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**PROBLEM AREAS IN THE HISTORIC CENTRES OF THE MEDITERRANEAN  
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Basic discussion paper prepared by the delegation of Greece

**Introduction**

1. The historic areas of the medium and large conurbations within the closed Mediterranean basin reflect the ancient history of the Mediterranean region. They are therefore the best guarantee for the continuity of our civilization and an effective means for promoting our countries. Yet, at the same time, they are often places of degradation and decline.

2. In those centres where the coexistence of the old with the new is particularly conspicuous or provocative, economic, social, planning and other conflicts appear. With time, these grow into "problem areas". A problem area could be a historic centre in decline, consisting of abandoned residences or run-down industrial buildings. It could also be a thriving historic downtown area with acute traffic and parking problems, or a prosperous historic residential area where new development is making inroads. In each country the problem areas of historic centres reveal not only their general Mediterranean characteristics, but also the particularities that stem from their changing socio-economic and geopolitical context.

**Historic centres and sustainable development**

3. The historic centres constitute a non-renewable stock. Equity requires that it should be passed on to the next generations as undepleted as possible. Therefore, it is the duty of each State to protect such a resource against the dangers of the country's development process. It is also its duty to protect and promote all authentic elements of the cultural heritage and the natural environment of the Mediterranean, which seem to be most exposed to the pressures of new development.

4. Respect for the non-renewable resources is the basic principle of sustainable development. As applied to historic centres, the notion of sustainable development refers to the balanced growth of urban centres, of tourism, of the economy, without depletion of the non-regenerative elements. Such elements are the historic building stock, the urban fabric, the human scale, the traditional uses, the natural topography, the surrounding natural environment, all of which combined give each individual historic centre its special image.

5. The need to preserve the world's cultural and natural heritage was recognized as early as 1972, when the World Heritage Convention, under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was signed. Guidelines for the preservation of the architectural heritage of Europe were officially established with the Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (Granada, Council of Europe, 1985), where the term "heritage" included open spaces and other elements of the immediate and natural environment, besides buildings and monuments. A shift towards the protection of larger entities, rather than single buildings, is apparent in all urban renewal policies and particularly in those dealing with historic centres. It remains to be seen whether such attitudes towards our historic stock contribute to improving the quality of life in the cities - which is assumed to be the ultimate goal of any policy.

6. In accordance with the new principles of sustainable development and management, government policies for intervention perceive the problem areas of historic centres as a challenge for coordinated efforts between the public and private sectors, with benefits at the enterprise, the city and the national levels. So what mechanisms do the various policies use to ensure that the intervention is not solely advantageous to the private sector?

**Are historic centres compatible with modern life?**

7. Identifying historic centres as such is useful only to the extent that it helps us make the right choices concerning intervention methods and policies. The rise and decline of each historic town, its urban structure and its geopolitical references, have established evolutionary patterns proper to the Mediterranean region, adjusted, of course, to the particular conditions in each country. A case in point is the juxtaposition of many architectural styles in the same town, in countries subjected to the influence of various civilizations. Also impossible to ignore are the modifications and the consequences brought about by violent and uncontrollable situations such as wars or natural disasters.

8. The birth and evolution of historic centres explain the complexity of their problems. At the same time they can point to solutions. The principles and the methods of protection since the Renaissance as well as the alleged conflict, starting after the Second World War, between private initiative and governmental protection (e.g. laws, enforcing mechanisms), established a code for State intervention, which, while subject to continuous changes, seems to remain basically unaltered. The unavoidable question, then, focuses on the purpose of the alleged conflict: is it to benefit those in power?

9. The urban character of the historic centres of the Mediterranean is indisputable, whether it concerns the city or a part of a large or medium-size town, or even a small historic town outside the urban centres' network. Many of the problems of the historic centres are caused by their urban character and take on a more acute and complex form in the large centres, notwithstanding the severity of problems in small centres, which, in some cases, may constitute a "problem area" in their entirety.

10. Urban life generates traffic and fast-moving cars are totally incompatible with the features of a historic centre: its street patterns, its building materials, its scale, its atmosphere. By definition, opening the historic centre to through traffic is a potential problem. Pedestrianization and new-technology mass transport seem to be minimum requirements of any rehabilitation scheme. Developing urban land use generates higher densities, often to the expense of open space. The lack of open space is a major factor in the deterioration of historic centres. So will the policies for upgrading a problem area strike the right balance between the need to recapture urban open space and to meet economic criteria?

#### **The changing roles of historic centres**

11. A significant factor in the development of an historic centre into a problem area is its function within the conurbation and, even more so, its role within the human settlements network, and the economic development of the country. Assuming that the change in its role is part of the particular policy objective, how real can such change be? And is it reversible?

12. Cities constantly experience the cyclical movement of people on the one hand: the abandonment of the old centres in quest of a better life in the suburbs, replacement by immigrants and minority groups, and the repopulation of the rehabilitated areas with a totally different social group from the original, unavoidably giving the area a new role. There are, on the other hand, social changes and problems that have spun off from the transformation of a problem area into an economically prosperous one, also unavoidably altering the character and atmosphere of the historic town.

13. Cities which have played a major role in the history of the country - as administrative, commercial, cultural centres - are being pushed into sudden growth and technological modernization, so that they can respond to the requirements of their new role. Smaller centres which are adjusting to the role conferred upon them by the particular development model, to which they have neither historic relevance nor reference, lose their identity and their personality. The case of historic centres that find themselves by chance on the touristic network is a familiar example of that phenomenon. Also victims of unsustainable development are the historic centres with a

specialized economic function (e.g. industry, port), which, in order to survive, are forced to change roles and to suffer deep dents in their structure.

14. During the last decades, there has been a continuous confrontation between the old and the new, a conflict between a tendency towards expansion, conventional urban renewal, technological innovations, on the one hand, and protection of the building stock as well as the urban fabric and the natural environment, on the other. If the intervention is not part of a wider planning framework or does not meet specific goals, it will create conflict and new problem areas.

15. This is not a new phenomenon; it has been with us since the early industrial revolution and urbanization. However, the issue has only recently acquired threatening dimensions in eastern and central Europe. Fortunately, it is now possible to introduce preventive measures in line with the principles of sustainability, which are now more prominent.

16. The historic centres of eastern and central Europe in transition, while having the Mediterranean characteristics, are dealing with their identity within a very particular socio-economic framework. During the post-war period and until recently, they were to some extent protected, in part because of the absence of market forces. Will these centres be able to take advantage of their unique situation?

#### **Social, economic and environmental considerations**

17. After several decades of intense urban development, the rate of development of new areas, particularly in south-western Europe, slowed in the 80s. There was also a tendency towards the upgrading and renewal of existing built-up areas. A clear policy for the protection and revitalization of the historic centres resulted. However, some problem areas seemed "too far gone" to be worth rehabilitating, depending on whether they were viewed from an economic, social, political or planning perspective. Macroeconomic considerations and sustainable management may justify saving the area, but how does one prevent demolition if the cost of restoration exceeds that of new construction and there are no other benefits?

18. The historic centre with its surrounding environment form a natural unit. Sustainable development requires that all procedures should be in harmony with the processes of nature; therefore, urban and environmental planning are fully interconnected. Urban ecology, the new concept in planning, expressing a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach towards the environmental problems of the urban centres, is looked upon as the only adequate way to upgrade and rehabilitate the problem areas in historic centres.

19. Notwithstanding the problems of pollution as well as those of scale, the environment also determines the viability or sustainability of the historic centres. For, how can, for example, a touristic historic town survive when the surrounding beaches are polluted or when the water resources are depleted? Such considerations, coupled with the need to preserve the sensitive relationship between the built and natural environment, lead to the need to assess in advance the impact caused by any intervention as well as the capacity of the historic centre to accept it.

20. The question is: how can an ailing central area remain part of a modern dynamic city? Is relocation a solution? Should the expansion area of a historic centre imitate its character and try to capture the atmosphere, or should it contrast with it? Perhaps historic centres should not grow at all, but then are they not in danger of becoming museum towns?

21. The impact of planning solutions to the complex issues emerging in the historic towns, is felt at all levels - environmental, ecological, cultural, aesthetic, social, economic and even political. That is why, true to the principles of sustainability, planning decisions may in no case be taken arbitrarily and without wider participation. Should local authorities take full responsibility for the future of their cities? If so, they should be able to represent those interest groups that serve the public interest. The role of local authorities is also to educate their citizens and raise public awareness to support the principles of sustainability.

### **Sustainable tourism development**

22. Poorly regulated tourist development goes against the concept of sustainability. Recognized as a primary activity in the Mediterranean region, tourism has the dual potential to improve the economy and raise the standards of living, and to destroy its very raison d'être. While tourism can promote culture and civilization, mass tourism can undermine that same culture. Tourism has represented a major source of income for the Mediterranean countries during the last decades. The European Environment Agency forecasts that by 2025 there will be about 380 million tourists in the Mediterranean basin. For how much longer will immediate profit prevail over long-term loss? Perhaps the historic centres and their natural surroundings have already been overexploited and their aesthetic and environmental value irreparably damaged?

23. The principles of sustainability need to apply particularly to tourist development. Tourist activity could be a catalyst in revitalizing the deteriorated historic areas of the Mediterranean region and promoting economic development at the same time. New forms of tourism such as cultural itineraries could effectively help promote the historic centres at the smallest expense to the environment.

24. It seems that what should be asked from the managers of the urban historic centres of the Mediterranean is straightforward: make the most of the special characteristics of the region, formulate policies beyond the national needs, so that all countries jointly responsible for safeguarding this wealth can work together.