Long-term evaluation of an urban development Project: the case of Hai El Salam.

Author: Claudio.Matteucci

1. Introduction

The international aid for developing countries involves a web of relationships among different subjects that can be divided in two main categories: donors and recipients.
To agree on common goals, these supposed "partners" first of all must communicate. This implies that they both should try to understand the point of view of the partner and openly share their own views.
By evaluating the 1978 demonstration project for the peri-urban area of El Hekr in Ismailia (Egypt), the present study will show how mutual understanding and learning are among the most difficult and important tasks in international cooperation[1].
The analyzed project was the first in Egypt to upgrade a large informal settlement and to plan for new development by the provision of sites and basic services.
The twenty year lapse from the implementation phase, now allows one to reconsider this project as an important part of a wider development process, which started with the 1976 Ismailia Master Plan (IMP) and continued until the early 1990s.
As a "demonstration" project, Hai El Salam was conceived as a model to show how the policies defined for the city-wide development program would have been implemented.
For a complete evaluation of this kind of projects, a simple comparison of specific objectives and local outcomes is not enough: the role played in the achievement of the program's general objectives should be considered as a matter of primary importance.
Since the success (or failure) of the demonstration projects does not guarantee a similar outcome of the entire program, a long term evaluation that includes this fundamental item can sometimes reverse previous assessments.
Although the implementation phase in Hai El Salam brought to a partial failure in achieving some specific targets, it was used as a point of departure for the projects that followed it.
The experience gained "on-the-job" made it clear what in real terms was possible and what was not. This brought to the formulation of an "adjusted" model, that was successfully replicated in other informal settlements.
The main limit of the Hai El Salam project turned out to be the absence of a true agreement between British consultants and local decision-makers, over the nature and quality of the new development.
Even if they officially agreed on main strategies, these subjects had in fact different visions concerning the "sites and services" area.
Consultants wanted to restrict the access to new plots mainly to low-income households. What they imagined was a new development, in a formal context, based on the technologies and the standards typical of informal housing.
Local elites, on the other hand, wanted to use the new development as both a form of liberalization of local housing market (following the government's "open door" policy) and a propaganda operation for the leading party.

[1] After the implementation of the project the area was renamed Hai El Salam (i.e. "district of peace"). This name was then currently used for the project itself.

The study reviewed the entire cooperation experience as a process of mutual adaptation between these different visions, and the implementation in Hai El Salam as the "point of agreement" that synthesized them.

2. Historical background

The El Hekr/Hai El Salam project is the first implemented intervention of a larger development effort for the city of Ismailia, along the Suez Canal. This process started in 1975, two years after the last Egypt-Israeli war, with the Ismailia Master Plan (IMP).
Even if the clashes did not last more than a month in all, Ismailia was evacuated and militarized for a long period, whereas its roads, buildings and utilities suffered considerable damages.
As the war ended, reconstruction was seen as both a national priority and a great opportunity for a spurt in economic growth.
In President Sadat's view, the end of hostilities with Israel coincided with a new climate of opening to western countries and to market economy. The commission of the plans for the reconstruction of the canal cities to British consultants was part of this idea and represented a clear sign of reconciliation with the UK, after the tensions of the Nasser era.
In accordance with ODA and UNDP the Ismailia Governorate entrusted Culpin & partners, a private British company[2].
Together with Egyptian professionals, the consultants wrote a vast and traditional Master Plan in 14 volumes, based on an integrated multi-sector planning approach (A.R.E., 1976).
With hindsight, IMP overestimated available resources and did not give the necessary consideration to implementation issues. In fact, a year after the publication of the plan, the implementation was not even started (Davidson, 1995).
To exit this stalemate, in May 1977, the Governor of Ismailia asked the same planning team to select a few strategic sites and carry out the demonstration projects.
In IMP, priorities were stated to provide basic services for all the areas of most urgent need, by gradual and diffused improvements. Since this method did not work, the only way to put the master plan's policies into practice was to start with the upgrading of few delimited areas.
Therefore, the Ismailia Demonstration Projects (IDP) were conceived as the beginning of the implementation and as an example to carry out the same strategies on a citywide scale[3].
At this purpose the selection criteria for sites included the need for upgrading, but also the presence of opportunities, the absence of threats and an adequate dimension to allow a credible demonstration.
The area of El Hekr, in 1978 was the northern limit of the city towards the desert. Described in IMP as an "unplanned progressive urban settlement", it was the widest informal area of the city. The Master Plan's survey recorded here the highest concentration of (informal) owner-builders and the liveliest pace in "spontaneous" construction.
Even though they were poor, many households were still able and willing to invest some of their time and their few resources in housing. The planners considered this a great opportunity for the success of the project.
The degree of soundness as well as the height and density of the buildings were very different between one and the side of the area. The southern part was an extension of the formal city, and with its three-to-five storey buildings, mostly built in modern red brick and concrete

[2] The Overseas Development Administration (then replaced by D.F.I.D.) was part of the British government.
[3] Together with the project for the El Hekr area, IDP included two other projects (for Abu Atwa and Nifisha) whose implementation was delayed for different reasons.

structures, it resembled the nearby quarter of El Arashia. Moving farther to the north, the houses gradually became lower, showing wider spaces between them, and the paths were much more sandy and impassable, whereas traditional materials took the place of modern ones. The northern part of the area was still a sandy desert: recent encroachments had just raised few scattered houses and low mud-brick walls that delimited wide plots.
Apart from few water taps, all concentrated in the main roads of the southern part, the area completely lacked access to water supply and to adequate sanitation.
Most existing houses were built on a straight and wide alignment that continued El Arashia's street pattern. Such distribution, together with the abundance of empty space in the immediate surroundings, offered an easy solution to the relocation issue.
All these positive factors made El Hekr the first candidate for the upgrading project. Since its geography, soil, form and position did not present any threat to the implementation, the area was finally selected.

3. Main contents of the project

The policies for housing provision set in IMP were based on a new vision for developing cities. The planners brought a radically different conception of the role of informal housing in urban dynamics: they started from the observation that where security of tenure and access to basic services are granted, the households who live in informal settlements tend to consolidate and improve their houses.
The existing official policy prescribed the clearance and demolition of these neighborhoods, coupled with the building of expensive and inadequate public housing settlements. The consultants suggested changing it with a strategy of support to the incremental construction of dwellings by families of owner-occupants.
Instead of wasting them in the direct provision of houses, scarce public resources would have been much more effective if used to finance the upgrading of existing informal areas and to expand the supply of land with minimal services.
This new form of welfare was thought to encourage and regularize informal construction systems, while preventing and repressing speculative pressures in land and housing markets.
To this purpose, IMP recommended the following set of policies:

1. Provision of land to low income populations that included:
    a. The control of land supply, to ensure that it constantly matches the demand pattern. The plan particularly emphasized the role of public administration in granting access to affordable land for low-income households;
    b. A mix of leasehold and freehold tenures, where freehold rights should be allowed exclusively to families of owner-occupants or owner-builders;
    c. A selection of those assignees that should enjoy subsidized leasehold (or freehold) conditions by enforcing the requirement of owner-occupancy;
2. A staged provision of infrastructure starting from a minimum level accessible to everyone. An incremental enhancement of utilities supply that should always follow effective demand, sharing with local residents the cost of gradual improvements;
3. The improvement of the supply and distribution of building materials, to consent a wider access to modern technologies;
4. The creation of a micro-credit system to help low-income households to finance the incremental construction of their dwellings;

5. The simplification of construction standards and procedures, so that building permits could be easily accessible to all and low-cost traditional technologies could be accepted at least as a temporary solution.

All of these different policies derive from one main principle: a society that guarantees basic needs of all its citizens is more fair and more productive than one that imposes unrealistic standards and is able to guarantee them only to a privileged minority.
The recognition of the value of informal construction as a primary resource in the struggle for shelter was not a new idea: among the consultants there were people such as John F.C. Turner that proclaimed it since the 1950s.
Just a few years before the Ismailia projects, this idea started to change the approach of the main multilateral development agencies and since 1972 the World Bank directly financed many urban projects based on the same philosophy.
In fact in 1977, when the job for IDP started, *upgrading* of informal settlements together with *sites and services* projects were already the mainstream of international practices for urban development. The outcomes from the first projects of this kind were being assessed and the *sites and services* model started to show some weaknesses.
Those World Bank projects that were highly subsidized and externally managed, suffered considerable delays in the provision of services and showed very low rates of cost-recovery.
Since international agencies did not invest local administrations with the full responsibility of implementation, these could not develop the capacities necessary to manage further projects.
The need for high subsidies together with insufficient local capacities often made replication of this model substantially impossible. Yet for the success of the *sites and services* paradigm the up-scaling of pilot projects was a vital issue.
For this reason, one of the biggest challenges for the IDP was to start up an urban development process without resorting to substantial public subsidies.
Apart for a small inception capital from the ODA, the project should have been entirely financed by the sale of freehold rights to both existing and new settlers.
Since affordability for low-income households was still one of the main requirements, the amount to be charged for each plot was carefully evaluated.
A thorough investigation was carried out to have a realistic image of the area, of its structures and, above all, of its population. This preliminary analysis allowed the planning staff to know how much each share of the target population could afford to pay for.
A new development area of 93 ha should have risen beside the existing 132 ha quarter. In the strip of the newly subdivided land adjoining the built-up area, a central zone with all main public facilities and commercial activities was planned.
The layout of the new subdivision was planned to minimize infrastructure costs and to fit different needs of a mainly poor population. Plots in both new and existing areas were valued differently depending on the potential revenues of possible commercial activities placed there. This internal cross-subsidy system enabled one to lower the price of the cheapest plots.
In fact the project encouraged the opening of small income earning activities, considered as an important source of revenues for low income households.
To assess affordability levels for new settlers, part of their likely budget for housing was earmarked, covering the cost of minimal superstructure, to be precise “two rooms of the cheapest informal construction” (ARE, 1978).
The purchase of plots should have been amortized over a period of 5 to 30 years. The price of minimal affordable monthly installments, together with the amount of land to be sold and the payment terms, fixed the basic available budget for implementation.

To gather further financial resources, some small portions of land, in particularly favorable positions, were earmarked to be sold at free-market prices. Even with this external cross-subsidy mechanism, the total available budget was not enough for the laying down of a modern water-borne sewage network.
Then, planners decided to begin with a minimal set of infrastructure provision. This basic set of utilities included just the improvement of main road surfaces to a level of practicability and, along these same streets, the laying of water mains and public standpipes, and the provision of basic drainage & electricity networks. Sanitation was guaranteed by on plot pit-latrines regularly emptied by a public service of suction trucks.
All further developments should have come gradually, when the population of single parts of the quarter could afford them.
IDP granted the management of implementation to a specific agency, with an independent budget, whose offices were directly placed in the project area. Although the manager in charge of the Project Agency (PA) had a wide margin of action in technical issues, all decisions requiring cash flow needed the approval of a steering committee chaired by the Governor.
This Board of Governors was composed of representatives from all the most important local institutions and government bodies in charge for single sectors of urban development.
The responsibility of implementation was entirely on local administration, whereas foreign consultants remained involved only in external assistance and training.
By adopting this solution, planners were aware that their project could have been changed even radically. Nevertheless, they realized the most important goal: that the new approach to urban development brought by the project could take roots and become an important part of the local urban practices.
This demanded a process of adaptation, part of which was already implied in the project itself. The second part of this path needed to be made directly by local technicians and administrators. The real challenge was to make them accept the "upgrading-sites & services" model, so that they could adopt it as their own. If this process called for changes in the original formulation of the project, as long as the basic principles were preserved, the sacrifice was worth it.

4. The implementation

From the point of view of local decision makers, the reconstruction of Ismailia should have been one of the first tangible achievements of the new "open door" policy. Although they agreed on the social nature of new urban policies, their first priority was the popularity of the projects and their own public image.
As far as propaganda and media were concerned, the Egyptian ruling class was well aware that popularity meant first of all visibility and appeal.
A gradual enhancement of infrastructure, diffused in the areas of greatest need, may be the most effective and fair use of public resources, but generally it does not guarantee the greatest visibility. Besides, from their point of view there was nothing particularly appealing in traditional poorly built housing, public water standpipes and on plot pit-latrines.
In this view, the best demonstration of the greatness and wisdom of political power was to transform some of the poorest and most neglected areas of the city into modern and good-looking residential neighborhoods.
Apart from the project's official statements, the will of local decision makers was to realize, as fast as possible, a development of the best possible quality. In this schedule, the role of international consultants was to introduce in the centralized system, inherited from Nasser's socialist regime, elements of liberalization based on free market economy.

Moreover, the ruling class considered both the new economic policy and the Ismailia projects an opportunity to benefit a new lower-middle class and to gain its support.
Most of the numerous studies on Hai El Salam agree in describing the main features of the project's implementation (Davidson, 1987; Metwally, 1987; Payne, 1985; Serag El Din – Shehayeb, 1988).
The most relevant outcome observed was an intense and rapid growth in private housing as to exceed the project's forecast. Particularly in the new subdivision, the quality and dimension of most buildings, persuaded many observers that low-income population had been displaced as a result of pressure from the wealthy.
This phenomenon was certainly favored by a huge rise in land value, a trend widely confirmed by the rising takings from the different plot auctions.
On the one hand these extraordinary results granted to the PA more resources for services and assistance to low-income households; on the other hand, they probably convinced many of the assignees to resell their plot and move elsewhere.
Since no complete evaluation of the project has been carried out, there is no reliable data on the amount of reselling of original assignments. Yet, informal assessments have assumed 75% as possible rate (Payne, 1985).
An Egyptian survey showed in 1985 elements that seem to confirm a substantial presence of wealthier owners in the sites & services zone. The evaluation registered that most constructions there were built with modern technologies. Moreover in this area 30% of assigned plots were not yet built-up and an even higher percentage of dwellings (over 43%) were not occupied (Metwally, 1987).
The research concluded that, especially in the new development area, land and building speculation benefited most from the project.
Many experts, analysts and persons directly involved in the project, such as consultants or project managers, were interviewed for the present study. The description of the implementation progress, both from the literature and from the interviews, gives a clear picture of the causes of such outcomes.
For this purpose, an enlightening exercise is to compare the single policy instruments provided by the Master Plan (mostly confirmed in IDP's directions) with the implemented policies:

1) In the provision of land:
    a) Although the "second largest latent demand group" that IMP identified in the city was for fully serviced apartments in modern multistoried structures, few projects before IDP supplied these kind of dwellings. This latent middle-class demand attracted investments in the new development area. Besides, the project layout that placed most plots for low-income demand in semiprivate areas in order to discourage vehicular transit, was radically changed in the implementation phase to foster traffic and enhance the commercial value of the land.
    b) Leasehold tenure was abandoned for a delayed freehold system. It was stated that freehold would have been granted only to the original assignees after they completed all the payments and built an inhabitable structure. The project's rule was bypassed applying a norm that guaranteed the power of attorney of legal acts to third parties. This change permitted many assignees to resell unbuilt plots and encouraged land speculation. Later on the original rule was abrogated.
    c) For the selection of the applicants IDP gave priority to those coming from the El Hekr area (or secondly from Ismailia) and excluded those who owned other

plots or dwellings. After the first draw, where the plots were assigned mainly to households from El Hekr, even these basic requirements were removed. In fact, in later draws, owner-occupancy was not enforced and no real priority to low-income households was granted.

2) After a few years, when the infrastructure provision followed IDP's directions, the Ismailia Governorate reached an agreement with USAID to connect the whole Hai El Salam area to the sewage network. The supply of modern high-standard infrastructures, which was highly subsidized, largely anticipated the effective demand, thus helping a substantial rise in land price.
3) At the beginning, the PA managed to obtain the supply of building materials at official prices for Hai El Salam applicants, while later the sector was partially liberalized. Nevertheless, for a long time the supply could not meet the local demand and this negatively affected the prices.
4) Due to administrative and legal problems it was very difficult to set up an official credit system for Hai El Salam applicants. Finally, when the PA made it possible, the terms were more of a traditional housing loan rather than of a micro-credit system. Such terms and requirements probably benefited more speculative investments than low income owner-builders.
5) Low-cost traditional technologies were "tolerated" by local authorities for a very short time. In 1982 the Governor officially forbade their use for all new constructions. Since affordability for low-income households was based on the cost of "the cheapest informal construction", we must conclude that settlements in the sites-&-services area were no longer affordable to the poorest applicants.

In fact, those elements of IDP conceived to hinder speculation and to grant affordability for low-income households, were generally not implemented. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the responsibility of the implementation was on local decision makers and their vision of urban development did not agree with that expressed in the project.
The local administrators invested so much in the "transformation" and development of the new Hai El Salam that in the following years the new office district, with all the most important local institutions and professional associations, was placed in the adjoining quarter.
The changes particularly affected the new development area, whereas in the existing quarter conditions of affordability were mainly maintained.

5. Conclusions.

To assess the extent of the change in the recipient population the study verified the actual situation of Hai El Salam, carrying out a research on the site.
This research has analyzed the present morphology of the quarter, defining the main typologies of both the buildings and the public spaces.
Following this morphological scheme, fourteen case studies were selected to obtain a representative sample of the living conditions found in the area[4].
The case studies show a high degree of social diversity among today's Hai El Salam population: today this goes from qualified professionals to unskilled manual workers.

[4] The selection was made according to the type of building, the type of public space and the location of households.

The interviews confirm a general correlation between housing and socioeconomic conditions of the inhabitants[5]. In particular, households living in one-storey houses are on average poorer than those who own higher incremental buildings; in turn, these are less wealthy than the residents of tall well-finished constructions.
Whereas in fact all incremental buildings are at least partially occupied by the owners or their relatives, most dwellings in tall constructions are rented. It was surprising to find out that also lower houses are commonly occupied by tenants.
A correlation also exists between the width of the streets, the cost of the rents and the incomes of the households who live there: the narrower are the streets, the lower are the rents and the poorer are the inhabitants[6].
Combining the analysis of the external conditions of the whole area with the case studies, we can draw and summarize the following general conclusions:

I. The majority of buildings in Hai El Salam have been constructed incrementally and are now occupied mainly by extended families of owner-builders. These households are generally the same people who bought the land from the PA and have grown in number. The central concept of IDP, to support this form of development as a strong drive for urban growth, has had positive outcomes.

II. Most low-income households of old El Hekr have maintained plots and dwellings there, benefiting substantially from the project. However, not all of them have improved their economic conditions, as pockets of poverty are still present in the old quarter. On the other hand, those families that had enough resources to invest in the new development area have increased their incomes and now enjoy a situation of relative soundness.

III. The population of the sites-&-services area is on average wealthier than the equivalent one of the upgrading zone. Not only the levels of poverty registered in the old quarter do not exist in the new one, but even tall constructions, built with good quality standards, are much more common in the second than in the first. These outcomes indicate also a higher incidence of speculation in this part of the quarter.

In conclusion, the research confirms that in the upgrading area the project has effectively reached the proposed target-population, while in the sites-&-services zone wealthier sectors of the housing demand have prevailed, displaced the poorest assignees.
The differences between old and new Hai El Salam do not allow us to say that gentrification or social segregation have occurred in any part of the area. There are poorer and richer zones in both sides of the quarter but none of them is self-sufficient or isolated from the surrounding ones: different neighborhoods are mostly very near one another and communicate.
Hai el Salam is now a very lively part of the city, where all kinds of economic activities can be found and main streets are filled with shops, workshops, coffee bars and restaurants.
Besides the formal economy, informal trades are also common in the narrow streets, where small shops support the income of many households.
Even if the Hai El Salam project did not fully achieve its objectives, it certainly allowed to successfully upgrade the widest informal settlement in the city, an area that housed (and still houses) almost one third of the whole urban population.

[5] The interviews focused on: the features and the dimensions of the households, their housing and working condition, their instruction and income, the form, the dimension, the level of servicing and the history of their dwelling, the degree of satisfaction they had with their house and with their neighborhood.
[6] This data was confirmed by interviews with different local real estate brokers.

The most successful result reported by the case studies is probably that all the persons interviewed stated their complete satisfaction with their neighborhood and, even among the poorest ones, very few felt the need for further improvements.
Together with the project's impact on the beneficiary population, also its role in the outcome of IMP and the spin-offs for the entire city should be considered. An outline of the projects that followed will clarify the importance at a citywide level of the Hai El Salam experience.
In the replication of the "IDP model" the technical assistance programs, financed by international aid agencies and composed by some of the original planners, had a fundamental role.
After helping to set up the Project Agencies for El Hekr and Abu Atwa, the consultants assisted the local administration in the creation of a citywide body based on the same model.
The Manager and most of the staff of the Ismailia Planning and Land Development Agency (IPALDA) came from the IDP experience (Davidson, 1986).
The main goal of IPALDA was to follow the path showed by the Master Plan, through the coordination of local project agencies and the direct implementation of other urban projects.
These single interventions had two basic aims: the development of services and infrastructures for the improvement and the expansion of the city and its economic activities and the upgrading of existing informal areas.
The incomes coming from the sale of serviced land at free market prices, financed projects that benefited the low-income households and the entire community (parks, streets, facilities and utilities).
What distinguished the projects implemented by this citywide agency from the Hai El Salam experience, was the absence of wide new subdivisions based on the sites-&-services model.
One of the main policies proposed in the IDP was abandoned by the local planning administration. This may be seen as a defeat of the reforms suggested in the projects, but it is only partly so.
"Sites and services" was only a means. Sticking to a model that proved to be unworkable, would have meant the failure of the whole development program and of the principles it contained.
On the other hand the flexible approach adopted in Ismailia, sacrificed a policy opposed by local authorities, but strengthened the local capacities to cope with the needs of low-income population.
The lessons learned in the first demonstration project, through a process of observation and adaptation, generated a different model that has been applied in other urban contexts.
This "adjusted" policy still complied with the basic principles proposed in IMP and has been the main means for its implementation.
More recently (in the 1990s) a new citywide plan was made under the direction of a manager professionally raised in the IDP experience[7].
The Sustainable Ismailia Project (SIP) had in common with the previous development effort the importance of local management and resources, the vital role of large scale capacity building programs, and the will to be at the front-line of innovation for urban development.
The new development program was controlled by "a high-level coordination body" in which there was "a wide representation of key stakeholders combined with senior authorities": the Ismailia Council for Sustainable Development (Eid, 2000). This institutional framework seems to derive from the Board of Directors that controlled the Demonstration Projects.
In the second phase of SIP two new projects were planned for the participatory upgrading of informal settlements along Lake Timsah.

[7] The Abu Atwa project manager: Miss Habiba Eid.

If this proves that IMP did not prevent the rising of new informal settlements, it also demonstrates that the seed planted in 1976 continues to bear fruit.
Some of the consultants more involved in the IDP and in the following assistance programs have summed up the whole experience in many different publications and in a planning manual (Davidson-Payne, 1983). This "Urban Projects Manual" is still one of the most diffused texts in disciplinary training all over the world.
An evaluation paper, published during the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, pointed out Hai El Salam as "an example of successful management of the human settlement development process" (UNCHS-Habitat, 1996).
Other consultants, coming from the Hai El Salam experience, have participated in large upgrading programs held in Cairo and actively take part in the national debate on housing and informal settlements.
Ismailia is now one of the most advanced cities of the Middle East in the field of urban planning and governance and its Sustainable Development Center is an important institute for capacity building at national and regional level.
A look at the condition of most Egyptian cities and at the current policies towards informal settlements shows that Ismailia stands as one of the few positive exceptions: the ambitious goal of IMP to change national approaches toward informal housing, is far from being attained.
Recent governmental publications clearly show that current national policies concerning housing for low-income population are still based on direct provision of dwellings through the construction of large-scale public housing settlements (ARE, undated).
Few thorough upgrading projects have been implemented in Egyptian informal settlements, while the sites-&-services model has been almost completely ignored.
In fact the reliance on the wide-scale implementation of this second experimental model, as the principal alternative to informal urban development, has been largely reconsidered in recent years.
The Hai El Salam experience certainly contributed in changing the urban development agenda, from a trend that emphasized the housing issues, concentrating the efforts on planning for the inevitable growth of cities, to one that combines the solution of shelter problems, together with the social, economic and human development of low-income communities.
The original sites-&-services model was more connected to the first kind of approach, which is now generally considered out-of-date.
The Hai El Salam process was an important moment of change from the old trend to the new one.

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