East Timor: Steps Towards a Sustainable Urban Development

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Abstract. The recognized importance of the role of cities for the overall quality of life of citizens involves the preservation of the identity of the places without restricting the capacity to respond to the future requirements of societies and their territories. The current century has been pressing for the urgency of providing adequate urban policies to cities, particularly in developing countries, as is the case with East-Timor. Despite its recent independence, East-Timor doesn’t lose its time and the country has been focused in the definition of territorial policies and development strategies, in order to promote territorial cohesion and to specifically define the purposes and the fundamental principles that guarantee equal opportunities for all citizens in access to infrastructures, equipment and urban functions. Therefore, on April 19, 2017, the Basic Law on Spatial Planning was approved by the National Assembly. Efficient public territorial management and organization is only possible with detailed knowledge of the use of its entire territory. Administrative political decisions related to the territory happen more efficiently with the existence of this knowledge. Consequently, the present National Law for Spatial Planning issues provides for the existence of two major types of planning and territorial organization instruments: those of national scope and those of municipal or local scope. A set of several spatial planning instruments are proved to be imperative, for outlining strategic objectives for future interventions in this territory, achieving a territorial, social, economic, and sustainable development. The conclusions show that these objectives towards urban development will be supported by strategies that in turn will be materialized in actions that will enable the public sector individually or in partnership with privates. The main goal is to promote the transformation of the territory and that in a concerted and programmed manner contribute to a harmonious social and economic development supported by a fair and balanced load capacity of the natural environment.

1. Introduction

Cities are, in general, the reflection of social, economic, cultural, political, and environmental structures built over time and history, thus making it essential to preserve their identity, responding to future needs [1].

The development of countries, the economy of cities, and how cities should be governed is a subject that has been studied by service organizations in many countries in relation with different levels of public administration [2].

Currently, most cities face a situation of urban chaos, resulting from the obsolete and contradictory model of urban occupation implemented since the industrial era, becoming a place to live and work globally. Although several reasons can be enumerated for the increasing migration of the population to
urban centers (mainly economic), the shortest routes, high mobility and greater cultural diversity are also among the factors that lead people to leave home and look for a future in the city.

The lack of databases on land ownership in developing countries has influenced the inhabitants of those countries to occupy public land. This situation has resulted in areas of informal housing, commerce, and agriculture, ultimately creating new informal settlements, which are becoming a serious problem in developing countries. These informal settlements contain inhabitants installed on public lands without any infrastructure and against the wishes of the legal owner. This process results in an uncontrolled occupation of land that promotes new informal areas without any adequate urban services, positioned in risk areas, where the minimum requirements for a healthy life are not being met. [3][4] In some cases, this encourages an informal economy.

In the case of East-Timor, which became one of the most recent independent nations in the world, at the beginning of this century, informal urban settlements are a reality, given that the country is also one of the world's poorest. Although it is giving its first steps regarding the spatial planning system framework definition and the definition of territorial development and housing policies. Therefore, this paper will start with a brief analysis of the problematic informal urban settlements. This type of zones/areas of the cities, with no conditions and no infrastructures, can be the focus for the beginning of urban regeneration of the urban territory, boosting the urban development in terms of sustainability.

The next part will be focused on the case of East-Timor regarding its strategies towards sustainable urban development.

2. Informal urban settlements in developing countries
Informal settlements represent a large percentage of urban areas in developing countries. Figure 1 shows the slum/informal settlements population by region, in different regions of the world, according to the UN-Habitat – Global Report of Human Settlements, 2003. These settlements are usually made up of buildings without construction or legal license or technical documentation, which promotes the destruction and contamination of land over time, hinders planning activity in the territory, and prevents the development of new opportunities. One of the common aspects of these settlements is the social segregation of the population, including social, physical, and spatial segregation between the settlements and the surrounding formal areas. [5]

Generally, cities comprise informal settlements and, consequently, sustainability problems, requiring urgent action. Solutions in informal settlements often do not adequately consider local characteristics, leading to difficulties such as environmental and public health deterioration and degradation, weakened access to housing, or problems related to economic sustainability. In addition, some housing programs do not fit the community's characteristics of social inequality and poverty [4].

The degradation of the urban environment is related to the lack of infrastructure and the consequent informal and precarious housing. This situation results from the absence of adequate housing policies related to territorial contexts, namely climate and geographical characteristics, and social and economic characteristics, leading to an increase in poverty and inequality.
However, informal settlements without land ownership or management have caused problems in terms of public spaces and public services, transportation, hygiene, environment and organization, and legal land solutions. As such, it is essential to introduce or improve land management systems to achieve sustainable development in these settlements [7].

Urban regeneration has been a path to a more sustainable city. Unlike developed countries, where urban regeneration is seen as a renewal and adjustment to new trends, in developing countries it presents an opportunity to start from scratch. In addition to pressing social and economic issues, several authors identify critical aspects in these informal settlements, including they are usually the only viable solution to transform the lives of the poorest in a meaningful and profitable way; and improvised solutions are in context and can use local resources and thus promote a more sustainable result. Thus, cities in developing countries can become a paradigm for urban development [8].

Planning laws are thus able to boost, establish, and regulate complex systems that not only govern spatial development, but also directly influence land management and financing at local and national levels. Therefore, they have an impact on many areas of life and economic activity in a country and, consequently, on its cities and territory. Ensuring that planning laws do their job as effectively as possible means that they are often under scrutiny as contexts and needs for change. It is thus possible to provide the right to a rational, proportional, and balanced spatial planning.

3. Sustainable urban development strategies in East-Timor

3.1 Contextualization of the country
Timor-Leste is one of the youngest nations in the 21st century, having become a democratic rule of law on May 20, 2002, after a period of administration by the United Nations by UNTAET (The United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor). It is an island country in Southeast Asia, surrounded by Indonesia and separated from Australia by the Timor Sea (Figure 2).

It is in this framework of discussion that the importance of the territorial development of Timor-Leste is understood, in favor of values of cohesion, as presented in the National Development Plan (PND, 2002), where the transformation of the East Timorese people stands out as major objectives. the struggle for independence, in the struggle for development. The aim is to achieve balanced development
between regions in the long term, in which combating poverty is associated with economic development. Sustainability issues are associated with the recognition of local values, in which the political-administrative construction of municipal power seems fundamental.

Figure 2. Location of East-Timor [11]

The territory in Timor-Leste, namely since independence in 2002, is subject to major problems and challenges of a different nature, depth, and multiplicity, particularly in the field of governance and in actions that promote the construction of territorial cohesion.

With the beginning of the administrative reform of local power in 2003, the Government of Timor-Leste started a process to structure political power as a source of popular will and expression of real interests and aspirations, making known the beliefs, values, institutions, communities, and underlying modes of learning and decision-making, seeking to combat the process of deterritorialization, largely as a result of the development flows and dynamics in force in the territory. [10]

After independence, there is a gradual recovery, especially of the infrastructures related to the transport, communication, energy, water supply, and sanitation subsectors.

After the August 30, 1999 referendum, the Indonesian administration was replaced by the United Nations Transitional Administration for East-Timor (UNTAET) administration.

3.2 Urban development policies
Spatial planning, as a public policy, became visible in the drafting of the Constitution of the Republic of Timor-Leste in April 2017, with the Basic Law on Spatial Planning, approved by the National Assembly, although previously underlying in Art. 72nd, referring to Local Power, [10] allowing the country's political, institutional, and social conditions to be framed.

Despite its recent independence, Timor-Leste has focused its efforts on defining territorial policies and strategies that guarantee: “the development of the economy, the creation of the material well-being of citizens, the protection of the environment and natural resources, and the affirmation and enhancement of the cultural heritage”. [11]

The Law No. 6/2017, of the Basics of Spatial Planning [12], thus presents, as the main objective of public policy on spatial planning “the promotion and harmonious and integrated development of sectors and regions, as well as the fair distribution of the national product”.

The approval of the Basic Law of Spatial Planning allows, thus, to specifically define the purposes and guiding principles of Public Administration in the definition of Spatial Planning policy, the identification of various public interests with a territorial dimension, the use of territorial planning
instruments as a means of intervention by the Public Administration, as well as defining the typology and objectives to which they must comply.

The Basic Law on Spatial Planning, therefore, provides for the existence of two major types of territorial planning instruments: those of national scope and those of municipal scope. The former must take the form of a National Spatial Planning Plan and can be complemented with sectoral plans of national scope, for each of the public policies that the Public Administration understands as convenient.

The latter, at the municipal level, cover the municipal district, with the decentralized organs of the administration being responsible for preparing the municipal spatial planning plan. When necessary, land use plans can also be drawn up and approved.

This Basic Law on Spatial Planning gains the purpose (Article 3.º) of guaranteeing:

- The harmonious and sustainable development of the national territory;
- The enhancement of soil potential;
- National cohesion, guaranteeing equal opportunities for all citizens in access to infrastructure, equipment and urban functions;
- Territorial integrity;
- The rationalization and sustainability of urban areas;
- The valorization of the rural space;
- The protection and enhancement of the natural, cultural and landscape heritage,
- The economic, social and environmental development of the territory,
- The protection of populations and heritage in the face of natural disasters and interventions that are likely to cause negative impacts.

3.3 Sustainable development concept

The idea of sustainable development is based on the need not to compromise the development of future generations due to excessive consumption. As such, it emerges as a new concept for the development of territories, with a view to harmony between humanity and nature, as well as economic sustainability, essential to promote the quality of life in cities [13].

With a large part of the world population living in cities and maintaining the current trend of urbanization, it seems necessary that the principles of sustainable development apply to cities, as these are the territories par excellence where these changes will have the greatest impact [14].

In order to meet this challenge, territorial planning, due to its decisive role in supporting the development of human activities, needs to build an operational instrument that will enable it to continue to support the process of development of societies and, at the same time, make it possible for this development to occur within the principles of sustainability [15].
On the other hand, the following principles, and parameters to be adopted for the planning process are numbered:

- Sustainable use of natural resources;
- Reduction of consumption and waste;
- Preservation of natural, economic and cultural diversity in an equitable relationship;
- Promotion of the economy and local employment;
- Promotion and promotion of the use of renewable energies;
- Involvement of the local population in the process;
- Promotion of disclosure and information on planned and verified development throughout the process.

4. Conclusions

One of the first conclusions of the presented analysis is that the poorest zones of the cities, besides their problems in cultural, economic, or social context could be pivotal areas to put in action strategies and policies in order to boost urban development as a whole.

In the developed countries, it can be more complicated to achieve the sustainable goals in developing countries. This can be a paradigmatic situation but, the reality is that, in developing countries, such as East-Timor, for the fact that the entire territory is very fragmented and has many areas of informal settlements and with a low density of construction, the planning can start almost from scratch. On the other hand, in developed countries, with high-density levels of construction, it can be harder to implement new strategies and sustainable infrastructures.

In the case of East-Timor, such as this research aimed to show, there is a set of policies to boost sustainable urban development. Even if the country is giving its first steps on this matter, it is strongly supported by a robust starting point, with several laws promoting and integrated development of regions and cities. There is a guideline based on principles regarding the spatial planning policies following a sustainable development, a national cohesion, or territorial integrity.

The spatial planning system in East-Timor is giving the first steps. In the future it could be the support to solve the problem of informal settlements, preserving their identities and the features of local communities.

Finally, there is still a long way ahead in countries like East-Timor, especially in the housing domains, given that in many cases the adopted solutions are based on foreign examples that don’t take into consideration local features. In countries with a lack of scientific studies and researches like East Timor, every attempt of going deeper into a territorial approach is always a great challenge. The main goal is to promote the transformation of the territory and that in a concerted and programmed manner contribute to a harmonious social and economic development supported by a fair and balanced load capacity of the natural environment.

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