

“A sustainable city needs sustainable institutions” Interview with Ahmed AbuLaban on Ramallah as a regional model for sustainability

Mr AbuLaban, the surrounding conditions for your work in Ramallah seem to be rather poor, at least from an external perspective. What are the main challenges you are facing as City Director of Ramallah?

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Actually, I think the main challenge we are facing, in Palestine generally and in Ramallah especially, is the Israeli occupation. Despite the fact that Israel pretends to have withdrawn from Palestine, they can still invade Ramallah anytime. They can get inside Ramallah and destroy the city infrastructure anytime. Also we need a permit from Israel for any city project that is located in area C as defined by the Oslo peace agreement. To give an example, it took us fifteen years to get a permission to build a cemetery.

The other challenge is to match the needs and expectations of our citizens on a daily basis. I am very happy that our citizens expect a lot from the municipality, but at the same time, this creates a huge responsibility. Precisely because we are doing well, expectations are getting higher and higher. From my point of view, the main goal of a municipality is, of course, to improve the quality of life for our citizens and this is a dynamic process, meeting rising expectations with improved policies and services.

Despite these difficult conditions, Ramallah has developed into a model for the region. What are the keys for your success?

I think that Ramallah has indeed become a pilot not only in Palestine but also in the broader region. The main reason for that is that we have focused very much on institution-building. I believe that building strong institutions is the corner stone of our work.

The elected mayor or the elected city council come and go, but the institutions of our municipality should be stable. In other words: I believe that a sustainable city, first of all, needs sustainable institutions. So, in my view, that is the main reason for our success. We have a very clear reporting structure within our administration, we have very qualified staff who share a common team spirit. I think all of this together makes Ramallah very unique.

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Did the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs have an impact on your city development strategies and how would you define sustainability for your city?

I am biased with the phrase of sustainability. There are so many different concepts for modern local government such as resilient or green or smart city.

“The challenge is to integrate the different dimensions.”

But I will adapt to the concept of sustainability because sustainability, from my point of view, is a dynamic concept and it covers different dimensions and issues, from economic growth to social cohesion to the protection of the environment. The challenge, of course, is to integrate these different dimensions and to pursue a balanced approach.

I think it is fair to say that we have been working on all these dimensions for a long time, but it was not in a very systematic or integrative manner before the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. I think we as a municipality currently contribute to all seventeen SDGs,

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except for number 14 that aims to protect life under water since we do not have access to oceans or large coastal systems. My favorite SDGs, however, are number 11 because it talks about sustainable cities and communities and number 17 on partnerships which, I believe, is the cornerstone because without partnership you cannot achieve any of the SDGs.

It is one of your declared goals to better connect your work to your citizens, so what measures have you taken to do so?

We are very successful in community participation. We have different kinds of dialogues with our citizens. For example, we established about nine advisory

boards, each focusing on a specific sector such as the environment, local economic development, culture, tourism or infrastructure. We also have different kinds of public meetings and hearings to implement our participatory governance approach. But I do believe that we need an umbrella for all these activities and instruments and that is why we are currently working on a social cohesion strategy. Each department and each institution needs to have a clear understanding of its responsibility for contributing to this strategy. And all of them together are accountable to the general public. Because people in a municipality represent something like the ‘general assembly’. They elect the city council which has to report to the citizens. From my point of view, the highest instance in our city structure is the citizen.

“We need an umbrella for all these activities and that is why we are working on a social cohesion strategy.”

Ahmed AbuLaban

Ahmed AbuLaban is the Ramallah City Director since April, 2006. Before joining the municipality team in November 1999 as the Administrative Director, he acted as the Executive Director for the Sirreyet Ramallah (Community and Youth Organisation).



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