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NEW TOWNS IN ALGERIA:
Purism of Plans Vs. Perplexity of Policy-Makers

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Abstract:
The New Towns policy in Algeria is a planning tool of the SNAT National Strategic Plan (2030) that aims at correcting the double distortion of the national urban hierarchy and promotes the post-oil smart economy. The country is facing continuous urbanisation of coastal areas and growth of some major cities, especially the capital. Contrary to the vetted plans, alluring 3D images and virtual animations approved and shown in the media, the implementation process looks quite fuzzy and faces many challenges. Some of the launched New Towns are lagging behind schedule and are being converted into mass housing only programmes. Others are temporarily on hold. The aim of the study is to assess current planning practises in the light of global experience. The extensive literature review provides key principles that help to validate these experiences. The paper aims to draw the attention of decision-makers to the gap between master plans and current practises, and provides unedited information on the scarce knowledge about New Towns in the country.
Key words: Spatial Plan, New Towns, Decision-Making, Community, Governance

Introduction

New Towns have always been a planning tool to reduce regional imbalances, decentralize, reduce traffic congestion, create jobs, and boost local economies (KERAMATOLLAH 2006, KAFKOULA 2009, PROVOOST & VANSTIPHOUT 2011, ZAMANI & AREFI 2013, HEGAZY & MOUSTAFA 2013). At a lower level, New Towns were the driving force for large housing programmes and means to improve the living conditions of the lower and middle classes (Bennet 2005). As satellite towns, they were intended to relieve the pressure on large cities and form autonomous and self-contained units that allowed for a balance between working and living.

The British New Town Act, spanning more than five decades, is at the forefront of the global experience (Bennet 2005). France has had a similar experience with the decongestion of Paris. In the developing world, Iran, India, and Egypt led the way in adopting New Town policies to address regional imbalance, stop urban sprawl, create housing, and control urbanization (ZIARI 2006, WANG & AL. 2010).

The International New Towns Institute, INTI in the Netherlands, considered the world's policy think tank in this area, provides a wealth of up-to-date data on New Towns across the continent. Recent experiences have been extensively documented (PROVOOST & VANISPHOOT 2011).

The overwhelming literature on New Towns helps identify key issues in New Towns policy. As a representative bibliography we can cite (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006, the International New Town Institute 1900-2020 database, EVANS H. (ed.)(1972) (2006), SUSSKIND 1973, BENNET 2005 & CLAPSON 2017).

This work is an overview of the Algerian experience covering a period of almost 40 years (1980-2021). It provides English audiences with rare data on the Algerian experience that is often unavailable due to language barriers and a weak presence on the global stage. It provides feedback that would enhance the long-term future programme of the 14 upcoming New Cities. It would also serve developing countries that have similar challenges and ambitions.

1. Addressing spatial challenges in Algeria.

Algeria is the largest African country with an area of 2,381,741 Km^2. Its urban hierarchy, most of which dates back to the colonial era (1830-1962), is characterized by two striking imbalances. Most cities are located along the narrow coastal strip. The rest of the country, which accounts for 87 % of the area, is formed by the Sahara. In terms of demographics, the Algerian population, estimated at 42,200,000 in 2018, is inversely distributed among the three contrasting regions: the north, the highlands, and the desert. The second imbalance concerns the increasing growth of the urban population, which at the same time reflects the social and demographic erosion of small towns and rural areas. The change in settlement status from agricultural to urban units is continuously fed by the socioeconomic gap between the city and the disadvantaged rural areas (OFFICE NAIONAL des STATISTIQUES, 2011).

Even within the urban hierarchy, the primacy of large cities comes at the expense of small agglomerations and towns. Algiers is the prime example of this primacy. Its worrying spatial evolution is a constant challenge for planners and thus partly explains the recourse to the New Cities policy.

1.1. The New Cities in Spatial Planning Strategy.

SNAT 2030 sets the framework for national development through the year 2030. It establishes both the vision and the roadmap for planning, policies and actions on the national territory. As it is a cross-sectoral document, it also refers to important sectors such as transport, housing, hydraulic engineering, health and education. It was approved in 2010 and is legally enforceable against third parties. Its reformist approach aims to reduce the role of the state in a country rooted in a centralized system, both politically and economically, and to introduce the mechanisms of public-private partnerships. Accordingly, new terms such as competitiveness, foreign investment, global market, and sustainability have been introduced into current urban planning jargon and policies.

The new cities policy, adopted in light of the SNAT 2030, was initially assigned to the Ministry of Spatial Planning, (MATE: le Ministère de l'Aménagement du Territoire et de l'Environnement). After moving from planning to implementation, they were assigned to the Ministry of Housing (MHUV: le Ministère de l'Habitat, de l'Urbanisme et de la Ville). The shift was apparently based on the latter ministry's need for competencies in terms of management and follow-up. However, this shift had some impact on the schedule and progress of the work (AZZAG 2013, SIDI-BOUMEDINE 2017).

As far as the hierarchy is concerned, three categories of Towns are envisaged. They are to be built mainly in the highlands and in the south in order to reverse the urbanisation trend away from the coast. Satellite Towns, planned to relieve the major cities of Algiers, Oran, Constantine and Annaba from congestion are therefore considered exceptional but necessary (JORA, Law 02/08-May 08, 2002) (Figure 1)(Table 1).

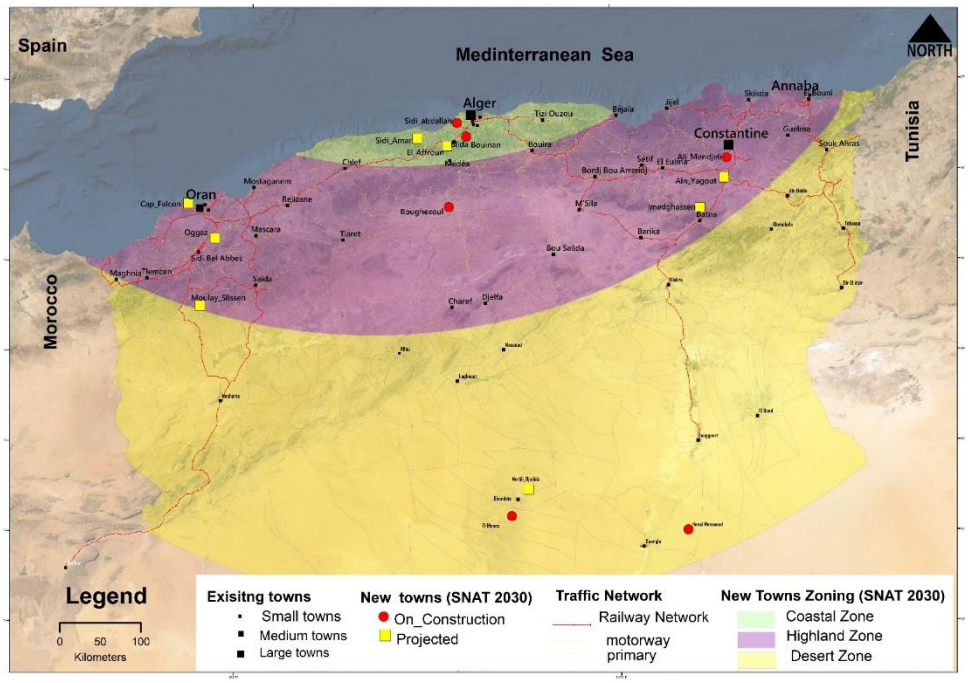

Figure 1: Locations of new towns on the national territory and their categories. Source: Based on the SNAT (2030).

The 1st ring of New Towns that is destined to be satellites of large towns are located in metropolitan areas. The 2nd ring, which includes more cities, is destined for the highlands. The cities have the task of restoring the balance of urban development and guiding urbanisation to these unsettled regions. The 3rd ring, which so far includes two new cities, consists of settlements that respond to the special character of the dry lands.

Of the 14 new towns planned, only 5 have been commissioned so far. The town of Ali Mendjelli, which existed before SNAT 2030, is located on the outskirts of Constantine, the third largest city in the country. It was built in the 1980s, making it the oldest satellite new town. (Table 1) summarises the specifics of each new town in terms of date, size, purpose and location.

Name	Ali Mendjeli	Boughezoul	Sidi-Abdallah	Bouinan	H. Messaoud	Menea	El-Affroun	Naciria	Sidi Amar
NT Category in the SNAT 2030	2	2	1	1	3	3	1	1	1
Mother City	Constantine	Algiers	Algiers	Algiers	H.Massaoud	Menea	Algiers	Algiers	Algiers
Distance in Km from the Mother City.	12	170	35	30	70	2	63	110	71
Establishment Date.	1992	2003	2004	2004	2005	2007	N.Y.	N.Y.	N.Y.
Date of Completion		2030	2030	2030	2030	2030	N.Y.	N.Y.	N.Y.
Area in Hectares	1500	6.000	3000	2175	3205	1000	917	1105	800
Projected Pop. In 1000.	500	400	200	150	80	50	132	100	757
Housing Units in 1000.	50	140	30	35	18	18	40	30	20
Investment Area in Hectares.	-	429	296.1	170	-	-	200	200	200

Table 1: New Towns either under construction or approved. Source: based on data collected from New Towns directorates, (MUHV 2015).

2. An overview of the current New Towns

In the following sections, the 6 New Towns under construction are presented in chronological order. The description follows the chronological order of implementation and a descriptive framework to facilitate comparison of the new towns, which has been abbreviated in the previous table.

2.1. Ali-Mendjelli New Town

It was approved in 1982 and commissioned in 1992. It is located on the plateau of Ain El-Bey, 12 km from the third largest city in the country, Constantine, and covers an area of 1500 ha. It was initiated by the local authorities to alleviate the overcrowding of this major city and to provide land for new development outside the confined and high rocky area (Figures 2 & 3).

Following the classic version of New Towns, Ali Mendjeli was created "out of nothing" on a public plot of land. Given the urgent housing shortage, the initial development was designed to provide housing for residents of the old town and surrounding squatter settlements. The first 5,831 completed units were distributed to households coming from shanty towns and buildings in danger of collapse in the Old City (MAKHLOUFI L. 2005).

An industrial construction system was introduced, based on standardisation and prefabrication. Originally 52,000 units were planned for a population of 300,000, but the

construction of social housing is still going on today in step with the endless social housing programmes.

Given the welfare state's policy of promising a home to every citizen, most of the construction projects were carried out by the public authorities and distributed according to the waiting list after completion. In terms of diversity, most of the units were social housing and only a small percentage, less than 5% of the land, was used for private housing (MAKHLOUFI 2005).

Basic facilities that accompany housing, such as schools, health centres and shops, although planned and considered in the master plan, were postponed to a second stage after housing. While 8,481 housing units were completed in 2000, there were only 2 primary schools and one middle school (BALLOUT 2014, LAKEHAL 2014).

A zone for diverse activities (ZAM) was supposed to create 3,000 jobs. But infrastructure provision was only started in 2003. Of the projected 238 industrial enterprises, the zone housed only 23 in 2010 (BALLOUT 2014). The thin segment of jobs on offer was limited to the existing regional airport, university staff with their housing estates, which were included in the master plan in 2000, and the construction sector.

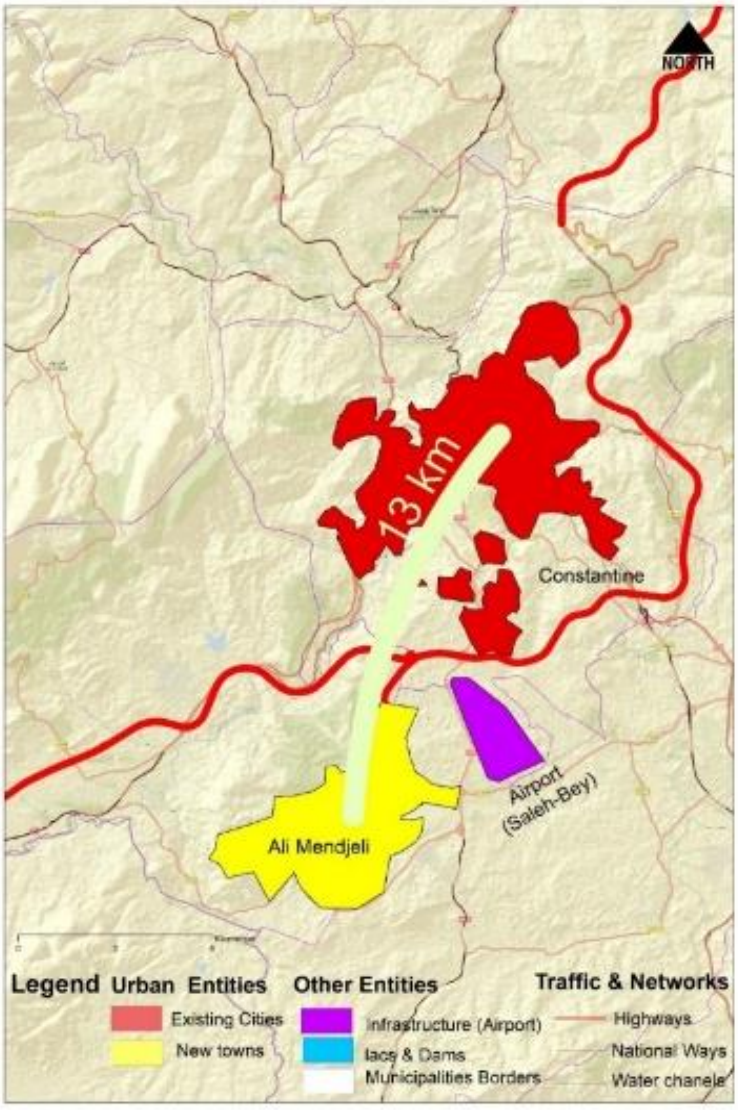

Figure 2: The location of Ali Mendjeli New Town near Constantine 3rd Larget Algerian city.

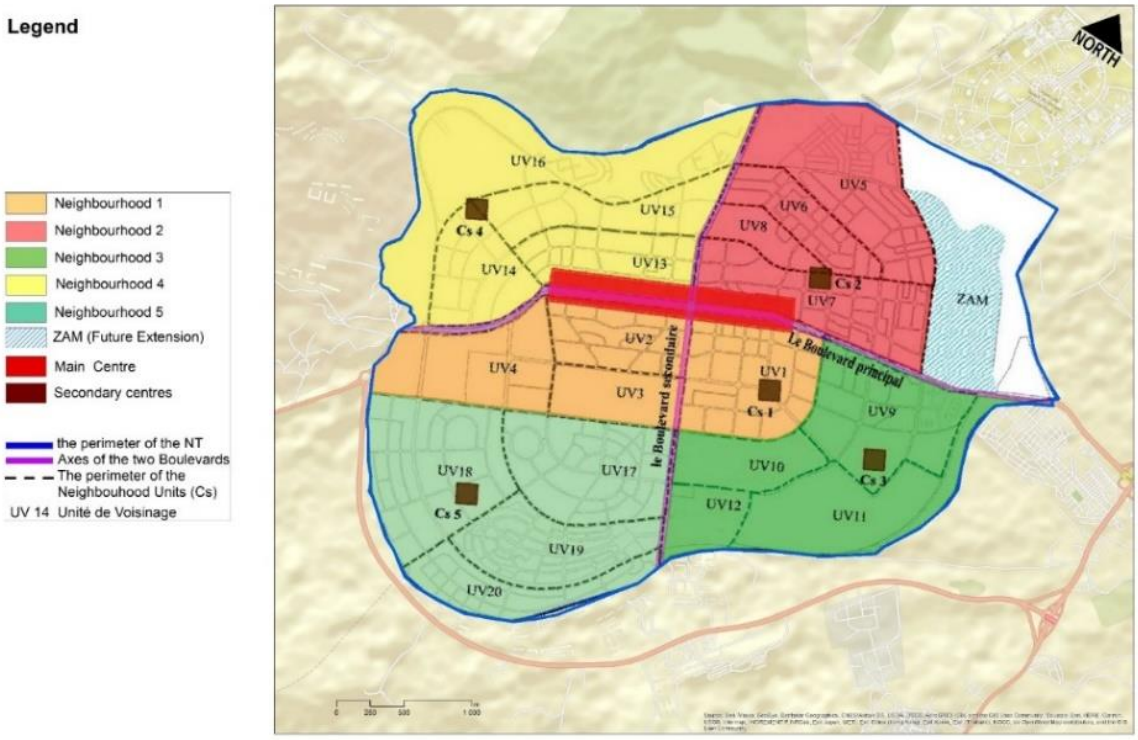

Figure 3: The master plan of Ali Mendjeli (Source: Rapport d'Orientation 1994, redrawn by A. Lakehal 2013).

2.2. Boughezoul New Town

Boughezoul, a New Town of the second category, was planned as the new capital of the country in the early 1970s. It was first scheduled following the trend of other developing countries that had just gained independence and were striving for progress (KAFKOULA K. 2009). It was then abandoned for decades and then brought out of the drawers and enacted again in 2004 (JORA 20-2004). It covers an area of 2150 ha and includes 15 residential districts that would provide space for 80,000 housing units and a population of 400,000 people (MUHV 2018) (Figures 4 & 5).

Many arguments are put forward for its location 170 km from the capital in the south. It is said to be the city gateway to the great Sahara and a gravitational point that would slow down the rural exodus from the highlands and the Sahara towards the north. It is also a safe place, protected from various disasters and threats such as earthquakes, floods and military attacks. The abundance of land and the absence of major physical obstacles is another advantage for the future expansion of the city.

As a new settlement, erected on public land and a virgin flat site, its design relies on a regular grid with roundabouts and a geometric form with rounded edges. The town is grafted to the newly inaugurated North-South highway relying the large Sahara with the Northern coast. It is also served by a regional airport that is only 24 km away. In an exceptional aspect, its landscape relies on abundant greenery and glazed high-rise buildings that contrast with its desert climate and local architecture.

Public works that started in 2006 stopped for abruptly in 2015, when most infrastructures were finished. It is only in 2018 that a disagreement with Daewoo Engineering & Construction Co, the company in charge of these works, was publicly announced. As can be seen from satellite images, works include underground channels of 29 km length, and the full road network. Two main water reservoirs of 4,000 m3 and a hydraulic network that provides water from remote dams have also been established.

Economically, the city is expected to become a centre for science and technology, promoting ITC and advanced medicine (MUHV 2018). Many areas with a total area of 679 hectares, accounting for 1/4 of the city area, are being created as sites for incubators and high-tech companies, which would comprise a total of 1,000 units. Around 50,000 jobs are expected thanks to the proximity to the capital, the international airport and the main port. Locally, there are a few branches of less than ten companies in the ICT, pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors. The residents, mostly from the capital, keep their old jobs and therefore commute daily.

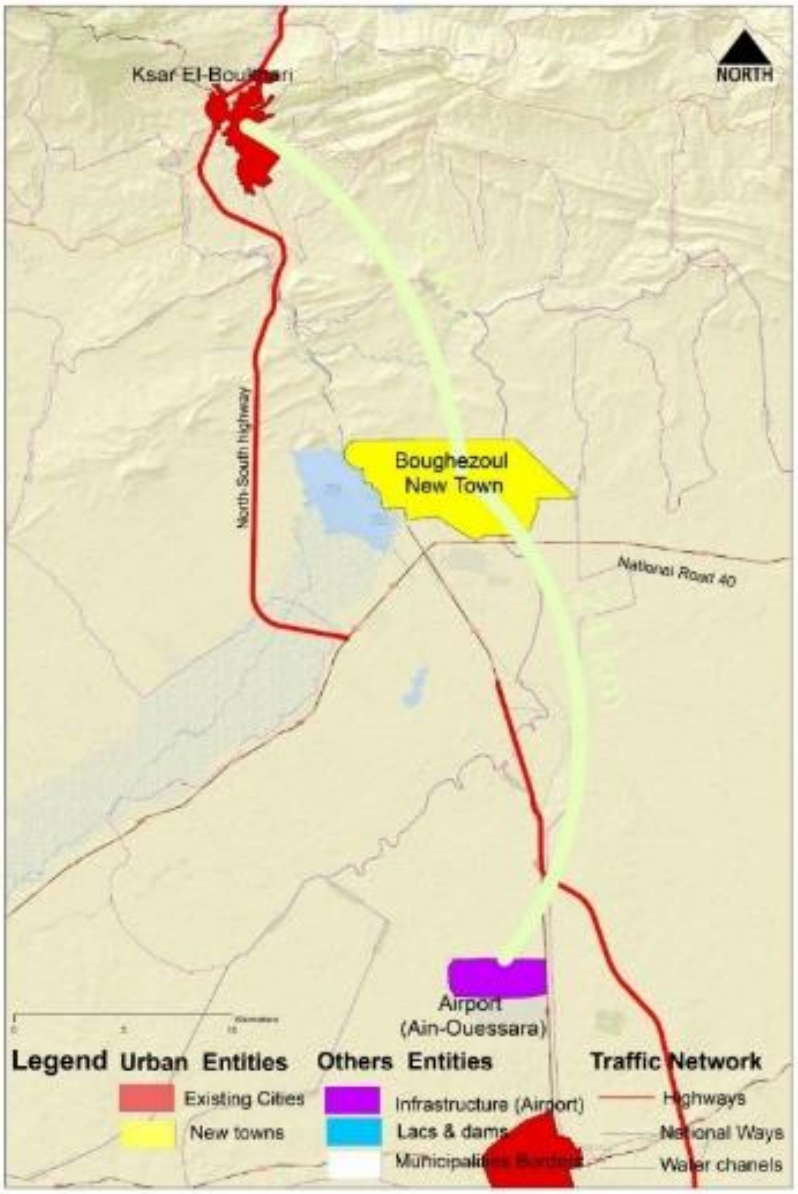

Figure 4: The location of Boughezoul New Town, 170 km South of Algiers.

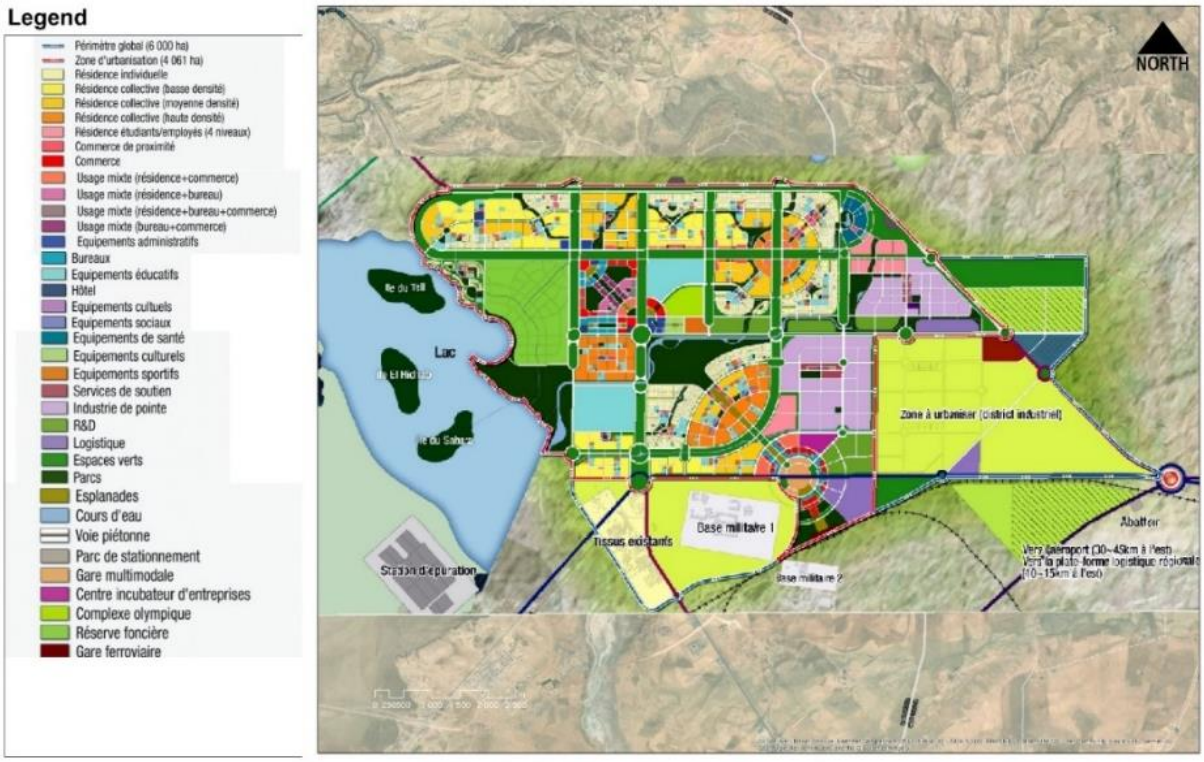

Figure 5: The Master Plan of Boughezoul New Town, (Source: MUHV/Etablissement Public de la Ville Nouvelle de Boughezoul).

2.3. Sidi Abdellah New Town

It was first planned in 1997 but only decided in 2016 (Décret exécutif n°16-215 du 11 août 2016), despite that the first delineations of its urban area was done in 2005. Within this time, many versions of the master plan were created. It is located on the outskirts of the capital about 30 km south on a total area of 7000 ha (Figures 6 & 7).

In contrast to the ex-nihilo approach characteristic of new cities (BEN-HAMOUCHE M. 2021), its master plan covers the territory of five existing municipalities: Mahelma, Rahmania, Zeatria, Souidania and Sidi Abdallah. It is expected to accommodate 50,000 housing units and a population of 200,000 to 240,000 people by 2020 (MUHV 2018).

Despite the public status of most of the land, which facilitated the transfer of land ownership, only 50% was acquired (SAMAN GROUPEMENT, 2009, UHV 2018). The other 24.7% of the land, which is privately owned and mostly used for agriculture, was subject to lengthy negotiations on the expropriation process with the owners demanding adequate compensation (Vikram & Murali 2015). Accordingly, only 716 ha were expropriated.

Of the existing structures, which are mostly scattered, 860 constructions do not have building permits and do not meet standards (ONS, 2008). The new housing units, mostly high-rise buildings, will be distributed as finished flats according to the Housing Ministry's waiting list, starting in 2018 until today.

Economically, the city is expected to become a centre for science and technology, promoting ITC and advanced medicine (MUHV 2018). Many areas with a total area of 679 hectares, accounting for 1/4 of the city area, are being created as sites for incubators and high-tech

companies, which would comprise a total of 1,000 units. Around 50,000 jobs are expected thanks to the proximity to the capital, the international airport and the main port. At present, there are a few branches of less than ten companies in the ICT, pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors. The residents, mostly from the capital, keep their old jobs and therefore commute daily.

Figure 6: The locations of Sidi Abdellah and Bouinan, satellite cities.

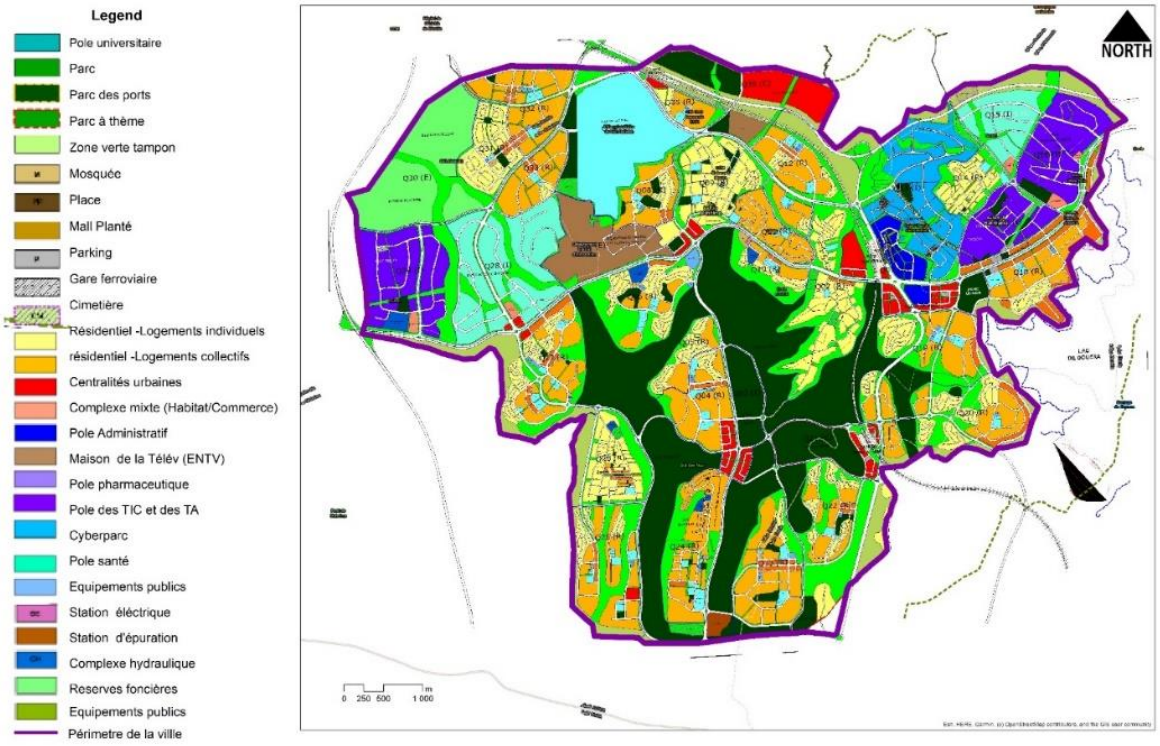

Figure 7: The Master Plan of Sidi Abdella New Town, (Source: MUHV/EVNSI, Etablissement Public de la ville nouvelle de sidi Abdellah, Algérie).

2.4. Bouinan New Town

It is the twin city of Sidi Abdellah and is located 30 km from the centre of Algiers. It was originally decreed in 2002 as a city for youth, sports and leisure (JORA 20-2004). Then it became another Technopolis (Miller 2007, Azzag 2013). The master plan includes 4 existing villages: Bouinan, Amroussa, Mellaha and Hassainia, which are located along a national road. This axis is also the marker line between the Atlas Mountains and Mittidja, the most fertile plain on which the town is partly located. Its initial size is estimated at 150,000 inhabitants, corresponding to 36,594 projected housing units (MUHV, 2018). The old centre of Bouinan was chosen as the new city centre, giving the city an identity and a memory (SAMAN GROUPEMENT 2009)(Figure 8).

The 2,175 ha site includes many private properties, which required a lengthy expropriation process, leading to delays. In 2018, 347 court cases were filed for unfair compensation and restitution (MUHV 2018, BEN-HAMOUCHE M... 2021).

The housing timeline calls for the delivery of around 10,000 new homes by 2019. During the last two years that witnessed a national social unrest, the entire programme was implemented in emergency and the housing units were delivered. However, there was a dramatic delay in the accompanying facilities such as education, health and other services.

In addition to the new development envisaged in the new town, the master plan includes numerous restructuring measures to upgrade the 2,400 buildings in the existing villages. Initially, the plan was to demolish the existing villages because of their low standard. But due

to the response of the residents, they were preserved. New buildings and existing urban structures coexist, but contrast strongly in shape, size and architecture.

As for private investment, an area of about 300,000 m² has been reserved for the location of businesses and factories. The terms of reference and tenders for the competition were announced in August 2018. Targeted projects and activities in multimedia, recreation and leisure, biotechnology, renewable energy, new information and communication technologies, health, business and trade were listed for investors. The list also includes nearby projects such as sports halls and swimming pools. However, the allocation of land and infrastructure is considerably delayed due to the high bureaucratic effort and lack of follow-up.

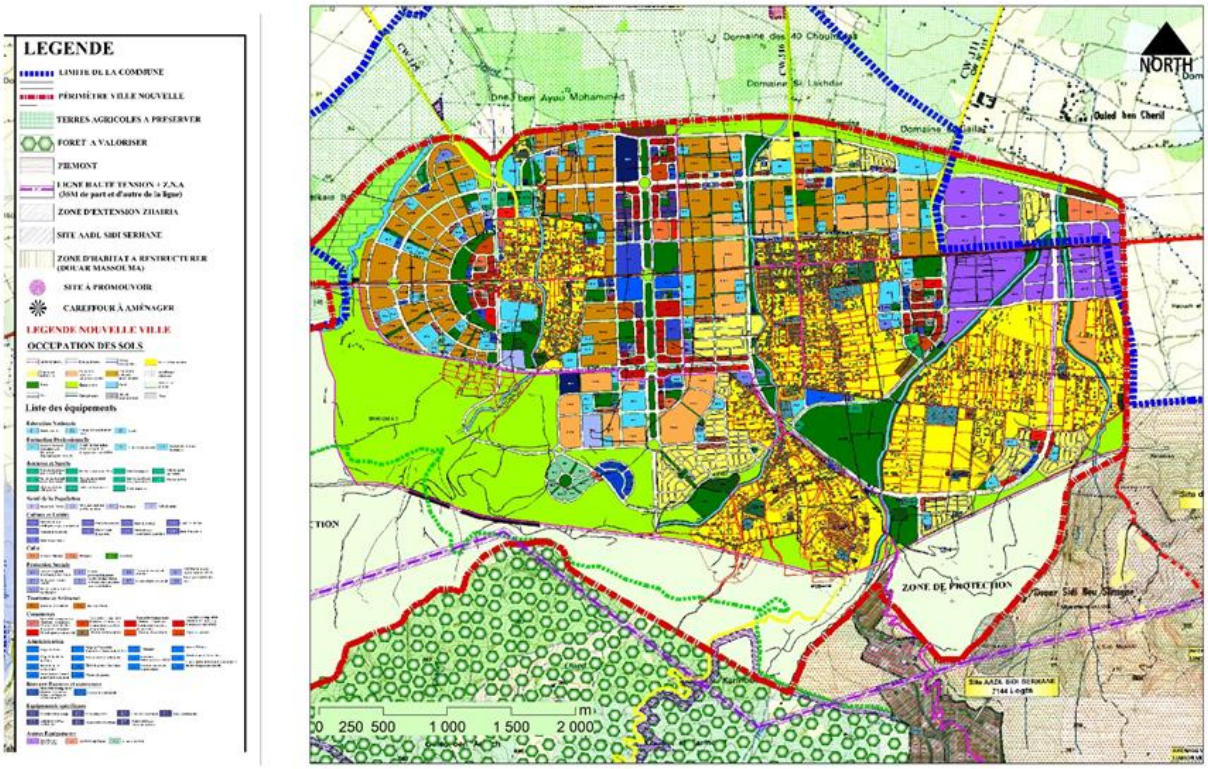

Figure 8: The Master Plan of Bouinan New Town, (Source: MUHV/EVNB, Etablissement Public de la ville nouvelle de Bouinan, Algérie)

2.5. Hassi Messaoud New Town

It was decreed in 2005 (JORA 2006) and was planned to be an industrial city that would substitute the existing oil city being the first oil basin in the desert and having the same name. It is under the tutelage of the Energy Ministry and would be co-financed by SONATRACH, the main oil State company. It is located in Ouargla province, 800 km south of Algiers. It is created ex-nihilo at an equidistance of 70-80 km from three existing cities; Hassi Messaoud, Ouargla, and Touggourt (Figures 9 &10).

As a third category New Town that has the main purpose to manage the major hydrocarbon industry, and provide a liveable place in the heart of the Sahara. Its projected population is planned to reach 80,000 people by 2030 that occupy an area of 4,483 ha. In response to the

desert, its planning is based on the concept of the "Oasis-City" that inspires its layout from the compact urban fabric and an inward-looking architecture (EVNH 2009).

Regarding employment, its Master Plan predicts 40,000 jobs that will be provided by the detached zone of logistics activity. It consists of industries, handling areas, and storage facilities as well as many non-polluting activities such as research and developments centres, new energy generators, and a university. A recent call for private investors and real-estate developers has been announced on mass media regarding land concession in both the town and its Logistics Activity Zone.

On the ground, public works and infrastructure have been finished. The most recent news (Algérie Presse Service, 13 January 2021) show that many other sites work for public facilities, mainly schools, a clinic, a post office, and 2,000 public housing units are under construction. A critical delay in its schedule is however noticed. The first stage of the town including the city centre and the first residential quarters for 14,000 people was planned to finish in 2018. The recent drop of oil resources coupled with the political crisis, that manifested in the massive rejection of the re-elections of the former president in 2019, seem to stand behind this lag.

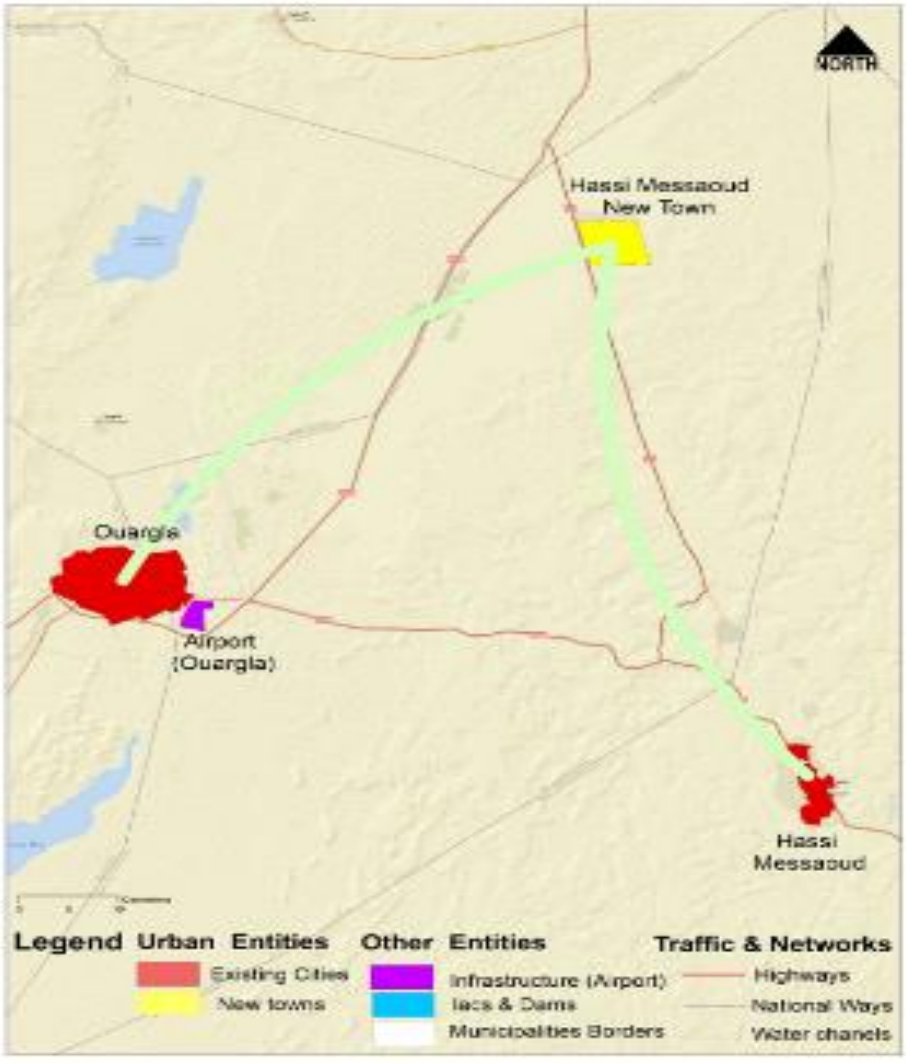

Figure 9: The location of Hassi Messaoud New Town.

Figure 10: The Master Plan of Hassi Messaoud New Town, (Source: MUHV/EVNB, Etablissement Public de la ville nouvelle de Hassi Messaoud, Algérie).

2.6. El Menia New Town

This is the second town that belongs to the third category. It was decreed in 2007 and planned for a capacity of 50,000 people that will occupy 10,000 housing units and an area of 350 ha (MHUV 2018). As an oasis-like town, it is surrounded by a tree nursery of 4 ha. Its location in the heart of the desert and along the major longitudinal axis of the country qualifies it for touristic, cultural and entertainment activities (Figures 11 & 12).

Recent satellite images and the web page of the town show that, apart from the road network that is traced and partially asphalted but seemingly frozen, ongoing works regarding water provision, sewerage and drainage are advancing at a slow pace due to the economic crisis.

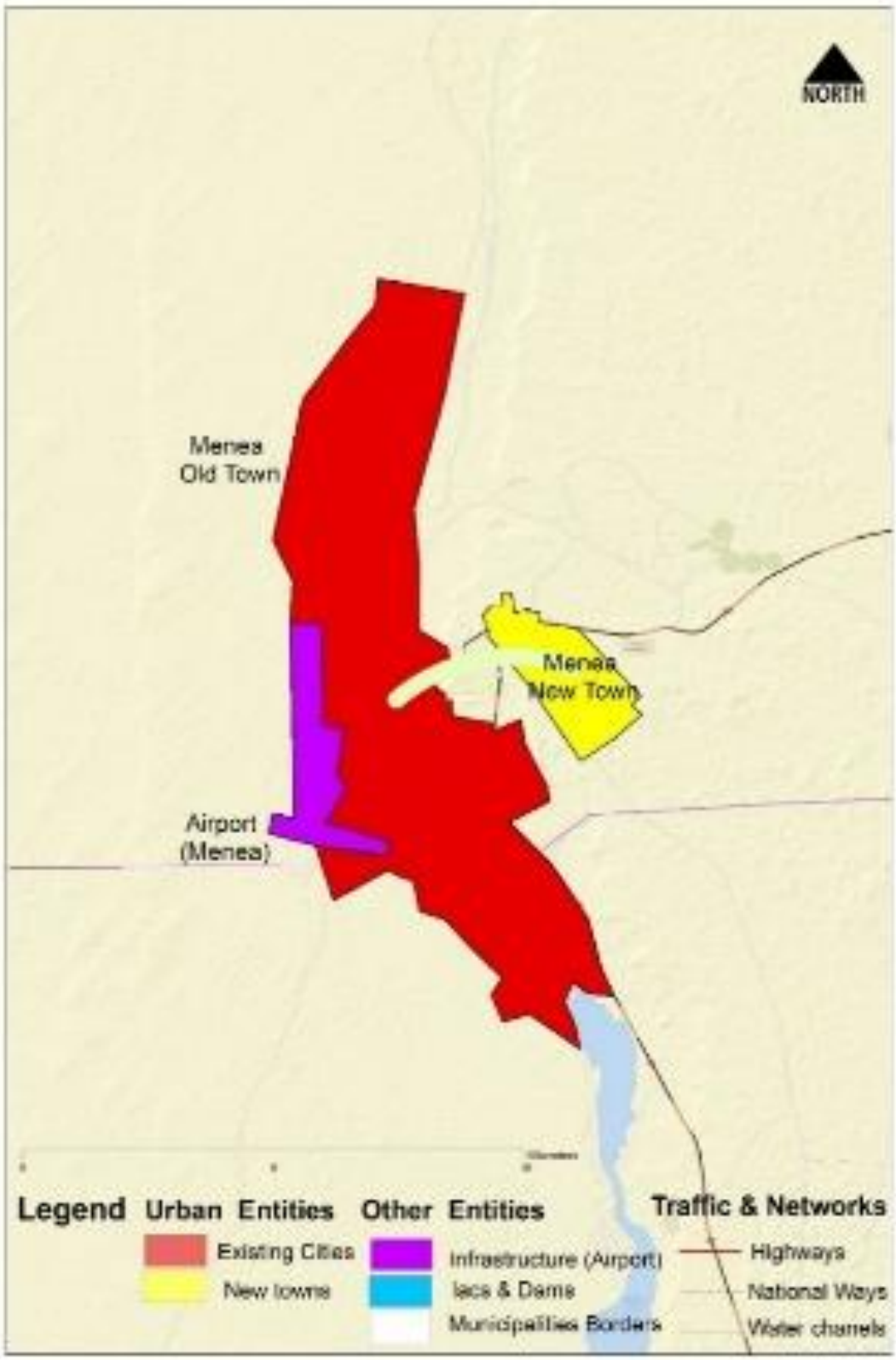

Figure 11: The location of El-Menia New Town.

Figure 12: The Master Plan of El-Menia New Town, (Source: MUHV/EVNB, Etablissement Public de la ville nouvelle d'El-Menia, Algérie).

3. Assessment & Critiques of the New Town Programme

The assessment of the New Towns programme consists of highlighting the discrepancies between the drawings and documents, and the practices on the ground. Initial documentation on each New Town, including Master Plans and accompanying report; have been collected from the Ministry of Housing and Directorates of each New Town.

The discussion is structured according to a theoretical framework that was established through an extensive world literature on the New Towns. The perplexity in management and implementation as will be seen below highlights the limits of planning and puts into question its utility in the city making. Limits of planning and discrepancies between Master planning and practices have been raised in many other countries that witness a high rate of urbanisation (Roy a. 2009, PROVOOST & VANISPHOOT 2011).

3.1. The New Towns Vs the National Policy

According to the SNAT 2030, the major task of the New Towns is to revert the urbanisation trend towards the South. The second and third categories are thus, the most prioritized New Towns, while the first category ones would be limited in number and role in decongesting the few large cities.

Under the continuous pressure of migration that is coupled with the drop in oil prices and the political turmoil due to the hirak (BAZIZ N 2021), the purpose of the New Town policy seems to have been missed. The first category towns are paradoxically taking the lead. While Ali Mendjelli, Bouinan and Sidi Abdellah, all of which are satellite cities, have been peopled, the other new Towns lactated in the second and third categories are either frozen or dismissed.

In the absence of any control measures, urban sprawl is continuing around the large cities. Intensive housing programmes have been shifted to the satellite towns and surrounding villages and towns. Sidi-Abdallah and Bouinan, at the edge of the capital, and the new Pole Urbain of Oran, are witnessing intensive construction work in an attempt to juggle the housing crisis and the increasing demand.

Preserving the fertile land in the Northern Strip, and the coastline from littoralisation are the main objectives of SNAT 2030 for sustainable development (BALLOUT J.M. 2019). Accordingly, most of the 14 Newt Towns (10) are located in the second and third rings, which include the Highlands and the Great South, as shown in Figure 1. However, the satellite towns, located on the edges of the 3 largest cities; Algiers, Oran and Constantine, are the most favoured and more advanced than the others. Their development would have a paradoxical effect without measures to curb urban sprawl. Their coalescence with the mother cities would be inevitable in the long run.

In terms of economics, the New Towns that were planned to be the engines of an After-Oil economy seem also to have turned into tools of the social welfare policy. While the delivery system has recorded an unprecedented number of distributed units, most activity zones planned for private investments are still vacant land and not serviced. Liberalization measures, Public-Private Partnerships and deregulation actions that were adopted and announced are not applied. The three new towns, Ali Mendjeli, Sidi Abdella and Bouinan that are fully inhabited could not, up to date, attract both foreign and local investors and economic actors (CHERRAD S. & SAHRAOUI B. 2004). Accordingly, the government is still the only and major urban actor in the development of the New Towns (GLOBAL TRADE, 2019).

3.2. Site Selection

One of the major criteria for the location of the new towns is the site selection and the acquisition of land. Public property provides the easiest procedure for this purpose (JORA 2-08, 2002, article 11). Compulsory purchase is avoided due to its long routine and the resistance of landowners. The refund process due to bureaucracy and the discrepancy between the market price and the outdated fixed-rate cause enormous delays. In the case of both Bouinan and Sidi Abdellah, 347 and 116 court cases with former landowners that go back to early times of implementation are pending (AZZAG 2013, MUHV 2018, BEN-HAMOUCHE M. 2021).

Traditionally, New Towns often stand for new entities and are developed «out of nothing». That is the case of Ali-Mendjeli, Boughezoul, Hassi Messaoud and El-Menia. The main advantage of this approach is the absence of pre-existing constraints such as buildings and infrastructure. However, drawbacks are also many. Too often, residents of New Towns suffer for a long period from up-rootedness. The distributive housing policy that is solely based on the recorded demands list, deprive them from kinships, neighbourhoods and other earlier relationships (BEN-HAMOUCHE M. 2021).

An alternative approach that consists of grafting the New Town on existing villages or urban nuclei has been applied in Sidi Abdella and Bouinan. However, this approach also presents another set of challenges. It has the merit of giving memory to the two New Towns. However, the existing urban fabric and old infrastructure present many technical challenges and planning issues and are thus, much more time-consuming. Actions of regenerating, upgrading, and urban renewals are undertaken in parallel with the new development but in a slow pace. Dealing with residents and informal settlements also demands soft skills that planners and decision-makers aren't trained to deal with.

3.3. Planning, Governance and Community Involvement

In terms of governance, New Towns are managed by public agencies called EVN: Etablissement de la Ville Nouvelle that has the authority to review master plan, proceed with the compulsory purchase, ensure the transfer of properties, and coordinate implementation works (JORA 2-08, 2002, article 07, Azzag 2013). Once the New Town is developed and inhabited, it is reverted either to the municipality that owns the territory or to its newly created institution. Due to the freshness of the present towns, they are temporarily attached to the existing municipalities.

In planning practices, all the New Towns follow the classical top-down approach. In the light of the SNAT 2030 directives, they are tendered by the Ministry of Housing as mega-projects and assigned to foreign consultant offices for design and planning. Once approved, the Master Plans are subdivided into many construction sites of various sizes that relate to a series of financial operations. Away from any neighbourhood subdivision and scaling, the sites range between 1000 and 5.000 units. Often, the districts are named after awkward number of homes they have such as 1067 and 4622 apartments that also become part of the addresses system.

Siteworks are undertaken by large building companies, mostly foreigners that meet the contracts notices and the prescribed short delivery terms. The assignment of each operation is made either through bidding or agreement with the Ministry of Housing. That is the case of the housing schemes in Sidi Abdella and Bouinan that were first allocated to Korean, then to Chinese and Turkish construction enterprises. For instance, Bouinan which would cost 3.2 Billion Dollars was part of a bilateral agreement between Algeria and South Korea (Algeria-Watch.org Dec 13, 2009).

Community involvement in the 6 presented New Towns is one of the missing ingredients in planning, implementation and management. In planning, residents are considered as anonymous demanders whose needs are estimated in the light of the national standards and norms, and names registered in the National Record for Housing Demands, Fichier National du Logement. Demands are ordered according to the dates of deposit and announced whenever a portion of housing schemes is finished. Payment systems accompany the demanders describing the shares of fees and contract's clauses.

As an image of the standardised system of construction that also reflects the rooted egalitarian social policy, apartments are uniform and provide a very limited variety ranging between 3 and 4 rooms. It is only after finishing that settlers are announced and are allotted the apartments keys. Their involvement in the New Town affairs then takes place through social interaction, coordination, and collective actions to claim the missing services (BEN-HAMOUCHE M.. 2021).

3.4. Housing Vs Jobs

Urban policy in Algeria is heavily shaped by housing demand. The State is the major housing provider thanks to oil resources and the social welfare policy. Housing policy mostly relies on industrial mass production and disregards the urban aspects such as the provision of social amenities and employment. Basic services such as schools, health centres, shops, and other social facilities in the New Towns are often delayed and shifted to the final stages of implementation. That was the case in Ali Mendjeli, and now in Sidi Abdallah and Bouinan. New settlers, during the first years, rely on towns in the vicinity or their location of provenance, and thus daily commute.

One of the major challenges of New Towns is the critical size that ensures the sense of urbanity (BELGUIDOUM S. ET AL. 2015, KNOOP B. 2020, RAU, S. 2020). Despite the fluctuation of the term and divergence on the minimum required size of a New Town that is mostly based on empirical data, studies agree on the density, the economic non-agricultural activities and the spatial contiguity as criteria (CUDO M. 2018). In the case of the Algerian New Towns, their demographic size seems to respond to the criterion. The smallest ones; Hassi Messaoud and Menia, both have 18,000 housing units, and a population of 50.000 to 80.000. However, balance between homes and jobs are not met.

Although, achieving self-reliance would be an idealistic target, the reduction of commuter movement and the generation of local economies is the bottom line of urbanity. The segment of jobs provided in Ali Mendjelli, Bouinan and Sidi Abdallah all show that they are much below the ambitious numbers announced in Master Plans. It is this deficiency that assimilates them to the Grands Ensembles (FOURA 2005, BERTHO R 2014).

3.5. Time-Factor, Maturation & Construction Process

Just like other living entities, cities have their own time for growth and maturity. Speeding up the planning and implementation processes would lead to unnatural results. To decision-makers and planners, New Towns are often subject to short term plans due to the economic, social and political pressures. They are consequently regarded as megaprojects and end-products rather than long-term processes. That is the case of many developing countries resort to New Towns as a means of facing rapid urbanisation and demographic challenges (KEETON, R. 2011).

Except for Ali Mendjeli that was initiated in the 1990s (LAKEHAL A. 2017), the present Algerian New Towns are mostly scheduled within 15 years. Master Plans were decreed in 2016, and the implementation was scheduled within the SNAT 2030 Plan (Table 1). However, the image of each city was displayed in advance with full details in 3D animations and made available in large media. The models that were finished as part of the deal with the consultants help politicians envisage the New Towns as an end product physical and establish a framework for its budgeting and staging.

For cost concerns and time-saving, the construction process also relies on a heavy system of standardized and industrialized construction. They are imported together with teams of highly skilled workers that dispense local manpower. As an efficient construction system, the areas under development are rationally covered with a number of lattice cranes, each of which has a radius of 45m. In some cases, architects and planners are asked to readjust the layouts of buildings and spatial organisation of neighbourhoods according to the cranes locations and movements.

3.6. Physical Planning & Architecture

One of the universal challenges regarding the New Towns is their newness which also connotes the absence of identity, lack of history and sense of place (REYNOLDS G.C.W.2015, BEN-HAMOUCHE M... 2021). That is especially the case of the New Towns that are created from scratch on undeveloped land and virgin sites.

In the case of the Algerian New Towns, 4 of the previously presented towns were planned on undeveloped flat sites that present no physical or legal constraints, while Sidi Abdellah and Bouinan were grifted onto existing villages. However, in most of these towns, the newly developed areas contrast sharply with the existing buildings and the local architecture.

El-Menia and Hassi Messaoud, make an exception in that their layouts are to a large extent inspired by the desert architecture and the oasis. Buildings are assembled in compact clusters that have low-rise and inward urban forms. Other New Towns entirely rely on international «pro-western» norms and high-rise buildings that are considered as a sign of modernity. Ali Mendjelli NT, Sidi-Abdallah, and Bouinan that are now fully inhabited share the unpopular architecture and the monotonous mass-housing that abound in the outskirts of the large towns (FOURA M & Y. 2005, PROVOOST M. & VANISPHOOT W. 2011).

One of the sources of the cultural alienation in architecture is the reliance on foreign consultancy and construction enterprises, and the exclusion of national experts. As megaprojects, they are delivered as key-in-hand, finished houses. The construction processes that have been tested in other countries and adopted for their economic efficiency, disregards any socio-cultural specificities of local users (Figure 13 & 14).

In the absence of any system of Monitoring and Evaluation UNHS (2009, 173), the drawbacks that are noticed in earlier New Towns, are often repeated in later ones. For instance, despite the lag of two decades between Ali Mendjelli (1992), and Sidi-Abdallah and Bouinan (2014), they share the same physical characteristics and challenges.

Figure 13: Aerial View of Bouinan public housing. (Source: MUHV)

Figure 14: an aerial view of Ali Mendjeli New Town. (Source: Constantine_nvc).

Conclusion

New Towns have always been a planning tool in directing urbanisation and rationalizing the use of national resources. In the case of Algeria, the New Towns policy initially started during the early 1980s. It was then combined with the National Planning Scheme, SNAT 2030.

An overview of the 6 launched New Towns, among which 3 are now inhabited, shows that there is a clear discrepancy between the goals as expressed in their Mater Plans and the ground reality.

According to the Strategic Plan, SNAT 2030, New Towns have the purpose of reverting the urbanisation trend towards the uninhabited highlands and the South, relieving the large cities, and marking the after-oil economic era. None of these goals seems to have been achieved. The heavy involvement of the State, the central top-down decision system, and the prioritization of social policy seem to be the major reasons behind such discrepancies.

Being the 6 early New Towns, among the 14 forecasted ones, the investigation on the gap between the planning process and the current practices would help revise the New Town policy. Accordingly, the study highlights some of the key issues such as the necessity of the community and the private sector involvement, the balance between homes and jobs, the required time for maturation, and the adapted design and planning process to local conditions.

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