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TESTING A NEW PARADIGM: UNRWA'S CAMP IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

*Philipp Misselwitz and Sari Hanafi**

The article will critically reflect on recently launched Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – an initiative that still remains at a pilot stage, yet bears the potential to radically overhaul the agency's approach to prioritizing and delivering services, its relationship to refugee communities and its engagement with the physical, social and cultural fabric of Palestine refugee camps. Focussing on two distinct, yet inextricably linked themes – the built environment and camp governance – the authors will speculate on how the ongoing experience could lead to a long-overdue, radical re-conceptualisation of what constitutes a “refugee camp” – from a space of victimisation towards an emancipated space where refugees live with civil rights – a new model with potentially global repercussions. Based on the conviction that both defending refugee rights and civil life in an environment of dignity and optimism are compatible, and fears and suspicion of “normalization” should be overcome, a series of projects are currently being implemented across the dispersed camps of the Middle East, which reflect a more developmental approach for improving, in a holistic sense, the refugee camps' physical and social environment. Here, the adoption of a participatory, community-driven planning approach offers the opportunity to learn from past mistakes. Camp refugees, for the first time, felt empowered to become active participants shaping their environment rather than just passive recipients of aid.

The rapidly deteriorating living conditions in Palestinian refugee camps demand no less than a critical rethinking of the camps' space, the rights of their inhabitants and the role of humanitarian missions. Facing some of the most congested urban environments worldwide, rife with poverty, bare technocratic relief provision is hardly tenable. In this context, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) established a new Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme (ICIP) in 2006, marking a shift from relief to sustainable development – an approach that follows the broader reform process within the UN, including in agencies assisting refugees,

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such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).¹ Endorsed by the 2004 Geneva Conference,² along with the differentiation between the “right of return” and the “right to live in appropriate living conditions”, UNRWA sought to introduce a more developmental approach for improving, in a holistic sense, the refugee camps’ physical and social environment by adopting a participatory, community-driven planning approach.³ This new policy intervened in the aftermath of the dramatic collapse of the Oslo process since 2000, which had already contributed to the “de-tabooization” of camp rehabilitation.

Yet, the introduction of the new approach has not been easy. To date, the program remains poorly funded and it is sometimes contested and misunderstood, both within and outside the Agency. This is not surprising as the ICIP directly challenges UNRWA’s *modus operandi* and its relationship with the refugees’ representative bodies. Though it is too early to evaluate the new program, the first experiences in camp improvement over the last several years reveal the potential remit of the ICIP.

In this article, we will discuss two salient and interconnected issues of key importance to the new programme. The first issue concerns the spatial and physical setting of the camps and the strategies and tools needed to bring about effective change. UNRWA’s attitude towards the camps’ infrastructure has traditionally been limited and characterized by a technocratic mindset, blind to the actual process of camp urbanization and the complexity of its spatial organization and production. The ICIP has acknowledged, for the first time, that camps are complex built environments with multiple needs. In this sense, we will trace and critically reflect upon UNRWA’s efforts to develop appropriate planning and steering tools needed to facilitate holistic improvements in refugee living conditions.

The second issue is related to participation and the decision-making processes involved in ICIP implementation; it also addresses the problem of the camps’ governance. The ICIP has been defined by UNRWA as the outcome of participatory planning processes, where refugee communities are expected to lead

¹ A milestone policy document which reflects UNHCR’s shift from the traditional focus on relief to a more developmental approach is the “Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern” published in 2003. The document was prepared by UNHCR’s Core Group on Durable Solutions, a think tank specifically set up to consider new approaches to durable solutions. It reflects a renewed interest in refugee livelihood and self-reliance strategies also referred to as “development-based approach”, see also G. Loescher, A. Betts, Alexander and J. Milner, *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection into the 21st Century*, Abingdon, New York, Routledge, 2008. The UNHCR document states: “The basic criterion for a good programme is self-reliance. In protracted refugee situations however, refugees – sometimes for decades – remain dependent on humanitarian assistance. One essential key to solving such situations is political; but, in the meantime, a facilitating element of any durable solution is development.”

² See Section 2.3 of this article for more details.

³ UNRWA’s new development-oriented approach was endorsed by the Agency’s Commissioners General in a memorandum dated 25 Oct. 2004 on the subject of “Agency Policy on Shelter Rehabilitation” (on file with authors) and also found reflection in UNRWA’s 2005–09 Medium Term Plan (MTP).

rather than receive.⁴ Certain pragmatic questions emerge such as: who speaks on behalf of the community? Who defines the priorities? Who participates in decision-making? Who can ensure sustainability of implemented measures? What role does and will UNRWA play in the process? These questions reveal the misunderstandings that characterize the current status quo. Because of its mandate, a humanitarian organization like UNRWA has historically understood its role as a temporary relief provider to a temporary group of victims, carefully avoiding taking on a wider governing role. At the same time, most refugees have effectively assigned UNRWA a key role, holding it responsible for problems in the camps that go well beyond the realm of its mandate.

We will argue that the resulting “phantom sovereignty” of UNRWA is based on this fundamental misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities, which leaves a problematic void, contributes to the sense of permanent emergency and exception, and fuels mistrust and suspicion. Decades of internal and international out-migration of the most educated and capable among the camp dwellers – keen to escape the trap of passivity and over-reliance on relief – has left camp communities in vulnerable conditions. Ultimately, the situation can be reversed by developing effective, democratically endorsed camp governance structures that represent community interests and can lead to camp improvements. UNRWA may choose to accept and engage with existing representative structures, overcome its paternalistic approach and sometimes institutional arrogance, and carefully assist and strengthen camp governance. Using the examples of Nahr el-Bared camp in northern Lebanon and Fawwar camp in the West Bank, we will trace how the implementation of the ICIP has addressed the question of camp governance.

After describing the status quo of the past decades, we will explore the context, changes and attitudes towards camp rehabilitation. We will then discuss the relationship between camp improvement and urban governance and, based on the first positive experiences of the ICIP, we will analyse the possibilities for effective and lasting change.

2. Attitudes towards camp rehabilitation

2.1. The “*tawteen*” (settlement) debate

The debate on the physical rehabilitation of Palestinian refugee camps has been deeply politicized. The quotations below illustrate some of the arguments of a long-standing debate often referred to as the *tawteen* debate:

Residents of Ain al-Hilweh in Southern Lebanon have expressed fear that the humanitarian associations could be linked to unnamed ‘international

⁴ UNRWA’s *Camp Improvement Manual* (2008), an internal publication developed as a product of the “Camp Development Pilot Research Project”, a cooperative effort between UNRWA and Stuttgart University, states at p. 5: “Camp Improvement cannot be imposed; it can only succeed as the joint effort of all stakeholders. Camp communities themselves hold the key: As ‘local experts’ camp dwellers themselves know best what is most urgently needed, can implement actions most efficiently and ensure that achieved results are lasting. Rather than remaining ‘receiving beneficiaries’, local communities must ‘drive’ the process at all stages.”

parties,' which are seeking to settle Palestinians outside their homeland and take advantage of their most basic needs to implement a settlement project. They see the political timing of the project as 'improper,' arguing that those who have suffered displacement for years are capable of suffering more in order to 'stop the conspiracy from finding its way through need.' Their right to return to Palestine is sacred, they said...⁵

Why do we need planning? We are a refugee camp. Camps do not need playgrounds or parks... This is something for cities. Do you want to transform the camp into a city?⁶

The EU project on camp infrastructure was not easily received by the population; some of the workers were beaten. People ask why the EU is hostile to our return and wants at the same time to improve our camp here.⁷

Similar critical statements of camp rehabilitation can also be heard in the diaspora, where refugees, activists and scholars are debating visions of a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The combination of the new urgency brought about by previously non-imagined levels of poverty and overcrowding in the camps, as well as the failure of the Oslo process, has signalled significant changes in the context of the debate about camp rehabilitation. Since 2000, Palestinian dissident voices have highlighted the instrumentalization of refugee camps by some political activists. Palestinian organizations and host countries have begun to challenge the hard-liners who were rejecting any physical or spatial improvements to the camps.

Actually, while camps are considered to be a laboratory of the Palestinian nation-building process and an expression of the evolution of the right of return, in daily life these camps are exposed to a process of double marginalization. On the one hand, the host authorities, including the Palestinian Authority (PA), exclude refugee camps from urban planning programs. On the other hand, camps are often disconnected from the social and urban networks of their neighbouring areas. While Emmanuel Marx considers the refugee camps as having lost their temporary nature and become low-class residential neighbourhoods,⁸ the latter have never properly integrated into their urban environment, and have been perceived as urban slums and specific political spaces. This is at least the case in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and in Lebanon,

⁵ Mohammed Zaatari, "Palestinians concerned over housing project: Ain al-Hilweh residents fear groups involved may want to implement a permanent settlement program", *The Daily Star*, Beirut, 17 June 2005.

⁶ Naji Odeh, director of Finiq Cultural Centre of Deheishe camp (West Bank) in a community meeting organized by the UNRWA-Stuttgart cooperation project in March 2007, published in the *Process Documentation Report of the UNRWA-Stuttgart Cooperation Project*, 211 (unpublished, on file with authors).

⁷ Coordinator of the EU project on Khan Eshieh (South of Damascus), interview by Raja Deeb, 2 Mar. 2009.

⁸ E. Marx, "The social world of refugees: A conceptual framework", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 3, 1971, 189–203.

where political reasons, leading to marginalization and de-legitimization, have further intensified the suffering of refugee camps' dwellers:

The dominant Palestinian imaginary discourses have narrated the conflict in terms of victimhood. The image of a refugee in the Arab region is thus confined to those who dwell in miserable camps and not necessarily those who dwell outside. The assumption was that the more miserable the camp, the less people would want to settle in the host countries and would ultimately return home.⁹

The assumption of a direct relationship between the place of residence (the miserable camp) and the fight for political justice (the right of return) is deeply flawed. In Lebanon, this assumption, often backed by some "political commissars", has conjoined with main trends in the Lebanese polity to keep the refugee camps as temporary spaces in order to prevent settlement. Indeed, *tawteen* is the scarecrow, which can develop into a public phobia against the basic rights of Palestinians. Any debate about civil and economic rights reiterates that the objective should not be settlement, and that refugees' rights should not be replaced by humanitarian or security solutions. The only common ground among the various Lebanese political parties is often the rejection of *tawteen* – a real taboo. Sometimes the mere talk of the Palestinians' right to work has been considered the first step towards settlement.

The logic of the *tawteen* debate is similar to the politics of humanitarian organizations regarding Palestinians, who perceive them as bodies to be fed and sheltered, lacking a political existence:

For those having such discourse, the Palestinians are mere figures, demographic artefacts and a transient political mass waiting for return. Between humanitarian discourse in the zones of emergency on the one hand, and the *tawteen* discourse on the other, the rights-based approach for the Palestinians as individuals and collectives, as refugees with civil and economic rights, but also the right to the city, is lost.¹⁰

This criticism echoes the arguments of the "End Refugee Warehousing" campaign¹¹ and the discussions accompanying the gradual adoption of a

⁹ S. Hanafi, "Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: Laboratories of state-in-the-making, discipline and Islamist radicalism", in Ronit Lentin (ed.), *Thinking Palestine*, London, Zed Books, 2008, 82–100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The watchdog organisation U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) launched an international campaign to "end warehousing" of refugees with the release of its "World Refugee Survey 2004". The survey states: "This is a term we and others before us use to describe the denial of human rights found in the '1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees' and other instruments to live lives as normal as possible while in exile, especially the right to earn a livelihood and freedom of movement. Warehoused refugees are typically, but not always, confined to camps or segregated settlements where they are virtually dependent on humanitarian assistance. But even refugees who are free to move are still warehoused, in effect, if they are not allowed their rights to work, practice professions, run businesses, and own property." Source: <http://www.refugees.org> (2004).

developmental and right's based approach to other UN agencies and such as UNHCR.¹²

2.2. *Changing attitudes toward camp rehabilitation*

Intensive debates and discussions also emerged within the camp communities themselves, particularly in the aftermath of the events of April 2002 in the West Bank, when UNRWA unveiled its plans for reconstructing the centre of the Jenin camp. In her analysis on the camp reconstruction, Linda Tabar quotes a senior UNRWA engineer:

The design process began, and we had an initial vision of suburbs with wide streets. The refugees said no – this will allow the Israeli tanks to enter the camp. Ultimately the people insisted that the land and the homes should be rebuilt as they were before.¹³

The insistence by the camp community – and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the main donor for the reconstruction – on rebuilding the camp as it was before the Israeli army occupation faded away rather quickly, but the debate continued for six months over detailed aspects of the new housing scheme, in particular the width of the roads. Among the camp dwellers, some agreed with UNRWA planners on wider roads that would improve vehicle access to their houses, better serve shops and allow ambulances to enter the camp. Others stressed the wish to reduce the width of the roads in order to prevent regular patrolling by the Israeli military, implicitly and explicitly accusing UNRWA of an urban design which served military, rather than humanitarian concerns.

This debate illustrates how controversial the introduction of urban planning into the camp environment can be. Although security and the constant threat of new violent confrontations with the Israeli Army has been a factor that cannot be underestimated, the division among camp inhabitants showed a pattern that can

¹² The UN's adoption of a rights-based approach had gradually evolved since the 1997 UN Programme for Reform, which called on all UN agencies to integrate human rights into their activities within the framework of their respective mandates. The 1997 resolution is predicated by intense discussion on the link between human rights and development (seen as a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process), which accompanied UN debates for more than half a century. Already in 1986, the right to development was made explicit in the "Declaration on the Right to Development." This Declaration states that "the right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized." The World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 reaffirmed by consensus the right to development as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights. (see <http://www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches.html>). UNHCR adopted the developmental and right's based approach from 2000 when it launched a global consultation process engaging States and other partners in a broad-ranging dialogue on refugee protection. One of outcomes is a new operational tool set named "*Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and Persons of Concern*" (2003), which states: "*The basic criterion for a good programme is self-reliance. In protracted refugee situations however, refugees – sometimes for decades – remain dependent on humanitarian assistance. One essential key to solving such situations is political; but, in the meantime, a facilitating element of any durable solution is development.*"

¹³ L. Tabar, *The Reconstruction of Ground Zero in Jenin Camp: Towards Camp Improvement, the Challenges of Building Participation with Vulnerable Refugee Populations*, report commissioned by the UNRWA-Stuttgart Cooperation Project, 2006, 6.

be found in other camps less exposed to constant military incursions. An UNRWA staff member, who followed the project through all its phases, stressed that:

opponents were mainly political activists who themselves had long left the camp and were not immediately affected by the destruction or reconstruction. Those directly affected were interested in an improvement of access to their houses and shops. Anger against the hardliners was growing. They said 'we are the ones who are suffering and we [want to] decide, how we want to live'.¹⁴

This more pragmatic approach is also reflected in the following statements made by two residents of other camps:

There are some historical examples that show us that improving camp life is not necessarily against the right of return. The Gazan experience proves that UNRWA's construction of new houses did not influence the status of the refugees . . . There are some in the camp who seek to politicize everything for their own benefit, to show how important they are. We should be careful not to reject those projects that will help our women and children live in better conditions.¹⁵

It takes us a long time to admit that improving the urban camp condition is not undermining the right of return. It was a wise decision of Yasser Arafat to appoint a member of the Gaza Municipality Board from the Shati camp, though some people are still contesting that.¹⁶

This change of attitude, a sort of disenchantment, has gradually become a mainstream attitude among Palestinian communities in refugee camps. The question is: to what extent has UNRWA been following these developments?

2.3. *International leverage: the Geneva Conference*

The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000 had two important consequences for UNRWA. During the Oslo years, UNRWA's future had been uncertain with proposals ranging from complete dissolution to gradual handover of responsibilities to the PA. But after 2000, the Agency's role was again firmly reinstated as a key-stabilizing factor in Gaza and the West Bank, taking on a wider range of emergency and other functions beyond its core responsibilities in support of the human development of the refugees.¹⁷ The continuation of UNRWA's mandate and the

¹⁴ Interview with Bert Willenbacher, UNRWA West Bank's Field Engineering and Construction Services Officer (FECSO) conducted by P. Misselwitz in Jerusalem, Feb. 2007.

¹⁵ Ismail Al-Amsi, Community representative and member of Working Group, Al Fawwar Camp. Quoted from internal report of Working Group session held on 9 Aug. 2007, published in the *Process Documentation Report of the UNRWA-Stuttgart Cooperation Project*, 212.

¹⁶ Housewife camp dweller, Shati camp (Gaza Strip), 28 Feb. 2009, interviewed by Akram Ijla.

¹⁷ The Hamas victory of the 2006 parliamentary elections led to the boycott of PA institutions by most Western donor states. UNRWA and other UN bodies were then frequently called upon to act as implementing agencies for projects and services beyond refugee concerns.

harsh challenges on the ground called for reforms. Peter Hansen and Karen Koning Abu Zayd (respectively Commissioner-General before and after June 2005) realized that only through a comprehensive strategy for improving the living conditions of the refugees to acceptable standards could the situation in the camps be eased. Many donors too called for introducing a more developmental approach to the way UNRWA delivers its services, and acquiring a set of new and more appropriate tools.

The rhetoric used by UNRWA to launch the beginning of the reform process of organizational development is reminiscent of policy documents and manuals published by UNHCR in the preceding years, thus, reflecting a more general, UN-wide reorientation of policy approaches towards refugees. The increasingly protracted refugee situations in many camps around the world led to the recognition that an emphasis on “relief” and “repatriation” was no longer sufficient. In 2003, UNHCR published its new “Framework for Durable Solutions and Persons of Concern”¹⁸ reflecting a “developmental approach”. The organization was also in the process of drafting operational manuals to put this approach into practice.¹⁹

In order to mobilize widespread donor and host country support, as well as trigger a momentum for reform and provide UNRWA with the necessary mandate for change, on 7–8 June 2004, UNRWA and the Swiss Government organized an international conference entitled “Meeting the Humanitarian Needs of the Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Building Partnerships in Support of UNRWA”, which became known as the Geneva Conference. The conclusions and recommendations were to directly influence the drafting of UNRWA’s Medium Term Plan for the period 2005–09 (MTP) as a key tool for guiding the internal reform processes. The conference’s recommendations were legitimized by a large official attendance (65 countries) of the donor community and the Arab refugee host countries.

The meeting achieved most of the desired results. Even host governments such as Syria and Lebanon, as well as all the major Palestinian refugee organizations, endorsed the launching of a new policy framework based on a developmental approach, including a radical overhaul of policy making and implementation. The participants at the Geneva Conference basically agreed that the Palestinian refugees’ right to live in improved living conditions within the camps would not jeopardize their right of return, and that camp rehabilitation could be best achieved through: “a comprehensive approach to community

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ A key manual developed by UNHCR at the time was the “Handbook for Planning and Implementing Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) Programmes”, prepared by Amadou Tijan Jallow (Consultant, Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, Division of Operational Support, UNHCR, Geneva) and Sajjad Masood Malik (Senior Rural Development Officer, Reintegration and Local Settlement Section, Division of Operational Support, UNHCR, Geneva) for UNHCR. The first public edition of Jan. 2005 states: “Empowerment and enhancement of productive capacities and self reliance of refugees through Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) would lead equipped and capacitated refugees to either of the durable solutions i.e. repatriation to their country of origin, local integration in the country of asylum or resettlement to a third country.”

development, including discussion with all stakeholders of the camp development strategy outlined in UNRWA's Medium Term Plan (MTP)".²⁰

Moreover, the Chairman's Summary Notes of the official conference report lists the following as one of the key issues of the conference:

Improving housing and infrastructure in refugee camps should be given higher priority with a view to addressing overcrowding, poor environmental and sanitary conditions, and a lack of recreational space. The Neirab re-housing project in Syria could serve as a reference pilot project in this context.²¹

The conference's specific recommendations fed into the formulation of UNRWA's MTP 2005–09, which states that:

Living conditions in camps must be addressed as a matter of urgency as part of an integrated strategy to improve the lives of the most vulnerable.²²

The MTP also proposed a specific policy for implementation:

In order to develop a comprehensive shelter and rehousing strategy which is adapted to the specific needs of different locations, the Agency is proposing to establish an Urban Planning Unit, which will be responsible for preparing urban development policies and a comprehensive camp upgrading strategy.²³

3. Complex urban settings have complex needs

3.1 *The Traditional approach toward shelters*

Before discussing the reforms implemented since the formal introduction of the ICIP, it is worthwhile assessing whether UNRWA's already existing instruments for camp improvement were sufficient to meet the challenges faced by UNRWA.²⁴

The archival records of UNRWA's Shelter Programme for West Bank camps from the 1950s show a clash between a "technocratic mindset" and the reality on the ground.²⁵ All plans were drafted by the same engineering office and based on a number of principles. The new planning schemes followed the principle of *tabula rasa*, disregarding how social and spatial orders such as streets, quarters,

²⁰ See official report of the 2004 Geneva Conference, published by UNRWA in cooperation with the Swiss Development Cooperation, Ch. 2, section "Main issues and themes, recommendations", 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²² UNRWA, *Medium Term Plan 2005–09*, UNRWA Headquarters Amman, 2004, 4. The MTP is UNRWA's key strategy, setting strategic objectives and goals for all programmes.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The following discussion will focus on tool sets available to the Field Engineering and Construction Services Departments to intervene in the residential fabric of camp shelters and residences.

²⁵ See also Section 3.2 of this article.

and family clusters had evolved, and proposed a radical re-planning based on a complete demolition of the existing fabrics. The rational layout was based on strict divisions of zones (a distinct zone for UNRWA services, zones for shelter buildings, a zone for water collection points and public toilets, all served by a strictly hierarchical access road system). All shelters were to be arranged according to a superimposed grid, divided into clearly demarcated blocks, consisting of approximately twenty individual plots and surrounded by wide streets and large open spaces.

In Amari (Ramallah in the West Bank), the grid was arbitrarily derived from the directionality of the boundary between the camp and a neighbouring plot to the south. Deheishe's hilly terrain led to a grid that follows the topographical bend in the valley. In both plans, neither much respect was paid to previously existing infrastructure, such as pathways and property lines, nor indeed were the many self-built structures taken into account. Although in Amari the original road remained, in Deheishe the plan completely ignored the old, and at the time still very important, path that meanders up the hill towards Bethlehem. Furthermore, the program intended to replace all tents and self-built mud and stone shelters with single-storey standardized shelter units (of approximately twenty square meters each, or about one room per family of up to five members, two rooms for families with more than five members), built from lightweight materials, such as hollow concrete blocks. The shelters were to follow the standard UNRWA typology of A, B and C.

However, later records, such as the Amari plan, suggest that the UNRWA schemes for both Deheishe and Amari, as well as similar plans for other camps, could not be implemented. This is especially clear in the case of Amari, where there is almost no trace of directionality or grid layout in the camp today. For Deheishe, some parts of the camp, particularly the central part, follow the grid layout, while in other parts the layout of the buildings bears no trace of it. Particularly striking is the fact that the ancient pathway meandering towards Bethlehem remains today in exactly the same location as when it was mapped on the 1957 plan. It is most likely that the shelter building schemes were more or less shelved, either due to a lack of funds or to resistance encountered within the camp community. Implementation of the scheme would also have meant demolishing most of the self-built structures in times of extreme hardship, while the shelter units planned by UNRWA would have been significantly smaller than the tents and emergency shelters combined.

As the camp community already developed a sense of ownership over such entirely self-financed structures, their demolition would have been extremely unpopular and probably only possible through costly compensation. It seems most likely that refugees used their entitlement to UNRWA's shelter units but decided themselves where to place them. A comparison of the 1957 and 1978 archival plans for Amari suggests that such units were simply placed next to the tents and self-built structures, thereby consolidating rather than replacing the pattern of family *hoshes* and leading to a horizontal densification of the camp territory.

The partial failure of the Shelter Programme in the cases of Amari and Deheishe suggests a significant precedent from which present planning schemes might be able to draw some important lessons. The more informal forces of everyday life within the camps collided with a planning bureaucracy that was oblivious to existing realities. The outcome of this collision suggests that, despite the relatively authoritarian and unchallenged rule of UNRWA at the time, grass-roots power was not only present, but in some cases was even stronger than external planning regimes. The informally evolved spatial and social orders inside the camps, including the system of quarters, proved effective and began to be consolidated. UNRWA's shelter building grid was implemented in other West Bank refugee camps such as Balata, Jalazon, and later Shu'fat and can still be seen today.

After the 1950s, UNRWA's role in refugee housing was gradually reduced to two main domains. The first was emergency repair and reconstruction in response to or in the aftermath of armed conflict – a reactive approach whose shortcomings are illustrated by the following two examples. UNRWA's involvement in the rebuilding of Shatila camp (Lebanon) demonstrates the consequences of a lack of strategic vision in an alarming way. In the Lebanese civil war, the camp had been almost razed to the ground. In 1986, UNRWA used donor funds to distribute grants to affected refugees in order to rebuild the camp, without setting up a coordination mechanism for the rebuilding process. This, in combination with other factors 20 years later, has proven dramatic. It is now one of the most congested and densely populated camps in the region, with some of the worst conditions in terms of structural safety and environmental health.

The second area, UNRWA's "Shelter Rehabilitation Program" aimed to assist refugees whose shelter and living conditions did not meet minimally accepted housing standards. The rehabilitation of individual shelters was possible only if the residents met the strict Special Hardship Criteria (based on household income). While the eligibility criteria ensured that the limited funds were benefiting the poorest and were understandable from a humanitarian point of view, the application of the program created many problems on the ground. At the same time, new shelters could only be built on the same spot, regardless of whether the area was in need of de-densification or more open space. The shelters that could be upgraded were randomly located within the camp. They were often not the worst structurally, and frequently they were structurally connected to their neighbouring houses, reducing the possible scope of the intervention.

The most important omission was that available resources were utilized in a piecemeal manner, constituting a haphazard, ad hoc and responsive approach rather than a larger-scale strategic one. Urban planning and infrastructure development were largely nonexistent. In part, the resistance of host governments was to blame (for example, in the case of Neirab, Syria), and partly UNRWA itself was to blame, as it considered housing a purely technocratic affair. There was no clear strategic concept of how to steer or improve the physical development of camps, which had become extremely congested and seriously impacted on the

living quality of camp refugees. Instead, UNRWA was forced into more and more responsive action without tools or strategic concepts in place.

3.2 First steps towards urban rehabilitation

The limitations of the above-outlined approach towards shelters have long been obvious to many UNRWA staff members. Some trace the efforts to replace the technocratic, piecemeal approach with a more comprehensive and holistic approach back to the early 1990s. At Neirab camp, Syria, UNRWA made an early attempt to expand the scope of the Shelter Rehabilitation Program, addressing the difficulty of dealing with randomly dispersed shelters, which had become structurally interconnected. The main structural problem was the condition of old French army barracks, which had been converted into shelters in 1948, and which were now buried under a complex, vertical maze of self-built structures. The need to remove the barrack structures made a more comprehensive approach obvious, but the reluctant host government initially rejected the proposal only to later reverse this decision and back the first large-scale rehabilitation project of an existing Palestine refugee camp.²⁶

An equally important learning experience was made during the challenges faced by UNRWA when dealing with the reconstruction of shelters destroyed during the second intifada in Gaza and West Bank. At first, the partial destruction of Rafah camp had exposed the vulnerability of the Agency to donor demands. An UNRWA staff member characterized the situation that emerged as follows: *“In Gaza we have the Japanese shelter, the UAE shelter and the Swedish shelter, each vary in size and standard, creating confusion and jealousy amongst the camp population.”*²⁷ Donors imposed their own design criteria, timetables concerning implementation, set limits to the scope of work and so forth, putting UNRWA under immense pressure to meet donor “dictates”, rather than thinking strategically about how to generate the best possible impact. However, UNRWA’s efforts to reconstruct the destroyed centre of Jenin, beginning only a year later, marked an important turning point in the Agency’s approach. The project, officially named “The Jenin Camp Rehabilitation Project” was innovative not only in its introduction of developmental aspects, for example, by integrating support for local businesses and institutions. The project also set an important precedent in UNRWA’s approach towards shelters. According to an UNRWA staff member, UAE donor dictates helped to convince the Agency to acknowledge the accumulation of investments made by camp residents to improve and expand their shelters. Rather than imposing strict and minimal UNRWA shelter standards, the Agency, for the first time and only after months-long internal debates, accepted that sizes and location of shelters

²⁶ In 2001, Syria reversed its earlier decision to reject UNRWA’s plans, recognizing that a more comprehensive, block-based rehabilitation was urgently required. The plan to improve housing in Neirab was revived as the “Neirab Camp Rehabilitation Project” and, together with Jenin, became an important precedent and learning experience for UNRWA in the wake of more substantial programme reform.

²⁷ Interview with UNRWA staff member, conducted in Amman, June 2007.

should be developed on the basis of what was lost.²⁸ This principle breaks with the rigid – one size fits all mentality – and remains important until today and also forms the basis for the ongoing reconstruction efforts in Nahr el-Bared Camp.

What has changed since? The Geneva Conference provided official endorsement of the new direction and approaches tested in Neirab and Jenin. As a consequence, “Camp Improvement” was officially adopted as a new Agency wide programme. Bearing in mind that the programme is still young and the pilot projects are still under implementation, it is still too early to take stock. However, the contours of the new approach are already recognizable.

One of the first steps following the Geneva Conference was the launch of a major research project. In recognition of the fact that essential base line data about the refugees and the camps was missing, the Geneva-based Graduate Institute for Development Studies (IUED²⁹) was commissioned to compile a comprehensive, regional survey of the living conditions of Palestinian refugees. Amongst other things, the report documents the negative aspects of camp urbanization and clearly states that, in terms of population density, building density, and in-house crowding, camps not only fulfil many of the UN-HABITAT criteria defining urban slums,³⁰ but are also amongst the world’s most densely populated and most congested urban neighbourhoods.³¹

In parallel, the new Camp Improvement and Infrastructure Department commissioned what became known as the Camp Development Pilot Research Project. Here, a joint UNRWA- University of Stuttgart research team conducted comprehensive field studies in three exemplary West Bank camps with the aim of understanding the patterns and internal logic of camp urbanization.³² For the first time, camps were investigated as specific urban environments. The spatial maps prepared under this project reveal for instance that on all the camps’ main streets, one finds commercial areas, schools, public facilities and mosques. In many cases, UNRWA’s centrally located service compound had become

²⁸ According to the UNRWA staff member, the shelter design principles applied in Jenin were the result of a compromise agreed between the donor, the community and UNRWA: At first, the UAE had insisted on rebuilding the destroyed camp centre literally while some UNRWA staff insisted on following established shelter standards. Eventually, it was agreed to pilot a new system whereby shelter sizes would be calculated on the basis of lost assets. Rather than literally reconstituting what was lost literally, the formula recognized the need to increase shelter size for some, while ensuring that the largest shelters would need to be limited in size to ensure a more contemporary and improved urban layout, wider streets and some public spaces. Source: Interview with UNRWA staff member, conducted in Amman, July 2008.

²⁹ Institut universitaire d’études du développement.

³⁰ For more information on UN-HABITAT’s definition of slum, see: UN-HABITAT, “State of the world’s cities 2006/ 2007 – the millennium development goals and urban sustainability”, London, UN-HABITAT/ Earthscan Publications, 2006.

³¹ For comparative data on densities of camps and other congested neighbourhoods see: J. AL Hussein, R. Bocco and M. Brunner, “Status of the Palestinian refugees in the near east: The right of return and UNRWA in perspective”, in A. Knudsen and S. Hanafi (eds.), *Palestinian Refugees in the Levant: Identity, Space and Place*, forthcoming.

³² UNRWA-Camp Development Pilot Research Project: Main Research Report (2006–08), commissioned by the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Department, funded by the European Commission.

a nucleus for the formation of urban centres. Clear residential quarters can be detected, bearing the names of the towns or villages from where the refugees originated. Many neighbourhoods developed local plazas, which are used for social gatherings and celebrations. Informal building codes and systems of conflict negotiation ensure basic internal social stability and cohesion. Complex identities have formed not only on the level of the camp, but also on the level of the neighbourhood and building block. The tightly knit community creates a sense of intimate belonging and keeps the knowledge of the history of spaces, buildings, and people alive.

The research compiled in the case studies shows that camps today are not just the sum of their dramatic histories, problems and deficiencies. They are also the product of decades of investment by refugees in built fabric, institutions and social networks. Camps are sites of exceptional economic and political hardship, but also of experimentation and innovation. Residents have developed survival practices, skills, and expertise that have made it possible for them to endure, building up new livelihoods inside and outside the camps. It is the intricate and complex norms and codes that have allowed camp dwellers to survive in conditions of extreme density and poverty.

The Camp Improvement Plan (CIP) for Fawwar camp drafted in the summer of 2007 is the first planning document that demonstrates how sensitivity towards, and awareness of, local individuals can inform a comprehensive development plan. Over a period of two years, the Stuttgart-UNRWA research team worked with the local community to produce the first comprehensive, spatial coordination and planning framework for a Palestinian refugee camp developed outside an emergency scenario. The novelty of the plan and its approach lay in its subtlety. Rather than being based on a large-scale intervention, such as the integrated Neirab Rehabilitation Project (which preceded the Fawwar CIP) or the current reconstruction of Nahr el-Bared, the goal is a sensitive upgrading, based on an evolving, step-by-step approach. This has partly pragmatic reasons as the envisaged budget is only a fraction of the other two projects mentioned.

Yet the refusal to propose sweeping changes is not merely pragmatic. Instead, the plan envisages small steps and solutions, which should improve the relation between investment and impact. Underlying this approach is a shift of emphasis from large-scale, centrally managed projects towards a scale of project that can be managed by the camp residents themselves. The intention is to initiate a smooth and flexible urban transformation process, based on the parallel strengthening of the urban fabric as well as the camp community, including building up local organizational structures to sustain what has been achieved. The alternative – a high-handed, top-down approach to camp improvement – risks being perceived as ignorant or disrespectful and is likely not only to trigger significant opposition, and a boycott, but, more importantly, will fail to utilize the vital pool of local experience and coping mechanisms gathered by local experts which can initiate and deliver effective change better than any external humanitarian intervention.

The following three examples illustrate how this approach is embodied in the plan: the elements of the public spaces strategy, measured for the improvement of the camps' internal circulation, and a proposal for an exemplary block restructuring. The plan proposes to strengthen existing clusters of camp institutions and service installations (including UNRWA services) into effective, interconnected community centres. A hierarchy of three "main centres" that serve the entire camp community, as well as a number of "neighbourhood centres" serving the six main camp neighbourhoods, are being proposed. While the main centres (school and education compound, civic centre, and leisure and recreation compound) serve community demand, the neighbourhood centres are intended to strengthen the sub-identity of each neighbourhood and will be formed by a "neighbourhood plaza" using, upgrading and extending the existing network of small "plazas" traditionally used for social events like weddings and funerals. Through small-scale interventions, plazas can be transformed into more permanent outdoor centres for multiple uses.

The neighbourhood plazas not only address the general lack of external open space which, in all camps, significantly reduces living quality, along with the lack of natural light and ventilation. They also recognize that, in a traditional and conservative culture, residents in particular rely on open spaces in close proximity to their homes to meet, stage social gatherings and events and, for children, to play in a protected and supervised environment. In addition, the improvement of an internal street system composed of "public lanes" open to multiple uses is being proposed as the most directly accessible outdoor space. The plan stresses that all measures should contribute to a coherent and connected external public space network connected through a pedestrian spine based on upgraded internal alleys and lanes, connecting all public functions and neighbourhoods, and therefore allowing for safe and easy pedestrian flows.

In many areas of the camp, the informal building activities led to a complete breakdown of vehicular access. The plan recognizes that, like in the historically evolved city centres of the region, vehicular accessibility to each house is unrealistic and undesirable. Instead, the proposal is to carefully and sensitively evolve the existing street network into a more efficient hierarchy of streets. This hierarchy would consist of primary streets or main streets comprised of the existing main camp road as well as two upgraded and completed road sections along either side of the valley, which would function as bypass roads; and secondary or neighbourhood streets in each of the camps neighbourhoods, which would allow for basic access and improved urban services and security (for example, waste collection, emergency access, and taxis). Again, the Fawwar CIP proposes a slow, evolutionary approach based on the upgrading of existing structures and functions.

A series of measures address the high congestion zones in the centre of the camp. Two strategies are being proposed. First, a more effective use of existing land resources within the camp borders and surroundings could help decrease population (and building) density levels. Assets owned by refugees located outside of the camp boundary (such as land or dwellings) could be used to decrease

the density within the camp boundaries. The availability of local land resources in Fawwar is unique in comparison to most camp situations and provides the camp's isolated rural location with room for natural expansion. In most camp situations, particularly those located in urban contexts, the problem of density and congestion is significantly more challenging and requires different and more radical solutions.

Second, the architectural possibilities of re-organizing centrally located blocks to free up valuable spatial resources for neighbourhood gardens and courtyards as well as for future growth should be explored. Here, the objective is to transform existing building blocks into viable urban cells with an acceptable urban quality and basic service units for internal circulation and access. Again, the plan proposes a sensitive evolutionary approach involving local residents at all stages with support programs such as compensation grants for demolished structures, building grants, and loans to complement private investment.

In addition to the above-cited spatial improvement schemes, the Fawwar CIP proposes a series of community development measures such as the introduction of a community based micro-credit scheme, the consolidation of local businesses, and infrastructural capacity and training for local institutions. To summarize, the plan attempts to support and direct dynamics and processes that are already taking place inside the camp – an approach that could be called acupuncture urbanism. This concept also expresses modesty and realism vis-à-vis the scale of the problems at hand. Despite the significant sums that are likely to be invested in the camps by the international donor community, they will be small compared with the scale of the actual problems inside the camps. Rather than aiming to replace the urban fabric, the emphasis will be on careful improvement and rehabilitation. To ensure success, physical, economic and social interventions have to be inserted at the right points of the nerve system of the camps, capitalizing on existing and sometimes highly effective socio-economic networks and utilizing available skills. Strategic planning interventions need to address physical but also economic or social aspects and can also include symbolic actions. A small number of carefully planned and implemented interventions can have an exemplary effect and trigger other secondary changes in the camps.

4. Camp Governance: UNRWA as a “Phantom Sovereign” and Other Actors

Traditionally, UNRWA, like any other humanitarian institution, considered refugees to be needy victims. Analogous to the failure of acknowledging the urbanization process that transformed tent cities into complex built environments is the failure of acknowledging that traumatized and voiceless victims desire to become emancipated subjects, especially after some sort of normalcy of life in the camps has set in. The paternalistic approach – a relief agency serving an anonymous crowd of beneficiaries – enters a crisis, unable to cope with the

ever more complex landscape of emerging community initiatives, local institutions and social mobilization.

The ICIP has offered a chance to readdress the relationship between UNRWA and camp communities, a relationship that has been characterized by frustration, mistrust, miscommunication and mutual misunderstandings. In the following, we will analyse some of the first steps towards redefining the roles of provider and passive recipient into a more genuine partnership. We shall begin by analysing the complex reality of camp governance, which forms the point of departure for camp improvement: who governs the camps?

Many actors are playing a role in the governance of the Palestinian refugee camps. In Syria and Jordan, the State controls the camps closely and through their specific organs (the General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR) and the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DAP)) assigns a camp director who plays a major role in organizing the urban and political life inside the camp. In contrast to this classical state control over slum areas including camps, the situation in the OPT and Lebanon is radically different. There is a web of complex power structures composed of one or two conflicting popular committees (in Lebanon), a security committee, notables (*wujahā*), political factions, Palestine Scholars' League (*imāms* coalition close to Hamas), PLO popular unions and organizations (workers, women, engineers, etc.), community based organizations (CBOs),³³ NGOs³⁴ and UNRWA Camp officers.³⁵ These forces vary in their importance from camp to camp and from area to area (see table 1). In each camp, leaders have imposed measures, which are frequently changing as a consequence of a constantly shifting balance of power between these different groups. The popular committees, however, stand out as the most important local governing body in Lebanon and the OPT. It is worth noting that the label "popular" could be misleading because it is not based on a popular vote but it projects the strength of one group or party vis-à-vis others (in Gaza and the West Bank, the term "local committee" or "camp committee" is also frequently used).

Instead of one sovereign, camps are ruled by a tapestry of multiple, partial sovereignties. This includes real sovereign bodies like the Lebanese government or the PLO/PA and a patchwork of actors who contribute to the governance of the camp. The situation is made even more complex when UNRWA's role is

³³ Some CBOs are mainly youth, women centres as well as rehabilitation centres for people with disabilities. They were created by UNRWA in the 1980s but now are quasi-financially independent having proven effective in establishing links with local and international NGOs, attracting more than 3 million US dollars in grants and in-kind assistance during 2002–03 (MTP Relief and Social Services Program). (Geneva Conference 2004).

³⁴ In many camps, the social role of NGOs is much more important than that of the political factions. However, some of these NGOs are connected to the political factions. Interviewees reported a climate of mistrust towards the NGOs. Meanwhile, Hamas is increasingly playing a social role in the camps.

³⁵ For a refined analysis of these structures, see M. Kortam, *Le Rôle des Acteurs Locaux dans le Processus d'Incorporation des Palestiniens du Liban*, unpublished MA thesis, Beirut, Université Saint Joseph, 2007, Ch. 2–3.

Table 1. Development of the Camp Governing Actors

	Lebanon	Syria	Jordan	West Bank	Gaza Strip
Leading force	PC ^a	Syrian State (GAPAR)	Jordanian State (DPA)	PC	Reformation Committee
Second leading force	Factions: Fatah or Hamas	Committee of Development	NGOs close to Islamic Work Front	Factions: mainly Fatah	Committee of reform ^b
Historical forces in 1950s and 1960s	Before 70s: Lebanese Military intelligence	State (GAPAR)	DPA + PLO + UNRWA	Jordanian State + UNRWA + notable	UNRWA & Egyptian Military officer
Historical forces in 1970s	PLO	State (GAPAR)	DPA + Partially notables	Israel Military Forces (IMF) + UNRWA + Notables	UNRWA & IMF
Historical forces in 1980s	Pro-Syrian Faction and PC	State (GAPAR)	DPA + Partially notables	IMF + UNRWA	IMF + notables
Historical forces in 1990s	Factions + PC	State (GAPAR)	DPA + Partially notables	IMF (before 94) + PC + notables	IMF (before 94) + PC + notables

^aPopular Committee.

^b(Iujnet al-islam) assigned by Hamas.

taken into account. Here, we would like to introduce the notion of “phantom sovereignty” in order to describe and analyse the critical position of the Agency.

Michel Foucault reminds us that our concern is not the power that stems from the exercise of sovereignty but rather the effects of power that a governmental technology generates. While UNRWA was not intended to, nor does it pretend to, govern the camps, it is ascribed the status of a sovereign by many camp dwellers. This is perhaps best exemplified by the ambiguous role of UNRWA’s camp services officers, a camp-based staff member who historically assumes a powerful position vis-à-vis the camp community. Power included in the past, for example, the ability to cut ration rolls for an individual who did not obey UNRWA regulations. UNRWA historically appointed these officers from among the camp community, after consultation and verbal approval from the local tribal and village leaders.

This policy is doubly accommodating. By appointing a representative of the camp’s new elite to become an official staff member, UNRWA sought legitimization and acceptance. From the early 1990s, UNRWA increasingly appointed members of new camp elites, such as well-educated camp residents (engineers, teachers, pharmacists and scientists) who were sometimes known historically for their political activism and good relations with the community.³⁶ In interviews, camp dwellers often refer to this officer as “camp director”, yet in reality his official function is merely to act as a facilitator of access to UNRWA services. Interviews clearly showed the gap between his perceived role and his actual function. This confusion stems from the historical role played by the UNRWA camp services officers in not only providing services, but also in administering and coordinating many aspects of the refugees’ lives. As a result, the “camp directors” are perceived as occupying a ruling position without acting accordingly.

The confusion over the role of camp services officers is symptomatic of the confusion over the role of UNRWA in general. Many camp residents, for instance, consider UNRWA and the popular committee responsible for the disorder in the camps. Expressing her anger at their perceived passivity, a resident posed the question: “Who can I complain to when my neighbour builds a second and third floor without leaving any proper space for my apartment?” Many interviewees indeed used the word “chaos” to describe the situation in the camps and attribute UNRWA’s inaction as a major cause of it.

4.1. Benefiting from the space of exception

According to the German philosopher Carl Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who proclaims the state of exception. He is not characterized by the order that he institutes through the constitution but by the suspension of that order.³⁷ While we observe the state of exception in the refugee camps, there is more than

³⁶ However, fearing the Israeli reaction in the OPT, UNRWA avoided appointing people with express political affiliations.

³⁷ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998.

one sovereign. Many actors, often the political commissars of these camps, and what we call the local sovereigns, insist on the exceptional status of the camps while refusing to submit them to state power. This is a power strategy used by these political commissars to keep their authoritative power without any sort of elections. This refusal comes from the need to keep the status quo where the majority of the camps' popular committees are nominated by the various Palestinian factions. However, as we mentioned earlier, the political commissar's position does not reflect the position of the sweeping majority of the camp population. The case of Lebanon that we will present here will reveal this complexity.

Before 1970, the camps in Lebanon had been governed by the state of emergency when Lebanese security forces (*gendarmes* and *Deuxième Bureau*) suspended the laws that applied outside the camps. Between 1970 and 1982, the police were not able to penetrate the camps without negotiating with the powerful Palestinian popular committee, who decided whether to cooperate or not on a case-by-case basis. After 1982, the PLO popular committee and security committee almost dismantled and were replaced by weaker, pro-Syrian committees lacking legitimacy and financial resources. Camp residents resorted to different actors like *imāms*, local notables, and local security leaders to resolve any quarrels or problems before going to the police. While such informal conflict resolution methods have been rather successful in the past, refugee camps no longer enjoy harmonious communitarian structures headed by local notables. This transformation has become more critical after sixty years of exile, as the situation is very different from that prevailing up to the 1980s.

Julie Peteet provides a seminal contribution to this debate that describes the use of different conflict resolution methods during the period in question. The Palestinian resistance accommodated traditional authority structures by building upon the customary forum and procedure of dispute settlement and by implementing customary outcomes.³⁸ For a considerable period of time, the camps witnessed the emergence of a new elite whose legitimacy was based on the Palestinian national struggle. However, this situation changed after 1982, as participation in the struggle was no longer sufficient for someone to become a powerbroker.

Recent interviews conducted in Badawi and Nahr al-Bared camps reveal that the absence of a legitimate popular committee is a serious stumbling block. Here, the original popular committees only survived thanks to the political and financial backing of political factions and the PLO. Since 1982, they have had very scarce resources that hinder them from fulfilling their municipal functions. The committees cannot hire engineers to provide expertise on urban regulations concerning the illegal extension of construction or to provide solutions for the acute water and electricity problems. Lebanese military intelligence and police forces use them when they need special favours like delivering wanted persons for

³⁸ J. Peteet, "Socio-Political Integration and Conflict Resolution in the Palestinian Camps in Lebanon", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, 1987.

justice, but they have never provided the committees with resources nor recognized them as a local municipal power.

In February 2009, the Italian cooperation office and International Habitat started a project to connect the sewage system in the “new camp” of Nahr al-Bared to the surrounding municipality (al-Muhamara). The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialog Committee (LPDC) organized many meetings without inviting the popular committee. The committee was only invited to sign the project, which it refused to do. Interlocutors complained that many of the projects proposed by the international cooperation offices and international organizations didn’t meet the priority needs of the camps. They were often driven by technical considerations, such as the kind of expertise the different donors and/or cooperation offices have, or the fact that they can provide only small grants which do not allow them to undertake significant infrastructure and other such projects.

Living in a space of exception proclaimed either by the real, phantom or local sovereigns has serious consequences for the living conditions of the camp dwellers but specifically for the urbanization of the camp, and on its relation to the surrounding urban or rural environment.

4.2. Camp improvement as a catalyst for the formation of camp governance

Holistic camp improvement cannot occur in a space of exception where almost no urban regulation is applied and rules and laws are suspended. Indeed, it is diametrically opposed to it. This raises a dilemma that is not easily solved. The intention of introducing notions such as “participatory planning”, “community empowerment”, and “strategic planning” remain empty rhetoric without directly addressing the issue of camp governance.

Over a period of four years, extensive fieldwork conducted in Neirab in Syria³⁹ and in three West Bank refugee camps,⁴⁰ as well as new archival research has provided the first holistic social-spatial understanding of the gradual transformation of camps from emergency compounds to complex and ambiguous urban Camp Cities (a term of Agier).⁴¹ At the same time, the reconstruction of Jenin and Nahr el-Bared camps after their demolition has shed light on this process.

When engaging with both UNRWA staff and community members, the West Bank research team faced tremendous mutual mistrust. In its top-down approach to delivering services, UNRWA had developed an *institutional arrangement* not recognizing the local community as partners in developing solutions, but instead, keeping locals at arm’s length following the logic of “if we give them

³⁹ Y. Bouagga, *Le camp de réfugiés peut-il faire cité ? Réflexions sur la politique dans un camp palestinien de Syrie en cours de réhabilitation*, unpublished thesis, 2008.

⁴⁰ Under the EC-funded “Camp Development Pilot Research Project” (2006–08), a cooperation of UNRWA and Stuttgart University, extensive fieldwork was conducted in Amari, Deheishe and Fawwar refugee camps; see also Section 3.2 of this article.

⁴¹ M. Agier, *On the Margins of the World – The Refugee Experience Today*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008.

an inch, they'll take a mile".⁴² Little emphasis was given to transparent communication, consideration of local feedback beyond technocratic surveys, or the constraints under which the Agency operates (including funding shortages). Due to the lack of direct communication based on partnership, bias and prejudice against UNRWA thrived; this included accusations ranging from corruption and incompetence to political conspiracy. Although, mistrust is a general problem facing UNRWA, camp improvement was likely to fail entirely if the relationship between the Agency and the community could not be improved. Furthermore, the support of host governments (including PA and PLO) and representative institutions vis-à-vis ICIP has been improving, but with some limitations.

To show the relationship between camp governance and camp rehabilitation, we will focus on two cases: Nahr el-Bared camp as an example of an emergency driven reconstruction effort and Fawwar camp as an example of camp improvement.

The story of the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared camp is highly revealing.⁴³ The ongoing reconstruction efforts have been strongly informed by UNRWA's new camp improvement approach. For the first time, UNRWA accepted working in full partnership with a grassroots, yet technocratic, organization, Nahr el-Bared Reconstruction Commission for Civil Action and Studies (NBRC).⁴⁴ The significance of this group is that its members understand the importance of empowering populations by organizing them. Composed of engineers and professionals, most of whom live in the camp, this organization has led the main task of managing community participation and in partnership with UNRWA preparing a geographical information system (GIS) plan on the spatial situation of the camp before its destruction and the desired future plan.

However, mobilizing the community is not easy. Sociologists have written about the disappearance of the public sphere, destroyed by the market⁴⁵ and colonized by the media.⁴⁶ To this, one should add the passivity of some refugees who have been socialized into the role of victim. NBRC has deployed great efforts in mobilizing the community. Quickly its leaders realized that the community is in fact composed of many village communities⁴⁷ and interest groups. They understood that traders have an interest in keeping the main vegetable and

⁴² Interview with UNRWA staff member, Amman, June 2007.

⁴³ The Nahr El-Bared camp was destroyed in 2007. The armed battle between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islām lasted three months, resulting in the killing of over forty Palestinian civilians, 167 Lebanese soldiers, and over 200 Fatah al-Islām militants, and the destruction of almost all of the old camp's premises, and the flight of around 33,000 people to the other camps.

⁴⁴ The idea came from some people from NBC and a group who had already helped several cities in South Lebanon (such as Bint Jbeil and Aita al Shaab) in their reconstruction.

⁴⁵ A. Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1989.

⁴⁶ R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001.

⁴⁷ Reference is made here to the original villages or towns in pre-1948 Palestine from which the refugees originated.

popular market in the same location and in the same design, which trumps their thinking about their living environment. Some engineers from the NBRC mobilized first their relatives and neighbours until they got satisfactory participation, although women remain quasi-absent. It seems that there has not been a sufficient effort to attract women, being stereotyped often as marginalized, left out, oppressed, and silenced.

Camp residents were asked to remember the camp before its destruction (by using mental maps and asset maps). The NBRC surprised UNRWA with the large amount of work completed through consulting the population of the camp about sketches of lost assets based on UNRWA maps as well as the formulation of the principals for reconstruction, which would be indispensable for future design plans.

The process of community participation was not easy. There were many difficulties brought about by the attitude of both the Lebanese government, which in the beginning wanted to deal only with international organizations like UNRWA, and PLO officials, who did not believe in the role of civil society in community participation. UNRWA played a chief role in empowering community participation though the full participation of NBRC in the entire design process.

UNRWA started to accept the right to participate in the shaping of the urban environment, and other parts of its programmes for that matter, as part of its approach to protection. It increasingly realized that participation constituted part of the civil rights of the refugees. However, another concern was who will ensure that no one will undermine the new design by changing the construction after its implementation. The role of the local authority (such as the popular committee) is definitely crucial. Here conflicting attitudes emerged. As elaborated in a document prepared for donor meeting in Vienna (2 June 2008), the Lebanese government insisted on establishing a police station inside Nahr el-Bared and to train the police to become what the document called "community police". The document was opposed by the camp dwellers and a new document on governance is currently under preparation.⁴⁸ It is expected to empower the popular committee, giving it legitimacy as the interlocutor for Lebanese municipal and governmental actors and make it more representative and more technocratic. The new document is also expected to promote mechanisms for community participation. It is on the base of this new local governance model, that the stakeholders involved in the camp reconstruction want to negotiate a package of socio-economic rights and the form of security arrangements. Nahr el-Bared camp could thus set an important precedent towards a new vision for camp governance in Lebanon. For the time being, UNRWA could play a role as mediator between such authority, from one side,

⁴⁸ S. Hanafi and I. Sheikh Hasan, "Constructing and Governing Nahr el-Bared Camp. An 'Ideal' Model of Exclusion", *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Falastiniyya (Journal of Palestine Studies)*, Beirut, Institute of Palestine Studies (Arabic).

and the central government and the municipal authorities in the host country, from the other side.

The second case we will deal with here briefly is Fawwar Camp improvement, already discussed from a different angle in Section 3.2. When Fawwar was chosen as a pilot for a planning initiative in the West Bank, the decision was not to follow the usual UNRWA rationale to “start with the worst”. Here we will focus on three key moments. Each of these moments describes a real tension between the research team, UNRWA and/or community representatives. The conflicts reveal how planning started to challenge the status quo and put established relations between key actors at risk – thus providing an insight into the enormous challenges that need to be overcome to achieve genuine participation and power sharing.

The first conflict unfolded at the very beginning of the planning process and characterizes the fears, reservations and plain confusion triggered amongst the community when introducing the project for the first time. The second conflict erupted several months into the planning process at a critical stage when improvement measures needed prioritizing and resurfaced in later discussions on the definition of pilot projects. Thirdly, conflicting visions on the format and status of the final planning document – the CIP – emerged which revealed the fragile status of camp improvement within UNRWA as well as uncertainties about the future role of the program.

In the process of community participation, we noticed the precarious position of the planning team, navigating through and mediating in an atmosphere characterized by tremendous mistrust between the community and UNRWA, as well as towards the notion of camp improvement as a whole. At the same time, the discussion showed how a concrete goal – improving the living conditions in the camp – can create a constructive frame in which long-standing, soured relations can be effectively changed for the better.

Despite many difficulties, the Fawwar project was a successful first attempt at introducing urban planning to camps in the West Bank based on grassroots participation. Yet some of the most important questions remain to be solved: who owns the CIP and assumes responsibility for regular revision and updating? What happens after completion of the pilot planning and the implementation of first actions? The project exposed the current absence of recognized and respected local camp governance structures, which could engage in a structured and clearly defined relationship on an equal footing with UNRWA and other bodies. Participation and local empowerment as realized in grassroots planning efforts are doomed to remain project-based and temporary if the current status quo is not changed. A substantial rethinking of camp governance is required to fully exploit the promise and potential of camp improvement – an initiative that has been based on the premise that UNRWA cannot and should not represent the camp community.

The pilot development of a participatory methodology in both camps, Nahr el-Bared and Fawwar, exposed the problems connected to the lack of camp governance, but also began to show ways of how camp governance

might evolve in a step-by-step process. Here the planning process had a catalyst-like effect in two ways. First, a working group was formed under the umbrella of the local committee for Fawwar and the NBRC respectively as a “gateway to the community” for the purpose of carrying out participatory needs assessments. Second, there were efforts to kick-start the negotiation process between working groups and external stakeholders. That endeavour led only to the establishment of a nucleus of camp governance, serving as a central platform for bottom-up and top-down processes.

These efforts also revealed the limitations of bottom-up processes. The much-needed local governance structure ensures bottom-up planning, but there is at the same time a need to participate in negotiating processes at a higher level with effective municipal and national level partners. The recognition of a need to combine bottom-up and top-down processes reflects an important shift in the much broader discussion on slum upgrading and rehabilitation efforts worldwide. Here, planners began to insist that good local governance requires sustained top-down backing and support and critiqued an over-emphasis on grassroots empowerment tools and programs such as Tony Gibson’s influential concept “Planning for Real”⁴⁹ which had turned against rigid bureaucratic master planning processes and passionately insisted on grass roots mobilization. Ellen Wratten, herself involved in conceptualizing “Planning for Real”,⁵⁰ critically reflects on its limitations, especially the failure to address effectively problems that cannot be solved on a neighbourhood level and that require planning on a national or city scale.

Finally, despite improvements in involving refugees and CBOs (youth, women and community-based rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities) as partners in planning processes, key themes such as community empowerment, participation, or a new vision for local governance have not been fully elaborated, let alone implemented, as envisaged by the participants of the 2004 Geneva Conference. The local authority needs to be trained to fulfil local municipal functions and to have sufficient resources to hire experts. Two promising signs appeared in Lebanon. First, UNRWA developed new job descriptions for the Area Officers, requiring more qualifications and bestowing them with more power on the ground, including inside the camps. Second, in March 2009, UNRWA established for the first time an NGO forum whose objective is to coordinate the activities of NGOs working in the refugee camps. Sub-sectoral fora were also created: one for the education sector and another for the health sector.

⁴⁹ Tony Gibson first conceived the idea for a method of public participation in the impoverished East End of Glasgow in 1977 with the help of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation in collaboration with the London School of Economics.

⁵⁰ E. Wratten, “Bottom-up Planning for Urban Development: The Development Planning For Real Pilot Project”, *Source*: RRA Notes 21, 1994, 83–90, IIED London, 2001. (http://www.planotes.org/documents/plan_02113.PDF).

5. Camps after camp improvement?

What will be the short, medium and long-term impact of the ICIP? So far, camp improvement remains a new concept, full of promise, and is about to traverse the pilot stage to become a fully recognized programme that is applied Agency wide.⁵¹ Yet hurdles remain enormous. UNRWA's perpetual budget crisis means that it is unlikely that the ICIP will be funded by the Agency's general fund any time soon. This also impacts the status of the programme within UNRWA's service portfolio. Continuity of activities is at risk, and it will be difficult to build up the required capacities and skills. This is a major challenge to forward planning, defining targets and elaborating development goals.

For the purposes of this article, we will not dwell on the many operational challenges yet to be solved. Instead, we would like to speculate on the potential of a large-scale CIP initiative to divert what otherwise would be a rather catastrophic outlook. The following scenario assumes that camp improvement will be institutionalized and funded in such a way that key strategic objectives of camp-level CIP can be addressed, such as building and population density, access and circulation systems, infrastructure, public space and many community development concerns. Secondly, the scenario assumes that, in the absence of a durable solution, UNRWA will continue to be a major agent delivering core services to Camp Cities, whilst beginning to operate on the basis of a radically redefined relationship with the camp community, which must include a significant shift towards real partnership in decision-making and community based camp governance.

In some ways, this scenario represents the best possible interim scenario for refugee camps, applying Susan Banki's concept of "local integration in the intermediate term"⁵² not as a durable solution but as an intermediate interim solution. Reflecting on Kenyan refugee camps, Banki argued that the ability of refugees to freely participate in the economic and communal life of the host region does not necessarily mean abolishing their status as refugees. Instead, full participation in the civil life of a host country is considered an essential human right, which should not compromise the political right to return or to receive compensation. Applied to the Palestinian case, this concept could lead to a radical re-conceptualization of OPT camps as Integrated Camp Cities that fully partake in the social and economic life of the host environment.

In view of the many hurdles and obstacles, the proposal may seem radical and perhaps unrealistic from today's perspective. However, a more global perspective shows that such a re-conceptualization is not only needed, but also

⁵¹ UNRWA's Medium Term Strategy for 2010–15 reconfirms Camp Improvement and Infrastructure as one of the five programmes through which UNRWA will meet the human development aspirations of Palestine refugees. It emphasizes that "UNRWA will prioritise shelter improvements for vulnerable refugees and will pursue a holistic and participatory approach to camp improvement that reflects the social as well as the physical aspects of camps. UNRWA, *Medium Term Strategy 2010-15*, May 2009, 30–31.

⁵² S. Banki, "Refugee integration in the intermediate term: A study of Nepal, Pakistan, and Kenya", *Working Paper No. 108*, Evaluation and Policy Unit, UNHCR, 2003; J. Crisp, "Who has counted the refugees? UNHCR and the Politics of Numbers", *Working Paper No. 12*, Policy Research Unit, UNHCR, 1999.

desirable and possible. Alternative models for self-sustainable, rural settlements for refugees that fully engage in the social and commercial life of the host area have been tested and implemented in an African context since the early 1980s and are currently being revived. The scope of this article does not allow us to fully elaborate on all the practical implications this vision may have. We will instead concentrate on two key issues discussed in this article: camp governance and urban rehabilitation.

A successful, large-scale application of the principles of camp improvement will inevitably lead to a radical transformation of the present urbanized refugee camps. Ultimately, the programme offers the opportunity to pioneer a new typology of refugee settlement, which will be in structure, outlook and organization different from any other type of refugee concentration – an urban environment in which refugees assume nearly full civil rights but continue to preserve their status as refugees for political purposes. The spatial and physical characteristics of the emerging Integrated Camp Cities might unfold in the way described below.

The already existing informal overspill would need to be acknowledged and camp improvement would strive to integrate old camps and new camps, which would continue to blur UNRWA's official camp boundaries. If CIPs would indeed operate across these boundaries, their impact on the daily life of refugees would further diminish. It will be more and more difficult to differentiate camps from their urban or suburban surroundings. Camp borders however are likely to continue to define effective property boundaries (inside the boundaries, the 1948 (or 1967) lease arrangement will prevail, while outside, ownership will be regulated in accordance with host government law).

Radical interim solutions to decrease population and building density will need to be found. In most cases, such solutions must be found outside camp boundaries. Whether boundaries will be formally expanded or not, large-scale construction activities need to take place within and beyond the already existing informal overspill areas. This will lead to perceived expansion of the camps and might involve the introduction of social housing schemes and new building typologies such as high-rise apartment blocks.

The average population size of the camps in the OPT is approximately 35,000, which is equivalent to the size of a small town. It is therefore only logical that sustainable camp governance should learn from municipal management. For the first time, this approach was proposed by a team of consultants led by Piet Goovaerts advising UNRWA on the development of the Camp Improvement Initiative.⁵³ Like municipalities, Goovaerts argued, camp governance structures should be led by democratically elected individuals, and should be transparent, accountable and regionally integrated into the national structure of the host government. The Fawwar process has shown that the already existing West Bank local committees could evolve into such structures. Indeed, their

⁵³ P. Goovaerts, *et al.* "Consultancy to assist in the development of the concept, policies & strategies for the new UNRWA camp development approach", *Smooth Managing*, Amman, 2006.

experience in delivering communal services and representing the community's interest is a good starting point and could serve as a model for other countries.

Like ordinary municipalities, camp governance bodies would need to act on two levels. They need to ensure the possibility for broad grassroots community participation in key decision-making. At the same time, the body must be recognized by the authorities of the host country as a legitimate partner and representative of community interests. Camp governing structures need to remain accountable not only to those they serve (camp residents), but also to the higher authorities. Key decisions cannot be made in isolation but will require the participation and consent of UNRWA, host area stakeholders and national governments. External stakeholders will be needed to monitor the effectiveness of the camp governing structures, the transparency of the election process, decision-making and spending.

In all likelihood, the process of setting up such structures will be a gradual one. UNRWA could aid this process by providing trainers in community mobilization for an institutional capacity building process. The positive examples of Nahr El-Bader and Fawwar show that any future camp improvement initiative could act as a catalyst and, indeed, should integrate the establishment of good local governance bodies as a core aim.

What could be the medium-term implications? Devolving decision-making power away from a centralized agency such as UNRWA to camp governance bodies, as well as the development of camp-specific CIPs, will lead to a growing diversification of refugee camps. Factors such as context and location, local characteristics and potentials, local initiative and skills will assume a new importance and will change each camp in different ways. Indeed, it is likely that integrated refugee camps, like municipalities, will find themselves competing with each other over resources, aid from donors and host government programs.

Successful CIPs will fuel local development and may put refugee camps in an advantageous position over nearby villages or towns who do not receive international donor support.⁵⁴ Already today, the gap in access to education, health services and aid programs can be felt. In isolated rural locations, refugee camps have already become economic centres and may gain increasing importance as regional development engines. The influence of local camp governance models on their host environment might also extend to inspiring a reform process of political and administrative structures, and encourage residents to demand greater transparency, accountability and direct participation in planning processes.

UNRWA's role vis-à-vis camps will inevitably change as responsibilities are more clearly defined and local governance is established. This might help the

⁵⁴ CIPs will also guide the development of UNRWA Field Implementation Plans and related financial investments as reflected in biennium budgets, and in turn UNRWA's six-year Medium Term Strategy, as acknowledged by the Agency, see Medium Term Strategy, 2010–15, 31.

Agency better meet its budgets and more effectively deliver core services such as education and health care, which will need to be expanded in accordance with the projected natural population increase. With the full implementation of a developmental approach, UNRWA will be called upon to provide other services such as capacity building, training, monitoring, and advocacy work on behalf of the camps, which will lead to significant internal reforms.