It has been 40 years since the Khmer Rouge Regime emptied Cambodian cities, and brought havoc to the country. Its capital Phnom Penh, which turned today into a rapidly developing South-East Asian Metropolis, is a great example of cities’ resilience when facing large-scale disasters. The proposed conference is organised within the framework of the 40th annual congress of the AIMF. It attempts to discuss some of the many urban reconstruction challenges that an increasing number of cities have to face today at global level.

Urban reconstruction, a challenge that is reaching global scale

Urban reconstruction has become a global issue. Post-conflict situations (Phnom Penh or Kigali), natural disasters (Port-au-Prince or New Orleans) or large-scale urban “rejuvenation” (Shanghai, London or Detroit) create unprecedented destruction and reconstruction cycles. Urban reconstruction has therefore played a key role for sustainable urban development.

This conference will focus specifically on large-scale reconstruction endeavours in the aftermath of conflicts or disasters. All presentations will revolve around three important reconstruction phases during which people heal and cities restart.

1) The urgency of reconstruction

Urban reconstruction, specifically in post-conflicts or post-disasters situation, requires the ability to simultaneously address, in context of emergencies, medical, food and housing needs. The high number of involved stakeholders (public and private actors, international organisations, NGOs etc.) requires efficient coordination of efforts and strong governance mechanisms to ensure efficient management of incoming funding and projects from international donors. Nevertheless, if large scale emergency situations are certainly often characterised as a result from the unpredictability of disasters, those are also and as much the consequences of pre-existing urban vulnerabilities. And often, lack of planning and anticipation.
As a matter of fact, strong technical and political capacities exist to prevent several disasters to occur, or at least, to increase cities readiness to mitigate catastrophes’ impact. Long-term urban policies can allow the identification and mitigation of urban vulnerabilities and help cities to be equipped with adequate responses capacities in case of unexpected events. The resilience of existing infrastructure, strong environmental related management skills, land use patterns detection, habitat specifications, and technical/institutional capacities of local authorities are all important factors that can either exacerbate or reduce urban vulnerability degrees. Risk management approaches must therefore be considered as a central component of urban policies, to ensure that the consequences of large scale disasters can be better controlled and mitigated.

2) Reconstruction is a complex process

The requirements that occur as reconstruction phase starts and unfolds are even more daunting than during the emergency phase itself. They demand to meet several challenging priorities such as managing the movement of populations, improving vulnerable housing sites, strengthening and developing local infrastructure and networks, restarting a new local economy, and implementing a governance system that is adapted to the local context, and, in conflicts situations, must help to foster reconciliation goals.

Urban policies then play an important role for the sustainable reconstruction of cities. Governance systems must adapt to not only rapid urban changes and support efficiently project implementation while helping the resolutions of disputes among local stakeholders. In contexts of speculation, the regulation of land and real estate markets shall help more sustainable urban development ends. Failing to adopt a holistic approach to reconstruction would bring a multiplication and juxtaposition of too many urban projects that will cause the fragmentation of territories and increase the vulnerability of its population. Therefore the institutional capacity to build human resources and strengthen the delivery of technical services become a critical goal.

3) Resilience and innovation

Urban reconstruction requires local populations and authorities to overcome the ill-effects of rapid urban changes and traumatic situations. Yet, resilience capacities can’t be built in a day. People and institutions must build those up over the long term, supported by public policies and programs aiming at fostering social and economic development, and citizen-led initiatives, to help reduce social divides and provide better alternatives to the most vulnerable population groups. The implementation of a balanced and equitable urban development plan that put city inhabitants at its core are non-negotiable must-have.

Urban innovations also have an important role to play to facilitate and support resilience and reconstruction endeavours. Be it with urban arts, new technologies, and urban planning innovations, all come in support of new and positive citizen-focused actions that will solidify social ties.

The conference will therefore present some of the challenges related to resilience in an urban reconstruction context. How to act in situation of urban emergency? How can cities decrease their vulnerability to disasters? What can be considered as vulnerability factors and how can we mitigate those? What tools and practices can increase resilience? How can the younger generations better contribute to the reconstruction process?
The day will be organised in two parts. Plenary sessions will highlight some of the reconstruction and resilience stakes, in Phnom Penh and other global cities. Then, three round tables will address the three distinct phases of urban reconstruction, its related challenges and possible solutions.