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## **FROM INDUSTRIAL CITY TO SUSTAINABLE CITY THE NORTHERN SUBURBS OF PARIS YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

**Abstract.** Former industrial suburbs, which are now the object of economic and functional transformations almost everywhere in Europe, are suitable testing grounds for implementing a more sustainable urban development. The case of the northern suburbs of Paris, which we will look at here, shows that there is no lack of political will or regulatory tools for imagining and planning this sustainable city. However, the social problems that affect these suburbs are a definite impediment to its realization.

**Key words:** sustainable city, economic changes, sustainable housing policy, sustainability and city planning, social mix policy, Paris.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Heavily marked by their industrial past, the northern suburbs of Paris have been left with more scars than other areas. Here, the Fordism crisis has left behind pollution, brownfields and insalubrious housing, while plunging the area into a long period of social crisis.

Due to its many difficulties, this part of the Parisian agglomeration is now the object of various public policy interventions, which in the post-Kyoto context, all fit more or less directly in the sustainability paradigm. Whether it is a matter of former industrial sites that are cleaned up and put to other uses, of developing public transportation or of large-scale housing renovation, this part of the Parisian metropolis serves as a testing ground for different ways to build a more sustainable city.

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The significance of these experiments lies precisely in the fact that real sustainability comes from a comprehensive and systemic approach that goes far beyond only environmental aspects. Economics, social issues, housing, transportation, environment, these are the elements of an integrated urban policy which today are reflected in planning documents (territorial coherence plan,<sup>1</sup> Agenda 21). By drawing on a representative example of the changes taking place north of Paris, we will examine this process of the transformation of an industrial city into a more sustainable city. By paying more attention to social aspects, and less to environmental or eco-construction issues, we will address an essential, yet often neglected dimension of sustainability. In this case, we will see that due to its social characteristics, this area presents a certain resistance to sustainability. It thus calls for a critical reading of the idea of a sustainable city.

## **2. ECONOMIC CHANGES AND SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION: SUSTAINABILITY IN THE TIME OF GLOBALIZATION**

Among the many industrial wastelands located in the northern suburbs of Paris, the Plaine Saint-Denis, which covers almost 800 ha and three municipalities (Aubervilliers, Saint-Denis and Saint-Ouen), is by far the largest. Having been the object of coordinated development since the end of the 1990s, in less than fifteen years this space has become the fourth economic hub of the city, after central Paris, La Défense and Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport. It now has around 65,000 jobs and 10,000 residents.

Yet when studied in terms of sustainability, this vast undertaking of changing the uses and shape of the city appears ambiguous. Various conversions and developments of public transportation have certainly helped enhance the environment of an area once ravaged by all sorts of pollution. On the other hand, the qualitative transformation of jobs that followed was done at the expense of the insufficiently skilled local populations.

### **2.1. A Sustainable Development Project**

When elected officials and urban planners addressed the redevelopment of this vast industrial wasteland at the end of the 1990s, they did not explicitly refer

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<sup>1</sup> These plans (SCOT) are derived from the Solidarity and urban renewal law (SRU) of 14th December 2000, one of whose objectives was to adapt regulatory urban planning to the principles of sustainable development.

to a sustainable city.<sup>2</sup> However, their proposed project reflected a real impregnation of the principles of sustainable development. Since 2006, this project has been part of a territorial coherence plan (SCOT) that covers the nine municipalities of the Plaine Commune agglomeration community<sup>3</sup> (400,000 residents). This SCOT, which is based on a programme of planning and sustainable development (PADD)<sup>4</sup>, is built around a local housing programme (PLH), an urban transport plan (PDU) and since 2010 an Agenda 21. The agglomeration's project has received true institutional recognition, since the Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development acknowledged it in 2009 as one of 12 eco-cities nationwide.<sup>5</sup> These planning schemes thus mark the official consideration of sustainable development in urban planning regulations. However, since the end of the 1990s, the Plaine Saint-Denis project has laid the foundations for a first prospective and systemic reflection. Three guiding principles have structured the project since its beginnings. First of all, it aimed to promote a dense urbanism to optimize the maximum occupation of space and limit urban sprawl. It then proposed a multifunctional development, mixing offices, housing and shops, to break with the damaging effects of zoning and to bring employees closer to their homes with the goal of limiting travel between metropolitan areas. There was also an effort to promote social diversity in order to balance the area's population. But the main concern of elected officials was economic. They absolutely had to attract new businesses in order to offer jobs to the population and to assure tax revenues for the agglomeration to finance projects and social benefits. So the development that was imagined had an economic, social and environmental aspect and perfectly answered the requirements of sustainable development.

At the end of the 1990s, the transformation from industrial uses required major environmental modifications. Soil remediation was undertaken at many sites, such as the Stade de France where a former gas plant had left tens of metres of significant underground chemical pollution. The development plan also envisaged the construction of roads and many green spaces to give shape to an area that had once been only a juxtaposition of factories. Green spaces played

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<sup>2</sup> The term was not yet common in professional urban planning circles or in the political sphere. In addition, elected Communist officials of this red suburb were, at that time, not very sensitive to environmental questions.

<sup>3</sup> The Plaine Commune agglomeration community was created in 2000 and acts in the name of the commune members to oversee property development, urban planning, development of the environment, social inclusion, cultural actions, road networks, transport, collection and treatment of household waste.

<sup>4</sup> Every SCOT must include a diagnostic, a programme of planning and sustainable development (PADD) and a cartographical volume, called the general orientation document (DOG), which is opposable to lower urban planning documents.

<sup>5</sup> The Ministry thus rewards agglomerations that are the most advanced in the area of sustainable development with major subsidies (40 million euros).

an important role in this quest for shaping an urban life. A three-kilometre stretch of motorway, which cut through the neighbourhood, was planted as an open garden. Public transport was developed to deal with the inconveniences of road infrastructures. When in 1996 the state decided to build the Stade de France to host the 1998 World Cup of football, the choice was made to bring the 80,000 spectators to the stadium by means of public transport. Two new stations were created on the suburban railway line and a metro station was renovated. Today these infrastructures make it possible to transport employees to the site without much difficulty. To complete this system, two new metro stations along with a tramway are planned for 2013 in the still poorly served southern part of the area, while other routes are envisaged as part of the Grand Paris express project.<sup>6</sup>

Densification was gradually put into place without, however, giving into the CBD model of urbanism that would have been unwelcome in this Communist Party stronghold. The desire to mix functions, which probably had more to do with a somewhat fantasized idea of the perfectly balanced city, was more difficult to accomplish. To achieve this balance, elected officials and state agencies decided to dedicate as much surface to housing as to other activities. So to complement the million-and-a-half square metres of office space, more than 15,000 new housing units were planned. Nevertheless, since the pace of office construction was much faster than that of housing, this agreement was constantly readjusted. In 2006, the state required 1.2 m<sup>2</sup> of housing for 1 m<sup>2</sup> of office space and 1.4 m<sup>2</sup> in 2011. Today, in spite of the construction of over 5,000 housing units, public facilities, squares and gardens, functional diversity is still far from being upmost in people's minds. For employees and residents, the Plaine Saint-Denis remains a workspace. The fact that almost all of the businesses are meant for employees (snack shops, sandwich bars, brasseries) is a good indicator of their main usage. Here, like elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> the implementation of functional diversity, which is at the heart of the sustainable city, proves to be relatively delicate. We will see that while the objectives concerning construction, although delayed, will probably be kept, these perceptions will also have an effect on the population of these units. For reasons that probably arise from the level of acceptance of nuisances, of requirements regarding quality of life and of transportation, modern cities are much more prone to functional fragmentation than industrial cities that once more easily juxtaposed workspaces and living spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a vast automated metro project that would encircle Paris for which the financing, estimated to be over 35 billion euros, is a problem.

<sup>7</sup> In Paris, the 8th arrondissement had only 40,000 residents in 2009 compared to 68,000 in 1978, while the number of jobs is 163,980. Elsewhere, as in Bercy-Village, functional diversity was fiercely fought by residents who could not find the usual amenities of a residential neighbourhood.

In reality, it is the rise of a veritable business district that we have seen over the past ten years. Since 2000, no less than 5,000 companies have been established here. With 65,000 jobs, the Plaine Saint-Denis now has more jobs than at the height of the industrial era (50,000 jobs in 1968). But this development, which improves the urban environment and sustains employment, also profoundly changes the nature of that employment. Thus, these rapid changes pose a certain number of social problems.

## **2.2. The Progressive Disconnection of Economic and Social Factors**

These economic transformations could be qualified as sustainable if they were accompanied by corresponding social changes. Yet, this is not at all the case, since as jobs became more qualified, at the same time workers were replaced by a population that was in a large part foreign born and poorly skilled. This has resulted in a profound gap between economy and society that is not very defensible.

From the early 2000s, the development of this space near the centre aroused the interest of Parisian companies in search of functional and inexpensive offices. Large groups took advantage of this new opportunity to consolidate certain business segments previously scattered around the city, for example, BNP moved its accounting services here. Then, more strategic functions quickly followed such as research and development (Saint-Gobain, SNCF), and finally head offices (e.g. Générali, Randstad, Arcelor Mittal, SFR, Veolia). These companies that were carrying out functional reorganizations within the metropolitan area, thus created very few new jobs. In addition, the jobs that were transferred here were often very highly qualified and poorly corresponded to the qualifications of the area's residents. Nearly 40% of the 400,000 residents of the agglomeration community have no diploma, while only 7.2% of them hold higher degrees (22% in metropolitan France). So in reality, the mechanisms of populating this suburb are not in tune with the economic transformations. In the Plaine Commune, between 1999 and 2006, 40% of the new arrivals in the agglomeration area were of foreign nationality. And these less-educated foreigners are often more unskilled than the French (57% against 25%).<sup>8</sup> Among those who arrived in Seine-Saint-Denis<sup>9</sup> less than five years ago, nearly one out of two is without a diploma. In addition, Seine-Saint-Denis draws the least skilled foreigners. Between 1999 and 2006, the number of young people without qualifications increased among foreigners (+ 23% at 24 years, + 15% at 29 years), while it declined in other parts of the agglomeration.

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<sup>8</sup> INSEE (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Department with 1.5 million residents, that makes up the major part of the northern suburbs of Paris.

Figure 1 summarizes the gap between jobs offered in the area and the qualifications of the residents.

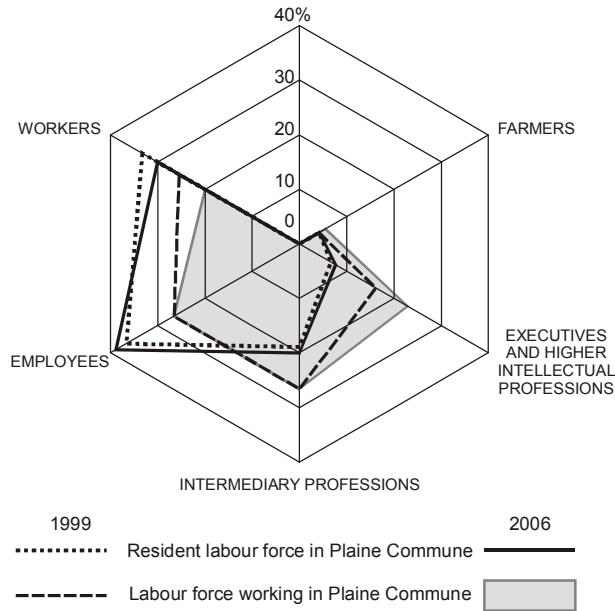


Fig. 1. Evolution of the CSP (Social Professional Categories) of resident labour force and labour force working in the Plaine Commune between 1999 and 2006

Sources: INSEE (1999, 2006)

This figure shows a growing disconnection between 1999 and 2006 of the socio-professional profile of the resident labour force and the labour force working in the agglomeration territory.<sup>10</sup> The proportion of qualified professionals went from 16% to 22.5%, while their proportion in the resident labour force increased by only 0.9 points, going from 6.2% to 7.1%. This resulted in significant commuting since 75% of the employees working in the Plaine Commune do not live in the agglomeration territory and conversely 75% of the labour force of Plaine Commune works outside of the agglomeration territory. The improvement of transport services has thus had unexpected damaging effects. It has placed the workers living in the territory in competition with more qualified employees from the rest of the agglomeration (Lebeau, 2010) and has also contributed to this distancing of the social territory from the economic territory.

This commuting that thwarts all of the efforts of the government to bring employees closer to their workplace is, however, of little importance when compared to the massive social exclusion that this situation reveals. For behind the undeniable contradiction of

<sup>10</sup> Due to lack of data, the same comparison at the level of the Plaine Saint-Denis could not be made, but it is likely that it would accentuate the phenomenon.

the flow, marked by the departure of low-skilled jobs<sup>11</sup> and the arrival of insufficiently trained populations, it is the conditions for large-scale economic and social marginalization that stand out. Furthermore, within the paradox of the situation that pits eco-mobility against social sustainability, it is the coherence of the government policy that is undermined by these territorial fragmentations. The mobility of jobs and people on a global scale should make us question the real room for manoeuvre available to urban authorities to build a sustainable city in a time of economic and social globalization.

### 3. THE PITFALLS OF A SUSTAINABLE HOUSING POLICY

For some ten years, the economic transformations of these suburbs have been accompanied by profound housing renovations. Public housing, which represents over 52% of residences, has been the object of an extensive renovation plan by the state and the agglomeration, concerning 8,000 housing units and calling for over 1.4 billion euros over ten years. But it is essentially a policy of demolition/reconstruction<sup>12</sup> through which elected officials intend to modify the appearance and the population of their suburbs. Thus, nearly everywhere in the northern suburbs, housing is replacing factories and old deteriorated buildings. This real estate policy responds to various objectives that are more or less coordinated by the municipalities. In Plaine Commune, the local housing programme (PLH) establishes and links these various objectives. This programme incorporates the principles of SCOT (density, functional and social diversity). It adds a component intended to limit the insalubrity that affects 20.5%<sup>13</sup> of private residences. Densification finds another justification in the fight against housing shortages,<sup>14</sup> which primarily penalize the poorest households. Finally, in terms of population, this programme recommends the construction of 2,200 housing units per year, 40% being public housing to avoid the relegation of the most modest residents to a distant periphery within the context of a sharp increase in real estate prices in the central zone. The other part (60% of new housing) is intended to house the middle and upper social categories.<sup>15</sup> The increase of population at the end of fifteen years is expected to be 50,000 people.

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<sup>11</sup> The decline in manufacturing jobs reached 26% between 1999 and 2006 in Plaine Commune. Manufacturing accounts for only 10.1% of jobs (9.1% in 2009 against 12.7% in 1999 at the scale of metropolitan Paris).

<sup>12</sup> Between 1999 and 2006, at the level of the Plaine Commune agglomeration, 9,741 new housing units were built and 5,766 were demolished due to their dilapidation.

<sup>13</sup> PLH Plaine Commune.

<sup>14</sup> Over 1 million housing units are lacking in the Parisian agglomeration in order to properly house the entire population.

<sup>15</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the French left has been very sensitive to social diversity. The socialist majority in power between 1997 and 2003 was at the origin of the 'urban renewal solidarity' law, which requires all French communes of more than 3,500 residents to build at least 20% social housing.

This housing policy, which intends to simultaneously recreate urbanity, densify the city and harmonize social balance, also fits into a sustainable perspective. Yet poorly suited to developers' business practices and out of step with the realities of the population, this policy accumulates disappointments. To the contrary of its original intentions, it generates new forms of social tension and disrupts the management of certain public services.

### **3.1. Sustainability and Market Logic**

Developers' business logic in terms of eco-construction and breakdown of surfaces has often contributed to the evolution of the initial objectives of the housing programme.

Before 1st January 2013, when all new buildings will be limited to primary energy consumption of 50 kWhEP/m<sup>2</sup>/year,<sup>16</sup> all eco-construction projects were subject to a negotiation between developers and municipalities. However, the agglomeration services that wanted to develop low-energy consumption buildings often met with resistance from promoters for whom this type of product was too costly in relation to the solvency of buyers. In addition, ecological housing projects also have agglomeration population targets that have been substantially modified by promoters. The agglomeration, which wanted to balance the distribution between small (30%), medium (40%) and large surfaces (30%) to encourage sustainable population insertion, and a rotation of households in social housing, often came up against business practices of promoters who believed that smaller surfaces were more profitable and more adapted to the demand. Population objectives ended up being extensively readjusted.

A high price is being paid today for these market effects in terms of household rotation, overcrowding of units and social balance. Yet they are only a reflection of the realities of the population.

### **3.2. Social Mix in Relation to Local Population**

In Plaine Saint-Denis, ten years after delivery of the first buildings,<sup>17</sup> housing supply has progressed 42% and the population has increased by 39% without significant reworking of social structures, as shown in table 1.

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<sup>16</sup> This is a measurement in kilowatts equivalent to square metres of oil per year. This measure has been imposed by the law known as Grenelle II of 12th July 2010.

<sup>17</sup> In a fifteen to twenty year period nearly 15,000 housing units were built on this former industrial wasteland.



Table 1. The limited transformation of social structures in Plaine-Saint-Denis (in %)

Specification	1999	2006
0–14 years	23.4	24.6
Unemployed	29.0	23.8
Without diploma	37.6	33.2
Single-parent families	25.4	27.8
Foreigners	40.7	40.6
Employees holding temporary jobs	22.0	19.5

Sources: INSEE (1999, 2006).

This inertia reflects the geographical origins of the neighbourhood's new residents, 2/3 of whom already resided in the agglomeration territory or in the poor northern arrondissements of Paris (18th, 19th, 20th). In the context of housing shortages and rising prices<sup>18</sup> throughout the metropolis, over the past years the poorest populations have tended to retreat to the most depreciated real estate zones. Plaine Commune, which gained over 33,000 residents between 1999 and 2006, after thirty eight consecutive years of population decline, has thus picked up a large part of these poor residents. The decrease in the housing vacancy rate, which went from 11% to 5.5% between 1999 and 2006, is proof of a massive return to uncomfortable living conditions in the old degraded housing stock. At the same time, the goals of social housing construction had to be scaled back in the context of the drastic reduction of public finances.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the five-year housing programme, the part of social housing in new construction had not exceeded 19% over the period of 2005–2009 instead of the 40% initially planned. The population which grows on an average of 1.5%/year, thus mainly concerns private residences, whether old or new.

The pace of this population growth, which far exceeds the pace of housing production, reflects a large-scale population dynamics (Seine-Saint-Denis) that is now beyond the control of local authorities. In Plaine Commune, the increase in population is 3.6 times faster than the number of housing units.

<sup>18</sup> Since 2000, they have increased by 114% throughout the metropolitan area.

<sup>19</sup> Funding for the construction of social housing comes from public financing. The central government is the major financier, but during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, funding for social housing was cut way back, since he wanted to redirect households to home ownership.

Table 2. Pace of yearly population increase and number of housing units between 1999 and 2006 (in %)

Specification	Yearly population increase	Yearly increase in number of housing units
Plaine Commune Agglomeration	1.5	0.4
Seine-Saint-Denis	1.2	0.5
Metropolitan Paris	0.7	0.6

Sources: INSEE (1999, 2006).

In Saint-Denis and Aubervilliers, which have both the largest stock of deteriorated private housing and the largest number of new constructions (Plaine Saint-Denis), the differential is 1 to 7.

In this context of extreme social polarization, gentrification of part of the territory seems increasingly illusory.

### 3.3. From the Desired Diversity to Social Conflict

Far from promoting the social peace that all elected officials implicitly expect from diversity,<sup>20</sup> this policy is, on the contrary, at the origin of new types of conflict.

Among purchasers of new homes, 80% are first-time buyers with modest incomes, one quarter of them coming from social housing. It is also worth noting the small share of homeowners, which never exceeds 55% for all of the buildings constructed between 1999 and 2005.<sup>21</sup> In reality, this situation, which underlines the extensive presence of landlords, does not bode well for the future of the neighbourhood. Thus, in some buildings where companies promoting tax incentives<sup>22</sup> took over apartment sales, 70% of the owners (Plaine Commune, 2008) do not occupy their residences. Renting of the apartments is assured by these specialized

<sup>20</sup> Many authors (Donzelot, 2006) emphasize that this diversity policy has its roots in what was called the social question in the 19th century. According to Chevalier (1958), the working class was assimilated to the dangerous class.

<sup>21</sup> All of this data comes from the Plaine Commune (2005).

<sup>22</sup> In France, many operations called *Périsol*, *Robien* or *Besson* (names of the ministers who set them up) aim at using the savings of households to finance housing construction. They were given tax exemptions in return. This is a fully integrated business in which specialized companies canvass investors put together tax exemption dossiers, build the housing, rent the units (the rents collected are used to reimburse the housing costs) and subscribe to insurance to cover unpaid rent. Negotiating insurance contracts on large numbers of housing units with previously defined delinquency rates, developers are sometimes careless about the credit worthiness of the tenants.

promoters who, due to a major segmentation of the responsibilities and of the people involved, are often lax about the procedures for granting leases. This laxity inevitably leads to a proliferation of unpaid rents and cases of overcrowding, to the point that five years after their construction, some buildings already show signs of deterioration or even insalubrity, thus counteracting the initial objectives of this policy. Thefts and delinquency have also emerged, provoking the departure of many homeowners, soon replaced by poorer populations. Today, the resale price of these apartments is two-thirds or even one half the average price in Paris<sup>23</sup> and one third lower than in other communes bordering Paris.

In reality, these new units serve as a substitution for social housing in a context of scarcity of supply and they put together populations for whom cohabitation is a problem. These tensions are especially acute between tenants and homeowners. For the latter, of which a majority come from social housing, owning their homes was seen as insurance of distancing themselves from the poorest populations. Their anger is thus equal to their frustrations. A survey (Plaine Commune, 2008) regarding 28 co-ownerships built in Saint-Denis and in Aubervilliers between 1998 and 2007 shows that security problems and incivility are major concerns, since over one third of the residents complain of insecurity, incivility, noise, theft, and deliberate damage to buildings and vehicles. To prevent the situation from deteriorating, the city of Saint-Denis has even asked mediators to work with managers in order to pacify relations between residents. It is not impossible that some co-owned buildings will see the appearance of 'slumlords' who are already present in the agglomeration territory, especially in older run-down housing or in the large co-ownership properties from the 1970s. The development of these practices, which consist of exploiting the most needy (e.g. undocumented, temporary workers, single women with children), would be a clear sign of the failure of the intercommunal housing policy.

Thus, home ownership, which was chosen to encourage social diversity at the neighbourhood level and throughout the entire agglomeration, has proven to be much less effective than hoped for. Failing to attract the expected population, this policy does not bring home/work closer together, since less than one new resident out of four works in the community agglomeration territory. This growing maladjustment of the supply even causes totally unexpected segregating effects, not only at the level of the agglomeration or neighbourhood, but even within buildings. Conditions of being 'among one's own', which are necessary for the smooth functioning of a co-owned property, prove to be illusory in this territory where people from very different origins and cultures live together.<sup>24</sup> Social diversity, far from encouraging peaceful social relations, on the contrary, divides the poorer classes

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<sup>23</sup> The most recent products sell between 3,000 euros and 4,500 euros/m<sup>2</sup> at Plaine Saint-Denis, while the average price in Paris is 8,300 euros/m<sup>2</sup> and 7,600 euros/m<sup>2</sup> in the nearby 18th arrondissement of Paris.

<sup>24</sup> People of over 100 different nationalities live together in Plaine Commune.

according to their occupancy status (owner/tenant) and their culture and sometimes transforms these differences into conflicts.

These methods of occupancy also pose a certain number of problems in the area of urban management.

### **3.4. Towards a Not Very Sustainable Management of the City**

This situation poses many problems for authorities for whom it becomes increasingly difficult to adapt services to the real needs of the population. Problems arise in areas as different as the organization of street networks, garbage collection or the construction of community facilities.

Thus, the over-occupation, often evaluated<sup>25</sup> at one third and sometimes double the buildings' capacities, poses problems in terms of water supply and evacuation. But it is certainly in the area of waste collection that it proves the most unpleasant. The garbage storage areas are so undersized when compared to the real needs that rubbish is sometimes placed directly on the street. In the end, it is possible that the agglomeration will be forced to renegotiate contracts at a higher price with companies for the removal and treatment of waste. In general, it becomes difficult to adjust to the demand of an entire range of services. In spite of regular, sophisticated demographic projections, municipal services consistently underestimate needs. This forces them to build various facilities (nurseries, schools, sports fields) in haste and thus in poor functionality and profitability conditions. In 2010, the city of Saint-Denis had to plan the construction of several additional school complexes, each costing 13 million euros. Beyond the difficult adjustments of supply to demand that require services to work in emergency situations, the cost of these residents is also evoked by municipalities. This is especially true in cities that have inherited municipal socialism where free services for the disadvantaged (e.g. school meals, nurseries, day care, evening schools) were a built-in principle.

Over the long term, deterioration of buildings could be very expensive to the community. In fact, procedures for tearing down insalubrious housing cost much more than the maintenance and renovation of social housing stock.

Far from achieving the expected sustainability, the housing policy amplifies more than it corrects the problems related to the presence of poor populations in private housing. But what is most striking is the sometimes abysmal gap between the sophistication of the conceptual models that served for its definition and the results of their implementation.

Sustainable development, which invites us to think of the city in terms of balance and harmony, contributes to bringing back in favour ideas such as social and functional diversity; yet the doctrinal application of such principles, without taking

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<sup>25</sup> Assessment made by waste collection companies.

into account the realities on the ground, can turn out to be largely counterproductive. The gap between the reality of the daily management of the city, which often appears erratic and disordered, and the level of conceptualization of urban policy that preceded it, is absolutely flagrant.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Sustainable development, which aims to take into account the systemic functioning of a city as well as long-term effects, brings undeniable advances in the way of setting forth and making coherent urban policies. But while planning has reached a high level of sophistication, which borders on escalation (e.g. SCOT, PLH, Agenda 21, PDU), one cannot help but noticing its disconcerting social inefficiency. In other words, in spite of its singularities, this example should make us question the ability of sustainable development to solve the problems that it sets forth.

The north-of-Paris case equally shows that while the model has some virtues, due to its utopian and normative dimensions it can also distance decision-makers from the realities on the ground and sometimes lead to deadlock. So while repairing the excesses of a modern urbanism that was applied here to the extreme,<sup>26</sup> sustainable development (Emelianoff, 2007) probably marks the beginning of another cycle of urban utopia, which shows that the construction of the city is perhaps as much a matter of ideology as it was in the past.

While many authors have long emphasized the theoretical weaknesses of the concept along with the difficulty of reconciling the three aspects of sustainable development (Veyret, 2005), it is worth adding that this is also largely a matter of scale and context. After all, while here this model of metropolitan development proves to be not very sustainable, the same economic and functional changes analyzed across the western suburbs of Paris, where the population is made up of over 40% professionals, would have led to quite different conclusions. Is the sustainable city, then, only a model for the rich, which only works (if one pays attention to environmental aspects) there where everything already functions? Probably, but through this example, which focuses on social difficulties, it is less a question of the relevance of the concept that is posed, than its possible application within the context of globalization. It finally suggests that the 21st century global metropolis, certainly less polluted, but much more fragmented and unequal, is in the end not much more sustainable than the industrial city.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The 8,000 social housing units undergoing renovation in the area were those built in the 1960s, a time when the principles of functional urbanism were applied almost dogmatically.

<sup>27</sup> We are referring to the last industrialization cycle, which in France stretched from the post-war years to the mid-1970s.

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