

# A tale of five cities

One person in two lives in a city of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, in most cases on the coast. It is in these cities that future population growth will be concentrated, a daunting prospect for many municipal authorities which find themselves ill-equipped to cope with the pressures exerted on coastal zones: marine pollution, saltwater intrusion into groundwater, coastal degradation, the decline of traditional fishing and handicrafts, a greedy tourist industry hungry for land and natural resources, overcrowding of historic quarters by destitute migrants, speculative real estate fuelled by the gentrification of city centres to draw tourists, not to mention a penury of training facilities and jobs.

Essaouira (Morocco), Mahdia (Tunisia), Omišalj (Croatia), Saida (Lebanon) and Jableh (Syria) all have a population of less than 500,000. In just a few years, the pressures on these coastal cities have been eased, thanks to an exchange of technical expertise, experience and skills with other cities and universities around the Mediterranean Basin within UNESCO's Small Historic Coastal Cities initiative.

In June 1996, a multidisciplinary team of experts met at UNESCO's invitation to mull over the disastrous effects of saltwater intrusion on the historic quarters of several Mediterranean cities. Along the seafront, saltwater was infiltrating groundwater and eroding the foundations of historic buildings, thereby exacerbating unhealthy living conditions in a quarter mostly inhabited by the city's poor and by newly arrived rural migrants.

The hydrologists, urban sociologists, historians, environmental economists, archaeologists, architects and urban planners seated around the table all concurred that the problem was cause for concern but found themselves struggling to communicate their concerns to one another. The urban planners were baffled by the hydrologists' scientific findings and the oceanographers were at a loss to understand the parameters of urban insalubrity. At this point, a Moroccan urban sociologist suggested tackling the challenge of integrated urban development by confining the scope of the study to a specific case, that of Essaouira, the ancient Mogador founded in the V<sup>th</sup> century B.C. by the Carthaginians.

## Essaouira: from obscurity to the World Heritage List

In 1996, Essaouira was not on the Moroccan tourist circuit. In the Tensift region, Agadir and Marrakech alone had been developed for tourism. Essaouira was in the grips of a



In Essaouira, the square in the Medina with its galleries and craft shops for tourists



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In the XV<sup>th</sup> century, Essaouira was still protected from the ocean by its ramparts and by the reefs in its northern bay. Today, saltwater is seeping under the ramparts and into the foundations of houses on the seafront. Unfit for habitation, the houses will eventually collapse. Expert studies conducted by UNESCO should make it possible to draw up a comprehensive project to protect the ramparts

serious economic recession at the time. Poorly connected to the national infrastructure, it nevertheless boasted a historic centre, the Medina, built in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century by Sultan Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah according to a design by one of Vauban's<sup>5</sup> students, who had conceived Essaouira as a port town.

The survival of the Medina was in jeopardy. The Jewish quarter of Mellah was in a particularly piteous state. Deserted by its owners, the Jewish quarter was now inhabited by rural migrants. The historic centre was being literally undermined by the intrusion of saltwater mixed with toxic chemical waste; this had exacerbated insalubrity and was hastening the collapse of some dwellings. The poorest tenants rented from absentee owners who had ceased maintaining their property. The quarter's historic buildings, which included former foreign consulates, a Portuguese church, synagogues and the law courts, were crumbling. As for the besieged ramparts along the seafront, nothing was being done to maintain them.

5. French architect (1633-1707), military engineer famous for his fortifications



### A diagnosis of the Medina's ills

The First Adviser to the King of Morocco appealed to the international community for help. A workshop on the theme of Essaouira's development was established as an annual event. UN-Habitat sent a representative to the city to set up an *Agenda 21* unit. In early 1997, UNESCO stepped in. Its office in Rabat despatched a group of specialists to Essaouira to assess the Medina's problems. Their expertise spanned oceanography, coastal conservation, the restoration of historic buildings and socio-economic dynamics.

Their assessment was to serve as the working document for the first international seminar on the theme of Urban Development and Freshwater Resources: Small Historic Coastal Cities, in 1997. Organized by UNESCO through its offices in Rabat, Venice and Beirut, the seminar led to the establishment of a network of cities in both northern and southern Europe, the Middle East and the Maghreb.

Schools of architecture in France and Spain, and a number of other foreign universities, carried out architectural surveys of Essaouira and launched bilateral projects to rehabilitate historic buildings and homes in the Medina. The Faculty of Sociology of the University of Alghero in Italy produced feasibility studies on the city's potential for tourism. In parallel, the Moroccan authorities worked to resolve problems relating to accessibility, the development of tourism and the rehousing of people living in crumbling dwellings.



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*Detail of the seafront façade of the Old City of Saida. After the Israeli bombardment in 1982, refugees moved into the Old City, constructing over Ottoman-epoch buildings*

### A perverse phenomenon takes hold of the Medina

It was the screening on French television in 1998 of a programme on the rehabilitation of the Medina which first catalysed foreign investment in the historic urban centre. Three years later, the city and its ramparts were placed on the World Heritage List. Suddenly, the local shops selling basic commodities were being edged out by a growing number of luxury guest houses, art galleries and craft shops. The price of even the most dilapidated houses in the Medina began to spiral. Within a short space of time, the perverse phenomenon of a 'gentrified' centre reserved for the lucky few had grown out of the tourism monoculture in the Medina.



UNESCO Courier (August 1991)

*IV<sup>th</sup> century mosaic depicting fishermen from the ancient city of Utica in Tunisia*

The local economy recovered and unemployment fell. Big chains built hotels on Essaouira's beachfront and shopping centres sprouted, their backs resting against the Old City's ramparts. Yet, despite the economic boom, UNESCO experts meeting in Essaouira in December 2003 to assess the project were indignant to learn that nothing was being done to strengthen the northern ramparts protecting the historic centre from the ocean. Mayors and academics from the network cities of Mahdia, Omišalj, Saida, Jableh, La Rochelle (France) and Kotor (Montenegro) attended the meeting.

Since then, the new Mayoress and Governor of the Province have launched a series of consultations to regalanise the fund-raising campaign. The proceeds will be used to consolidate the northern ramparts and ensure regular maintenance of the wall.



*Although it remains one of the locals' main activities in Mahdia, fishing is threatened by marine pollution and overfishing*

### Universities and municipalities hand in hand

Essaouira was thus the first case study. During the 1997 UNESCO workshop on Essaouira, first Omišalj and Saida then Mahdia and Jableh asked to be considered as case studies themselves. The following are a few examples of the projects which grew out of this collaboration.



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*The Borj, a fort built at the end of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century to house the Ottoman military garrison. View of the tip of the Mahdia peninsula; drawing by Charles de Chassiron in 1849, courtesy of Mahdia's museum*



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*The Borj today showing erosion of the foundations of the ancient fortifications*

In Mahdia, ancient capital of the Tunisian Fatimids in the X<sup>th</sup> century, the schools of architecture of Tunis (Tunisia) and Nantes (France) set about rehabilitating a house in the Medina, following a UNESCO seminar in June 1999. Implemented with joint financial support from the department for decentralized co-operation of Nantes and UNESCO, the project included technical trials carried out by the

*ma'allemin*, masons specialized in traditional construction and materials in the Arab region, and a survey of residents on the social transformations in the Old City.

Acting on the recommendations of a UNESCO expert and with UNDP funding, the *Institut d'études des dunes* of the city of Montpellier (France) stabilized the dune border and training local specialists from the *Agence pour la Protection du Littoral* (Coastal Protection Agency).

The universities of Venice (Italy), Gremloux (Belgium) and Zagreb (Croatia) focused on Krk island (Omišalj), jointly producing a master plan for the development and urban planning of the island under the guidance of UNESCO's Venice Office. The latter also joined forces with the University of Venice to conceive a standard future-oriented urban planning methodology for small coastal cities on the Adriatic.

In Saida, the ancient Sidon, professors from the *Université Lumière* in Lyon (France) studied the erosion and rehabilitation of the city's northern beach with support from UNESCO's Beirut office and in tandem with experts from Saida. The *Université Libanaise* in Beirut (Lebanon) teamed

up with the *Université Aix-Marseille* (France) to conduct an urban assessment of the Old City in order to help the municipal authorities draw up a plan for its sustainable socio-economic development.

As for Jableh, a city dating back to ancient Phoenician, Greek and Byzantine times, Lattakia University and the University of Damascus in Syria are to conduct a future-oriented study on the development of urban tourism as a means of revitalizing its historic centre and coast. Acting on the recommendations of two UNESCO expert missions in 2002 and 2003, and in conjunction with the town and country planning course of the *Institut d'études politiques* in Paris, the universities will work on the project in tandem with the municipal authorities.

In addition to these projects involving co-operation between cities and universities, high-level experts from the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Spain have carried out missions, at the invitation of UNESCO, on marine pollution and freshwater resources. These have been highly effective in raising awareness among the network's municipal authorities of the issues at stake.

The different initiatives have taught some valuable lessons, the successes and failures of early initiatives helping to finetune later ones. The cities which have supported these case studies deserve a word of thanks, in particular Venice and Taglio di Po (Italy) for Omišalj and La Rochelle and Nantes (France) for Essaouira, Mahdia and Saida. The city of Jableh, which only joined the network in 2002, is still looking for a fellow coastal city to support its own development efforts.



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*The reputation of Mahdia's traditional weavers extends far beyond Tunisia. Some of the World's leading designers call upon their craftsmanship*

**Global urbanization gravitates to the coast**

The UN-Habitat *Global Report on Human Settlements* published in October 2003 noted that recent urban growth had been concentrated primarily in 19 megacities, home to 8% of the world population. Sixteen of these megacities lie on the coast.

Small cities may not have to cope with the phenomena of mass social exclusion or slums but they rarely dispose of adequate facilities and technical services. They also have



*View of the Mahdia peninsula*



Both photos courtesy of Municipality of Omišalj

*Aerial view of the historic centre of Omišalj. In coastal zones, urban expansion is exerting more and more pressure on land. The coastal environment and historic structures suffer the consequences*

trouble holding the attention of national authorities. Yet, small cities are the first destination rural and other migrants choose. If some will subsequently move on to bigger urban centres, most will decide to stay. The ability of small cities to integrate newcomers, both in terms of employment and housing, is a persuasive argument for staying put rather than trying one's luck in one of the regional capitals or megacities.

### Cities with a destiny

The political and economic influence of cities is destined to grow. Now that the three major organizations grouping cities and local authorities, the World Federation of United Cities, the International Union of Local Authorities and the World Association of Major Metropolises (Metropolis), have merged, since May 2004, the political and economic weight of the newly formed umbrella organization, United Cities and Local Governments, will be substantial. This new status is likely to be acknowledged at future sessions of the United Nations General Assembly.

In a speech from the Throne on 2 February 2004, the Government of Canada stressed that 'our communities, our towns, our cities are key to our social goals and our economic competitiveness. Large and small, rural and urban, Canada's communities are facing new challenges, often without sufficient resources or the tools they need'.

### An interdisciplinary approach to urban development

The Small Historic Coastal Cities initiative has drawn on the findings of research conducted within UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) programme on



*An archaeology workshop was organized by UNESCO's Venice office in co-operation with the universities and the City of Omišalj in this 5<sup>th</sup> century Roman basilica, which is being restored with assistance from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre*

country-to-city migration in the Arab region. MOST also contributes to the research network on the role of medium-sized cities in the context of global urbanization. The initiative is an illustration, in the specific geographic context of coastal zones, of the important role played by small and medium-sized cities in absorbing rural migrant populations and in regulating national and interregional urban networks.

The initiative also reflects the priority accorded by UNESCO to the sustainable development of freshwater resources, within its International Hydrological Programme<sup>6</sup>, and that of coastal regions and small islands.

Inspired by the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements (Habitat II, 1996) and the ICOMOS<sup>7</sup> Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (1987), the Small Historic Coastal Cities initiative strives above all to alert public policymakers to the socio-economic, environmental and cultural principles involved in an interdisciplinary and sustainable approach to the urban development of these small cities on the Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts.

Brigitte Colin<sup>8</sup>, Joe Kreidi<sup>9</sup>, Philippe Pypaert<sup>10</sup>  
and Alexei Suzyumov<sup>11</sup>

For details: [www.unesco.org/most](http://www.unesco.org/most) or [www.unesco.org/csi](http://www.unesco.org/csi)

6. [www.unesco.org/water/ihp/index.shtml](http://www.unesco.org/water/ihp/index.shtml)

7. International Council of Monuments and Sites: [www.icomos.org](http://www.icomos.org)

8. Programme Specialist for Architecture and Cities within MOST (Paris): [b.colin@unesco.org](mailto:b.colin@unesco.org)

9. Programme Specialist, UNESCO's Beyrouth office: [j.kreidi@unesco.org](mailto:j.kreidi@unesco.org)

10. Programme Specialist, UNESCO's Venice office: [p.pypaert@unesco.org](mailto:p.pypaert@unesco.org)

11. Programme Specialist, Coastal Regions and Small Islands Platform (Paris): [a.suzyumov@unesco.org](mailto:a.suzyumov@unesco.org)