What underperforming EIA systems of developing nations can learn from the UK practice: The case of Jordan

Having spent the majority of my life moving to different cities across the globe, from Baghdad to Tashkent to Dubai to Amman and then finally to Manchester, I have developed an interest in exploring the various ways in which development in low- and middle-income nations differs from that in developed nations.

With every year of my Town and Country Planning university degree my curiosity was fed with the insights I gained into the development control process and planning practice in the UK. Since leaving University, my role as a Graduate Planner working within a multi-disciplinary environmental consultancy has introduced me to the intricate and extensive processes that shape and inform development proposals, such as Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). This has allowed me to better understand the reasons behind the efficient, resilient and responsive development in prosperous nations and the shortcomings of the development process in developing nations such as my native Jordan.

My undergraduate dissertation was focussed on how the proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in Amman would help alleviate the city’s urban mobility issues. The BRT is a proposed 32 km network of segregated median busway, comprising a total of 39 stops and a fleet of 136 articulated vehicles running on Compressed Natural Gas. The scheme was developed in 2009 by Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) as part of the Amman Plan and funded by the French government’s Agence Francaise de Development (AFD). In July 2010, construction began on the first two kilometres of the busway. However, in May 2011, suspension of the BRT construction was called for by members of the Jordanian parliament who prematurely deemed the project a failure and unsuitable for the city. This was fuelled by media attacks on the scheme and echoed by the public’s outrage at claims of corruption.

Since then, the project remained at a standstill until February 2015 when GAM announced that work on the project will finally resume after a JD 8 million tender for the second package of infrastructure works for the BRT was approved.

One of the findings from my research attributed the lack of transparency and public engagement in the planning process as a major flaw in the scheme undermining public confidence in it. However, it was not until I started working that I began to relate and fine-tune my conclusions based on what I have learnt so far about the UK’s EIA practice.

As is the case with many other developing nations, the EIA system in Jordan lacks strict regulations and comprehensive guidance. Although the Ministry of Environment has EIA requirements, they are not applied consistently. The director of Transport and Traffic Management at GAM informed me that EIA requirements are only strict for projects such as the BRT that are financed by international development agencies. However, although an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was prepared for the BRT, it had shortcomings that reflect the weaknesses of the practice in Jordan. However for the purposes of brevity, I will focus primarily on the lack of public consultation and community involvement in the EIA process.

The EIS prepared for the BRT scheme stated that: “it was deemed that no formal consultations with the general public will be needed for the purpose of preparing the environmental assessment”. This single sentence sums up what essentially led to the project’s long hiatus.

In the UK practice, community engagement is increasingly gaining greater importance in the EIA process. This was initiated by the introductory clauses to EIA Directive 2003/35/EC which stated that the EIA process should enable effective public participation and it was strengthened by the need for the process to be compliant with the 1998 UNECE Aarhus Convention.
From what I have seen so far from my six-month working experience, public consultation is a fundamental principle of the EIA process. Not only is public involvement in the UK practice a valuable source of information on key impacts, potential mitigation measures and the identification and selection of alternatives, it also ensures that the process is open, transparent and robust. It secures accountability and provides adequate information and the opportunity for appeals to be dealt with efficiently.

The public backlash, scepticism and scrutiny that the Amman BRT scheme has faced is a consequence of public consultation being excluded from the EIA process. Had the EIA regulations been stricter and the practice as transparent as the UK’s, the local community may now have been reaping the benefits of an integrated and efficient public transport network rather than suffering from congested roads, polluted air and constrained urban mobility.

TEP, April 2015.