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The Agenda 21 for culture and Essaouira

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The Agenda 21 for culture and Essaouira

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Cultural diversity: a possible fate for Essaouira

In contrast to several other ancient cities in Morocco, Essaouira did not come about through the gradual settlement of rural populations on a site that subsequently grew into a city or through a mass immigration movement like those that Morocco has known throughout its history. Essaouira was the product of the royal will of the Sultan builder Sidi Mohamed Well Abdellah, who wanted to make it an economic hub of the first order and the first commercial port of his kingdom.

Essaouira was therefore one of the first purpose-built cities designed with a very clear aim. As the city was being built, the Sultan wanted to integrate the population of the new city into its planned economic activity. And so he called on families throughout Morocco, known for their expertise in trading and negotiating with the affluent foreign powers of this period. This selection was made without distinction on grounds of colour or creed. Thus, Jewish families from across Morocco, Spain and other countries in North Africa decided to set up home in Essaouira alongside native and Andalusian Arabian families, as well as Berber peoples from the region and others who had come from sub-Saharan Africa.

This multi-ethnic set-up made Essaouira a melting pot of cultures from all these populations, which would mark the identity of the city and its inhabitants forever with traits of harmonious existence, tolerance and cultural and religious diversity throughout its history. All these populations contributed their own culture traits to forge a common cultural heritage unique in Morocco, the result of diverse contributions originating from different ethnic and cultural origins. This heritage has managed to survive despite the erosion of memories and major changes that the city and its population have undergone due to mass out-migration, immigration of specific roots, and the progressive decline of the city's economic role in favour of new cities built initially by the protectorate and subsequently by the central government in Rabat.

Essaouira retained a special interest as a rare example of cultural diversity that had coexisted in a time of tolerance and peace.

Nevertheless, the survival of this common heritage, long the work of a local elite both native and foreign, underwent the same misfortune as the city in general, both in terms of its ancient buildings and in the oral heritage that is a feature of any cultural and traditional inheritance bequeathed by the different ethnic groups that made up Souirie society. Because of the city's fame – particularly due to the strong diaspora very much alive in big international metropolises – Essaouira retained a special interest as a rare example of cultural diversity that had coexisted in a time of tolerance and peace. This interest was transformed into the desire to preserve the heritage common to every culture that had helped to forge the Souirie identity. As a result, several actions were launched, generally sponsored by institutions and international organisations in order to fine-tune programmes to safeguard the city's heritage. These actions basically involved the rehabilitation and restoration of the city's old buildings, listed as a world heritage site by UNESCO.

Among the actions taken to protect Essaouira, Agenda 21 is one of the more visible operations because it is more general and integrating, particularly in terms of the local professionals who participated in the efforts to restore the city's monuments.

The local Agenda 21 of Essaouira: pioneering in Morocco

Agenda 21 is the framework document of the international community for sustainable development, approved at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992). The part of its contents aimed at reinforcing the environmental aspect of government politics and encouraging citizen participation is very clear but, in Rio, Agenda 21 made very little mention of culture. Essaouira was very interested in implementing Rio's Agenda 21 on a local scale. The past, present and future of our city (cultural diversity being the jewel in our crown) meant that culture was a very important consideration as one of the components of our local Agenda 21. It was something very coherent with our city project. This stance – as we found out in time – has been one of the inspiring elements of Agenda 21 for culture.

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Initially conceived as a pilot project in Essaouira, the action of Agenda 21 subsequently spread to several cities across the kingdom. Launched in 1996 with the support of the Post Graduate Centre Human Settlements of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, the project had the following aims:

- Management of the city's cultural heritage;
- Rehabilitation of the Mellah neighbourhood;
- Creation of a green belt and city park
- Creation of green spaces in the city.

This ambitious project played a big part in Essaouira's being listed as a UNESCO world heritage site in December 2001.

The project and the experience gained from the local Agenda 21 of Essaouira inspired the Moroccan government to prepare and introduce a large-scale national programme encouraged by Essaouira's example (local Agenda 21 programmes in city environments MOR/99/00). As a result, since 2002, the programme has focused on the preparation of local Agenda 21 programmes in the cities of Marrakesh, Meknès and Agadir.

City project: restoration of the old city of Essaouira

Cultural tourism has become one of the mainstays of economic development in the city. Founded in 1760, the city originally had two main elements: the port and the medina.

The port, which had been the hub of the city's economic life since it was built, is now reduced to a simple unloading point for coastal fishing, following the closure of the seafood processing plants and the migration of the bulk of professional fishermen to southern ports.

This crisis, made worse by a rural exodus caused by several years of drought in the region, constituted a real threat to the physical unity of the city, which watched its old buildings crumbling day in day out. Urgent action was needed to save what was left as the only source of income for the city and its inhabitants: tourism and crafts.

Since 1996, a number of measures have been taken to introduce a planning process for the city's sustainable development. In this respect, the rehabilitation and protection of Essaouira's medina was the main concern for the local authorities.

The actions taken along these lines include the rebuilding of the city walls. This project was begun in the framework of the Agenda 21 project and involved filling in the gaps along the coastal wall. This operation was the starting point that raised local, national and international awareness of the need to safeguard this heritage.

In this framework, three projects were launched simultaneously:

A. RESTORATION OF THE INLAND WALL

Project co-funded by the municipality and the Ministry of Culture that consisted of resurfacing the entire inland wall. The project, begun in June 1998 and lasting nine months, experienced technical problems due particularly to the inappropriate quantities of materials used for the surfacing.

B. PROJECT TO RESTORE A MAIN SECTION OF THE COASTAL WALL

The partners in this project were UNESCO and the municipality. It consisted of finding a solution for the consolidation and restoration of the coastal wall. The technical difficulties encountered in this project were essentially due to the lack of experience and skills of the company that conducted the work.

C. PROJECT TO RESTORE THE WESTERN COASTAL BASTION

The partners in this project were the local authorities, Agenda 21 and French cooperation. The aim was to restore the western bastion of the wall that was in a very advanced state of disrepair. The operation used a chantier école or "workshop project" approach, with the participation of members of the Compagnons du Devoir du Tour de France association, young apprentices and local master craftsmen. The project was scheduled to last for 12 months and conducted within this period as planned.

The restoration work saved this ruined monument. Considering its location on the tourist route, visitors to the city can now access the wall and appreciate the beautiful panoramic view it offers across the port and of the islands. The apprentices benefited from practical training, which gave them the opportunity to find work. Besides the long-term benefits of saving a historical monument, this project was also an opportunity to pass on moral values regarding collective and participative action among its participants, in particular:

- Possibility of transfer. The lessons learned from this project, which are based on the exchange of experiences, training and meticulousness in the execution of work, served as a reference for the implementation of other restoration projects in the medina, notably the project currently underway to restore the gates of the wall.

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- Participative approach. The performance of works for this project involved gathering together certain actors in the framework of a partnership:
 - Local authorities guaranteed the basic materials.
 - The Agenda 21 programme helped with backing and financing.
 - Compagnons du Devoir ensured the training of the young apprentices with the help of local master craftsmen.
 - Improved dialogue. Monitoring of the project progress generated effective communication between the various participants.
 - Respect for culture. The assessment of the project showed that the techniques used are in perfect harmony with the local context and have highlighted our cultural heritage.
 - Awareness-raising. The location of the restored site, close to the main square of the city centre, meant that inhabitants were able to follow the stages of the restoration. This also raised awareness among inhabitants of the value of the ruins. In fact, it was noted that this awareness increased as the maintenance and restructuring of buildings in the medina was taking place.
 - Reinforcement of local identity. The success of this project has raised awareness of the following points:
 - The importance of giving new life to the expertise of our ancestors so that future generations can appreciate it.
 - The close relationship between our cultural identity and our heritage
 - The need to continue these actions and to rehabilitate and protect the medina.

Conclusion and recommendations

Due to its pioneering role in the introduction of the Agenda 21 programmes to Morocco, the experience obtained in the performance of projects in Essaouira should serve as a lesson to all and an example to ensure the success of the projects undertaken.

The experience of Essaouira has shown that a good selection of partners, particularly from a technical and professional perspective, is a guarantee for the success of the actions undertaken, thus allowing full respect for the guidelines and aims set down by the UCLG in reference documents, particularly that defining Agenda 21 for culture as an undertaking by cities and local governments for cultural development.

This undertaking has been translated by the Committee on culture into a programme of actions with four specific objectives:

- (1) To develop the institutional framework of cities and local governments.
- (2) To guide the development and implementation of services to cities.
- (3) To develop institutional partnerships in culture.
- (4) To promote research and development in culture.

To guarantee these objectives, it would be more appropriate for all projects launched as part of Agenda 21 for culture to pay special attention to their choice and selection of enterprisers charged with carrying out technical operations both for studies and diagnoses and for various types of construction work.

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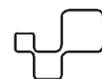
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