

Finding the right contacts and designing cities

Strategic planning is central to the development of cities. In order to plan, you need expertise and contacts with decision-making authority. What can French companies offer?

There is not really a French-style “urban concept” behind which France’s various organizations and companies line up in battle formation to go out and accompany and conquer the markets derived from Africa’s rapid urban development. “We intervene more in terms of local issues and needs expressed by the cities rather than the idea of a city concept”, says Nicole Madariaga, an economist in the French Development Agency’s (FDA) Local Authorities and Urban Development division. In Latin America, the challenge for the FDA – and this is its mandate – is to intervene for greener, more mutually-supportive growth. In sub-Saharan Africa, the FDA’s priority intervention zone, the emphasis is placed on sustainable development, peace and security in the region.

Indispensable planning

“Territories are complex in Africa. Depending on the size of the cities, you’ll find some quite old, structured districts, recent formal or informal urban development and trends towards an urban sprawl spreading towards the desert or coastline, often to the detriment of agricultural land. And we try to achieve an understanding of the whole”, says the FDA.

To do this, the French plan and draw up a blueprint. France is not the only country to do this, even though planning is deeply rooted into its culture. Others use it widely, such as Japan, through its JICA cooperation agency, which is currently heavily involved in issues relating to African cities: in 2014, it even undertook a revision of the urban plan for Dakar.

“In Addis-Ababa, we accompanied the establishment of the blueprint and worked with the city council on both a physical and a strategic plan. That led to a clarification of property rights, intended uses and structuring projects such as the first bus service using separate lanes, more efficient waste management to build up a network between the rag col-



© grandeduc - Fotolia.com

lectors, recycling and the final landfill site”, says Pierre-Arnaud Barthel, project leader for the above-mentioned FDA division.

Secondary cities upgrading

Project management capacity often needs to be reinforced in Africa in order to run and oversee projects, as the city councils rarely have all the technical and administrative expertise; they are delegated little authority or borrowing capacity, notes Maggie Casal, chairman and founder of “Urbanistes sans Frontières”. Apart from a few rare projects such as Dakar, Addis-Ababa, Nairobi and a few cities in Morocco and South Africa, some of which have solid tax resources often linked to the property boom, the funding

agencies rarely lend directly to the cities, capitals or secondary cities. There are also expertise problems and political problems too.

And yet, as the recipients of a frantic rural exodus, and as the barometer of democracy – and often cost-effective as a result of strong local links – secondary cities are beginning to attract attention from the World Bank, UN Human Settlements programme and the FDA, which financed its first direct project in 2011. In 2014, it allocated 125 million EUR to urban development for secondary cities in Cameroon and 20 million EUR for drinking water supplies in Ethiopia.

The French “city contract” concept fits in well with this idea of urban projects carried out under a contract between the government, the regional authority and other partners (funding agencies or others). But here, too, expertise and decision-making authority, i.e. real decentralization, are essential.

The Chinese talk directly to the government, not to the local authorities, offering an investment-project approach rather than a global approach to the city. China also works more on new city projects rather than trying to re-develop existing cities. It trains people on the spot, but often for precise projects. Beijing is the champion of tied aid, thereby offering its companies rapidly-growing markets.

Urban development and climate risks

Over the last 10 years the NGO “Urbanistes sans Frontières” (Urban developers without borders) has been working on informal districts and climate change, training and informing inhabitants and local authorities and drawing up blueprints and projects with volunteer town planners. The NGO is organizing an international conference and African meeting, “Town planning and sustainable development”, in Bamako from 16 to 19 May 2016, with the town hall and government, with the aim of incorporating climate risks into the design and development of cities and the restructuring of shanty towns and informal districts: treating and recovering rainwater, managing sanitation systems ecologically, putting emergency work to protect against flooding on the agenda, etc.