Coping with Disparities
Urban Development in Tunisia

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THE MAYOR OF LA MARSA, M, considers himself a patriotic citizen and a devoted politician, but he leaves no doubt that, by training and professional socialisation, he is first and foremost an urbanist. His reasoning and perception are profoundly influenced by urbanist thinking. This allows him to keep the big picture in focus while drawing connections with public policy. Balancing his many hats and roles, he shows himself as a mediator who delicately juggles multiple commitments with public institutions such as ministries and the administration, foreign donors, private agencies, consultancy companies, civil society actors, and the local population. Throughout his career, M. has gained intimate knowledge of urban planning processes, the functioning of the central state and various local disputes. This led him to the conviction that crucial planning issues and their legal implications are often insufficiently understood. As he admits, it is still unclear how decentralisation, local power, and participation play out in territorial development. His most urgent concern is to upgrade deficient infrastructure and integrate deprived areas – such as Bahr Lazreg – within the boundaries of his municipal district and into the surrounding urban fabric. As an expert for urban development issues, he has criticised that the challenges of urban projects have been left in the hands of private developers and investors for too long. More than ten years on, the legacy of Ben Ali's crony capitalism still looms large. M. is among those who became actively involved in reshaping local politics in line with national policy reform and new legislation, the adoption of the new code of local authorities being the most prominent case.

Field notes, based on an interview with the mayor and president of the municipal council of La Marsa (June 3, 2022)

The neighbourhood Bahr Lazreg, which is situated within the municipal district of La Marsa, one of the seaside suburbs in the northeast of the Greater Tunis region, illustrates very well how an urban development project comes with many conflicting prior-

ities and a high degree of uncertainty. According to M., the mayor and president of the municipal council of La Marsa, the city must address infrastructural deficiencies in this utterly deprived zone, where approximately 50,000 residents live. As parts of the public highway have no sewer connection, regular floods obstruct plans for upgrading the road system and public utilities. Makeshift drainage systems are only a temporary solution for flooding problems. As the mayor stresses, there is an urgent need to take action in order to avoid further degradation. Even if his entire budget for this community were used, it would not be sufficient to tackle the challenges in this zone. The total cost of such a comprehensive development project is impossible to afford for the municipality by its own means. A consultancy company has been commissioned to conduct a full analysis of planning needs in the Bahr Lazreg zone. However, as the mayor points out, the funds for conducting this study have not yet been made available.

Bahr Lazreg is not covered by an urban land use plan, which not only hampers the implementation of an urban development project, but, according to the mayor, also makes it impossible to find a solution for unauthorised or non-conforming housing. A study commissioned by the Ministry of Equipment (2020), which outlines an operational approach to urban intervention and restructuring in the localities of Bahr Lazreg (La Marsa) and El Matar (Sousse), demonstrates that non-conformity of habitat can take a variety of forms, for example housing in commercial areas or in green spaces. The study argues that instruments for legal intervention and regulatory urbanism, such as an urban land use plan, are not adapted to informal neighbourhoods; in fact, they undermine any operation for restructuring informal housing. While acute violations of the legal framework and of construction regulations are often attributed to land tenure issues, the land available for urbanisation is mostly in the hands of private developers who engage in speculation and hoarding outside the scope of institutional norms and regulation (ibid. 20–24).

In face of this problem, the mayor has pledged on several occasions to review the urban land use plan of La Marsa and adapt it to the realities of the urban terrain. He is very critical about the fact that the state has withdrawn from any national strategy for access to housing, so it is not surprising that struggles of marginalised people for housing have become more acute in terms of claiming the right to a territory, even if this disregards regulations. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of refugees and migrants residing in this zone, many of them from Sub-Saharan Africa, has greatly increased and their housing situation is often very precarious, especially sanitary conditions. Among them are workers, students, and young families who have to contend with different forms of exclusion and racism (cf. Parikh, this volume). Due to the urban morphology, population density, and the modes of transport available, urban zones like Bhar Lazreg have also proven to be particularly sensitive to the challenges of the pandemic.

Municipal governance thus faces problems and disparities on very different levels: financial constraints, environmental risks, social vulnerability, legal uncertainty, and governmental and political instability. While a longstanding economic crisis over the last decade has had a negative impact on the middle-classes and their income situation (Kreuer/Gertel, this volume), failed attempts to install a mode of governance that supports the inclusion of vulnerable groups and poor classes have proven even more devastating. The pandemic crisis, which came on top of this, laid bare the vulnerability of cities being dominated by a centralised system, which, as we will see, does not favour

the transfer of competencies to the local level. The legislative mandates of municipalities are too limited to manage societal problems and disparities within their district autonomously.

Starting from this specific case, the chapter offers an introduction and analyses of urban development and disparities in the Tunisian context. Our argument develops as follows: We start with addressing the emergence of regional and urban disparities from a long-term perspective. We then contextualise urban development and planning. In a next step we scrutinise the Programme for the Rehabilitation and Integration of Residential Neighbourhoods (PRIQH) as a recent urban development programme driven by vested interests. We finally illustrate respective socio-ecological and political implications in particular localities, including the neighbourhood of Bahr Lazreg. The chapter's method is based on a critical and comparative analysis of implementation and evaluation reports, available publications, as well as scientific studies of urban development programs in Tunisia. The findings are combined with qualitative interviews with key actors involved in urban development.

Emerging Regional and Urban Disparities

The debate on the preconditions of the Arab Spring addresses spatial inequalities as a major cause of the protests in 2010 and 2011, which eventually led to the political uprising in Tunisia (Daoud 2011).[1] Territorial inequalities manifest themselves in social and economic forms of disparity that have become pronounced between north and south, coastal and inland, centre and hinterland, and border regions, depending on one's point of view. According to Meddeb (2017: 2), the lagging behind of the country's periphery is not solely due to neglect, but it is also the result of a targeted policy of the Tunisian central state over several decades. The protracted crisis that finally brought about the political uprising of 2011 is not least a crisis of the state's ability to act and of its poor integrative capacities at the local level. This finding can also be applied to processes of 'city-making'. To the extent that urbanisation primarily concentrated in coastal regions, key economic sectors such as industry and the service sector primarily developed in the cities located there. Under the Ben Ali regime, the central administration of Tunisian territory was no longer run by state institutions but directly subordinate to the then president, or outsourced to foreign investors, developers and land speculators, who built large-scale tourist facilities, commercial and industrial enterprises, residential complexes and shopping malls (Bouraoui 2011).

In times of advanced globalisation, spatial policy shifted its focus to increasing the international competitiveness of Tunisian cities by embracing metropolisation. The three coastal cities of Tunis, Sfax and Sousse were to be developed into regional attraction poles by bundling political functions and economic activities there. Even after the uprising of 2011, the majority of Tunisian and foreign companies are mainly active in coastal areas. In 2012, 85 percent of Tunisia's gross national product was generated in

1 This section is adapted from Johannes Frische's doctoral thesis published as a German-language monograph (Frische 2022: 68–85).

the three cities of Tunis, Sousse and Sfax and 92 percent of all industrial firms are within an hour's drive of these three cities (World Bank 2014: 282).

In order to respond to the problem of territorial inequalities, growing disparities, and marginalisation of regions in the interior of the country, known as shadow zones (*zones d'ombre*), several social programmes and social policy instruments were introduced. The related measures were able to provide basic social welfare by means of financial assistance, and partially integrate particularly vulnerable groups into the social system; however, the causes of unemployment and economic disintegration were not addressed (Destremeau 2009: 147–49; Laroussi 2009: 111). Against the backdrop of a growing territorial divide, it is no coincidence that the waves of protests in late autumn 2010 spread rapidly across the periphery of the country and moved then from the marginalised regions, particularly the southeast and southwest of Tunisia, to the metropolitan centre of Tunis.

After the uprising of 2010/2011, the problem of regional disparities was officially recognised; however, concrete development measures were only hesitantly undertaken, or postponed. The second transitional government, which worked under the leadership of Béji Caïd Essebsi, prepared a white paper that analysed the root causes of regional disparities. The study evaluated previous spatial planning policies and made recommendations for improving public infrastructure in the areas of health and education, social housing, as well as legal and administrative reform concepts (Mattes 2016: 4). In addition, the problem of regional disparities was recognised in the Tunisian Constitution of 2014 and included in the State Development Strategy; henceforth, the principle of 'positive discrimination' was to be applied in favour of balanced regional development. However, the implementation of development measures failed again due not only to a lack of budgetary funds, but also to the delay of the decentralisation process. In fact, the legal framework for decentralisation was established as late as April 2018 in the run-up to the local elections.

Short-sighted government policies and unbalanced socio-economic developments have created an asymmetrical geography in the country, which furthered inequities between the centre and the periphery at different levels. This also applies to Greater Tunis, which, as the most important urban centre in Tunisia, is both a driving force behind national developments and in turn is exposed to them. Over a period of eighty years, the rate of urbanisation in Tunisia has increased steadily, from 28 percent in 1925 (under the French protectorate) to 65 percent in 2004 (under the Ben Ali regime). Large and medium-sized cities have developed mainly along the Mediterranean coast; already in 1994, 68 percent of the Tunisian population were concentrated here (Chabbi 2006: 219). Moreover, rural areas also experienced a profound transformation. After political independence the aim was to modernise agriculture by setting up cooperatives. Chabbi explains how this project failed. Small farmers were relocated by force and their landholdings incorporated into the cooperatives. Threatened by poverty, many heads of households had no choice but to move, with or without their families, to larger cities, first and foremost the Tunisian capital (ibid. 30).

In the Greater Tunis region, precarious residential areas, known as *gourbivilles*, were built from temporary, self-built dwellings. Throughout the 1960s, these *gourbivilles* became more and more widespread, as the authorities were unable to provide accommo-

dation for poor internal migrants. Instead, the state sometimes destroyed temporary dwellings with bulldozers and deported the inhabitants back to their region of origin or placed them in resettlement camps (ibid. 14f). To escape these measures, many migrants moved to the Medina, the old city centre of the Tunisian capital. Due to the large number of internal migrants and the lack of financial resources, the state was unable to counter or control these unpredictable dynamics with planning measures. Increasingly the living conditions in the *gourbivilles* deteriorated and led to an 'urban exodus' (ibid. 22): migrants who had previously found shelter in the overcrowded city centre or in the *gourbivilles* moved out of the urban core into housing projects at the peri-urban fringe. In these zones, precarious housing named Habitat Spontané Péri-Urbain (HSPU), became increasingly widespread. They differ from the *gourbivilles* in the urban origin of their inhabitants, the solid construction and the prior purchase of the land by the residents. The expansion of these informal settlements was thus not so much driven by rural-urban migration from the countryside to the city, but rather from population movements within the growing metropolitan area of Greater Tunis. It was not until the 1970s, in the wake of the beginnings of economic liberalisation, that a new urban planning policy emerged, aimed at upgrading precarious housing, improving transport systems, and creating government housing programmes to cope with the worsening housing conditions.

With the new urban planning law of 1979, urban construction measures were supposed to enable better control of the spatial expansion of cities. However, it was primarily the (upper) middle-class that benefited from social housing projects, as almost half of the Tunisian population lived in extremely precarious conditions and could even not afford state-subsidised housing. They had no choice but to acquire land on the black market, which prospered due to the high demand (Chabbi 2012b: 102). The process of so-called *péri-urbanisation*, i.e., the development of informal settlements on the peri-urban fringes of the city and ever-expanding the city limits, is largely due to this dynamic. Between 1975 and 1980, the surface area of these informal settlements doubled each year and by 1980 they extended to an area of 400 hectares within the Greater Tunis region (ibid. 97). On the western outskirts of Tunis, the two suburban areas of Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher were created in this way. By far the largest number of precarious housing residents was concentrated in these two suburbs. By the late 1970s, a quarter of the country's population lived on the periphery of the Greater Tunis region (Mansouri 2002: 66), whereas the population in centrally located neighbourhoods, especially in the old city, decreased from 160,000 in 1966 to 95,000 in 2004 (Chabbi 2006). Due to spatial expansion and a higher housing density in peripheral areas, property prices rose considerably between 1975 and 1995, so that by the turn of the millennium scarce housing became a serious problem again.

Administratively, the Greater Tunis region – the metropolitan area – consists of four governorates: Tunis, Ariana, Manouba, and Ben Arous. This metropolitan area is very heterogeneous in terms of history, population and layout. The Governorate of Tunis, which is located in the vicinity of the northern Lac de Tunis (Lac 1), contains the traditional city centre, the Medina, and the modern extension, the former colonial city. It stretches from the northeastern coastal strip (including the upscale suburbs of La Marsa and Gammarth) to the western shore of the salt-lake Sebkhet Séjoumi in the southwest of Greater Tunis (with the adjacent neighbourhoods Sidi Hassine-Séjoumi

and Ezzouhour). While the governorate of Tunis constitutes the core of the metropolitan area, its adjacent urban periphery consists of the three other metropolitan governorates: Ariana (to the north and northwest), Manouba (to the west and southwest), and Ben Arous (to the south and southeast). In the north, there are mainly affluent residential areas such as the El Menzah zone and the coastal districts of El Kram or Sidi Bousaid, while the south and southwest contains mainly middle-class districts, industrial areas and the commercial port of Radès, an important hub for national and international trade. In the west and northwest, there prevail residential areas of the lower income groups and middle-classes, such as Sidi Hassine, Séjoumi, Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, which emerged as informal settlements (Lamloum/Ali Ben Zina 2015).

Since the turn of the millennium, the Greater Tunis region has expanded considerably. On the one hand, this has led to a reduction in population density, and on the other hand, created or increased commuting times. With longer distances between the place of residence and economic centres or workplaces, many city dwellers are required to use urban transport systems in order to be able to overcome physical distances (cf. Bouzid, this volume).

For urban politics and urban planning, the territorial expansion of the Greater Tunis area and its internal fragmentation proved to be major challenges. In the context of advanced globalisation, Tunisian urban policy increasingly followed an efficiency-oriented market logic, and at the same time subscribed to international flagship models of innovative urban planning. As early as the 1980s, a first project was launched to upgrade the Berges du Lac district, with the aim of constructing high-calibre new residential complexes, and expanding infrastructure (Barthel 2008). With the increasing orientation of the Tunisian economy towards the world market, the so-called 'urbanism of large-scale projects' experienced an increased boom after the year 2000. Considerable investments have been made in the implementation of ambitious projects like in the vicinity of the Great Lakes in Tunis, such as shiny waterfronts, sports facilities, technology parks and upscale residential districts, which were financed by private investors and foreign holding companies, especially from the Gulf States. These large-scale projects were no longer directly under state control but were instead left to the management of urban planning companies and foreign investors. However, the financial crisis of 2008 saw a decline in capital flows; some investment projects were abandoned. Ben Othman Bacha and Legros (2015) argue that these large-scale projects produced ambivalent effects: on the one hand, they enabled the upgrading of peripheral areas and promoted their integration into the urban system. As poles of attraction, they created new dynamics that benefited – albeit only partially – the urban economy of the Greater Tunis region. However, since these spatially isolated large-scale projects were aimed exclusively at the middle-classes and the wealthy, they also deepened marginalisation of other urban spaces and furthered socio-spatial polarisation.

The power vacuum after the uprising of 2010/2011 led not only to a temporary loss of state control over national territory, illegal land occupations and informal housing also expanded. Since self-constructions were not officially approved, it was not possible to apply for housing aid and the dwellers were often not connected to the electricity grid or drinking water networks (Hibou et al. 2011: 29). At the same time old established planning structures have had an enduring legacy: after the introduction of an ur-

ban planning policy in the 1970s, which led to the creation of the Tunisian Urban Rehabilitation and Renewal Agency (Agence de Réhabilitation et de Rénovation Urbaine, ARRU), several restructuring, upgrading and rehabilitation measures were carried out in the urban periphery to improve infrastructural and sanitary conditions in informal settlements. These measures served not only to alleviate poverty, but also to regulate social problems. Although nowadays decentralisation and privatisation dominate the urban planning agenda, the central state still indirectly intervenes in urban peripheries through the mediation of NGOs and local associations. It is crucial to understand if neo-liberal strategies can deliver on their promises of overcoming poverty and precariousness, promoting economic initiatives, and reducing socio-spatial exclusion, or if the state will need to step in, but this aspect exceeds the scope of the chapter.

Urban Development and Planning

Engaging with issues of urban development and planning inevitably raises questions about the nature of public intervention and the role of the state in these functions. In fact, these issues are part of a larger historical continuum which Hibou (2015: 148) describes as the 'social and spatial asymmetry of state formation'. This asymmetry can be considered a root cause of the perpetuation of uneven development, despite efforts to counterbalance regional disparities. The attempts of the 1970s to promote rural development and curb internal migration from rural areas and small towns to big cities eventually gave way to more integrated development schemes for improving local living conditions. Public intervention at the local and regional level increasingly shifted its focus to urban areas, but the projects remained modelled after the state-led development approach first applied in rural areas. The implemented measures were mostly targeted to a sector, and they pursued a particular objective, such as the social integration of working-class populations in the periphery of the Tunisian capital. Small cities and towns were largely excluded from this field of intervention.

Under the regime of Ben Ali, regional planning as a technical process that gave priority to the development of Tunisia's coastal governorates was closely intertwined with the international development cooperation apparatus (ibid. 118). These planning processes remained, however, to a large extent centralised, often – as mentioned – directly subordinated to the then president. As municipalities lacked both financial and administrative autonomy investment decisions were usually imposed from above in a technocratic style of government that catered to the interests of private investors and real estate developers. The technocratic model that dominated urban policy-making was tied to an image of the state as an urban developer, commissioned to provide technical solutions for different forms of 'underdevelopment' (Chabbi 2012a: 214). However, what Chabbi considers a strategy of 'rationalising urban development' (ibid. 205) led to little more than the creation of planning tools, planning documents and operationalised procedures, often without practical components for the actual implementation of projects in urban agglomerations. Institutions capable of coordinating planning processes were largely absent, and if local government authorities had a role, it was mostly passive. According to

Chabbi, the sectorial approach for upgrading infrastructure hampered any effort to build coherence through local planning instruments (ibid. 205–206).

Nowadays urban development and planning should be understood as being embedded in a process of decentralisation that puts greater emphasis on participatory approaches. However, so-called integrated approaches of previous development schemes, which were established as part of the national strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion, still constitute the prevailing logic of interventions, often with a regional or local focus. As will be shown below by the example of the programme to upgrade residential neighbourhoods (PRIQH), these interventions address the interplay between urbanisation and economic development through different components (such as providing basic infrastructure, creation of productive activities and employment opportunities, socio-collective equipment) with the goal of fostering social and territorial cohesion. Yet, even a decade after the Tunisian revolution, the long-lasting impact of these state-led urban development interventions, suffer from uncoordinated, incoherent planning policies, and risk to undermine power-sharing as well as counteract the support of and for local government authorities.

Operational Implications of an Urban Development Project

The Programme for the Rehabilitation and Integration of Residential Neighbourhoods (Programme de Réhabilitation et d'Intégration des Quartiers d'Habitation, PRIQH) was first launched in 2012 by the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement, AFD) as part of the Support Programme for City Policy (PROVILLE). It works as a strategy for enhancing urban management across national territory. Exploring the design and implementation of this programme allows us to inquire into the challenges of urban development and planning in the context of urban disparities, the impact of governmental instability and of constrained financial resources. We will illustrate our argument by referring to case studies from Sfax and Gabes, but we will also come back to Bahr Lazreg in Greater Tunis.

The original impetus for this programme came from the French Development Agency, which was convinced by the integrated character of the earlier programme, Programme de Promotion des Quartiers Populaires dans les Grandes Villes (PPQPGV) and determined to offer a follow-up.[2] On the one hand the initiative can be seen as a strategic move by the AFD to reassert its role in urban development while creating synergies with other fields of action, namely energy transition, resource management, innovation, and governance. Moreover, the AFD offers technical support to the Tunisian government and its city-oriented policy. For the Tunisian state, on the other hand, the

2 PRQPGV was first initiated in 2007; it emerged from acknowledging the limits of an eradicative approach vis-à-vis informal neighbourhoods. In situ upgrading and the improvement of living conditions became established as new priorities. Reaching out to 26 neighbourhoods in 17 municipalities,160,000 urban residents and 32,000 housing units, this program was financed with a budget of 114.5 million Dinar. It was followed by a supplementary program in the period 2010–2012 that drew on an investment of 149.715 million Dinar, covering 56 neighbourhoods and 200,000 residents (Ben Jelloul 2013: 6).

PRIQH provides an opportunity to explore a new mode of operation that relies on a multi-actor approach within a participatory public policy framework. It is subsidised by the Tunisian state and refinanced by the French Development Agency, the European Union and the European Investment Bank. The structure of foreign donors suggests that the public aid provided for this programme serves two major purposes: promote European Union neighbourhood policy and offer a contribution to the achievement of global developmental agendas (first and foremost the SDGs).

The first generation of this urban development programme (PRIQH1), which ran from 2012 to 2024, reached out to 155 neighbourhoods in 100 selected municipalities and 24 governorates. Its preoccupation was to overcome spatial seclusion of neighbourhoods, especially within urban areas in the interior regions of Tunisia, by upgrading basic infrastructure and building sport areas, as well as activity zones and industrial facilities. The programme covered both so-called popular neighbourhoods as well as rural agglomerations. Public service networks became extended to create a safer and cleaner environment, better living and housing conditions, as well as new employment opportunities (both direct and indirect). The programme resonated with the strategy to tackle both regional disparities and territorial disparities between neighbourhoods.

The second generation of the urban development programme (PRIQH2), which, from 2019–2024, extended to 161 neighbourhoods and 100 municipalities, aimed to replicate the positive impact of previous upgrading projects (implemented as part of the PRIQH1 for residents of informal neighbourhoods labelled by ARRU as *quartiers anarchiques*). Being aligned with Tunisia's five-year development plan, the programme comprises four stages, each one lasting two years. The originally calculated total costs amounted to 1.2 billion Dinar, which were reduced to approximately 700 million Dinar, because otherwise the Tunisian state would not have been able to finance its share (covering value added tax and the costs for housing rehabilitation; ARRU 2022). The funds provided by the Tunisian state have been complemented by co-finance (both credit and grants) from foreign donors, namely the European Investment Bank, the French Development Agency, and the European Union. Within this total envelope, allocation across different regions was decided according to the development index, i.e., by calculating a budgetary quota for each governorate. While the number of implemented projects varies from one governorate to another, the method of allocation does not privilege one region of the country over another.[3] The programme explicitly aims to improve living conditions in disadvantaged urban zones, providing better access to basic services and enabling the socioeconomic integration of their residents, who can be considered 'beneficiaries in the lower part of the wealth distribution' (Morabito et al. 2021).

Urban development projects are, however, complex undertakings that take place in a particular environment and are often also confronted with unfavourable environmental conditions. Flooding, as for example in the governorate of Sfax, caused by a rise in the water table (like in the zone of Essaltnia-Zanket in Sakiet Eddayer) can have an extraordinary impact on buildings, roads, and infrastructure. Here, a rainwater drainage system had to be installed to resolve this recurring problem. Another example would be

3 This information was conveyed during an interview with a representative of ARRU, December 2, 2021.

unsafe housing construction in hazard zones of natural depression such as the *Sebkhas*, highly saline aquatic systems. According to the AFD, tackling such risk factors impacts the project budget heavily. But there are also significant trends of improvement, for example the installation of a potable water system in Debdaba el Hamma in the governorate of Gabès, which has led to a lower hepatitis B contamination rate. These examples illustrate how social and environmental vulnerability become intertwined, especially in risk prone areas within poor or deprived neighbourhoods. Though urban development projects involve a variety of institutional stakeholders with their vested interests, these projects are only one aspect of urban transitions. At the same time, they are likely to raise questions about the interplay between socio-ecological impacts and longstanding processes of urban transformation.

New evaluation approaches thus put stronger emphasis on the economic, social and environmental impact before and after the implementation of a specific urban development project. To this end, several consultancy companies were engaged to produce a longitudinal analysis. In many cases, the implementation of such projects faces a number of operational challenges, including sluggish administration procedures and a lack of knowledge about the existing infrastructure among the public service concessionaries.[4] They also face the more profound problem of discerning whether the issue at hand is merely upgrading and rehabilitation or if there is a more far-reaching need for adapted spatial planning and comprehensive bottom-up development. The urban management approach is supposed to address this very problem. However, attempts to regulate irregular or dysfunctional processes are likely to produce new loopholes, haphazard processes or cutting of corners. Dysfunctional processes seem to be an inherent part of ongoing urban development processes and are to some extent deliberately tolerated by public authorities in order to deal with existing inequalities.

The case of Bhar Lazreg mentioned earlier is particularly instructive because it provides an example of how urban development processes are embedded in specific socio-ecological spaces and how they articulate local expertise with different temporalities. The latter emerge, for example, under conditions of uncertainty such as the instability of the governmental and legal framework, an economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and a complex mix of socio-ecological problems. The profound challenges for the Bhar Lazreg neighbourhood have repercussions at the municipal level. Local affairs are particularly susceptible to political interference. One example of this is the disagreement between representatives of different political parties in the municipal council, which led to serious tensions and affected cooperation between the technical administration of the municipality and the elected committees. The mayor, however, is keen to underline that as an independent political figure he considers the work he does as both patriotic and non-partisan. What he has in mind is the implementation of a large project for Bhar Lazreg, and he is determined to bring in more expertise in urbanism from abroad. Due to his understanding of public policy issues, he presents himself as a person that mediates between involved stakeholders and prevents conflicts between local institutional actors and civil society representatives. In any case, he is determined to push his municipality to the centre of collective efforts for building a new city strategy. In addition to

4 Field notes based on an interview with two representatives of ARRU, June 1, 2022.

government programmes, it is therefore also personalities at local level who ultimately shape urban policy. It remains to be seen to what extent mediators, such as mayors, who could strengthen municipalities against the abuse of power by the state, private interests and external interventions, represent a new opportunity for a fairer and sustainable urban policy in the future.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a multidimensional understanding of urban development in Tunisia by providing a long-term perspective – from providing historical insights into emerging urban disparities to discussing the recent PRIQH2 programme for upgrading residential neighbourhoods. Urban development, as a paradigm, which eventually came to replace an interventionist approach geared towards restructuring, has fed into a broad range of upgrading and rehabilitation projects in varying scope and investment size. Context-specific conditions of access to land, housing, and facilities highlight the problem of territorial inequality that is constitutionally recognised but insufficiently addressed by territorial planning and decentralisation policies. While changes in the legislative and institutional context have reconfigured local governance, further capacity-building in public agencies and municipalities is required to foster participatory approaches, inclusive governance mechanisms, and a solid institutional framework. For now, urban development in Tunisia reflects a wider trend of how the democratisation of public action in the vast domain of international cooperation faces profound challenges (cf. Ben Medien; Sha'ath, both this volume).

Our analysis of the urban development programme for residential neighbourhoods (PRIQH2) revels that the sectorial approach and municipal interventions are not yet fully compatible with each other. It shows that there is a need for further alignment of urban development with decentralisation goals, local participation, and the empowerment of municipalities. In particular, land management issues require concerted action when it comes to the implementation of planning, urban development, and housing projects. The urban land-use plan is significant in confronting deregulation, over-regulation and informal urbanisation. However, it appears to be merely a policy instrument that extends regulation and promotes hurried catch-up urban development within a short-term time frame. An alternative would be an adapted planning tool for long-term-focused planning processes, which would be more suitable to anticipating ongoing urbanisation trends.

As concrete cases of urban development project or plans thereof demonstrate, the potentials and perils of upgrading and rehabilitation could better be grasped by methods, which take into account the project environment and a variety of socio-ecological and political implications that affect local governance strategies to facilitate interventions. These strategies are developed or improvised under constraints that are financial, political, or environmental in nature. In view of these constraints, local institutional actors may develop their own approach for addressing territorial inequality and conceiving a city strategy that is not, from the start, predetermined by an institutional framework.