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# STRATEGIC SPATIAL PLANNING IN LEBANON: AN INTERNATIONAL "RECIPE". THE CASE OF THE UNION OF MUNICIPALITIES

**Abstract.** In 1977 the municipal law authorised the creation of unions of municipalities in Lebanon. However, only recently have they actually begun to emerge; 13 unions existed in 1990 while 57 were created by 2017. Over the last decade these unions have assumed an important role within the local dynamics, particularly in the field of strategic planning. This article aims to analyse that shift by answering the following questions: first, what is the positioning of the unions, as institutional planning actors, on the planning chessboard? Second, how was strategic planning transferred to the unions of municipalities? And finally, what was the echo of this transfer on other national or local actors?
**Keywords:** Strategic Spatial Planning, planning systems, unions of municipalities, circuit of knowledge, localisation, International Development Funds, Lebanon.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The public planning law and other regulations in Lebanon have long been considered as tasks entrusted to government institutions. In a highly centralised country such as Lebanon, national institutions conduct regulatory planning by strongly emphasising land use and zoning.

However, in the context of globalisation, two issues arise: on the one hand, decentralisation fosters the rise of new actors playing an increasing role in urban planning and development. On the other, the transfer of planning ideas and practices, where a plethora of new planning approaches are spread via networks of in-

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formation, is judged, in particular by international donors (IOs), as more effective than traditional land-use planning.

This is also the case in developing countries, with Lebanon representing a good case to investigate the issues. The withdrawal of the state and its reluctant performance is accompanied by the rise of new actors who are gaining power and could have more influential roles. They are adopting new planning approaches, yet infrequent to become institutionalised. The identity and effect of these actors remain in question. Who are these actors? What instruments do they use to fill the gap of the insufficient state intervention? How does their presence affect the regulatory planning system in place?

Unions of municipalities in Lebanon, which have increased in numbers over the past two decades, seem a game-changer on the planning chessboard. They resort to a new planning approach for developing their territories, however, producing plans legally labelled as non-binding. While joining forces with IOs, unions of municipalities received an "international recipe" that fostered the adoption of a strategic approach to planning based on a knowledge transfer process. IOs were the vectors of a new planning practice that brought in narratives of decentralisation, participation, local democracy, etc. At first glance, this cooperation is seen as an autonomous endeavour. However, practice shows that the learning process provided by IOs to unions had resonated strongly with other local and national actors.

The objective of this article is to analyse this turning point: the rise of new planning actors, unions of municipalities, strategic planning transfer and localisation, and their influence on the traditional planning system. For that it is necessary to answer the following questions: first, what is the positioning of the unions, as institutional planning actors, on the planning chessboard and which instruments do they use for planning? Secondly, how was strategic planning transferred to unions? And finally, how did this transfer influence other actors, both national and local?

## 2. UNIONS OF MUNICIPALITIES, NEW INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS BETWEEN THE CENTRAL AND THE LOCAL

In the first part, the article investigates the following questions: what is the positioning of unions of municipalities, as institutional planning actors, on the planning chessboard? Which instruments do they use for planning?

The article shows that unions of municipalities are inserted between the central state and the municipalities, but appear to be game-changing and active on the local level while resorting to strategic planning to develop their territories.

## 2.1. The late rise of a new institutional planning actor

Administratively, the Lebanese territory is divided into eight *mohafazahs* (governorates) governed by a *mohafaz* (prefect), each subdivided into *cadas* (districts) governed by a *caimacam* (sub-prefect). These divisions represent the level of deconcentrated[1] administration. On a territorial basis, the only decentralised territorial level is the municipality (Verdeil E. *et al.*, 2016, p. 96). The national territory is divided into 1,409 territorial localities, which represent the cities, towns and villages of the country. Most of them (1,018) have the status of a municipality (Localiban, 2015). In the absence of a municipality, the territory is directly administered by the *caimacam.*

The idea to establish unions of municipalities dates back to 1965. The act of 30 June 1977 on municipalities authorised the creation of unions to undertake projects that exceed the technical and financial possibilities of a municipality, including both large urban projects and more sectoral projects (e.g. firefighting, management of slaughterhouses, sewerage network development, road safety, etc.). However, the civil war (1975–1990) slowed their emergence: 13 unions of municipalities were created between 1977 and 1990 (Verdeil *et al.*, 2016, p. 98). In 1989, the Taif Agreement[2] put an end to the conflict. Hence, for national reconciliation and harmonious coexistence of communities and political parties, Taif advocated decentralisation to achieve balanced development that eased the tension between different communities (Corm, 2007). It was not until the first post-war municipal elections (1998) that the creation of unions of municipalities resumed. By 2016, 53 unions were created. Although they did not span across the entire Lebanese territory (Verdeil *et al.*, 2016, p. 98), the process is ongoing (Fig. 1), allowing them to benefit from state grants and increasing their chances of obtaining support from international donors.

Unions of municipalities are created by decree, either at the request of municipalities or by the initiative of the Minister of the Interior (Article 115 of the Municipal Law, 1977). They may include an unlimited number of municipalities, as well as territories under prefectural administration. In the context of unaccomplished decentralisation, unions have acquired partial independence. They have a relative financial and administrative autonomy, without the authority to collect taxes (Article 114 of the Municipal Law, 1977). The union is governed by a Union Council composed of the mayors of the member municipalities and representatives of other territories and chaired by an elected president of the council.

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[1] "Deconcentration consists of a regional representation of the central government where the Mohafiz and caimacam are appointed by decree of the Council of Ministers, while the mayors of municipalities are directly elected from the people, as defined by law. The municipalities are therefore considered the only autonomous elected body" (Harb and Atallah, 2015).

[2] It is a constitutional document adopted by the Lebanese Parliament in 1989 to bring a consensual end to the Lebanese Civil War (Corm, 2007).
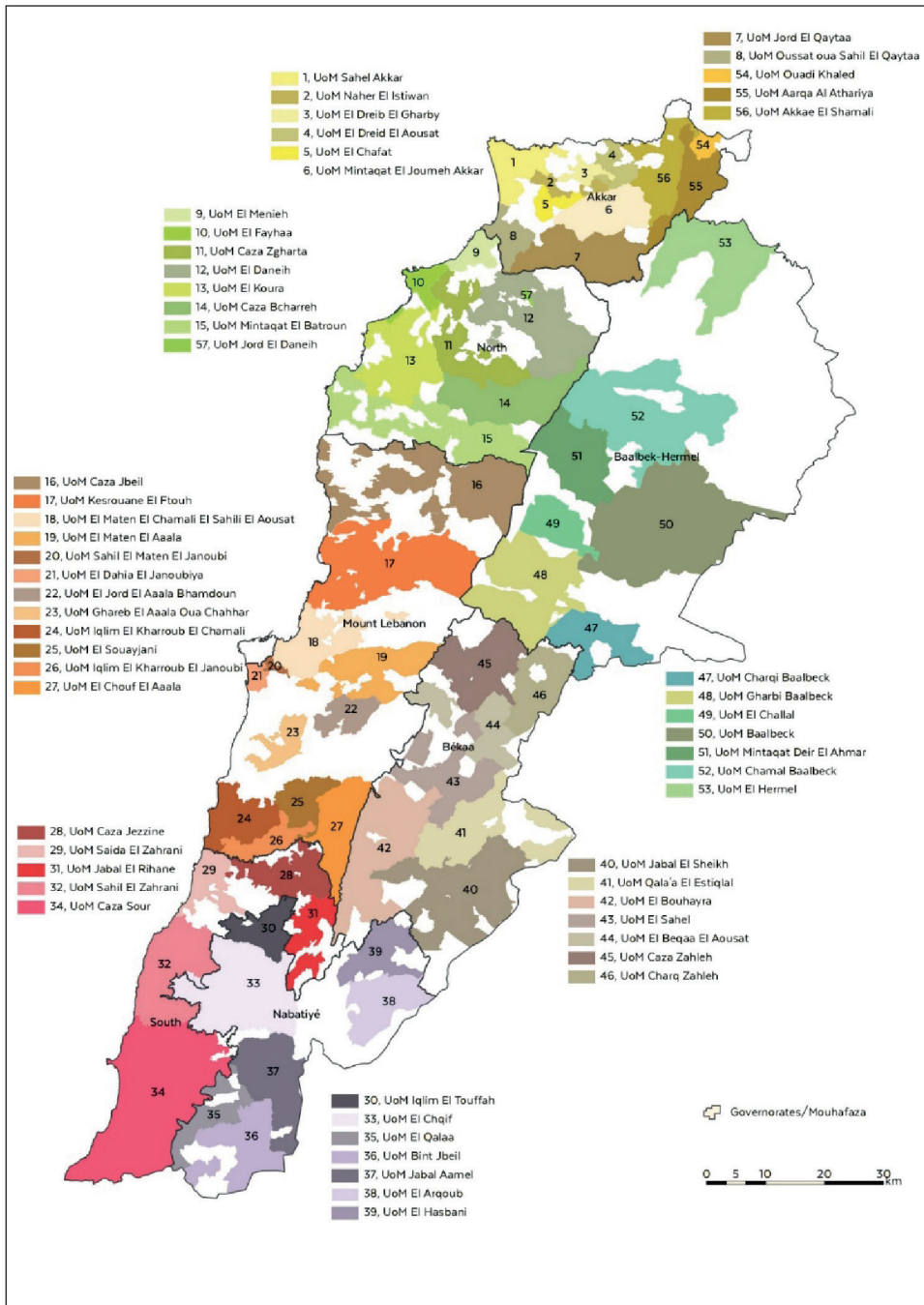
Fig. 1. Unions of municipalities of Lebanon until October 2017
Source: adapted UNhabitat, 2017.

The regrouping of the municipalities into unions sheds light on an emerging territorial actor strongly involved in the reconstruction and development of a regional political territory (Darwich, 2014).

## 2.2. A new planning actor between the national and the local

Two national institutions provide the national framework of the planning process in Lebanon: Directorate General of Urban Planning (DGU) and the Development and Reconstruction Council (CDR). This institutional administrative framework is outdated and incapable of responding to the evolving cities' needs.
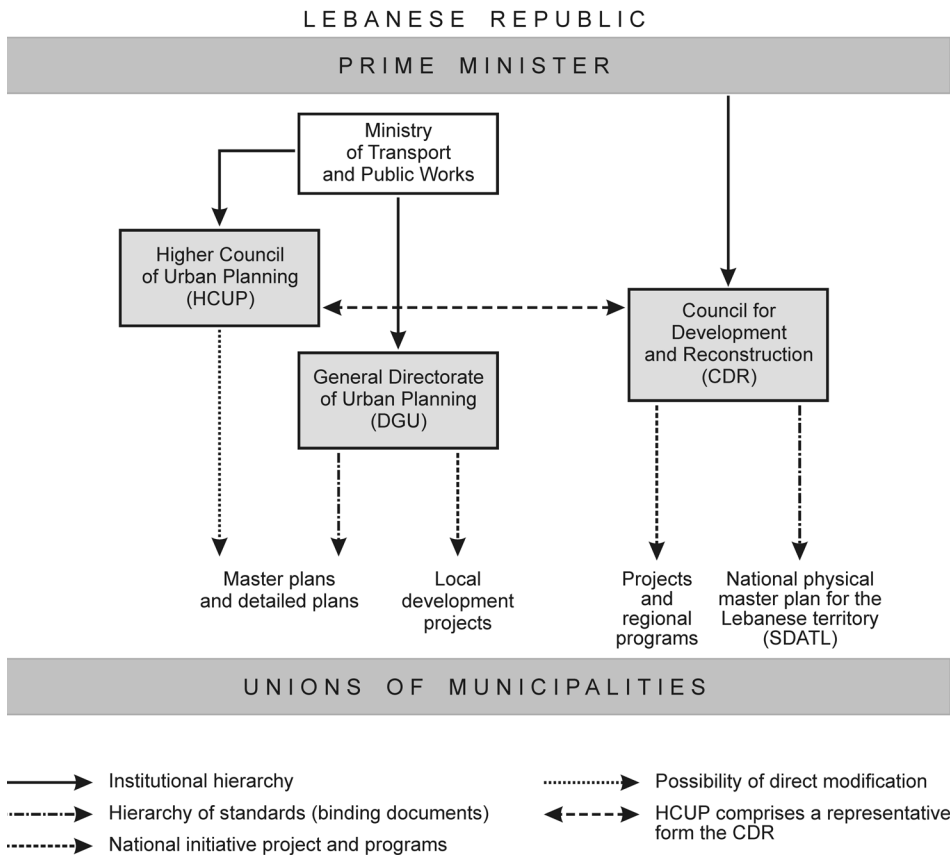
Fig. 2. The Lebanese planning system
Source: own study.

Inherited from an extended period of centralisation, regulatory planning remains the prerogative of the state (Fawaz, 2005) entrusted to the DGU. The latter falls under the authority of the Ministry of Public Works and Transport and is responsible for urban planning at the central level. It draws up local master plans, updates the cadastral plans, and oversees the implementation of the 1983 Urbanism Law.[3] This institutional administrative framework is considered obsolete, static, and it is plagued with bureaucratic inefficiency (UN-Habitat, 2012). Its methods of work are long and slow, and the preparation process of planning documents is outdated (Harb and Atallah, 2015, p. 198).

In terms of operational planning, the central actor is the CDR. Replacing the Ministry of Planning, the CDR reports directly to the Prime Minister, bypassing all ministries, to avoid bureaucratic delays. Its responsibilities include different functions related to construction and development projects in the fields of urban planning and land use management. Since its creation in 1977, the CDR was entrusted with the task of developing the National Physical Master Plan for the Lebanese Territory, the SDATL (*Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement du Territoire Libanais*). The SDATL is a comprehensive land-use plan for the entire Lebanese territory and serves as reference for spatial development in public agencies, as well as regional and local governments. However, the plan only provides general guidelines and lacks implementation procedures on different levels, fostering the independent work of various planning actors.

Since the civil war,[4] the intervention of the Lebanese State in the development of the territory has weakened. This was manifested by a policy of laissez-faire (El-Azhari, 1970, p. 3). Indeed, due to the lack of sufficient resources, the state is struggling to provide public services and to implement a national planning policy. To fill the gap, the state entrusted private companies (SOLIDERE, LINOR, and ELYSSAR) with the task of planning and reconstructing certain areas in the 1990s. Meanwhile at the local level, municipalities joined forces and formed unions of municipalities. The number of unions with an increasing role in planning, mainly through developing strategic plans (SP), has risen significantly since the 1960s. This allows them to go beyond the limitations of regulatory planning. However, between the state and the municipalities, their power is limited.

In the context of unaccomplished decentralisation, the municipalities gained partial independence. The 1977 Municipal Act gave them broad powers and financial autonomy. Nevertheless, the central government exercises control over their activities, particularly in terms of finances. As such, the municipalities joined forces and formed unions of municipalities to benefit from state grants and increase their chances of obtaining support from international donors.

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[3] Inspired by the French planning law, the urbanism law includes a set of urban planning tools to improve cities and towns (land subdivision, expropriation, re-parceling, transport, etc.) (Harb and Atallah, 2015).

[4] 15 years of civil war from 1975 until 1990.

As new actors for planning, unions of municipalities are likely to fill the gap between the insufficient intervention of the state and the lack of power of the municipalities. Yet the distribution of roles between municipalities and unions of municipalities is not clearly defined and their services are often redundant (Harb and Atallah, 2015, p. 203). Furthermore, they lack sufficient resources and political backing.

Nevertheless, practices have shown that unions of municipalities are taking the lead to respond to regional needs while coordinating with other actors. Being inserted between the central and the local, they are resorting to a new planning approach, "strategic planning", that allows them to go beyond the ubiquitous regulatory land-use planning to develop their territories. In the following section, strategic planning practices in Lebanon are discussed.

## 3. STRATEGIC PLANNING, AN INTERNATIONAL RECIPE TRANSFERRED TO UNIONS OF MUNICIPALITIES THROUGH THE KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PROCESS

For the past decade, strategic planning has been developing in Lebanon. The Syrian crisis has accelerated this development, with a substantial number of refugees settling in urban and rural regions challenging local authorities and subsequently establishing unions as recipients for donors' money. They are empowered and supported by IOs and organisations aiming at enhancing their capacities. That enables unions to confront regional challenges, for both hosting communities and displaced refugees, particularly in terms of public service delivery. This has also led to strengthening the unions' development capacities in general, which fostered the implementation of strategic planning (Ghanem, 2016). International organisations and international donors (Karam, 2009, p. 1) play an essential role in local development and have recently begun investing in strategic planning (Harb and Atallah, 2015). Since 2008, more than ten strategic plans have been developed (Verdeil *et al.*, 2016, p. 99–101). In this vein, the question to be asked is: how was strategic planning transferred to unions, especially since it is a non-binding document?

In this section, the article provides an answer to this question based on a detailed desk review and fieldwork covering 25 semi-structured interviews.[5] A de-

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[5] The interviewees fall into three distinct groups. The first are the policy makers, where interviews were held with representatives from the CDR and DGU; the first type of a questionnaire was adopted to examine the role of each one in the development of strategic planning and the influence of knowledge transfer on national actors. The second are local practitioners, scholars and consultancy offices who developed or assisted in the development of a strategic plan; the second type of a questionnaire was adopted to trace the knowledge transfer process and the localisation from the

tailed analysis grid, discussed below, of the field work shows that strategic planning in Lebanon was transferred by IOs through specific channels and mediums using a knowledge transfer process.

Unions of municipalities were recipients of donors' working methods, know-how, and expertise, having imported the method of strategic planning, which emerged in Europe during the 1990s, to Lebanon, particularly at the regional level (Motte, 2008).

## 3.1. Understanding knowledge transfer

Mobilizing strategic planning as a practice transferred from Western contexts relates to the phenomena identified by several authors as "knowledge transfer", "circuits of knowledge", "transnational flow of planning ideas and practices" (Healey, 2013, p. 1), "urban policy mobility" (McCann, 2008), "transfer of urban policy, planning models, ideas and techniques" (Harris and Moore, 2013), "policy diffusion, transfer and learning" (Stone, 2012), and "motion" of urban policies (Gonzalez, 2010).

In the past two decades, literature has featured a growing dialogue on planning ideas and policy diffusion across countries (Harris and Moore, 2013). It provides a critical analysis based on multi-disciplinary literature of the "soft" (Stone, 2012) transfer of ideas and information, and its impact on the context where it is applied (Healey, 2013).

Driven by globalisation, Healey stated that nowadays, "ideas about how to develop places and manage them seem to flow around our globalized and interconnected world with increasing speed and ease" (Healey, 2013). In her critical analysis on the flow, she argued that attention should be given to the "original stories" of the ideas, channels and actors involved, and how they become "localized" based on the evolving dynamics of the context within which they are applied (Healey, 2013). Stone (2012) investigated the impact of those travelling planning ideas on the institutional framework; she argued: "it is rather more infrequent to see such ideas structure governance and become institutionalized".

Based on the field work, the following section analyses the strategic planning application in Lebanon with special attention to Healey's circuits of knowledge framework, identified by three main variables of analysis: 1) *the source of knowledge* which illustrates the origin of planning ideas; 2) the knowledge transfer *medium* as the process through which the transfer of knowledge occurred from the

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"recipient's" point of view. The third are IOs and donors who were involved in any of the phases of developing a strategic plan; who either funded the development of the document or provided technical assistance. The third type of the questionnaire was applied to examine the knowledge transfer from the "source of knowledge" point of view that focused more on the international model, the means and mediums of transfer.

source of knowledge to the unions; and 3) the actors that channelled the know-how to the unions, identified as *channels*.

Hence, the following travelling stories are addressed based on each source of knowledge, its appropriate medium, and channels as per the following diagram (Fig. 3).
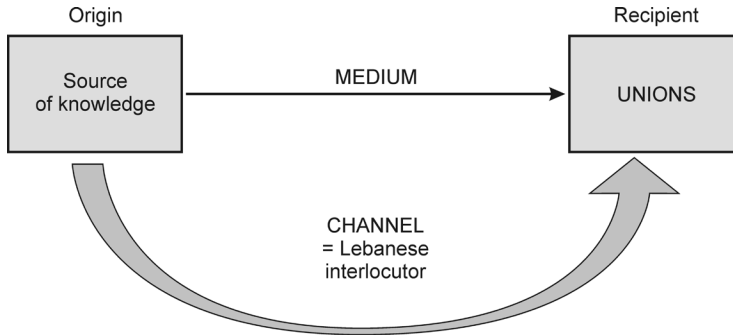


Fig. 3. Strategic planning "travelling" process: relation actor, medium, channel and union
Source: own study.

## 3.2. The rise of strategic planning in Lebanon: an international transfer

The first creation of strategic plans was the result of the know-how and knowledge transferred through three projects funded by the EU (Abdallah,[6] 2017, expert interview). Those three projects, detailed below, are considered as EU mediums to mainstream the strategic approach in planning. They were channelled to a Lebanese interlocutor before addressing the unions.

The first project, Assistance to the Rehabilitation of the Lebanese Administration (ARLA), was implemented in 2002. In that program, the EU interlocutor in Lebanon was the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR). The latter was the main channel to provide unions with the EU directives. According to Harb,[7] the project is considered as "the first milestone in strategic planning" (Harb, 2018, expert interview).

The aim of EU's ARLA program was, in particular, to support local authorities in order to enhance regional development through establishing local development offices and developing SPs. The program targeted twelve group-

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[6] Charles Abdallah is an economist and senior local development expert working in the EU („*Economiste de l'EU et chargée entre autre de projets de développement locale*").

[7] Mona Harb was one of the experts who developed a PSDL. She co-authored, with Mona Fawaz, the PSDL of *Iqleem el Toufah*.

ings[8] of municipalities[9] to prepare a PSDL: Simplified plans for local development (*Plan Simplifié[10] De Développement Local*) for each grouping.[11] According to the team leader of the Lebanese experts working on the PSDL, the EU's aim was to mainstream the recommendations of the agenda 2000, and to build the capacities of local Lebanese authorities by bringing them new knowledge and best practices (Osmat, 2017, expert interview). That was done through the establishment of an SP for each region, and the identification of priority projects to be funded. Once asked about the methodology and to what extent it suited Lebanon, Osmat[12] stated that "the methodology adopted was an international one, we did not have the technical expertise and the knowledge required back then to adapt it to the Lebanese context… It was a copy-paste application of the international *feuille-de-route*" (Osmat, 2017, expert interview).

The second project, CHARAKA[13] (*Appui à l'amélioration de la gouvernance locale[14]), was* implemented in 2009, funded by the EU (source of knowledge) and managed by OMSAR (channel). The major objective of Charaka was the creation of local development offices as the basis of the participative planning, which began with 12 clusters. According to Osmat and Moussawi (2017, experts interviews), the project was the second phase of the implementation of project ARAL. The 12 clusters or grouping of municipalities were the same ones endorsed by the ARAL project. The aim of the CHARAKA project was also to create a decentralised cooperation[15] between those municipal clusters and their European counterparts (charaka.gov.lb).

Those two projects have not only introduced planning at a regional level where back then unions' boundaries were not part of the planning relevant ech-

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[8] The 12 groupings of municipalities were chosen by the EU and OMSAR, taking into account the local political and confessional factors (Osmat, 2017).

[9] The majority of the grouping of municipalities later became the unions of municipalities.

[10] In some reports and interviews, the term "strategic" is used instead of "simplified", referring to PSDL as *Plan Stratégique de Développement*. The nomenclature used in this article is the same as the one provided by the official document of the OMSAR.

[11] This was done based on 1) Data collection and SWOT analysis for each grouping relying on a participatory platform between the elected council and the citizens, 2) the development of five technical files for five projects to be implemented in each region, 3) preparation of a technical file for the implementation of local development offices in each grouping called BDML (*bureau municipal de développement local*) (Kabbani*, 2017; Osmat, 2017; Moussa, 2017; Moussawi, 2017).

* Roula Kabbani is a Senior EU coordinator at the OMSAR and previously a coordinator with the EU in the ARAL project.

[12] Bachir Osmat is a senior socio-economic development expert and previously the team leader of the local experts in ARAL project.

[13] "Charaka" is an Arabic word meaning partnership.

[14] In English, reinforcing local governance.

[15] The BTVL office (*Cités et Gouvernement Locaux Unis au Liban/ Bureau Technique des Villes Libanaises* UCLG / BTVL) was in charge of setting up the BMDL in some regions based on decentralised cooperation with European cities.

elons, but also values and planning principles that the regulatory planning discourse was missing. One of the main values was the participatory approach to planning, highlighted by Ali Moussawi, an local development expert, who stated that "the same methodology was adopted in both projects: ARAL and Charaka. The EU has provided experts with a specific working methodology based on a participatory platform of decision making" (2017, expert interviews). This platform consists two of committees: (1) the elected committee gathering the municipalities' council and presidents, and (2) the consultative committee gathering the civil society representatives (students, intellectuals, associations, etc.).

Throughout all the PSDL elaboration phases, the experts confirmed that a participatory approach was adopted mainly through the brainstorming meetings held between experts, civil society representatives and municipal councils, allowing a continuous platform of discussion between relevant stakeholders all along the PSDL process of development (Moussawi, Harb, Moussa,[16] 2017, experts interviews). Thus participatory approach to development was first implemented in Lebanon with the PSDL experience (Harb, 2017, expert interview).

The third medium used by the EU was based on a funded project in 2016, the "Support to Municipal Finance Reform" (MuFin) program. With the key channels of knowledge being the CDR and the Ministry of Interior and municipalities (MoI), the program's main objective was to improve the municipal finance framework and enhance the capacities of the municipal sector to assume its mandate (EU, 2012). According to Osmat (2017), the MuFin grant has resulted in the elaboration of eight additional SPs based on a methodology that was highly inspired by the one endorsed in the ARAL project.

In parallel to EU funds, several IOs and funders have also invested in strategic planning. The UNDP,[17] UN-Habitat, Italian cooperation, and AFD either funded or provided technical assistance to the unions in the development of the SP (Osseiran, Fakih, Chammah, Muhheiddine, 2017, experts interviews).

The result of a detailed desk review showed that each program has given a different name to their final report; PSDL (ARAL project); Territorial Strategic Development plan (ARTGOLD program), local strategic plan (Unhabitat), Strategic plan (Italian cooperation). All the methodologies adopted to develop strategic planning final reports were almost the same. They all covered a diagnosis for the region based on a SWOT analysis, a future vision, and concluded by identifying priority projects.

Although some differences applied,[18] the overarching aim of those plans was: 1) to help the unions better understand their own region based on sectoral data (so-

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[16] Ziad Moussa was the general coordinator of the PSDLs.
[17] UNDP (United Nations Development Program); UNhabitat (United Nations Human Settlements Programme); AFD (*Agence Française de Développement*).
[18] In some reports, additional sections can be found: mission, strategic development axis, priority projects with a detailed budget estimation.

cial, economic, environmental, etc.), 2) to elaborate a future vision for the territory, and 3) to accordingly propose a list of projects to be implemented as per their priority of elaboration to "spatialise" the vision in the short, medium, and long terms.

When asked about the plurality of methodologies, Telvizian and Yazigi[19] (2017, experts interviews) stated that, in Lebanon, all the methodologies applied referred more or less to the same notion. Strategic planning was mainly transferred by Ios defending and promoting common values (such as participation, local democracy, decentralisation, etc.) based on each development goal. As such, it is important to highlight that between the first (ARAL) and the last project (MuFin) implemented by the EU, a period of 10 years did not result in any modifications of the methodology, nor its adaptation to the Lebanese context (Osmat, 2017, expert interview).

Telvizian and Yazigi explained why all Ios resorted to local actors to implement this tool, affirming that external actors through many programs were keen on importing both a new planning tool – strategic plan – and a new planning echelon, "the regional". Those correspond to IO funds allocated to empowering local authorities and relate to their discourse on decentralisation. In Lebanon, this echelon is consistent with unions of municipalities.

Based on the aforementioned field results, strategic planning was not part of a bottom-up planning process, despite including processes of participation; it is rather a tool that was transferred based on international initiatives, agendas, and goals. The latter emphasised regional development, the strategic approach of planning through setting priorities of intervention, the role of local authorities, building local capacities, and the role of the civil society in the decision-making process by encouraging their active participation and promoting local governance.

In this section, a deeper understanding of the model of strategic planning is provided through the identification of the origin of various models, the relevant mediums, and the channels transferring them. Overall, it can be concluded that Ios were the vectors of a cultural transfer, where strategic planning appeared to be an international import. The fieldwork also showed that strategic planning in Lebanon had no particular model, labelled and transferred from Western countries, without major modification, to unions of municipalities by Ios and channelled based on various mediums. All these dynamics referred to the literature surrounding the circuit of knowledge. More specifically, in relation to strategic planning, Healey stated that "international aid agencies and funding agencies have encouraged the production of planning strategies and visions as part of their programs related to urban governance and urban development" (Healey, 2009). However, Stone (2012) believed that those travelling planning ideas rarely did structure governance and become institutionalised. Is this the case in Lebanon? In the following section, an answer to this question is provided.

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[19] Dr. Yazigi and Dr. Telvizian are two of the experts who worked on the PSDL and many other strategic plans in different regions. Yazigi was also head of the team of experts that further developed the strategic plan of Aakkar region in 2014.

## 4. THE ECHO OF STRATEGIC PLANNING TRANSFER

In the third section, the article investigates the last research question: what was the influence of this transfer on other actors, be it national or local?

It shows that strategic planning has significantly resonated with both local and national levels; 1) after 15 years of implementing international guidelines, it became a localised planning tool, bringing in a new dynamic of local planning practices, 2) it was co-opted by national institutions, yet when facing the regulatory planning challenges, it remained a non-binding document that could not be institutionalised by the DGU or the CDR.

### 4.1. A "localized" tool at the local level

As previously investigated, unions of municipalities joined forces with IOs and made significant efforts to initiate planning, while being inserted between the national and the local. They have elaborated SPs to respond to evolving regional needs. Although its first implementation was based on an international knowledge transfer, recent practices of strategic planning have shown that it resonated significantly at the local level. Healey (2013) referred to this particular phenomenon, stating that traveling ideas become "localized" when inserted into new contexts.

Based on the same fieldwork conducted while examining strategic planning practices, the recent planning experience of Saida Zahrani's union of municipalities, discussed below, clearly shows how strategic planning became a localised practice. This is a shift to a reversed dynamic, where strategic planning becomes a local initiative shedding light on the normative and analytical approach to adopting a SP.

The Union of Saida Zahrani municipalities, which covers a territory of 16 municipalities, launched its joint program in December 2017 with the Urban Planning Department at the Lebanese University to prepare a SP for the union. As the first step of its kind since the union's establishment, the Saida Zahrani union collaborated with a local academic institution rather than an international expert, to elaborate a SP based on their experience in the field.

According to Khattar, the responsible expert for the strategic planning[20] in Saida Zahrani region, this was one of the major steps in terms of local development since the existence of the union. "We believe that the SP will provide a balanced development for the rural areas after many years where the majority of the projects implemented and funds allocated targeted only the city of Saida"[21] (Khattar,

[20] Elie Khattar is a professor at the urban planning department at the Lebanese university and mayor of "Tanbourit" municipality which is a member of the union.
[21] Saida is the biggest city and the center of the Saida Zahrani union of municipalities.

2017, expert interview). According to Saoudi[22] (2017), the union president, developing the SP was the union's idea. Saoudi also stated that the SP development process will be completed locally in collaboration with the planning department of the Lebanese University rather than an international expert. Khattar explained the reason behind this particular initiative: "We have reached a point where we are very well aware of our region's local specificities, as habitants, professionals and mayors. Based on our personal experiences in local development, we will construct a SP based on a methodology adapted to the region's specificities. This can change between a region and another in Lebanon based on its socio-spatial and socio-political particularities". He added: "However, we are trying to cooperate with an international expert through external consultancy or collaborate with a foreign municipality based on a decentralized cooperation, only to have an international legitimacy in case we need to apply for a fund or so".

Accordingly, it is clear that the use of strategic planning tools has been significantly altered compared to their use in the beginning of the 2000s. They have evolved from a tool of definitive international determination addressed prior to an allocated fund or grant to a more "flexible" tool adapted by local decision-makers as per their region's specificities. The consequence of this shift is the rise of a reverse dynamic: nowadays, unions of municipalities initiate the development of a SP and resort to IOs to fund particular projects with their own list of "conditions", instead of abiding to IOs and funder's conditions.

### 4.2. A "co-opted" tool at the national level, yet non-binding

According to the municipal law, SPs are not treated as binding documents. There is an absence of a formal approval by the Council of Ministers and, therefore, a lack of commitment[23] (UN-habitat, 2012). Nevertheless, in practice, the state, through two of its institutions (CDR and MoI), supports strategic planning implementation and co-opts a methodology for preparing these non-binding documents. Relevant practices in this respect are the following.

In 2011, the Lebanese state represented by the CDR published a study funded by the EU that proposed typical Terms of Reference (ToR) of the so-called "Strategic Sustainable Regional Development Plans" (SSRDP) to key players[24] involved in local and regional development in Lebanon. In a normative approach, this document aims to unify all the methodologies adopted in Lebanon (Awada, 2011, p. 7).

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[22] Mohamad Saoudi is president of Saida Zahrani union of municipalities and mayor of Saida municipality.
[23] In this regard, the article 126 of the 1977 law states, with no further explications, that the union "should approve the development plan that falls within the area of the Union and within its competence" (*Loi sur les municipalités…*, 2009).
[24] CDR, Ministries, donors and other stakeholders.

The SSRDP ToR and the proposed methodology were applied in two regions: 1) In Aakkar, where the SSRDP of Aakkar and the upper regions of Hermel and Dennieh were developed on a territory that surpasses the administrative territories of Aakkar unions of municipalities, covering the territorial boundary prescribed by the SDATL (SSRDP for Akkar, 2014), and 2) In Tyre, where the union of municipalities developed a strategic document with the same name "strategic sustainable development plan for the Caza of Tyre" covering its territory grouping of 60 municipalities, in partnership with region Provence Alpes Cotes d'Azur (PACA) in France.

In 2012, the Lebanese state represented by the MoI cooperated with the UN-habitat to prepare a training guidebook on how to develop a strategic plan, "Local Strategic Planning", with the aim to enhance municipal capacities. That methodology of strategic planning, very similar to the one endorsed by the CDR, is recognised by the MoI as "one of the principal pillars of local development process and a pivotal milestone in the development of municipal work" (UN-habitat, 2012). Several unions have applied this methodology, such as Alfayhaa and Jabal Amel union where the CDR did not play any role in its development (Osseiran, 2017, expert interview).

These practices illustrate the influence of strategic planning transferred to unions of municipalities on national actors. The CDR and the MoI have co-opted this methodology. However, the state failed to institutionalise the methodology and the document remained a non-binding one.

One might question the role of the DGU, which is entrusted with the regulatory planning through preparing local master plans. The General Director of the DGU, Elias Taweel stated that the "DGU mandate and mission only cover the provision of land use plans" (2017, expert interviews). He believed that SP is a new tool for Lebanon that should be opted as a binding document by a Ministry, which can provide a legal context and cross sectoral coordination, not a directorate. He affirmed: "The holistic approach of strategic planning that covers a wide range of sectoral policies and coordinates between them should be adopted by the Ministry of planning.[25] The DGU cannot assume this role of coordination between line ministries" (2017, expert interviews). However, he confirmed that SPs and master plans, although two different planning approaches, should complement one another at the planning chessboard. Taweel stated: "Strategic plans are visionary tools and action oriented, however, they should provide guidelines for land use as well in order to complement the regulatory planning" (2017, expert interviews).

Contrarily, at the local level, strategic planning shifted to another dynamic becoming a localised planning practice.

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[25] As mentioned earlier (section 1.2), the Ministry of Planning was replaced by the CDR in 1977. However, the CDR was only entrusted with the development of the SDATL as a national binding document, while all local binding documents are developed by the DGU.

Accordingly, based on the conducted fieldwork, the flexibility the unions gained by their interim positioning between the central and the local seems to have provided them with a larger margin of manoeuvring to adopt strategic planning. Their ambiguous role and their merged responsibilities with those of the municipalities allow them to absorb strategic planning as a planning practice. However, this is not the case for local state institutions (DGU and CDR) that constitute the regulatory framework of the planning system. The DGU, static and plagued with bureaucratic inefficiency, (UN-habitat, 2012) was unable to intervene. While the CDR, being more flexible than the DGU and bypassing all the ministries by reporting directly to the Prime Minister, could only co-opt the methodology without any intervention on its legal context.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper traced the implementation of strategic planning vis-a-vis the rise of the unions as part of fragmented planning practices; a practice that began in the last 15 years and is still ongoing.

First, the paper positioned the unions of municipalities as institutional actors on the planning chessboard. They are inserted between the central and the local. While both national planning institutions are in tension, and municipalities lack financial and technical capacities, unions appear to be active at the local level and are game changing. They have proven themselves by investing in a new planning approach, i.e. "strategic planning", calling for new planning tools, such as "participation", and different approaches than the ones implemented nationally.

Second, it examined strategic planning practices based on fieldwork interviews with relevant stakeholders. The paper articulated the validity of knowledge transfer and skills carried out through strategic planning and their relevance to the Lebanese context. In terms of circuits of knowledge, strategic planning in Lebanon corresponds well to the international trend of circulating knowledge and practices. It appears as a theoretical model born in another geographical reality, travelling through channels and specific mediums. Strategic planning has entered the Lebanese planning system and was adopted by unions of municipalities, as a tool that includes a fine-grained methodology to apply and specific values to adopt. The actors and channels are international: the EU, UN agencies, etc., and domestic (CDR and MoI).

Third, it has investigated the influence of strategic planning on knowledge transfer. Strategic planning was transformed into a localised practice; it has evolved from an international rigid recipe that fits the IOs and donors' agenda to a "flexible" tool modelled by each region based on the local dynamics and the

socio-spatial context. Although it remains an ongoing practice, SP appears to be autonomous and non-binding in the landscape of planning practices.

The framework of the strategic planning analysis presented in this paper provides a point of departure for an enhanced understanding of a recent planning practice that has re-questioned 1) the planning system while examining its inability to adopt new planning approaches such as strategic planning; 2) the role of unions as adequate echelon for development while referring to unions of municipalities that are inserted between the central and the local with limited power; and 3) the efficiency of the regulatory planning, emphasising land-use planning rather than visionary and participatory planning.

This relates to the ongoing debate in Lebanon on reforming the planning system at the planning level, and the decentralisation agenda at the political level.

The critical questioning on strategic planning continues to be relevant and necessary in the current context, since institutional actors are involved and encourage the implementation of a SP. The learning process in Lebanon, which took place over the last 15 years on many levels, continues as a localised practice. For decades, Lebanon relied on the regulatory planning framework provided by the DGU and the CDR to develop its territories. Urban and rural planning policies were the result of traditional, land-use oriented master plans (master and detailed plans) and a national master plan that lacked implementation procedures (SDATL). However, many stakeholders are engaged in the strategic planning process advocating the necessity of shedding light on their roles and agendas when examining their involvement. This needs further investigation which is beyond the scope of this article.

Concerning the involvement of the CDR, future research should look into whether the CDR is trying to promote a new neoliberal agenda with the IOs in a socio-political context of *laissez-faire* or if the strategic planning internalised by the CDR can be considered as a new way of transforming the static plagued system.

As for the DGU, researchers could ask if this new strategic planning complements the traditional planning system as a more effective planning that mitigates the shortcomings of the land-use master plans, or if, on the contrary, it acts a strategy that bypasses the system and is mobilised for the interests of particular actors. And, finally who benefits from strategic planning?

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