Nouakchott: urban development, public policies and citizens’ answers

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Context of the Study

• At the end of 2009, the Spanish Government awarded a funding to our research group in order to realize a three years study on urban changing processes in three African capital cities: Nouakchott, Praia and Addis Ababa.

• Marta Alonso and I looked after the research in Nouakchott, the Mauritania’s capital city (January 2010-December 2012)
Three main researche issues in Nouakchott (2010-2012)

• The urban changing processes;
• The daily mobility’s practices;
• The transports’ uses and crashes’ resolution.
Why Nouakchott?

• For its idiosyncratic story and urban development;
• Because its creating process was parallel to that of the independence of the country;
• And because it is the mere result of a political decision to make Nouakchott the symbol of national unity.
Some chronology

• **1958**: The beginning of the capital city’s construction.

• **28th November 1960**: Day of Mauritania’s Independence. Nouakchott was still a small urban cluster mostly composed by administrative buildings.

• **1970s and 1980s**: two periods of deep dryness, mass nomad people sedentarization, unexpected demographic and urban growth.

• Today more than one million inhabitants, or one third of the country’s population, live in Nouakchott.
Urban development and public policies

• The inadequacy and ineffectiveness of urban plans, adopted in order to deal with the city’s growing needs, have resulted in a more and more deep spatial and social segregation.

• The Avenue Abdel Nasser, that crosses Nouakchott from East to West, seems to be a real border between two worlds: the North with its rich and affluent neighborhoods, and the South, that is composed by the most dense popular neighborhoods and slums.
• The urban development of Nouakchott has taken place in a stellar and horizontal way along the main arterial roads connecting Nouakchott with the rest of the country.

• All these main roads converge into the commercial and administrative city center called Capitale, being its principle accesses.

• Nouakchott is the result of a sum of neighborhoods, which can be distinguished not only by the economic level and quality of life, but also for the ethnic origin of their inhabitants: we can observe a majority of bidan into the Northern and Eastern zones and a majority of Sub-Saharan people into the Southern ones.
• Nouakchott is a very heterogeneous city, where all Mauritanian ethnical groups are represented and the disparities increase from all points of view: housing, infrastructures, services, mobility, transports, etc.

• The constant and mass population’s increase into the peripheral areas and the resulting urban extension have progressively distanced the outskirts from the city center, which concentrates the majority of the administrative, commercial and working activities.

• The paradoxical result is that the humblest and poorest inhabitants are forced to daily displacements toward the city center in order to satisfy their needs. And, as distances have become more and more arduous, they have to use the transports.
• The mobility’s features in Nouakchott and the access to transports perfectly reflect the social stratification of the city.

• First of all, the public sector almost doesn’t exist, except for the Société des Transports Publics, which was created in 2010 and is semiprivate (50%).

• Until now, the private sector has provided the most efficacious answers to the increasing mobility’s needs of the population.

• Secondly, despite of the remarkable vehicles’ increase, their access is still not equitably generalised: many people can’t afford the transports’ costs, so they cover long distance by foot or carts.
Different types of motorised transports

• In a city where people don’t like to move by foot or to have a walk, their favorite transport is the private car or, in its absence, the taxi. Owning a car, even if not luxurious or in good conditions, is a sort of mean of social distinction which not always corresponds to a wealthy status.

• But, the majority of Nouakchott’s inhabitants has not a private car and can’t afford the taxis’ costs. They have to resort to other kinds of means which are not the most efficacious solutions to their needs and often are in very bad conditions.
One of the most popular transports in Nouakchott is the so called *taxi tout-droit*, whose name results from its prefixed itinerary along which passengers can get in or get off where they want. There are different lines connecting the outskirts with some strategic points of the city. Their tariffs are rather low.
The *minibus* or *minicars* are a cheaper option, but their conditions are even more precarious and also dangerous. We are talking about vans adapted to passengers’ transportation. They work as the *taxis tout-droit*, but the difference is that there is not a limit to the passengers’ number and they have not the same agility in the traffic.
The animal traction carts

- They are still a valid option to transport persons or merchandises, especially in the outskirts.
Process of “modernization” and citizens’ answers
• Between the end of the last century and the beginning of the new one, the Mauritanian Government adopted a series of “modernization” urban policies, most of which was carried out on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the country’s Independence, the 28th November 2010.

• Tanks to the funding of different international institutions (European Union, World Bank, etc.), the Government achieved some urban interventions in order to make the centre of Nouakchott the “showcase” of a modern, efficient, charming city: roads’ asphalting and lighting, signage’s increase, traffic regulation, creation of parks and green areas, elimination of certain “annoying” elements such as old buildings, obsolete transports, carts, peddlers and other informal activities, etc.

— Société des Transports Publics
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Maitre d'Ouvrage : Communauté Urbaine de Nouakchott (CNU)
Maitre d'Ouvrage Délégué : Agence du Développement Urbain (ADU)

Bénéficiaire : Communauté Urbaine de Nouakchott (CNU)
Programmes : Projet : Construction de 6 km de voirie urbaine de Nouakchott
Financement : IDA + ETAT

Montant du Marché : 459995891 UM TTC
Entreprise : EBTR
Bureau de Contrôle : SCET - RIM
Date du Traçage : 7 Mois
Durée du Marché : 7 mois

Mise en Oeuvre : Etablissement des ouvrages de voirie urbaine et travaux associés à la réalisation de 6 km de voirie urbaine de Nouakchott.
Some conclusions

• Most of the urban plans have failed because they have always followed foreign abstract models instead of considering the urban context and the inhabitants’ real needs. People’s daily practices have always overstepped the public planning.

• So, in our opinion, the only way to adopt efficacious and long-lasting urban plans is by observing the concrete and pragmatic answers given by Nouakchott’s inhabitants to the changes in which they are constantly involved.
Thank you