and Road Cities

China has been strategically building relations with North African countries as part of its BRI. Beijing has had BRI partnership agreements in place with Egypt and Algeria since 2014, and with Morocco since 2016; it signed memorandums of understanding with Libya and Tunisia in 2018.[50]

Mounting political tensions with the EU and other Western partners have been a catalyst for North African countries' willingness to engage in diplomatic, economic, and security relations with China, which promises economic development without political interference or normative requirements. Its development model, which "seeks to combine authoritarianism with economic growth", appears to resonate with many regimes in the region.[51]

In contrast to the US-led liberal model's development approach, the BRI-driven urbanization prioritizes "infrastructure, supply chain management, legal zoning techniques, and connectivity" over "finance, financial service, and the intermediary relationships needed to further such exchange".[52] It also prioritizes surveillance over the freedoms that have come to be associated with urban life.

BRI urban-development patterns first and foremost follow Chinese commercial interests. Simon Curtis and Maximilian Mayer identify two dominant urban forms promoted by the BRI: "urbanizing corridors as subnational and (often)

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[50] A. Abdel Ghafar and A.L. Jacobs, *Beijing Calling: Assessing China's Growing Footprint in North Africa*, Policy Briefing, Brookings Doha Center, September 2019; and F. Wehrey and S. Alkoutami, "China's Balancing Act in Libya", Lawfare (blog), Lawfare Institute in cooperation with the Brookings Institution, May 10, 2020.

[51] Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs (2019), p. 1.

[52] I. Klaus and S. Curtis, "Cities of the New Silk Roads", *Diplomatic Courier*, November 27, 2019.

transborder development models", and "the smart surveillance city".[53] In China's venture into Northern Africa, the former type of development project dominates. However, there are other construction projects that fall into the latter category, or projects that are not directly related to BRI infrastructure and are geared toward strengthening political, trade, and cultural ties with North African countries.

Egypt is the focal point of China's North African policy. It is the most important North African country in the BRI because of its geographic position as a passageway into Africa and Europe, China's largest export market. Egypt's Suez Canal is especially crucial for the transport of Chinese goods. China's most high-profile project in Egypt is the New Administrative City (NAC), located 45 kilometers east of Cairo, roughly halfway between the capital and the Suez Canal. Chinese banks are financing approximately 85% of the US$3 billion project and the Chinese State Construction and Engineering Company (CSCEC) is building the city's Central Business District.[54]

In Morocco, Chinese-financed urban infrastructure projects are mostly industrial and free trade zones and financial centers, including Casablanca Finance City and the Tanger Med port complex, where a regional logistics center for Chinese businesses will be set up.[55] In close proximity to the new port, the planned Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City has been described as "the largest Chinese investment project in North Africa".[56] This technology manufacturing hub has been valued at US$10 billion and dubbed the Shanghai of North Africa.[57] Construction started in 2019 on the new smart city that will

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[53] S. Curtis and M. Mayer, *Belt and Road Cities Begin to Find Their Form*, CIDOB Opinion 630, 2020.

[54] S. Mathews, "The Competition for Egypt: China, the West and Megaprojects", *Al-Jazeera*, March 15, 2021.

[55] Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs (2019), p. 4.

[56] "Tangier: King Mohammed VI Launched $1 Billion Chinese Investment Project", *Morocco World News*, March 20, 2017.

[57] B. Hamama, "Morocco's Chinese-Funded Tech City: The Shanghai of North-Africa?", *Il Giornale Dell' Architectura*, December 29, 2020.

feature several industrial zones and host two hundred Chinese companies – strategically located just a few kilometers from the Strait of Gibraltar.

Algeria holds the record as China's most long-standing economic partner in North Africa. Relations between the two countries date back to the Algerian War of Independence, during which China provided political and military support. Today, most of Algeria's imports come from China.[58] At the same time, Chinese companies are firmly established in the Algerian energy, construction, and housing sectors, and have been commissioned with key public development projects.[59] The capital, Algiers, is today defined by infrastructure projects that have been built by the Chinese, including a new terminal at the city's Houari Boumediene Airport, the East-West Highway, and low-cost housing complexes.[60] Other projects that are of a more symbolic nature and geared to strengthening political and cultural relations include Chinese construction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Algiers Opera House, and the Great Mosque of Algiers.

Chinese investments in Libya have largely been put on hold as a result of the civil war and subsequent instability. However, Chinese firms are currently exploring postconflict reconstruction opportunities in the country.[61]

North Africa's BRI cities and other urban projects are primarily strategic sites to improve connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe and drive economic growth. They tend to take the form of megaprojects that consist of new developments rather than building on existing urban and socioeconomic fabrics, and are negotiated at the national, political, and diplomatic level

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[58] Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs (2019), p. 4.

[59] J. Calabrese, *'The New Algeria' and China*, MEI@75, Middle East Institute, January 26, 2021.

[60] Notably, Chinese construction businesses completed these development projects on a "service-provision contractual basis", meaning they hold no ownership of them and cannot be considered investors; see Ibid.

[61] Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs (2019), p. 4.

with little or no involvement of local actors. Thus, while the BRI has boosted the strategic geopolitical relevance of North African cities, it leaves little room for the political agency of local authorities, stakeholders, and citizens.

Outlook: The Future of Cities in the Region

Scanning the horizon of the North African urbanization processes, there are early signs that many regional cities are slowly transitioning toward more sustainable development pathways. Yet the conditions necessary for these transformations to be fully effective and accelerate as needed – including enhanced decentralization, local institution and capacity building, and stronger mechanisms for citizen participation – are still weak. Just like this decade is a make-or-break time for climate and sustainable development, it is an important decade for setting the trajectory of North African cities. The next few years will be critical in putting regional cities on track toward sustainability and resilience in order to come closer to meeting the 2030 targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

As shown in this chapter, many global players and international funders – from the EU to China but also the United States – are involved in shaping regional cities' development. While some of this support and associated investment are reinforcing unsustainable urban development trends (especially many of the BRI megaprojects), much of it has had a positive impact. To become more sustainable and resilient, North African cities will need to formulate their own locally contextualized pathways toward a better future. External partnerships, financing, and knowledge exchange are necessary for this, but regional cities could also greatly benefit from revalorizing their urban heritage and identity, and learning from their own urban traditions, local environments, and practices of resource conservation and environmental adaptation.