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Master Plan Hub: Creating new opportunities in urban planning

Master planning constitutes a core element of Palestine’s urban planning system. Yet, it faces diverse challenges. The Master Plan Hub is a centre in the northern West Bank that brings together experts, urban planners, and technical staff under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) with a defined composition of responsibilities and tasks. The Hub is a technical support unit that provides additional urban planning capacities to municipalities, Village Councils (VC) and planning directorates of the MoLG that lack sufficient resources. In addition, it is a lab that tests and evaluates enhancements and digital innovations of urban planning processes in collaboration with the MoLG and academia.

The MoLG has been facing several problems related to the approval of master plans according to Planning Law No. 79, which is seen as outdated. Human resources and capacities, specifically within the directorates, are weak vis-à-vis the enormous number of plans. The process of publishing and approving plans is highly complex and, thus, time-consuming. Published draft plans often receive hundreds of objections, whose adequate review and consideration form a bottleneck of the process. Digital technology has not been used yet to maximise potentials and efficiency.

Against this backdrop, MoLG and Al-Najah University, with the support of the Local Governance Reform Programme (LGRP II), established the first-of-its-kind Master Plan Hub in September 2019 in Nablus to accelerate the process of finalising master plans in the northern West Bank. MoLG piloted comparative units in the past, however, lacking a physical entity with defined responsibilities. As part of this new endeavour, five young engineers and planners have been recruited for the pilot phase.

One of these engineers and planners is Enas, a 26-year-old woman who graduated in 2019. As a fresh graduate, and especially as a woman, job opportunities in the field of engineering are scarce, and many companies ask for practical experiences which she has not yet had the chance to collect. However, Enas is aware of the challenges in master and urban planning in Palestine. She wishes to become part of a solution to the difficult situation. When she heard of the opportunity to work with the Master Plan Hub, she was excited to join the team. As a volunteer, Enas supports the Ministry and selected VCs for two years.

Master Plan Hub at a glance

The Master Plan Hub is a centre in Palestine’s north that provides technical support to the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG) and Local Government Units (LGUs) in reviewing, technically updating and finalising plans for their approval.

The Hub also functions as an incubator for junior engineers and freshly graduated urban planners to build their capacities.

The Hub is a lab that tests and provides feedback on newly developed urban tools.

The Hub fosters cooperation between the Ministry and universities to enhance urban planning processes.



Young engineer Enas works at the Master Plan Hub

Development

In its initial phase, the Master Plan Hub was piloted for one year under the MoLG's directorate in the northern West Bank. In this phase, LGRP II supported the design of the Hub's scope, its methodological concept, the physical implementation as well as technical equipment and the recruitment of the engineers and local planners. An-Najah University supported the process by providing the facilities. Eventually, the Hub was fully furnished and equipped to fit the needs of its staff.

During the early stages of designing the Master Plan Hub, it was unclear how the Hub would manage to connect the different levels of already existing structures and bodies, such as the different committees involved in the urban process. By piloting the first processes and through continued technical support and advice between the different stakeholders, the functionality of the Hub and its integration into the urban planning processes could eventually be defined. After the successful results of the first year, the Hub's scope was expanded to serve urban planning processes in other areas of the West Bank, including Area C. The span of implementation was extended for another year.

A remaining challenge is to sustainably integrate the Hub into the administrative structure of the MoLG. Currently, the MoLG is operating the Hub with central government funds. The involved stakeholders are assessing the options for how the Hub can be institutionalized and financed in the long term and, possibly, be replicated in other regions of Palestine.

Soon, MoLG plans to expand the Hub to include more experts and to provide support and advice for an increased number of LGUs, aiming to serve the whole West Bank. The Hub is supposed to become a core unit which has the mandate to interact with local authorities, increase the limited capacities and enhance the availability of resources at the local level. An-Najah university continues to provide the venue and support the Hub through complementing research by professors and students.

Application

Enas and the other junior engineers are of course not alone in the Hub. All activities are supervised by a coordinator from MoLG's Planning Department. Together, their task is to prepare technical documents and plans and to represent MoLG in technical advice for and exchange with relevant stakeholders, such as the Higher Planning Council (HPC). Enas and her colleagues have been trained in urban planning processes. They have specifically been prepared to provide advice and recommendations for municipalities and VC in finalising their plans. The five experts have become an expansion of the Ministry's Urban Planning Department to finalise the pending master plans and to test new urban tools.

Since joining the Hub, Enas has witnessed the challenges firsthand: **“Several master plans were delayed in the approval process, some of them since 2014. The delay was due to different reasons: the availability of human resources at the Ministry, and the lack of clarity and responsibilities.”**

The Hub showed positive impacts on the urban planning processes of both the Ministry's and LGUs. Within two years and with the support of the five young engineers and planners, 68 urban planning processes from the long list of pending and delayed processes in Areas A and B were reviewed, technically updated, and finalised for approval. 45 master plans in Area C were updated to match the MoLG's technical requirements. The Hub experts also participated in discussions with different committees and planners from the private sector to resolve objections. Lastly, the Hub supported the development and testing of an urban design manual based on six pilot projects: the rehabilitation of “Hisham's Palace” in Jericho, the touristic area in Al Badan, the industrial zone in Beit Eiba, the Entrance Road of Qalqilia, and the public space in Al Thahryah and Bani Naim.

Enas reports: **“The Hub team took the initiative to facilitate the discussions on the delayed plans to solve their problems. A huge number of plans is currently being approved or in the final stage of approval because of the Hub's activities”.**

Master Plan Hub experts discuss an urban plan



On the other hand, the Hub created five job opportunities for young talents and integrated them into the structure of the Ministry. Enas is proud: **“The Hub developed not only my experience and my skills but also my character”**.

Relevance

Urban planning in general is crucial to the spatial and socio-economic development of cities and towns and the provision of adequate services to their population. Master planning is both a technical and political process, encompassing the planning of development and the use of land, the environment, and above all, the people. Successful planning requires relevant resources and skills to create suitable and adequate outputs. In a context in which sustainable urban development and expansion are constantly met with barriers, the Master Plan Hub is seen as a great success. As a support centre equipped with young experts, it shows a positive impact on several levels. It has increased the efficiency of planning processes, the capacities of MoLG to provide guidance and advice to LGUs, and the efficiency of LGUs in finalizing their master plans for approval by MoLG and the endorsement of the HPC. The processes have accelerated and become more efficient since they are now being done in-house and without the support of external stakeholders and consultants, at the same time allowing for more capacities at the side of the ministerial staff in the Planning Department.

Moreover, young talents are given a space to expand their knowledge and contribute to the development of their country.

“I am proud that I was part of this unit. The progress we made is valued by the Ministry, village councils, and other local authorities which received the service from the unit. They promoted our work and encouraged other village councils to approach us to solve their problems”, says Enas.

The planned horizontal upscaling of the Hub reaffirms its relevance to the MoLG and the broader local governance sector. The exploration of future sustainability and the expansion of the Hub are underway. Enas is excited: **“I wish the tasks of the new phase of the Hub will exceed master plans to different urban processes, also to allow us to develop master plans in-house and to follow up and supervise planning assignments implemented by the private sector”**.

Eventually, the improvement of urban planning processes benefits citizens through the overall sustainable development of Palestine.



Masterplans as visualised on MoLG's spatial data platform



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