



A Model of Participatory Development in Tunisia

Sfax is Tunisia's second-largest city after Tunis, and its commercial epicentre. For decades, its thriving manufacturing industry and large Mediterranean port made Sfax an attractive investment destination. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the city grappled with industrial stagnation, rising unemployment and other socio-economic challenges. These had a serious impact on the city's growth trajectory.

In 2003, elected officials of the seven municipalities that make up the Greater Sfax metropolitan area – Sfax, Sakiet Eddaler, Sakiet Ezzit, Chihia, Gremda El Ain and Thyna – drafted a Greater Sfax Development Strategy (GSDS) to revitalise the Sfax area through economic development, with the support of the German development agency (GIZ) and Medcités. At that time, the combined population of the area was 500,000 and one-fourth of the urban residents lived in under-served areas.

In pre-revolution Tunisia, political and governance systems were tightly-controlled and centralised, with limited scope for citizen involvement. The GSDS was thus as a bold attempt to involve municipal and other local stakeholders in city development.

Captured under the vision of *Grand Sfax 2016*, the GSDS reflected the municipalities' shared vision to revitalise the area and its economy. Based on consultations with various city stakeholders, investment priorities were identified. The next – and most challenging – step was to translate the strategic vision for Greater Sfax into action.

Supporting the Implementation of GSDS

In 2007, the seven municipalities approached the Cities Alliance for support in operationalising and implementing the GSDS. Unlike many of the other Cities Alliance - supported **City Development Strategies** (CDS), the strategic planning process in Greater Sfax was complete by the time the Alliance got involved in the **second phase of GSDS**.

Project: Greater Sfax Development Strategy (GSDS) – Phase 2

Partners: Cities Alliance, Municipalities of Greater Sfax, MedCités, GIZ, the World Bank, City of Barcelona

Duration: 2007 – 2011

Cities Alliance Financing: USD 245,000

The Cities Alliance supported a series of diagnostic studies to assess the extent of the problems facing Greater Sfax. Specifically, the studies focused on local economic development, underserved neighbourhoods, employment, and mass transport. An urban observatory was established to gather, analyse and disseminate city data. Based on extensive surveys spanning a two-year period, a typology of underserved neighbourhoods was also created. These efforts eventually contributed to the identification of a set of priority projects for the Greater Sfax area.

The GSDS Yields Results

The GSDS supported by the Cities Alliance provides an important and timely model of participatory development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Almost all segments of the population were actively involved in formulating a long-term economic development strategy for Greater Sfax. This included the private sector, universities, urban planners and civil society representatives – most of whom were previously excluded from the city's decision-making processes.

The GSDS is particularly noteworthy for the unlikely partnerships that grew out of it. Seven Mayors of neighbouring municipalities took the initiative to collaborate on their development efforts. They worked together to align other city stakeholders and donors around their shared vision for Greater Sfax. Their activities not only benefited their individual municipalities but also the region as a whole. The Technical Director of Sfax



“Grand Sfax 2016” outlined Greater Sfax’s long-term vision for strategic development

municipality Riadh Haj Taieb says, “The CDS is now regarded as a model of strategic urban development - not only in Tunisia but the entire region.”

The diagnostic studies supported by the Cities Alliance yielded surprising new information about underserved neighbourhoods in the seven municipalities. For instance, it emerged that 22 per cent of the local population lived in underserved neighbourhoods, much higher than previous estimates. Likewise, an analysis of the labour market showed that women were lagging far behind men in access to jobs. This allowed the local administration to better understand the areas it served and plan its interventions more strategically.

Importantly, the CDS went beyond the country’s established urban development framework by spelling out its own long-term vision for strategic development. The city’s action plan was so widely appreciated that some of its projects were included in Eleventh National Plan for socio-economic development. These included projects related to the upgrading of airport facilities, coastal area management and highway extension. More funding was made available as well; in 2012, the Tunisian government pledged 8 million dinar (approximately USD 5 million) for infrastructure development in low-income areas of Sfax.

As the World Bank’s Alexandra Ortiz, who supervised the project, commented, “The CDS was a very dynamic, results-oriented, and highly participatory initiative, unlikely to happen in a country like Tunisia which had a tightly controlled and centralised governance system. It was remarkable how the Mayors of the seven municipalities were persistent and worked together

harmoniously. There was a great sense of ownership for the process and outcomes of the CDS.”

Lessons Learned from the Sfax experience

The GSDS was framed prior to the 2011 revolution, when Tunisia’s governance system was still highly centralised and the Ministry of Interior was responsible for municipal development. Since municipalities had limited powers, they had little incentive to take on additional responsibility. However, the persistence of Mayors of the seven municipalities in drafting and implementing the GSDS – and the strong leadership they provided – were critical to the success of the project.

The project provides a compelling example of a well-considered, coherent partnership at the local, regional, national and international level, with each partner playing a clearly defined role. Apart from the seven municipalities, domestic partners included the Ministry of Environment, Tunisian Association of Urban Planners, and the National Federation of Tunisian Cities. International partners comprised GIZ, Medcités, the World Bank and City of Barcelona. The large-scale, complex nature of the project involved a range of high-profile partners, requiring careful coordination, patience and persistence. The international partners, namely CMI, Medcités, World Bank and CDC continue to support Greater Sfax in GSDS implementation.

For those involved in the CDS, the Greater Sfax experience demonstrates that building active participation is a time-consuming, yet rewarding, process. While physical results invariably take time, the Sfax leaders have nonetheless provided an important example of the power of participatory governance in a region long dominated by centralised and arbitrary decision-making. The next challenge is to share the Sfax experience within Tunisia, particularly in smaller towns in the interiors, and region.

The Greater Sfax - Phase 2 project contributes to the objectives of the Cities Alliance by:

- Promoting local economic development strategies, and prioritising underserved neighbourhoods
- Promoting inter-municipality cooperation for city and regional development
- Leveraging significant budget allocation