

Urban development and rural spaces on the Sahelian coast : From competition to complementarity

By
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Tunisian tourism has been experiencing spectacular development for some decades, seaside activities are the main attraction, and this is physically expressed in the coast's growing urbanisation, which occurs in a linear way.

Tourism is aimed at international customers and with the constant fall of air transport costs, this urbanisation has naturally developed around large centres that have been represented by international airports. That's why after the airports of Tunis and Djerba, but before Sfax, Gabès or Tabarka's, Monastir's airport, unveiled in 1968, made the region of Sousse one of the most important areas of tourist development.

One of the first agricultural regions of Tunisia, the Sahel, of which Sousse is the capital, has become one of the main sites of development and seaside urbanisation. Therefore, it is an ideal area in which to assess the specific terms of an urban policy that consumes open spaces (i.e. unbuilt spaces), and in particular, agricultural land. The conjunction between the currently active agriculture and this particular form of linear urbanisation, which is also very dynamic, operates then in conditions of competitiveness that requires detailed analysis, beyond the relatively simple understandings of consumption of spaces by cities.

The stakes are high: we need to better understand the mechanisms of this conjunction, so that the two main economic resources of Tunisia, agriculture and tourism, can keep developing in synergy instead of in a relationship of reciprocal trouble.

Seaside urbanisation on The Sousse's coast : a process to control

The urbanisation of Sousse's coast, which was initially limited to the creation of planned seaside resorts and punctual implantation of big hotels, is accompanied by an urbanism of the Tunisian holiday that grows little by little, occupying former agricultural plots. Traffic problems have progressively increased; this wasn't particularly important when overseas tourists were arriving in Tunisia by plane, but they have quickly revealed the inadequacies of the existing road infrastructures. Following the examples of other European coasts, a few decades earlier, one risks seeing the development of compact and linear urbanisation, structured as well as can be expected by a network of roads mainly aimed at serving beaches.

If it follows the known traditional model of the coasts of Western Europe, this road network will tend to develop in the form of an orthogonal grid which will extend all along the coast and stand, *de facto*, as the urbanism plan. Whether it is, entirely spontaneous or locally planned, the grid, will probably be set up without any relation to the existing network, and will result in a barrier effect, which isolates, on the one hand, a linear urbanism strictly dedicated to seaside activity and, on the other hand, a back-country suddenly deprived of, at the very least symbolically, its relation with sea.

This foreseeable territorial break is likely to occur at the same time as tourist demand will turn towards a diversification of activities, with the probable decline of exclusive seaside practices (sun-sea-beach trilogy), which will be increasingly provided to the worldwide tourist by tropical countries.

In anticipation of this future evolution of Tunisian tourism, it is important, from now on, to think about the conditions of a thought out local management plan, which will maintain, even restore, physical, visual and symbolic links between coast and back-country, as put forward in 1994, by the “*Cités Durables*”² programme and, in 1995, by the 21st National Agenda³.

These links should not be thought only in terms of patrimonial conservation, but also, and importantly in terms of economic resources of tourism, whose potentialities must be preserved while organising in the best manner the conditions for development.

Of course they concern the production of landscapes, for which agriculture can stand as an instrument for building and regulation, but also rural agricultural activities which, while adapting to the evolution of a local economy, could be the subject of new tourist activity, like other industrial activities that have an increasing success, particularly with Anglo-Saxon tourists.

Beginnings of this “*Agricultural tourism*” are already visible on Sousse’s coast where, near El Kantaoui harbour, more and more numerous vacationers ask to visit gardening/farming cultures, olive groves, presses... and to savour the local products.

The urban agriculture⁴ in the region of the Tunisian Sahel

The extension of urbanisation, the multiplication of seaside resorts and the expansion of the urban fringe in most urban areas of the Tunisian Sahel, since the seventies, has weakened the rural agricultural environment of coastal areas, and has caused a movement of farming to the back-countries. Nevertheless, in order to preserve the coastal rural landscapes, limit the intensive building of houses in agricultural areas and contain urban expansion, the authorities have intervened by legal means. Firstly in 1983 a law was passed, relating to the protection of agricultural areas, then the “Littoral law” of 1995 was passed, which related to the protection and highlighting of seaside landscapes. However, even though the application of these two laws has allowed the reduction of the consumption of the urban fringe agricultural areas and preserved the natural heritage of coast, observation of the current situation shows that the urban expansion remains active.

As a result of this urbanisation, the organisation and working systems of the rural agricultural environment can progressively be distinguished from the former production methods of the Sahel landscape, which has given the spatial and landscaped social economic foundations. This process is closely bound with the move of the planning initiative, whose decisions marginalize urban agriculture. To speak of marginalization, it’s putting forward the hypothesis that, even if it still appears as a dynamic and productive one, this agriculture is excluded from the modes of organisation, urbanism planning and development in general, and particularly from coastal areas.

As a result of this marginalization, the rural life of sandbank is loosing its local territorial meaning, as agricultural activity looses both its function of spatial organizer and local provider of fresh products. Contrary to the last century, this activity is no longer increasing, but in decline. Its internal coherence is continuing to decline and if the urbanization process is not controlled, and above all, if a policy of alternating urban planning to allow its insertion into a new system of production for the Sahel area is not created, its future will become threatened. The alternative is therefore urbanisation under regulation of the preservation of open spaces with landscape value.

Contributing towards the design of this new policy constitutes the main objective of our research program, which is currently underway. The goal is to initiate an action plan capable of demonstrating that, in Tunisia, agriculture in seaside areas is able to organize urban and urban fringe spaces. Agriculture, which is multifunctional, can assume, besides the continuing important function of farming, some further functions related to urban, social, landscape and environmental aspects, improving the quality of the urban space of seaside cities for their inhabitants and tourists.

Consequently, our main hypothesis is that sustainability of the sandbar agriculture depends on its ability to come within the scope of a policy and a urban project, which exploits diverse political demands and is aimed at open spaces and the economy of underlying social and tourist activities.

Tourism and agriculture

The meeting between tourism and agriculture seems then unavoidable and will have to be the subject of reflection with the intention of improving the organisation of the landscape, avoiding economic impact becomes anecdotal, or even negative. It is in fact the case that sometimes tourists sometimes perceive agricultural activities as a nuisance, and reciprocally, farmers feel the development of tourism is a hindrance to their activities.

To avoid these counterproductive effects, it is important that urban agriculture is understood, as observed in France, Germany, Italy and Holland, as a full component of landscape organisation, and is not perceived as a residual activity surviving in the spaces left by tourism.

These different European countries have passed new agri-urban policies, which thanks to realistic planning approaches; make agriculture come within the scope of the urban plans for landscape production and even within the planning documents. Institutionally active people, such as planners and designers, recognize then the multifunctional nature of agriculture in urban and urban fringe environments.

These policies testify today to areas occupied by agriculture, in and around urban areas. They are not necessarily designed to be entirely constructed, since they have their place in urban planning strategies. So the idea is to create new relations between city and farming areas, not only in terms of material goods sharing (foods and agribusiness products, agricultural inputs, redundancy market, etc...), but also in terms of social and environmental services (landscape, leisure, green cuts, pollution control, liquid waste recycling, increased disposal of solid waste, agri-tourism, cultural heritage, etc...).

In order for these policies to emerge in Tunisia, we will need to explain the specific multifunctional nature of the Tunisian urban agriculture, on economic as well as ecological and social scales, to facilitate acceptance with:

- Decision makers, managers of seaside cities plans, who will have to integrate it into the urbanism documents, because in most cases the actions they develop at present go against the interests of the agricultural companies.
- Farmers, because multifunctionality is a plan between farmers and city dwellers where the role and the interests of everybody have to be specified.

Approach, methods and development

This research work, which is still in its early stages, would benefit from the support on-the-field work. Firstly consisting in establishing the state of geographical evolution of prospective sites, where possible transformations could occur in accordance with different patterns.

It implies French and Tunisian researchers taking a comparative approach between the current situation of the Sousse's coast and the historical conditions of seaside urban development that occurred along the French coast a few decades ago.

It aims at putting emphasis on what both situations have in common in order to evaluate to what extent some French experiences, for example the "*Mission Racine*"⁵, could be used as models, or counter-models, for Tunisia.

It is also interested in what makes both countries and both historical periods different. These differences manifest themselves in the terms of the physical and cultural environments, of what is offered to and demanded by tourists, but also in the types of existing landscapes. Indeed, French seaside urbanisation

has often developed on sandy or swampy grounds with low agricultural value. That is not exactly the case for the Sousse's coast, where gardening cultures traditionally extend on grounds very close to sea: the conditions of the meeting between seaside urbanism and agriculture are obviously not the same.

The development of this work will not only consist in publications and participation of symposiums, but will also contribute to the training of young Tunisian researchers through, in particular, the master's degree "*Paysage, territoire et patrimoine*"⁶ of the Chott-Mariem's Horticulture School and the Sousse's University. The students of this master's degree will be invited, as early as the beginning of 2004, to take part in on-the-field work, documentation research (cartographic, photographic, bibliographic), and polls close to publicly important and active members of the community, inhabitants and tourists. Already, two Tunisian PhD students of the "*Ecole nationale du génie rural, des eaux et des forêts*" (ENGREF-Paris)⁷ are carrying out research, and in the following years they will be joined, other PhD students from the master's degree. All concerned thesis are or will be the subject of Tunisian French training.

The development of this work will be supported by the experience and acquired competences of the French and Tunisian research teams, concerning public policies for urban and urban fringe planning, seaside urbanism, urban agriculture and regulation of ground use.

Conclusion

Our research is orientated in four main directions:

- The understanding of the production systems of the urban and urban fringe landscapes of the Tunisian Sahel.
- To advice political decision makers, and seaside areas planners.
- The introduction of new planning strategies and real estate control, capable of reducing the consumption of farm land, and increasing the development of urban space and, when applicable, act on their management methods.
- Gaining knowledge of government's modes of adaptation to the degradation of the rural/agricultural heritage of the sandbar, but also to its social and economic consequences.

Both the defining of intentions and the general objectives of the research make for a transverse and multi-disciplinary body of research concerning the improvement of the environmental, social and economic conditions in the urban seaside areas, where population increase is concentrated today. One can evaluate the unquestionable economic stakes in terms of maintaining dynamic, productive and profitable farming companies, which supply the urban markets with food, and preserve the rural heritage with a view to a future cultural tourism. To this unquestionable economic stake is added an environmental stake, which can be evaluated in terms of:

- Improving prospects of existing public policies (urban planning and real estate management).
- The identification of collective (or common) interests in sustainable management of the agriculture of seaside urban areas.

The ethical stake of this research work is to put in place respective limits to existing political and legal plans of action, as well as limits of available scientific pieces of knowledge and existing social practices. It also concerns the identification of active conditions for a better use of, material and immaterial, agricultural and urban resources.

The management of urban agriculture in countries like Tunisia cannot remain purely technical. It must also take into account the social and economical, private and collective effects it implies. Moreover, this project should prove that recognising the multifunctional dimension of the spaces, which are produced by this agricultural form is not separate from the social qualification of urban spaces, especially when the tourist and residential economies are at stake in the local development.

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² Contracted, in 1994, between the Tunisian government and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the “*Cités durables*” (sustainable cities) programme aims at improving the abilities of natural resources management and environmental planning of town councils and their partners in public, private and community sectors.

³ At chapter 10 of the 21st Agenda, entitled “*Tourisme et Développement durable*” (tourism and sustainable development), it is about “*déconcentrer le tourisme des zones balnéaires en l’ouvrant sur l’intérieur du pays et en identifiant les ressources en paysage et en patrimoine naturel et culturel qui pour qui pourraient être valorisées par le tourisme et qui contribueraient à la diversification du produit touristique national*” (to decentralize tourism of seaside areas by opening it on the back-country and by identifying the resources in landscape and in natural and cultural heritage which could be developed by tourism and would contribute to the diversification of the national tourist product). (21st National Agenda, Department of Environment and Territory Planning of Tunisia Republic, 1995, page 77)

⁴ The urban agriculture is the farming activity where resources, products and services are or can be the subject of a direct urban use. With city, this agriculture indeed maintains reciprocal functional relations and it is together that cultivated and built spaces take part in the urbanization process and form the city’s territory.

⁵ The “*Mission Interministérielle pour l’Aménagement Touristique du Littoral du Languedoc-Roussillon*” (inter-department mission for tourist planning of the Languedoc-Roussillon’s coast), called “*Mission Racine*” from its president’s name, Pierre Racine, was created by the French State in 1963.

⁶ Landscape, Territory and Heritage

⁷ National School for Water and Forests Rural Engineering.