PUEBLA - RIVER AS A LEVERAGE FOR REGENERATING THE CITY

INTA Initiative Act 2: "Cities and territories in transformation"
Puebla - Mexico, june 2017
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City identity: a reflection of its personal history
The growth and development of Puebla were first supported by the textile industry, and then by the automotive industry, which both had shaped the city identity. However, its development, as in other Latin America cities, is the source of an uncontrolled urban growth. In Mexico, this phenomenon has a particular feature, due to the way the “ejidal” property (collective agricultural area) has turned into allotment that messily outgrew the city’s urban area: this is what happened in Puebla.

INTA’s first intervention
In February 2016, upon an invitation of the Municipal Commission of Urban Development and Environment of Puebla City Hall, INTA organized a first mission aiming to contribute, from an international perspective, to the updating process of the Municipal Programme for Urban Development. In this context, two important aspects were highlighted: the first is the near absence of the river in the urban planning schemes, even though it is a structuring element of the city; second is the informal and illegal occupations of the land areas.

The context of this second mission
This second international mission is organized as an answer to the occasional request from the Mayor Luis Banck, during the World Summit for Habitat III in Quito. The mandate was to focus on the recuperation of the Atoyac river and its potential to leverage urban and territorial regeneration. Our approach was to contribute to the process through the ¡Vive Atoyac! Committee adding our international dimension to its local perspective. This is why we address the issue in a global way, in particular trying to align the Atoyac river recovery potential with the recommendations of the New Urban Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Objectives promoted by the United Nations system.

The urgency of consolidating different views
Our priority was to underline the urgency of consolidating the different, often contradictory, views on the river recovery. We called the authorities at three government levels, the private sector, the associative sector and the citizens, to take more decisive positions to face the territorial challenge: this challenge is to reinvent the Atoyac river which is today extremely toxic, that is not only a risk for the environment and public health, but also for the local and regional economy.
A critical territory
In our reflection about the Atoyac river, we used the notion of “critical territory”, which helps to qualify the territorial fragility as a fundamental characteristic of the ecosystem. The “critical territory” concept allows us to grasp the Atoyac river from the Alto Atoyac river basin (69 municipalities on 2 States), and not as a problem for Puebla only. At this scale, we focused on the various interactions and tensions: institutional, social, economical, political... We are careful on how decisions from municipalities upstream in the basin are affecting the river, and also on how the decisions from the Puebla Municipality affect the downstream territories.

A multi-scale perspective and an integrated governance through an Intercommunal agency
A governance that span over several territorial and temporal scales face institutional limitations and legal restrictions. Thus, how can Puebla fulfill the New Urban Agenda recommendations, which assign an important role to cities and local authorities, without a specific and dedicated governance mechanism? Working at an intercommunal scale makes easier to promote the river as a Procomún (a natural good, that deserve to be protected, our legacy for next generations), making it a top-notch challenge for authorities. We are advocating the creation of an autonomous coordination agency, granted with technical competences and institutional weight so as to become a counterpart and ally for the Mexican actors from all sectors and government levels. This agency should ensure the horizontal and vertical coordination of the process.

A national project of international interest
We are suggesting as a general position to make the Atoyac recovery process a project of national interest/priority and to benefit from the conjuncture of the global debate on urban development and sustainability (Paris Climate Agreement, New Urban Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals), to carry out a project that can attract international attention and financing.

Coproducing with citizens
Taking as an inspiration the examples set by other cities for the recovery of their rivers (see the cases of the Medellín river in Colombia, of Mapocho in Chile and Pasig in Philippines), we underscored the importance of active involvement of citizens in the process to benefit from the local assets and support. This highlights the need to acquire a management structure with institutional capacities matching the task and responsibility. From our perspective, the Atoyac river recovery and its change into an urban regeneration factor is opening a window for opportunity for an institutional clarification and for the reinforcement of a territorial intelligence momentum. It is not enough to ambition a “smart City” (Puebla is organizing for the second year in a row the Smart City Expo for Latin America), but it is necessary to take a step forward and create an innovation process (social, institutional, technological) that would be able to enhance collective intelligence. It is not enough to “know what to do to recover the river”, it is also important to: create a shared vision on which citizen can identify themselves and believe in, to listen to them, to value their life experiences, to give them the possibility to bring something to the process1.
Positive discharges: 12 month of short-term actions

After reading and analyzing a great part of the written production on river recovery process, roam its course on the city and heard a few dozens of officials, researchers, specialists, social leaders, representative of organized civil society, activists, representatives of institutions of three government levels, representatives of the industrial sector, entrepreneurs, representative of international cooperation organisms, and, more generally, citizen, during interview sessions, and during the participative civic design workshop, we can suggest a short and medium term strategy, focusing on the transformation of negative discharges (physical, biological, social, political and cultural…) into positive discharges, to generate an inclusive, innovative and sustainable change.

Un espacio ecológico de recreación