



## « THE AL-DARB AL-AHMAR HOUSING REHABILITATION PROGRAMME »

Cairo, Egypt

*Period of implementation: 2004-2009 | Study case written in 2010*

**A**l-Darb al-Ahmar is an historic district in Cairo, and its 100,000 inhabitants are among the poorest. While featuring rich concentration of Islamic monuments, Al-Darb al-Ahmar suffers from a lack of adequate infrastructure and services. Consequently, an alarming percentage of residents complain of health-related issues. In an effort to consolidate the existing urban fabric, the HRP was established to improve the quality and quantity of housing and to meet health standards, while maintaining original architectural features and fairly providing secured tenure. The Al-Darb al-Ahmar Housing Rehabilitation Programme (ADAA HRP) was started in 2004 with a target of 200 houses by the deadline of end of 2009. After the launch phase, it is an ongoing programme but dependent on the action of local communities and new contributions from several donors. The HRP aims to improve the quality and quantity of responsive housing through rehabilitation, achieving long-term sustainability. HRP formulated a multidisciplinary strategy to tackle the principal causes underlying housing decay, in cooperation with all stakeholders



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *City context*

Cairo is among the most populous metropolises in the Arab world and has a vast architectural and urban Islamic heritage. Cairo absorbs about 40% of the Egyptian population and shares with the country its Arab name *Misr*. Over the last century, urban management policies have had to address a gradual and ongoing growth in population and issues related to the huge geographical area gravitating towards the Cairene conurbation, which has resulted in limited policy effectiveness and has generated severe problems such as the spread of informal housing solutions; overcrowding in historic areas; the transformation, gentrification, and deterioration of ancient urban fabrics; and the use of monuments, burial sites, and marginal areas of the city (such as the banks and islands of the Nile) for residential purposes.

Today the metropolis of the Greater Cairo Region has a population of more than 18 million inhabitants, over half living in informal settlements, with an impressive urban and demographic expansion and rapid changes in the social structure, once strongly connoted by an Arab-Islamic traditional organization. The Cairo Governorate has a population of 7,137,218 inhabitants.

Poverty, a lack of basic facilities, housing, and unemployment issues are among the major problems in Cairo both generally and especially in its historical areas:

- In Egypt, the 2008 GDP per capita was U.S.\$2,161, with a human poverty index of 23.4 and 16.7% of the population below the national poverty line. In the Cairo Governorate, 99.2% of households have access to water and per capita potable water consumption is 975.1 Litres/day/person. However, the quality of service is weak because of a discontinuity of the water supply in several areas, especially those where the population density is rapidly rising – 40% of Cairo's inhabitants do not get water for more than three hours per day. Moreover, old supply networks and the insufficient sewage network do not allow for a good drinking water quality. Further, while 98.2% of households have access to sanitation, only a fraction is connected to a sewer system.
- In Cairo, the public policy for housing is unable to meet the overall demand. In the period 2005-2006, governmental housing produced 2877 low-cost governmental housing units and 80 economy governmental housing units within a total of 8294 housing units constructed. In the Cairo Governorate, there are 1,783,335 households (6,687,961 individuals), with 693 public housing units that host 70,620 individuals.
- At the Cairo Governorate, employment is 89.2% (66.9% M, 22.3% F) and unemployment is 10.8%. The informal sector accounted for 51% of total employment in 1990, increasing to 54% by 1998. The share of women in informal employment increased from 33% to 39% and that of men declined from 67% to 61% during the same period. In 2006, the informal employment share in non-agricultural sectors was 69.3%.

### *Decentralization context*

The local administration system is governed by Law No. 43/1979 (later amended by Law 145/1988). The constitution of 1971 recognized local autonomy and identified a minimum of three tiers, namely Governorates, Cities, and Villages. Law 52/1975 added two levels: Markazes and Districts (Cairo is a fully urban Governorate and is divided into Districts). It also created a bicameral system in local units: elected Popular Councils and appointed Councils, which was considered as a leap towards administrative decentralization. Later, Law 145/1988 minimized

the local governance aspect in the system and deprived Popular Councils of the power to hold local executives accountable. Each local unit is governed by the collaboration of an elected local Popular Council and a local Executive Council whose head is appointed. The main function of both is to implement public policies at the local level.

The general status of local administration in Egypt is characterized by a constrained and rigid context that affects planning and financing as well as the implementation of functions:

- There are inconsistent trends in decentralization. For example, while according to law, local units are fully autonomous to manage community affairs, executive chiefs, in fact, control Popular Councils and representative agents of central ministries at local levels do not report to the governors in most cases.
- Planning capacity is weak at the local level. Moreover, such planning is directed towards the issuance of the budget and not toward achieving specific objectives. Most locally executed projects are planned by the central ministries, taking local needs and priorities into consideration, but only as perceived by the central authority. Locally suggested projects cannot be implemented without the approval of the central ministries and are constrained by complex administrative structures and fiscal regulations.
- Financial flexibility is limited. The rigid budgetary system has limited financial flexibility, restricting the reallocation of resources at the local level between items. Reallocation of resources between parts requires the approval of Parliament and of the Minister of Planning. At the local level, financial flexibility is also limited by scarcity of funds allocated by the central authorities, intricate disbursement procedures of those funds, and insufficient resource generation.
- The Governor has inconsistent authority over local entities and other agencies are completely subordinated administratively to central entities. Most local organizations affiliated with central ministries are not authorized to make decisions; they only implement directives from the central agencies. This further reduces the potential for decision-making at the local level.
- Community involvement is limited due to a lack of channels of communication. Moreover, the community, faced with the inability of their representatives to influence the executives, has limited interest in maintaining such channels. In fact, the concentration of power at the central level can be appreciated through the substantial number of local issues discussed in Parliament.

Recently, community participation has found a place on the government's agenda as a result of growing pressure that has been unmet by state resources. Such community participation is a tool to mobilize community resources for project implementation because projects for which community resources are mobilized can receive government matching funds.

### *Social context*

Al Darb al-Ahmar households, particularly those close to the Ayyubid Wall, are among the poorest in Egypt (see Table 1). People in this part of Cairo have to survive on less than the equivalent of one dollar per day and average household expenditure levels show that more than 50% of people's incomes are spent on food items. Very little money is spent on rent, not just as a percentage of actual expenditures, but also in absolute terms. Such low rents are typical of very old rental agreements; they are also indicative of the near complete negligence of

housing maintenance in the area. The Al Darb al-Ahmar district, with its narrow alleys, shacks, and strewn with rubbish, was often seen as an urban slum.

Yet community and family life remain strong. Family businesses, including carpentry, tile making, and other crafts, continue to provide a portion of the local population with a living.

However, social participation is limited: approximately 76 NGOs are active in Cairo (Worldwide NGO Directory 2010) but Egypt's state of emergency poses some limits. The law poses restrictions on NGO activity and fundraising ability and grants the Ministry of Social Affairs the right to disband any NGO deemed to perform illegal activity. It also requires all of Egypt's 16,000 organizations to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs by June 2003. Significantly, the applications of some long-established human rights organizations were rejected. In addition, NGOs are not allowed to take part in political or syndical activities. According to the general legal framework for NGOs in Egypt, organizations must serve the public's interest, be formally registered, have internal regulations, and have a non-sacramental mission. Associations may not engage in political activities unless they are registered as political parties.

**Table 1. Contextual data for the Al-Darb al-Ahmar district**

<i>Al-Darb al-Ahmar district population distribution</i>	
Estimated total population:	100,000 inhabitants
By gender and age:	0-15 years: 28% (14% F, 14% M) 15-60 years: 65% (33% F, 32% M) > 60 years: 8% (4% F, 4% M)
By indigenous population, according to birthplace:	83% al-Darb al-Ahmar 8% Historic Cairo 9% Elsewhere
<i>Al-Darb al-Ahmar district GDP per capita (%):</i>	
Average yearly incomes (late 2003):	Less than U.S.\$193 per capita
<i>Al-Darb al-Ahmar district total and by gender level of employment/unemployment:</i>	
Employment:	39.3% (35.9% M, 3.4% F)
Unemployment:	60.7% (8.7% M, 52% F)
<i>Al-Darb al-Ahmar level of education:</i>	
Education:	11% Diploma 6% Secondary school 7% University degree
Low education:	45% Illiterate 24% Basic education 7% Without formal education

## Policy development

Less than two centuries ago, al-Darb al-Ahmar was one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Cairo. Today the 100,000 inhabitants of this historic district (1.2 km<sup>2</sup>) are among the poorest. In spite of its central location, pedestrian scale, historic buildings, and active community, living conditions in Al-Darb al-Ahmar have worsened over the past few decades and the area has experienced a 50% decrease in population since the 1970s. This is due to the lack of maintenance of infrastructure, coupled with low family incomes and the severe deterioration of monuments and private housing. This condition has been aggravated by outdated planning constraints, widespread insecurity of tenure, and unrealistic rent controls.

In spite of these serious shortcomings, Al-Darb al-Ahmar remains socially far more cohesive and architecturally more genuine than other parts of Cairo. Accordingly, any planned intervention has to accommodate different needs while meeting health standards. Hence, in an effort to consolidate the existing urban fabric, the Housing Rehabilitation Programme was established to improve the quality and quantity of housing while maintaining original architectural features.

### *Background*

In 1984, the Aga Khan decided to donate a park to the citizens of Cairo. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) selected the site of al-Darassa, sited to the east side of Al-Darb al-Ahmar. The Azhar Park project attracted public and private investments in the area, enhancing the district's prospects and providing a strong impetus for parallel rehabilitation efforts in Al-Darb al-Ahmar. In 1996, when the AKTC took over the site from the Cairo Governorate, aiming to manage and to anticipate the risks of speculative pressures and uncontrolled development, the AKTC and its local subsidiary, the Aga Khan Cultural Services-Egypt (AKCS-E), developed a more comprehensive urban rehabilitation programme for the entire area of Al-Darb al-Ahmar.

In 1999, a survey was conducted in the Aslam Mosque neighbourhood as a pilot initiative for identifying planning policies and housing strategies aimed at the preservation and appropriate development of the entire area. In 2003, a baseline survey of Al-Darb al-Ahmar revealed that 22% of the dwelling units had no private lavatory; subsequently, many families share public toilets. Moreover, 51% of the households were deprived of a consistent water source in their kitchens, while 32% of the dwellings had non-ventilated rooms. In the survey, an alarming percentage of residents complained of health-related issues. Findings also showed that 86% of residents wished to continue residing in Al-Darb al-Ahmar despite declining living conditions.

### *Policy goals*

The AKTC's long-term strategy focused on the physical upgrading of the building stock and the socioeconomic development of the community, two complementary objectives aimed at the general revitalisation of the entire district.

### *Chronological development and implementation*

Initially, AKTC concentrated its efforts in three Action Areas, each with its own special character, needs, and opportunities: Burg al-Zafar Street and its immediate surroundings; the Aslam neighbourhood; and the Bab al-Wazir area and its extension along al-Darb al-Ahmar Street. By 2004, 19 community-owned houses (approximately 70 families), a health centre, a business centre, the restoration of an old school building, and two reconstructed minarets were completed. An additional 11 houses will be rehabilitated either directly through AKTC's activities or through the microcredit programme (rehabilitation of 8 additional houses began in the spring

of 2004). Of the 19 housing projects completed in 2004, 7 were part of the initial pilot credit programme. By 2008, up to 200 houses were brought into the housing credit programme.

The rate at which the Housing Rehabilitation Programme has developed has been slower than expected, but the programme has been holding its original target of 200 houses (13% of houses in the three Action Areas) by the end of 2009. Housing projects that AKTC agrees to rehabilitate are selected on a case-by-case basis; many of these are in conjunction with AKTC's conservation programmes along the Ayyubid Wall and other identified monument restoration programmes.

During the second phase, AKTC initiated a larger-scale development plan for the district, aimed at improving and developing the area's public infrastructure and open spaces, and creating better conditions for private investment. Because the project hires most of its staff members from the al-Darb al-Ahmar community, by the end of the second phase the project staff was technically and administratively able to carry out the activities and direct the project. The credit services within the project are designed to be self-sustaining and will be continued after the initial disbursement. Investments are recuperated during the second phase. It is envisioned that the microcredit activities could eventually become a formal microfinance bank.

### *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

The Housing Rehabilitation Programme (HRP) follows an integrated approach synergizing available resources. Through direct links with local authorities, community groups, and other Community Development Corporation initiatives such as vocational training and employment, the HRP has been able to mobilize resources into a mechanism capable of implementing rehabilitation strategies towards its objectives. Resource types, roles, and team players include:

- Financial resources from the Social Fund for Development, Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and Ford Foundation grants; residents' direct financial and in-kind contributions (cost share 30% to 50% of rehabilitation costs); and Aga Khan Agency for Microfinance's housing loans to support different income levels
- Technical expertise in rehabilitation from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Community Development Corporation; partners at different levels ranging from Cairo Governorate, municipal authorities, community-based organizations, to community members; and local HRP staff providing administration and technical support
- Microenterprises, suppliers, and small contractors in Al-Darb al-Ahmar providing construction and finishing works
- Institutional and administrative resources mobilized and facilitated through the Cairo Governorate, the Supreme Council of Antiquities, and Social Fund for Development
- Knowledge transfer of building techniques and suitable practices through coaching and structured training that diffuses technical expertise to locals, which is having a multiplier effect and enabling the programme to achieve higher targets and technical sustainability outcomes

The policy is aimed at the District's residents, enterprises, and social groups. AKTC's proposed urban improvement programme requires not only simultaneous physical, social, and economic actions, sustained over an extended period of time, but also institutional capacity-building. Here, the task is to support the formation of local NGOs in various domains until they are ready to carry on with reduced assistance from AKTC. A public/private Development Corporation has been established as an umbrella organisation in Al-Darb al-Ahmar under the auspices of the



District Authorities to coordinate ongoing activities, generate income from restored facilities and services provided, and eventually be responsible for a self-sustained rehabilitation process.

The promotion of community awareness and self-governance is recognized as a means of restoring a distinctive feature of traditional Muslim cities in residential areas and making people more aware of their cultural traditions. To this effect, the project has promoted the creation of the Darb al-Ahmar Business Association and the Family Health Development Centre, two locally based organisations charged with the delivery of services to the community in the all-important sectors of health and business development. In addition, it has provided support for a number of existing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the area who are seen as key partners in raising community awareness and channelling local resources towards the future revitalization of the district. The AKTC has provided the establishment of a Community Development Corporation (DACDC) based in the area. This body operates as a self-sustaining community-managed private-sector initiative working on physical upgrading and environmental improvement activities while mobilising community resources within the framework of locally identified problems, needs, and priorities. A case in point is the successful 'Women Working Together' group's pilot activities; the group was established to encourage and support educational and income-generating activities among women residents of the area.

To support the physical rehabilitation, a social housing team has been engaged by the HRP to assist in providing the legal documentation required for the buildings' rehabilitation, to negotiate among the various parties, and to ensure that all the non-physical conditions are met before physical rehabilitation takes place. Following a preliminary agreement reached with the residents of the buildings earmarked for rehabilitation, an independent credit team carries out an assessment to establish the credit-worthiness of the individual families concerned.

### *Institutionalization and financing*

The HRP approach has initiated significant policy changes regarding community participation and the role of housing in revitalization schemes in Egypt. Over the past 6 years, the Supreme Council of Antiquities changed its demolition policies, which had led to the eviction of hundreds of families from Al-Darb al-Ahmar. Based on the HRP approach, the Supreme Council of Antiquities issued a decree in 2005 approving the protection of the existing housing stock in the vicinity of existing monuments. Accordingly, Cairo Governorate revised the 1973 District Plan which allowed for massive demolitions based on the Supreme Council of Antiquities policies. In 2008, the Cairo Governorate ratified the new Conservation Plan for Al-Darb al-Ahmar, the first of its kind in the Egyptian context, allowing for active community involvement while maintaining realistic conservation measures.

In addition, in 2007 the National Organization for Urban Harmony identified the HRP approach as a best practice/model in its 'Guidelines for Historic Areas' to be implemented on the national level. In 2008, on the local level, the Cairo Governorate modified the legal requirements for the rehabilitation of existing housing stock in order to promote a better rehabilitation process.

The al-Darb al-Ahmar programme is a component of the larger 'Azhar Park Project' of the Historic Cities Support Programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. By late 2004, more than EGP 25 million had been spent on socioeconomic rehabilitation for housing projects and monument restorations, with grants from the Egyptian-Swiss Development Fund, the Ford Foundation, the World Monuments Fund, and AKTC. From 2005 to 2008 a larger programme for the rehabilitation of al-Darb al-Ahmar was implemented with major contributions from the Social Fund for Development, the Ford Foundation, the Canadian International Development Agency, and AKTC, adding to the program another EGP 5 million (U.S.\$800,000).

## Outcomes and reflections

### *Key results and achievements*

The HRP uses the LogFrame approach to improve efficiency and control. For the targeted group of residents, the program provided 285 households with secured tenure status; rehabilitated 85 buildings; and improved living conditions through the provision of: 42 new private bathrooms, 55 new kitchens, additional living space, improving privacy for family members, natural light and ventilation to all habitable spaces, and improved access to safe water supply and sanitation.

Secondary results for the program were secured tenure was achieved through increased collaboration and willingness between owners and tenants to contribute to rehabilitation (44% owners/56% tenants); Even with escalating cost-shares and inflation in building material prices, the demand for the programme, local craftsmen, and contractors continues to increase; The microcredit HRP loan was established and achieved a repayment rate of 99.6% over the last five years; Knowledge was diffused on nonconventional low-cost building techniques; and a refined and recognized practical rehabilitation mechanism was established.

More broadly, the programme's primary impact was that it established national planning practices acknowledging community needs for residents of Historic Areas, allowing for the revision of the existing demolition plans and establishing a new participatory process. Furthermore, a high percentage of total rehabilitation cost circulates within the community itself, creating 400 jobs and supporting local commercial businesses.

### *Main obstacles faced*

- *Complicated legal procedures, planning constraints, and outdated plans* – The HRP and other Community Development Corporation initiatives have addressed this issue through: working with different authorities to change the demolition plans in favour of rehabilitation; coordinating transparent decision-making processes involving different stakeholders; legal mediation between tenants and owners; formulating/empowering Community-Based Organizations able to proceed with rehabilitation activities; and establishing a formal participatory decision-making mechanism.
- *Lack of technical knowhow and standards for rehabilitation of traditional structures* – Al-Darb al-Ahmar's early twentieth-century houses are in a context that lacks proper technical knowledge of maintenance. The HRP developed with local craftsmen a body of knowledge on cost-effective and appropriate rehabilitation techniques, and disseminates this knowledge through technical manuals and training activities.
- *Low incomes and lack of housing finance mechanisms* – Most residents cannot access mortgages due to collateral complications and low incomes. The HRP stimulated community investments and directed them to rehabilitation without jeopardizing living standards. The HRP introduced a housing finance mechanism mixing between grants and loans; promotes social equity through flexible intervention packages responsive to different income levels; and reduces costs through low-cost building technologies.
- *Weak sense of ownership and participation* – This was primarily due to insecurity of tenure and planning constraints. The HRP worked on stimulating a higher sense of communal civic responsibility through community-based planning involving participatory design with different community groups; promoting models of leadership through policies



rewarding collective communal efforts; and promoting gender equality through sensitive design and planning measures catering for different groups, especially women.

### *Replicability*

The HRP represents an alternative to traditional remedies to the decline of historic neighbourhoods. These usually involve isolating monuments by the forced removal of inhabitants or accepting a *laissez-faire* approach that allows commercial developers to set the priorities of a neighbourhood. In either case, residents are displaced. In contrast, the approach of the HRP has been to stimulate rehabilitation without displacing residents, largely by ensuring that they have a stake in the future of their community, helping create viable businesses through the provision of micro-credit, and assisting owners restore crumbling houses. Community priorities, including health, education, solid waste disposal, job training, and jobs, are also being addressed by the comprehensive AKTC Al-Darb al-Ahmar programme.

In its initial six-year period, the HRP has substantially enhanced the image of al-Darb al-Ahmar and has provided a sound framework for collateral investment and donor participation. Continuing to jointly mobilise public institutions, donors, residents, local business and private investors is essential to achieve the critical mass needed to make the final turn-around happen.

Together, the HRP and the comprehensive socio-economic development programme for the Darb al-Ahmar district are part of an integrated urban planning concept for the eastern portion of the Darb al-Ahmar district, which is prepared in coordination with the District authorities. The relevance of these different initiatives goes beyond this particular district as it offers an alternative model of urban management and development for neglected and economically depressed historic areas that has wider applicability in Cairo and, indeed, other Islamic cities.

The policy could be replicated in other historical neighbourhoods and cities with a significant presence of ancient monuments and similar urban fabric and life patterns. The participative pilot project approach, by providing a successful example – rehabilitation of a row of houses, for example – can reverse pessimistic expectations when people see what is possible. This is enormously important in neighbourhoods where decline is often accepted as inevitable. Historic monuments and the traditional urban fabric can be important parts of community life rather than a drain on resources. Through adaptive re-use, monuments and cultural assets can be returned to their original function as integral parts of daily life.

But none of the aspects of development can be treated in isolation from the others: an environmental problem cannot be treated in isolation from the surrounding social issues. For physical rehabilitation to be successful and sustainable, it must be coordinated with social programmes in a comprehensive way. Some elements are unique of the Al-Darb al-Ahmar urban context and indirectly could be an obstacle to the replicability of the policy elsewhere. The vicinity of several important commercial and cultural centres, monuments, and archaeological attractions constitutes an additional asset. The area's strategic location provides Al-Darb al-Ahmar with unique opportunities for private investment in housing, visitor facilities, and commercial space. Moreover, the large availability of ruined and vacant lots can be used to meet the current housing shortage with new residential developments.

### **Further information**

This case was researched and written by Dr. Michele Morbidoni under the supervision of Dr. Giovanni Allegretti at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2010.

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