URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF CITY CENTERS: The Case of Rafah City, Palestinian Territories

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Abstract
City centers worldwide are perceived as essential parts of the city, where city memories are preserved and its identity is expressed. They are planned to satisfy the functional requirements and pleasurable qualities of the city. Under the accelerating urbanization of the modern city, several challenges face these centers including demographic, economic, and environmental challenges. This requires a continuous and incremental urban development process based on clear strategy and action plans. Thus, this study focuses on urban development strategies of city centers, with a focus on Rafah city located in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories. The geographic location of this city near the Palestinian-Egyptian borders makes it a promising commercial city at local and regional levels. Thus, the current situation of Rafah city center has been analyzed, and several development strategies have been proposed. This has been done through a field survey based on observation and a questionnaire directed to city center users. It has been found that there is a great potential of Rafah city center to be developed as a commercial center. In this regard, several strategies and required actions have been proposed in the fields of transportation, environmental quality, shopping activities, investment opportunities, and visual perception.

Keywords: Urban development; City center; Development strategy; the Gaza Strip.

INTRODUCTION
City centers, or downtowns, hold a special importance for communities. They form high-value urban hearts of the city, where needs and services are provided. Historically, the Greek “agora” and Roman “forum” formed an integral part of the ancient city center, where public meetings and occasions were organized. In general, public squares have been historically used to form city centers, where religious and public buildings are manifested (Herzog, 2006). In the modern city, city centers are generally characterized by concentration of services, high traffic density, high land prices leading to buildings vertical expansion, and high variation of population density between day and night time. Several types of services are concentrated in city centers. Among these services, the commercial role of city centers is essential.

This is reflected in the existence of shopping facilities and headquarters of commercial firms, which form the so-called Central Business District (CBD). Some even argue that city center strength depends on its ability to maintain the main economic center of the city, even under the trend of decentralizing of shopping services (Gallion & Eisner, 1986). However, planning centers of mixed uses, including residential one, ensures vitality of these centers and reduces the potential of urban crime (Tallon & Bromley, 2004). This is essential to face the desire of maximizing the income rate from commercial land development on the account of the essential urban and cultural role of the city center as a main image maker of the city. Within this context, several challenges emerge in the modern city. This mainly includes reclaiming city centers from the automobile for the pedestrian and open spaces (Riddell, 2004). In this regard, local culture should be favored to create the required connection between aesthetics and design values (Taylor, 1998). Thus, a comprehensive development approach is required to invest the high commercial value of city centers without compromising urban quality of the city. Despite the fact
that cities grow and develop, response of city centers is usually slower. This is related to the complicated urban situation of these centers characterized by high population density and concentration of services and transportation. Thus, it is essential to propose proper and incremental development strategies of this vital part of the city.

Several studies have been carried out in this regard. Al-Qaddomi (2000) investigated development strategies of the CBD of Nablus City, Palestinian Territories. Al-Qaddomi discussed the current needs that exist in Nablus city center through a filed study. These needs have been diagnosed depending on a questionnaire analysis. As a result, several development strategies have been proposed including planning for pedestrians, conservation and reuse of historical buildings, improving pleasurable and visual qualities of the center, and encouraging community participation. Donaldson and Du Plessis (2013) also investigated urban development of city centers as an area-based process. The study reviewed the lessons learnt from the proposed governmental urban renewal program of the CBD of Cape Town’s Khayelitsha node. The paper used qualitative evidence obtained from a sample of the program stakeholders. It concluded several strategic recommendations in the context of urban development. This includes the need for a flexible system of land-use management to respond to both private and public-sector investment and requirements. In another study, Pérez and Rey (2013) presented a multi-criteria approach in the context of urban renewal of existing neighborhoods. This aimed to ensure sustainability through the integration of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental criteria in these neighborhoods. This has been done through an evaluative approach applied to a specific case study. This approach consists of a structured assessment based on a multi-criteria comparison of three possible development scenarios.

In this study, Rafah city center has been selected as a case study. Rafah has a great regional importance attributed to its location as the southern gateway of the Palestinian Territories, where Africa and Asia connects. Rafah city is located in the southern part of the Gaza Strip, which stretches along the Mediterranean coast with an area of 365 km². Rafah city is surrounded by the city of Khan Younis from the north, the Egyptian borders from the south, the Mediterranean Sea from the west, and Al-Showka village from the east. Rafah governorate area is 64 km², representing 17.53% of the Gaza Strip area. Its population is estimated at 188,690, which represents 12.3% of the Gaza Strip population (PCBS, 2013). Fig. 1 illustrates Rafah location within the Gaza Strip.

Figure 1: Rafah city in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories (Source: PCBS, 2012).
Considering the regional importance of Rafah city explained above and the shortage of studies in this regard, this study focuses on the center of Rafah city as the most important part of this city. It is assumed that this center can effectively contribute to the development of the city as a whole. This task is challenging considering the current situation of the center as will be explained in the field study. However, several development opportunities exist and can't be ignored. Thus, the importance of this study lies mainly in the fact that it offers holistic strategies and solutions to the urban problems of Rafah city center considering its crucial urban and commercial role for the Gaza Strip.

FIELD STUDY OF RAFAH CITY CENTER
This study is based on a field study, where data about urban situation of the study area has been collected and analyzed. This is a valid approach for urban development studies, and has been implemented in several studies such as Sullivan & Lovell (2005), Dempsey, Brown & Bramley (2012) and Chan & Yung (2004). Field quantitative and qualitative surveying has been done through:

- Direct participatory observation to understand the current urban situation.
- Photography to record the reality of the place.
- A questionnaire distributed in the study area to understand people’s problems.
- Collection of the available data about the study area from the municipality of Rafah, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (BCBS), and many other official resources.

Specifying the center boundary
There is no clear official specification of Rafah city center. Thus, boundaries of the study area have been identified to encompass the central commercial area of the city in addition to Abu Bakr Street as a central street. This area is characterized by high urban and traffic density, and existence of services and utility buildings such as the central market and the Municipal building. Fig. 2 shows the proposed boundaries of the central area of Rafah. Area of the specified zone is about 39.2 hectare. It is clear from Fig. 2 that the center accommodates a dense built up area and major traffic streets.

![Figure 2: Suggested Rafah city center boundaries (Source: Municipality of Rafah, no date).](image)

Field Study through Observation
Direct observation gets researchers involved in the study environment and allows getting to know people’s problems and suggestions. Based on the related references and direct observation, the following were observed:
1. Urban Land Uses: Based on the satellite images of the city and the public buildings guide produced by Municipality of Rafah (2007), land uses in the study area have been identified. Fig. 3 illustrates these uses, while Table 1 shows their proportions.

Residential use is the main use in the area, which represents about 60% of the study zone. This percentage is normal in urban areas in general, but it is relatively high being located in the city center, where services are supposed to be centralized. Also, most of this zone is classified as refugee camps. Thus, overcrowding is the main problem that can be noticed in the residential zones, where buildings are tightly clustered and served by narrow alleys (Fig. 4).

Table 1: Proportions of land uses in the study area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use</th>
<th>Area (1000 m²)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential (Refugees Camps)</td>
<td>241.7</td>
<td>57.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential (Planned)</td>
<td>11.64</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>9.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>18.48</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Areas</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roads</td>
<td>91.44</td>
<td>21.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>423.85</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Land uses in the study area (Source: Authors).

Figure 4: Overcrowding in the residential zone (Source: Authors).
The educational uses represent 9.5% of the study zone. There are seven schools in the area, which significantly increases the number of individuals in the center during daytime. This puts more pressure on the traffic and road network, where traffic jams occur as students leave their schools. The third main land use is the commercial one, which represents 4.2% of the study zone. This use is mainly concentrated on the main streets in the ground floor of mixed-use residential buildings, especially in Abu Bakr Street, which passes through the study area. The rest of land uses are limited in general. It is clear that the area requires more green areas and sport zones, which currently represents less than 2%.

2. Land Ownership: Determining land ownership is important to facilitate the development process and to help finding appropriate solutions for land tenure. Table 2 shows percentages of the different types of land ownership in the study area, excluding streets. It can be noticed that the majority of land ownership in the study area is classified as private land. Rest of categories, the public land, is mostly used for schools and services and there is a limited area of vacant land. For example, only 1650 m² (0.6%) of the land owned by Rafah Municipality in the study area is vacant land (Municipality of Rafah, 2008). This means that land required for development projects in the area should be either bought or rented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ownership Types</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>73.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>7.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waqf*</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNRWA**</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>12.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Managed by Ministry of Religious Affairs
** United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees

3. Building Uses and Heights: The highest percentage of buildings in the study area is low-rise buildings, which shows that the high-value land in the center is not properly investigated (Fig. 5). As for building uses, most of buildings are residential ones, where commercial use is less than what is expected. This is related to the fact that commercial uses are linear in pattern, i.e. concentrated along the main streets. Inner streets have insignificant investment value. As for building character, there are no historical buildings in the area. All buildings have been established following the 1948 migration. They form crowded concrete or stone blocks with unclear architectural character. This negatively affects the urban value of the place and the city. Thus, building rehabilitation to improve their character should be an essential goal in the development strategy of the center.

Figure 5: An overview of Abu Bakr Street in the middle of the center (Source: Authors).
4. Roads and Transportation: The area is characterized by the existence of several main roads that form vital commercial axes in the city. Through the field surveying, the following were observed:

- Traffic congestion reflected in the low-speed movement of vehicles. For example, this is clearly observed in Abu Bakre Street, which is a vital street that penetrates the city center. On the contrary, the lowest traffic flow is noticed at night time.
- Pavements misuse and poor conditions of in some main streets, especially Al-Huda Street, and Abu Bakr Street. This forces pedestrians to use car lanes for walking.
- High percentage of animal-driven carts in the city center (3.5%), and motorcycles (7.9%), which are hazardous for both pedestrians and cars (Natuf for Development, 2007).
- Lack of traffic control tools such as signs, signals and safety measures.
- There is a conflict between pedestrians and vehicles movement at the school area, where appropriate sidewalks and pedestrian routes are not provided.
- There's a shortage of places for car parking, especially in the crowded places near markets and public places. As a result, most cars use both sides of the main streets for parking.
- There is no public transportation system in the city center.

5. Landscaping and Land Marks: Lack of proper and consistent landscaping and street furniture is generally easy to observe in the study area. This is reflected in several aspects including lack of sufficient green areas, lack of landscaping elements such as sculptures, artistic views and water elements, insufficient night-time lighting for secure shopping environment, and lack of street furniture elements such as benches, flowerbeds, pergolas, and litters. As for land marks, some have been observed in the area such as Al-Awda mosque and the Martyrs statue in the former Al-Nejma square.

5. Pollution: Pollution in its different kinds is considered the most serious problem that characterizes the city center. Sources of air, noise and visual pollution are common. These are direct results of the crowding and the unplanned urban growth. Air and noise pollutions in general are caused by car emotions, and electricity generators. In addition, waste resulting from domestic and commercial activities is a major source of air and visual pollution. Other causes of visual pollution include mixed nonconforming land uses, occupying sidewalks by peddlers, irregular arrangement of the street lights, unplanned car parking, and the absence of a proper character of buildings and facades.

Field Study through Questionnaire

A questionnaire has been carried out to help identifying the urban problems from users' point of view, and to confirm the findings of the field study by observation. The targeted population of the questionnaire is city center users including vendors, shoppers, workers, drivers, etc. Assuming that all Rafah governorate residents regularly visit the center, then population of the study equals population of the governorate. This is estimated at 188,690 residents (PCBS, 2013). For this population, a sample of 100 units would be representative, with 95% confidence level, and 90% precision level (Dhamen, 2009). Questionnaire has been distributed in person, and individuals have been selected randomly until the required number of returned sheets is achieved.

The questionnaire has been designed to cover five areas: users' recognition of the city center, shopping problems, environmental concerns, transportation and traffic problems, and visual quality. Under each area, several closed and opened questions are listed, using five-level Likert scale. Questionnaire validity has been reviewed by five referees, in addition to a pilot study. In total, respondents have been asked to answer 45 questions. Results have been analyzed using SPSS to produce frequencies and relative weights. Main findings of the questionnaire were as follows:
1. Recognition of the City Center: Most of the respondents (67%) believe that the center of Rafah city is limited to the Sea Street, known as Abu Bakr street. This is possibly because this central street gathers most of city facilities and commercial services, in addition to its importance as a district distributor. The rest of opinions are divided into different options, which indicates the need of clearly define the center boundaries. This has several implications including proposing and implementing special building regulations in this specific area to meet its special urban needs. As for the city center function, 77% of the respondents indicated its important commercial role.

2. Shopping Problems: This part of the city is in the commercial center. Thus, it is characterized by overcrowding caused by day-time visitors of the center. Table 3 lists shopping problems in Rafah city center from the respondents’ point of view, presented according to their average and relative weights. It shows that shortage of pedestrian facilities is the main concern of respondents. With the exception of night-time lighting, the rest of shopping problems is also confirmed by the majority of respondents. This requires implementing strategies and measures that prevent obstacles on shopping paths and improve pavement conditions. Respondents have been asked to suggest some pedestrian facilities that they need in the center. Several facilities have been suggested by the respondents in the following order: gardens and parks (29.2%), squares and open spaces (22.7%), and sports and leisure facilities (163%).

3. Environmental Problems: In general, respondents believe that Rafah city center suffers from the following environmental problems: air pollution, street hygiene, and noise. In order to face these problems, it is important to find solutions for the reasons behind them. Table 4 presents these reasons from respondents’ point of view.

Table 3: Shopping problems in Rafah city center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficiency of roads and pedestrian paths</td>
<td>80.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shortage of pedestrian facilities</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalls and obstructions on pavements</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficiency of night-time lighting</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent power interruption</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Environmental problems in Rafah city center and their reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
<th>Top Reasons</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Air Pollution</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>Car exhausts</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electricity generators</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban overcrowding</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Streets Pollution</td>
<td>90.8</td>
<td>Lack of proper waste management</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Absence of rainwater drainage</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electricity generators</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Passing cars</td>
<td>91.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overcrowding</td>
<td>79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Transportation and Traffic Problems: Results show that there are several problems related to transportation in Rafah city center. There is almost consent that the main problem affecting city center users is the difficulty of parking their cars. This is followed by the lack of adequate sidewalks, which force pedestrians to walk through vehicle lanes. In addition, the necessity of preventing animal-drawn carts from using the main streets is stressed. Table 5 shows other problems as seen by the questionnaire respondents. Insufficiency of public transportation came at the bottom. However, it can be noticed from the study sample characteristics that the largest
number of respondents (42%) lives outside the city center, and use taxis to travel to and from the center (Fig. 6). This explains the taxis crowding in the center, which also confirms the need of proposing bus system to serve the city as a whole and the center in particular.

Table 5: Transportation and traffic problems in Rafah city center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficiency of car parks</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstructions on pavements</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal-driven carts on main streets</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrians crowding causing cars congestion</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic flow restriction commercial facilities</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficiency of public transportation</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents have been asked to give their opinion regarding some proposed solutions to the traffic problems. These solutions are listed in Table 6. It can be noticed that some ideas such as changing the Saturday market location is not acceptable to the respondents. Alternatively, respondents believe that the best way to overcome the problem of traffic congestion in the city center is to prevent the entry of animal-driven carts at peak times of the day. In addition, it is required to enforce some traffic control tools such as signs and signals. Finally, the use of multi-story car parks is acceptable to the respondents.

5. Visual Quality Problems: Results show that there are several visual problems in Rafah city center. Table 7 lists these problems. Absence of amenities and visual interest is the main problem as indicated by 83% of respondents. The following problems, presented in Table 7, are in fact the aspects of the aforementioned main problem. Thus, the required actions include improving the surrounding built environment, rehabilitation of building facades in the center, and provision of urban design elements such as seats, green elements, phone booths, trash cans, and water bodies and fountains. In this regard, the current construction works of a new square at al-Najma area is appreciated by the respondents, where 75% of them believe that it will create a focal point and unique amenity in the area.
Table 6: Respondents’ opinion regarding the proposed solutions to the transportation problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restricting specific sections of the main street (Abu Bakr Street) to pedestrians</td>
<td>51.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Converting specific sections of the main street to one-way street</td>
<td>53.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Saturday market outside the center</td>
<td>58.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of vehicle entry at certain hours</td>
<td>60.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of multi-story car parks</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of carts entry at peak times</td>
<td>80.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic signals to control congestion</td>
<td>82.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Visual appearance problems in Rafah city center.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Relative Weight (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The absence of visual attractiveness in general</td>
<td>83.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The negative effect of adjacent slums</td>
<td>78.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lack of urban design elements</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building facades need maintenance</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistency of shops banners</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encroachment on the sidewalks by adjacent shops</td>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unplanned car parks</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

URBAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF RAFAH CITY CENTER

The process of formulating a strategy means setting achievable goals, development projects, and practical indicators. This strategy should be implemented in accordance with clear policies and in accordance with the relevant legislations. This framework is out of the scope of this study. Rather, the main aim is to outline the urban development priorities and needs that help strategic planners in forming detailed development strategies. In the previous section of the study, the current situation and urban problems of Rafah city center have been explored using detailed field study. This study was based on direct observation and questionnaire directed to the center users. Based on the findings of this field study with reference to the similar experiences in this field, it has become possible to set some urban development goals and actions for the development of the center. This includes the fields explained below:

Improving Traffic Movement in the City Center

- Vision:
  Traffic movement in the center of Rafah city will be easy and safe for all.
- Proposed goals and actions:
  1. Facilitating traffic movement and prevention of through traffic:
     - Implementing an integrated system of buses which includes a central bus station, bus stops, and effective operating system.
     - Planning a ring road to prevent the through traffic in the city center.
     - Keeping animal-driven carts off the main streets, especially Abu Baker Street.
     - Installing traffic control signs and signals to improve safety.
     - Providing proper pedestrian paths and landscaping, and limiting the crowded side streets to pedestrian use at peak times.
  2. Providing sufficient and well-planned car parking:
     - Analyzing parking needs and availability.
Increasing the effective width of streets to include on-street parking, or alternatively using parking courts.

- Developing a parking fee system, with restrictions on allowed parking time.
- Provision of effective car park arrangements such as underground and multi-story parking, and encouraging the private sector to invest in this field.

**Improving Quality of the City Center Environment**

- **Vision:**
  Rafah city center will enjoy a clean and healthy environment that attracts visitors.
- **Proposed goals and actions:**
  1. **Reducing levels of air and noise pollution:**
     - To issue a penalty fine for unnecessary use of car horns.
     - To monitor cars with excessive emissions and keep them off streets.
     - To prevent the use of amplifiers or any source of noise in the streets of the city center, cafes and public places, especially at night-time.
     - Planting trees along the streets to dissipate noise and absorb carbon dioxide.
     - Reducing the use of taxis and encouraging the use of public transportation.
     - To issue commercial licenses only for uses that cause acceptable levels of noise and emissions.
     - To replace the individual electricity generators that run during electrical power interruption by large ones that serve clusters of shops.
  2. **Improving public hygene:**
     - Development and implementation of a waste management plan for the city center.
     - Provision of trash cans and recycling bins all around the city center and maintaining them on a regular basis.
     - Organizing an awareness program on the importance of environmental quality.
     - To issue a penalty fine in the case of inappropriate waste disposal.
     - Provision of rainwater collection system from streets to keep market area clean and hygienic.

**Improving the Overall Appearance of the City Center**

- **Vision:**
  The center of Rafah city will become an urban attraction point locally and regionally.
- **Proposed goals and actions:**
  1. **Improving streets urban design:**
     - Providing urban furniture and amenities necessary for the pedestrians.
     - Providing additional green areas, especially in sidewalks, wide street islands, and squares (Shohadaa Square and Bilal bin Rabah Street).
     - Maintenance of pavements and sidewalks to favor pedestrians and the disabled people.
     - Developing current squares especially Shohada Square, and Al-Awda square.
     - Developing a system for numbering buildings and streets.
  2. **Providing open spaces for social and civic activities:**
     - Creating a mixed-use development and plaza near Shohada Square to serve center visitors.
     - Creating recreational opportunities for youth such as sports fields.
     - Reconstructing Al-Najma Park as it is the only park in the area.
  3. **Rehabilitation of buildings:**
     - Cleaning building facades overlooking the main streets and squares, and preventing of vandalism.
     - Removing encroachments caused by shops located on the main streets.
     - Proposing specific regulations to give buildings located in the center a unique character that reflects city history.
Making a detailed study of the camps zones in the city center to propose a development plan for them jointly with UNRWA.

Making a comprehensive survey on the banners in order to identify the need to improve, remove or replace them in an acceptable character.

Organizing awareness campaigns and offer incentives to get people involved.

Encouraging the use of green buildings and sustainable design.

**Promoting Development and Investment Opportunities**

**Vision:**
Rafah city center will represent a stimulating development environment.

**Proposed goals and actions:**

1. To support the existing and new investment firms:
   - To contact the existing retailers and consider their complaints and suggestions.
   - Developing an cooperation program between the educational system and local businesses.
   - Leasing governmental lands to the private sector on a long term and facilitating the subsidies and investment loans.
   - Capacity building of the local labor.

2. Upgrading the shopping environment:
   - Encouraging mixed-use land uses in the city center to enhance its vitality.
   - To establish municipal investment projects in the center, and to use their revenue for the upgrading process.
   - To promote night-time shopping, and implement the required measures.

**CONCLUSION**
The process of developing city centers needs efforts and involvement of several stakeholders including concerned municipality, ministries, and private sector, in addition to community participation. The large number of stakeholders in the development process may ease the burden, but it also requires high level of effective coordination and responsibility sharing. This study aimed to study the current situation of the commercial center of Rafah city in order to outline the main strategies required for the urban development process. This has been done through a field survey based on observation trips and a questionnaire directed to city center users. It has been found that community participation is essential in such studies in order to understand people's needs and to get them involved in the planning process. It has been also found that there is a great potential for the study area to be developed as a central urban area that serves at local and regional levels. In this regard, main development fields have been identified. For each field, development vision and goals have been specified. To achieve these goals several strategies and actions have been proposed.

Firstly, there is a need to improve traffic movement in the city center. Increasing efficiency of traffic network, prevention of through traffic, and providing well-planned car parking are essential actions in this regard. The second strategy concluded is improving the overall appearance of the city center. In this regard, there is a need to improve streets urban design, providing open spaces for social and civic activities, and rehabilitate building facades improving quality of the city center environment is an essential strategy too. This requires reducing levels of air and noise pollution, and proposing an effective system for waste collection and disposal. Finally, developments should be oriented towards promoting investment opportunities, which can enhance the overall development process and create a self-incentive to upgrade the area. Implementing these strategies requires a further investigation to guide detailed action plan proposals and development scenarios. This should be done in a way that ensures an incremental development process in which different stakeholder roles are well-coordinated based on clear goals and indicators. It is also required to study and develop the current legislative frameworks that govern local planning processes to make them more responsive to the development needs and plans.
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