MC²CM

MEDITERRANEAN CITY-TO-CITY MIGRATION

CITY CASE STUDY
TUNIS

THE REVITALISATION OF TUNIS' MEDINA AND
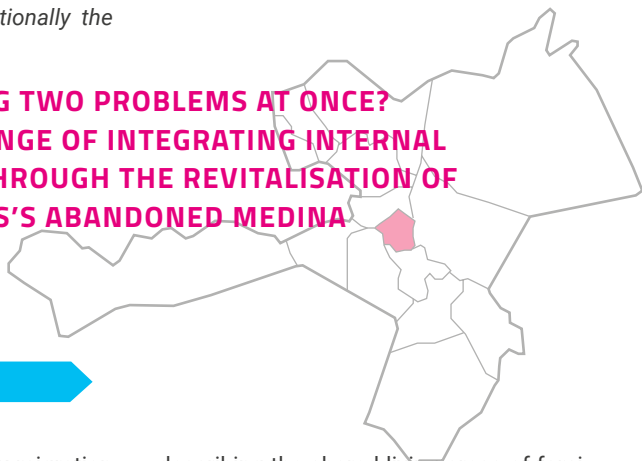INTEGRATION OF INTERNAL MIGRANTS

INTERNAL MIGRATION

OUKALAS

REVITALISATION

MEDINA

ADEQUATE HOUSING

VIENNA

LYON   TURIN

MADRID

LISBON

BASIC SERVICES

TUNIS

BEIRUT

TANGIER

AMMAN

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International Centre for
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United Cities
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FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

This case study was developed in the framework of the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Project (MC2CM), a project coordinated by ICMPD and funded by the European Union and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The MC2CM project has been working since 2015 with Amman, Beirut, Lisbon, Lyon, Madrid, Tangiers, Tunis, Turin and Vienna to increase the knowledge base on urban migration. Additionally the project has sought to nurture a peer-to-peer dialogue and mutual learning on specific urban challenges such as social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, employment and provision of basic services for migrants, among others. This case study was selected by the Municipality of Tunis in order to showcase a practice that contributes to social inclusion of migrants at the local level.

MEETING TWO PROBLEMS AT ONCE? THE CHALLENGE OF INTEGRATING INTERNAL MIGRANTS THROUGH THE REVITALISATION OF TUNIS'S ABANDONED MEDINA

ABSTRACT

The city of Tunis faces complex migration dynamics. A destination for international migration in its own right, Tunis also acts as transit hub for migrants making their way onwards into Europe. Internal migration represents another important facet of the city's migration profile. After independence in 1956, the city of Tunis attracted large numbers of internal migrants searching for employment opportunities. The majority of these migrants secured shelter in the city's historic centre, known as the Medina, where many of the houses and apartments were vacant, as former inhabitants moved to suburban areas in search of modernised housing solutions. Families moving into the Medina's abandoned living spaces created so-called **Oukalas** – a word describing the shared living areas of families from poorer backgrounds. Whilst providing much needed low-cost housing for migrants arriving into Tunis, housing conditions had deteriorated after their abandonment. As a consequence, **Oukalas** were often unsafe, unsanitary and overcrowded. To address these challenges, the Municipality of Tunis initiated in 1991 the **Oukalas** Project. Structured around two main objectives, the project aimed to improve living conditions for residents of the Medina, many of whom were internal migrants, whilst also restoring historic buildings and monuments in the neighbourhood. The project ended in 2012 and reached more than 3,000 households.

Comprised of 15 districts, Tunis is the capital and most populated city of Tunisia. The city's historic centre is known as the Medina of Tunis, and was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1979.

Tunis faces complex migration dynamics. A destination for international migration, Tunis also acts as transit hub for migrants making their way onwards into Europe. Beyond this, internal migration patterns further complicate the city's migration profile. The latter dynamic has a specific history in Tunisia, connected to the strict recruitment policies enacted during colonial and postcolonial periods to resource projects deemed to be of specific colonial / national interest. The effects of such engineered rural exodus has been a highly uneven economic and social development pattern between regions. In recent times, un/under-employment has become the principal determinant of internal migration in Tunisia.[1] As a result, the Municipality of Tunis has been compelled to develop capacities to respond to such migration flows.

Whilst the city does not engage in targeted projects specifically tailored to addressing migrant needs, the municipality does include migrants within existing social and

cultural offers designed to improve the quality of life for all citizens living in Tunis.

This case study presents the Oukalas project, an initiative led by the Municipality of Tunis that was implemented between 1991 and 2012. The project targeted people living in the Medina of Tunis (including high numbers of internal migrants) and aimed to provide adequate housing and basic services whilst simultaneously restoring and revitalising this historic area. The project is therefore an example of state-led regeneration designed to improve housing conditions for residents of the medina, many of whom are internal migrants.

After independence in 1956, Tunis attracted many internal migrants searching for job opportunities in the city. At the same time, better-off families living in the Medina of Tunis were relocating to suburban areas. Once abandoned, house quality in the city centre deteriorated, leaving many houses at risk of imminent collapse due to a combination of age and poor maintenance. Vacated by those able to afford safer suburban alternatives, many of the traditional old town buildings were left uninhabited. For families arriving from Tunisia's rural areas, many of whom lacked social support networks in the city, these abandoned houses represented the only available shelter. They moved into the houses and created so-called **Oukalas** arrangements – a word describing the shared living areas of families from poorer backgrounds. However, these

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[1] The period 2009–2014 saw the city of Tunis experience a negative balance of internal migration; this means more people left the city for other destinations than arrived to the capital from elsewhere within the country. See MC2CM Profil migratoire de la ville de TUNIS

places were often unsafe, unsanitary and overcrowded, posing a public health and environmental challenge for the city. The **Oukalas** project was initiated by the Municipality of Tunis in 1991 to address some of these deficiencies. Although the project was primarily initiated to protect families living in buildings at risk of collapse, it had a broader objective to improve the general living conditions for all residents and to catalyse the restoration of historic buildings and monuments in the area.

Project activities included:

- The relocation of families living in Oukalas into 2,000 new social housing units equipped with basic services and infrastructure (electricity, potable water, sanitation, roads, public lightning, schools, markets etc.)

- The demolition of old buildings at risk of collapsing and replaced with newly constructed buildings to provide shelter for groups and individuals living in Oukalas arrangements

- The provision of housing loans to selected households for the renovation and rehabilitation of their apartments

- The restoration and rehabilitation of public buildings and historic monuments

On top of the provision of secure shelter and the renovation of historic buildings, the project also provided social assistance to vulnerable Oukalas residents. Such initiatives included:

- The construction of 76 houses for older people living independently in the community. Each house of 25 m^2 consists of one room, a bathroom, a kitchen and a small garden

- The provision of access to loans for 220 elderly individuals, unable to access financial support through familial or social support networks

- The provision of support for twelve handicapped children, covering their education and healthcare costs

- The provision of 60 scholarship grants to allow local students to finish higher education

- Seasonal support for vulnerable groups to help meet costs associated with religious observation and/or school year cycles

Activities were implemented in four phases. All phases included the relocation of families living in inadequate and dangerous living spaces and the renovation and rehabilitation of public buildings and historic monuments. The project also addressed the restoration of private buildings and encouraged homeowners and landlords to renovate their own buildings by providing favourable housing loans. Additionally, the project included a number of social aspects, such as post-relocation citizen surveys and the provision of social services, including youth and cultural centres, in the new locations that Medina inhabitants were moved to. The project came to an end in 2012.

The overall project costs added up to 52 million Tunisian Dinars and was part funded by the Municipality of Tunis and part by a loan from FADES (Fonds arabe pour le développement économique et social).

RESULTS AND IMPACTS

Project Oukalas had a significant impact on the Medina quarter, the people living in Oukalas and on the wider city of Tunis. The main targets of the project were lower-income households living in the abandoned buildings of the Medina of Tunis. Almost exclusively, such households drew from an internal migration backgrounds. The project gave priority to vulnerable groups – defined as families living in buildings at imminent risk of collapse; very poor families; aged people living independently; and female-headed households.

Results can be seen both in relation to localised social and economic indicators and also with respect to the wider urban development of Tunis. Impact indicators for the initiative include:

- The rehabilitation and revitalisation of the Medina quarter

- Homeowner investment in maintenance, extension and beautification

- The repair of Sabats and buttressing arches

- The creation of sightseeing tours for tourists

- An increase in numbers of students enrolled in the city's university

- Inward investment into commercial units

- Increased rates of in-migration and an economic revival associated with the establishment of hotels, guest houses and cultural centres

Overall, more than 3,000 households (approx. 15,000 inhabitants) were impacted by the project either through being relocated to improved housing units within or without the Medina; through the use of rehabilitated and renovated buildings (both public and private); or through access to targeted home improvement loans.

In the earlier phases of the project, central **Oukalas** residents were relocated to peripheral districts. This raises important questions regarding the impact of relocation on **Oukalas** residents' social networks and employment opportunities. In the last phase of the project, however, inhabitants of the **Oukalas** were provided with housing opportunities in the Medina itself; in buildings that had been built over the foundations of demolished structures deemed unsafe during the first phase. Residents were given the option to rent or purchase the new apartments at discounted rates (residents had to cover costs equal to the construction costs, with additional costs covered by the municipality and the national government).

Challenges in the **Oukalas** project can be seen related to the definition of project beneficiaries. Whilst providing improved housing conditions, the relocation of residents to peripheral sites often risks the emergence of other problems, such as the loss of social capital or restricted access to employment opportunities, and socio-cultural amenities – significant costs for already vulnerable groups. In view of the relocation approach adopted during the first phase of the project, it appears that the renovation of buildings and revitalisation of the Medina did not primarily benefit the people living there. In order to mitigate some of these issues, the Municipality of Tunis invested in establishing a youth and cultural centre in the relocation area where former Medina inhabitants were being moved. Moreover, the final project phase supported existing **Oukalas** residents to secure improved housing in their existing neighbourhood.

Further challenges were experienced relating to the affordability of post-renovation rental prices and the collection of assessed rents, especially in cases of families relying on social welfare. This challenge speaks to the overall sustainability of the project and the question of how to provide continuous support to beneficiaries after their relocation into houses that provide adequate shelter. This becomes particularly relevant in light of the cost-intensive nature of the project, and the associated financial burden that it imposed on the Municipality of Tunis. Indeed, financing represented the main

challenge of the project and, ultimately, led to its closure in 2012. The restoration of historic buildings and development of vacant sites within the Medina required costly and labour intensive interventions, such as the (dangerous) restoration of balconies.

In some ways, the **Oukalas** project can be seen as an urban intervention that facilitated improved access to human rights for internal migrants by recognising the particular precariousness of their living situation. The project aimed at providing adequate housing and access to services for all inhabitants of the Medina irrespective of migratory background. The project followed an idea that all residents should have access to an improved standard of housing and, as such, can be seen as an attempt to promote a right to decent housing in Tunis. In the context of widespread regeneration, inclusive measures are needed to ensure all citizens retain full access to urban life. Close monitoring and a regular reassessment of the situation is therefore needed. In the case of the **Oukalas** project, it would be interesting – and useful for institutional learning - to compare the experiences and wellbeing of **Oukalas** relocated at the periphery of the city, with those relocated in the Medina. Whilst such information is not available, future initiatives would benefit from a solid and inclusive social impact assessment of rehabilitation measures. In particular, these types of regeneration projects benefit from adopting a broad conceptualisation of housing - one that

takes into account the thick social support networks that underpin many inner-city communities. In the context of the **Oukal-as** Project, the construction of youth and cultural centres in relocation sites is a positive gesture in this direction. Such an approach opens up creative solutions that can overcome the widespread 'false-choice' between central squalor vs peripheral provision as the only game in town.

Taking on board the above precautionary comments, aspects of the project's approach could usefully be explored and extended - in particular, the attempt to explore synergies between rehabilitation agendas and the provision of services to newly arrived populations, i.e. two important contemporary urban development challenges. Indeed, this combined approach could apply to different contexts, and be extend to international, as well as internal, migrants. Similarly, it could be explored for addressing the housing needs of refugees, following their relocation from immigration detention centres / camps and for supporting their integration into urban society.

An additional learning is related to the financial burden that such an intervention places on local municipalities. Whereas there are still buildings in Tunis' Medina that need renovation, securing sufficient financial resources for such interventions presents a major challenge for the local government. The project's continuation therefore relies on securing additional resources from partners outside of the state – in this context, attention must be paid to ensure that socio-spatial inclusion is placed at the heart of development proposals. With the nec-essary support and refinement, the project has the potential to provide an interesting solution to the challenges of social cohesion and the revitalisation of abandoned city districts in Tunisia and beyond.

REFERENCES

The case study builds on documents and information provided by the Municipality of Tunis. Regrettably, it was not possible to conduct interviews with project coordinators, project beneficiaries or local civil society actors.

The background information of Tunis and its approach to migration governance is based on the MC2CM Tunis City Migration Profile and complemented by the following source:

• Amara, M., & Jemmali, H. (2016). Deciphering the Relationship between Internal Migration and Regional Disparities in Tunisia. Giza, Egypt: Economic Research Forum, Working Paper No. 1043.

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