Joint strategic forward planning: a tool to serve territories

FRANCE, OVERSEAS TERRITORIES – DECENTRALISATION – CHANGE OF SCALE

Context: exceptional demographic growth

The municipality of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni is located in western French Guyana, on the border with Surinam. Between 1967 and 2010, its population grew sevenfold to exceed 38,000 inhabitants. Between 1999 and 2010, the rate of demographic growth was 4.3%, and since 1990 the gross birth rate (45%) has reached a level only rarely encountered in developing countries. Under this demographic pressure, the town is developing rapidly and is poorly managed, particularly with a huge increase in informal, substandard urban settlements.

The solution: joint strategic forward planning

The municipality of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni commissioned GRET to conduct work on territorial forward planning up 2030, aimed at projecting various possible futures following strategic orientations and decisions1. The process was carried out in three phases:

- **The memory phase** (retrospective) during which information from the past is collected and makes it possible to understand the changes that have taken place in the territory studied, and to detect the data from the past that remains relevant for the future.

- **The observation phase** (forward planning diagnosis), which leads to the projection of what looks almost certain to occur (key trends that will affect the territory in the long term), and to the identification of early warning symptoms, expected or dreaded seeds of change in the run up to 2030.

- **The projection phase** (exploratory forward planning), which makes it possible to recompose and reconfigure the data collected during the previous stages in a collective creative process, to design possible futures based on human and territorial assets.

The study placed a key focus on interviews with local stakeholders and used the Delphi-Abaque de Régnier method to involve stakeholders in the exploratory forward planning phase. The latter consists of asking a panel of stakeholders to take a stand on assertions translating strategic issues and options, with a view to the broadest possible ownership. Analysis of opinions makes it possible to identify shared visions and controversies or disagreement, based on which it is possible to project probable possible futures, a shared vision of the future acceptable to the broadest number of stakeholders and alternative futures. This examination makes it possible to inform debates between stakeholders and build strategic options.

1 This work, carried out in 2015, received support from the Agence française de développement (AFD). This publication expresses GRET’s own point of view and does not necessarily reflect the point of view of the AFD.
Initial results produced in the field

The forward planning study consisted of producing a decision-making tool in two parts:

- **Demographic projections and requirements in the run-up to 2030**

According to the most likely scenario, these projections demonstrate that Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni will have a population of 135,000 in 2030. Requirements will be colossal, in terms of housing (26,500 new housing units, two thirds of which are social housing) and education (185 new classes by 2030). Job creation (20,000 new companies to create by 2030, 90% of which in self-employment). These projections make it possible to define a “gradual” scenario that highlights the effects pursuing the current public policies would have on the town, in light of the trends observed (especially the eightfold multiplication of informal urbanization), to deduct the negative external aspects of such an evolution and to calculate the minimum direct cost of inaction.

- **strategic scenarios on the future of the town according to a joint approach:**

An endogenous development scenario with no exceptional State resources. For the town, this would mean prioritising the search for conditions of economic growth higher than demographic growth, by putting the main resources into job creation.

An interventionist and catch-up scenario, based on a high level of State intervention. This would mean first and foremost solving the distortions in development between Saint-Laurent and the rest of French Guyana via a catch-up policy: strengthening of public institutions, upgrading of the town according to a polycentric model, development of housing that would be accessible to the poorest, and transformation of the sub-regional economic capital.

Challenges and questions

Joint strategic forward planning is a reflection on the future to guide current action, but only deciders at local and national level can launch and conduct this action, by generating projects that can respond to their long-term vision of the town. It requires strong political backing and mobilisation of all stakeholders and citizens in an ambitious participative approach focusing on the definition of common priority issues, in order to build territorial governance, back and implement political orientations. It necessitates real resources to facilitate the production of scenarios and subsequently transform them into territorial public policy.

Recommendations

Few towns in developing countries have the skills and resources to conduct this type of process, especially secondary towns that will be the very ones to bear the brunt of a huge portion of future urban growth. Their capacity to anticipate is vital in order to avoid being overwhelmed. GRET invites international cooperation players to support this type of approach and the implementation of forward planning and urban planning capacities in cities and territories via financial support through donations, technical assistance and programmes to strengthen authorities and local expertise.

More information