CONCEPT NOTE

REFORMING URBAN PLANNING SYSTEM IN LEBANON

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MOVENPICK HOTEL
BACKGROUND

This conference falls within the frame of the UN-Habitat initiative entitled “Reforming Urban Planning System in Lebanon” implemented in partnership with the Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU). The initiative involves a number of activities, including conducting a research/assessment to assess the overall institutional capacities of the DGU and to map the various planning methods, procedures and mechanisms applied by different governmental and international organizations in Lebanon.

The initiative came to consolidate UN-Habitat rich experience in Lebanon in dealing with local governance and urban planning issues.

In 2009, UN-Habitat implemented a two and a half year Project “Improved Municipal Governance for Effective Decentralization in Lebanon”. The project aimed to support the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MoIM) in empowering municipalities in Lebanon and to improve the technical, planning, administrative and financial capacities of municipalities, promoting national information exchange and networking among municipalities in Lebanon.

The project was not only able to achieve significant results, but also contributed to building strategic partnerships with key national stakeholders involved in the urban sector, notably, the Directorate General of Municipalities, the Directorate General of Urbanism (DGU), the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) and the Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA).

From a normative perspective, UN-Habitat has developed two main publications of direct relevant to urban planning sector in Lebanon.

- The first publication “Lebanon Urban Profile” is a desk review that looks at five main themes of relevance to the urban sector: population and urban growth, the urban economy, urban development, urban environment and urban governance. It concluded with emerging urban issues that focus on Lebanon’s urban divides.

- The second publication represents a training guidebook on “Local Strategic Planning” and is used as a reference by experts and practitioners to empower local authorities and allow them develop local strategic plans at the level of municipalities and unions of municipalities. This guidebook is strongly aligned with existing national planning procedures and has received the endorsement of the MoIM.

The elaboration process of the training guidebook mobilized key national stakeholders involved in urban planning. This process has concluded with identifying two key actions:

- The need to initiate a national dialogue on challenges related to the urban planning sector in Lebanon, and

- The need to develop appropriate urban planning frameworks that take into account the territorial changes of the regions, and the increased and rapid urban sprawl in Lebanon.

In this context, the organization of this conference comes to further address these actions within a wider frame of a reform process, building on the key findings of the mapping and assessment exercises that have been conducted by UN-Habitat during the past few months.

This exercise, which was conducted at the level of key concerned planning institutions, namely DGU, CDR, municipalities, and sector ministries, focused on assessing urban planning practices from different key perspectives: institutional setup, territorial scale, applied tools and methods, existing laws and regulations, and current coordination and collaboration frameworks.

The assessment, which turned to be a learning process and led to a number of key findings, has confirmed the need for the elaboration of an advanced urban planning framework which would take into account the newly created territorial boundaries and the arising developmental challenges resulting from the expansion of urban areas, as well as the various interests of concerned local and national key actors.

RATIONALE

Lebanon is a highly urbanized country. 87% of its population lives in urban areas, concentrated in and around the main cities and coastal towns that became inter-connected. This urbanization was not accompanied by any state policies or plans, which turned many cities and towns into a single urban area that is challenged by a lack of basic services, as well as transport problems, traffic congestion and a deterioration of the natural environment.

Although Lebanon has a number of national players concerned with urban planning, the state policies in this particular sector remain minimalistic. Those key concerned players...
include the local authorities, the DGU, the Higher Council for Urban Planning (HCUP), the CDR, and several sector ministries.

Urban planning in Lebanon is exercised in a highly centralized manner. As a key government agency, the DGU is responsible for developing and reviewing master plans all over Lebanon. It should be mentioned that the Master Plan only provides guidelines and recommendations that still need to be reinforced by means of mandatory laws and relevant policies and regulations. The HCUP includes representatives from several ministries as well as specialists in urbanization, and is responsible for advancing recommendations that guide urban planning at national level.

As for the CDR, it was founded in 1977 to take charge of reconstruction and rehabilitation projects. To regulate urban growth, the CDR was assigned the task of developing a National Physical Master Plan for the Lebanese Territory. The final output represents a national ‘general guiding framework’ to urban planning and land use in Lebanon to be abided by all actors involved in planning. Being an officially endorsed document (2009), the need arises to complement this national guiding framework with regional urban planning frameworks.

In parallel to this, the role of local authorities in urban planning is also gaining a significant importance, specifically in light of the increasing interest of donor agencies to partner with municipalities and community representatives to develop Local Strategic Plans.

### KEY OBJECTIVES & OUTPUTS

The objectives of the Urban Planning conference are the following:

- Share the findings of the mapping and assessment exercise conducted by UN-Habitat, as well as a number of experiences related to regional urban planning systems within the European and the Arab States regions;
- Discuss and agree on a set of policies and actions to overcome the arising challenges and lay the foundation for a reform process of the urban planning systems in Lebanon.

It is expected that the outputs of the conference would represent the key elements of the road map which will guide the process of reforming urban planning system in Lebanon, and supporting a better multi-level planning articulation (national/regional/local), as well as a better multi-sectorial coordination. The conference would also identify key areas for resource mobilization at the level of national and international development partners.