Blind regional Planning in Darfur

RP105
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1- Introduction

This paper is based and inspired by a practical experience of a volunteer based work that the author has been involved in. Having been contacted by a nongovernmental organization for the development of Darfur, the author was asked by the head of this NGO for consultancy in the preparation of a regional development plan for the Darfur region. Despite the interesting and challenging request, there was a pressing problem withstanding against the realization of the whole process; that is the extreme difficulty in being able to visit the region itself or to gather sufficient data and information from authenticated governmental sources, mainly because of:

1. The domestic instability in Darfur and the Sudan at large
2. The shortage of financial resources to fund such a large scale intervention
3. The NGO is not being in good terms with the Sudanese government.

Despite, these hindering obstacles, the author decided to contribute in making a development plan, later turned more to be of a development vision, for Darfur region owing to the very interesting and challenging case. The expression of blind regional planning was coined for this intervention, in which the whole planning process was based on discussions and workshops with members of the NGO from Darfur as well as information from the internet without being able to visit the region or have any discussions with its planning authorities.

The planning process outcome did not reach the level of a regional plan, it yielded a regional development vision instead, and a local development process document. The main aim of the NGO is to use these two documents in attracting possible local, regional and international aid donors willing to fund development projects in the region and consequently help in promoting the development vision to a development plan. The aim of this paper is to discuss the planning process that took place, especially with the ideological conflict that was taking place between the planner and the NGO. The NGO long term vision seeks a self governance status and a possible federal relation with the central Sudanese government, while the planner's sole purpose is to contribute to the regional and human settlements' development and

the well being of the people in Darfur region, especially after its recent history of famine, war and poverty, without any political goals.

2- Background on Darfur region

Darfur is a region in the West of Sudan, composed of three states, North Darfur, South Darfur and West Darfur. It consists of an immense plain that has an area of approximately 440,000 square km. The Marrah Mountains dominate the central part of this plain and receive heavier rainfall than other parts of Darfur. Elsewhere the sparsely populated plains of Darfur are relatively featureless and arid, particularly in the north, where they merge into the Libyan Desert. The region is inhabited by different ethnic groups including Arabs, Fur , Nubian as well as other groups. Heavy rainfall in the Marrah highlands permits the intensive agriculture, as well as crops grown at other locations in the southern part of Darfur. In the arid north, camels, sheep, and goats are raised. Nyala and Al-Fāshir are the principal towns[1].

Ethnic tensions, among the different groups in Darfur began erupting into armed conflict in the late 1980s. The violence was sporadic until 2003, when rebels from among the agriculturalists attacked government installations to protest what they contended was the Sudanese government's disregard for the western region and its non-Arab population. It is alleged that the government in Khartoum responded by creating an Arab militia force—which came to be known as <u>Janjaweed</u> that began

attacking the sedentary groups in Darfur. Within a year, thousands of people had been killed, and hundreds of thousands had fled westward to refugee camps in neighboring Chad; many others remained internally displaced (*ibid*).

It is argued that the main reason for this internal conflict and unrest is mainly due to the extreme case of regional disparities and inequalities in Darfur region in comparison to the rest of Sudan. Whitehouse and Wear (2006) argue that the reasons for such conflict lay within the post colonial
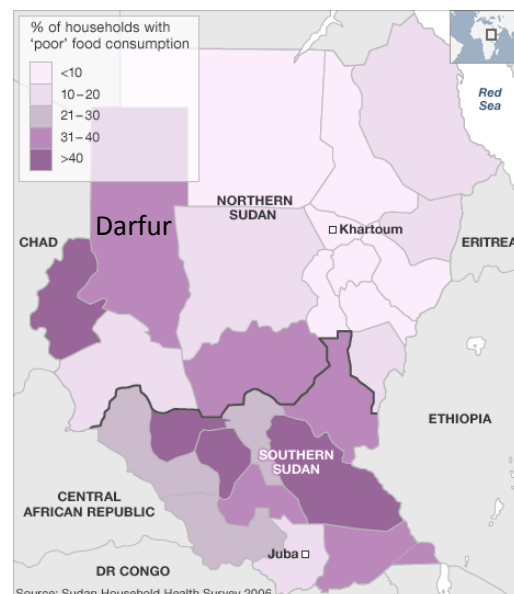

Fig1: Regional inequalities in Sudan: example on the poor food consumption in Darfur region

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[1] http://www.britannica.com/search?query=darfur , August 2012.

development of Sudan. They argue that in the post-colonial states whose infrastructures were shaped to assist the flow of wealth to the colonial power. The development focus would be on capital cities for example Khartoum, while the "periphery" was first defined by its irrelevance to the colonizer's goals, then neglected. If the periphery did not start out poor in absolute terms, it tended to become so because it was politically marginalized. As for the involvement of foreign investors they would only care about their own needs for wealth extraction, which reinforced the existing regional disparities. This situation fits for Darfur, which is still not connected to Khartoum by a single paved road, and it has the country's worst schools and hospitals[2].

One way of reflecting regional inequalities is through the comparison of basic services, health services and food consumption. This is clearly visible from the above figure showing the stark inequalities between Darfur and the rest of the Sudan.

3- Request for Assistance

With the help of a common acquaintance, the author got in contact with the head of the so called "Civil Society Alliance for a free Darfur". This alliance was formed in Cairo in 2011 as a merger between several Darfurian NGOs which issued a charter explaining their main aims, goals and objectives for a war free and prosperous region.[3] The alliance is also nicknamed Keirafur, which refers to the name of the old African kingdom that prevailed in Darfur before its incorporation into Sudan.

The head of the alliance requested the consultancy firm, to which the author is affiliated[4], to contribute in the development of the region by providing designs to specific projects, such as constructing and developing a number of villages, factories, hospitals and capacity building centers. He also requested that the firm's contribution would be voluntary since the newly formed alliance does not have enough funding to cover the fees of the consultancy firm, yet granting a promise to the firm that in case future funding is secured, the firm will be assigned officially as the main consultant to some of the projects within the development intervention.

The consultancy team argued that the kind of projects asked by the alliance cannot be made without a general scheme of regional development to justify the establishment

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[2] Whitehouse and Wear (2007), Save Darfur from US intervention ,
http://www.isreview.org/issues/50/darfur.shtml
[3]Civil society alliance for a free Darfur: Basic system, Cairo, 2011.
[4] The firm is the Engineering Consultant Office for Planning and Architecture (ECOPA).

of the proposed projects. The team argued that a general scheme of regional development should be formulated before tackling individual projects; such scheme would attempt to alleviate regional disparities, ensure the proper use of natural resources, improve accessibility to the main human settlements in the region and foresee the development of key human settlements and cities in Darfur.

The alliance represented by its head accepted the rationale of the consultancy firm and decided to start with a regional development scheme.

4- Conflicting and matching objectives

The objectives to proceed with the development scheme were not always matching between the alliance and the consultancy firm.

From the point of view of the alliance, the resources of Darfur region were channeled to the well being of other regions in Sudan. It accused the central Sudanese government of neglecting the development issues in the region and draining the region out of its resources. They also argued that since the reign of President Ghavar Nomairy in the 1980s, no real development attempts were made in the region. Moreover, with the recent conflict in Darfur that reached the limit of genocide in some areas as well as the direct accusation of the central Sudanese government with its involvement in the conflict, the alliance considered a range of actions starting from having an autonomous rule, to having a Federal relationship with the rest of Sudan and reaching for having a separate state similar to the case with South Sudan. As such, the political target of the alliance is to reach for one of the above mentioned forms of governance.

On the other hand, the alliance had reasonable development objectives as well, they reasoned for having a set of formulated development projects and plans that could be implemented directly in the region once they have sufficient funds and financial resources for that. Their main objective is to alleviate the stark regional disparities between Darfur region and the rest of the Sudan; to alleviate poverty and to mobilize human development are the secondary objectives they had.

As for the consultancy firm, political objectives were clearly not among its interest, moreover, they were conflicting to the consultancy team's own belief with the unity among different Arab nations, and clearly made it obvious to the alliance. Their main interest was to contribute in a regional development intervention in one of Sudan's

poorest and deprived regions, while eying the historical ties between Egypt and Sudan. The firm was seeking a region wide actual experience in an Arab-African country with a zest to face actual regional development challenges. The consultancy team was convinced after listening to the alliance representatives with the degree of misery and regional disparities in Darfur, however they issued a statement to the alliance stating that their only concern in intervening in such an initiative is to realize regional and human settlements development in Darfur seeking the well being of its local population, with no political intentions or interest what so ever. This statement was accepted and acknowledged by the alliance and respected throughout the engagement in the development scheme.

5- Aiming for funding

To the alliance, securing enough funding to the development projects is the main obstacle facing any development intervention. The problem lies in two folds, the first is to secure sufficient funds for the development interventions, while the second is that the money has to be channeled and diffused through the central Sudanese government. In many cases, funds were donated by International aid donors to development projects in Darfur, however, they were difficult to get channeled to the actual region since they were taken by the central government and reassigned to development projects in Khartoum or other areas in Sudan. The consultancy team and the alliance agreed that in order to apply for funding from the international development organizations, there should be a concrete document or proposal for development to apply with. Owing to the already existing lack of funding and even proper accessibility, both agreed to have an outlined development scheme as well as a brief document on local and regional development mechanism that could be applied in Darfur. The idea was to use these documents to apply for funding, once funding is secured, the alliance would attempt to find ways to channel the funding bypassing the central Sudanese government.

6- From Development plan to a development outline

Professionally, setting a strategic development plan requires to follow a strict planning methodology of four to five phases each includes several steps.

These phases, explained by El-Wakil, (2007) go through current situation documentation, current situation analysis, setting of alternatives and coming up with the most relevant plan.
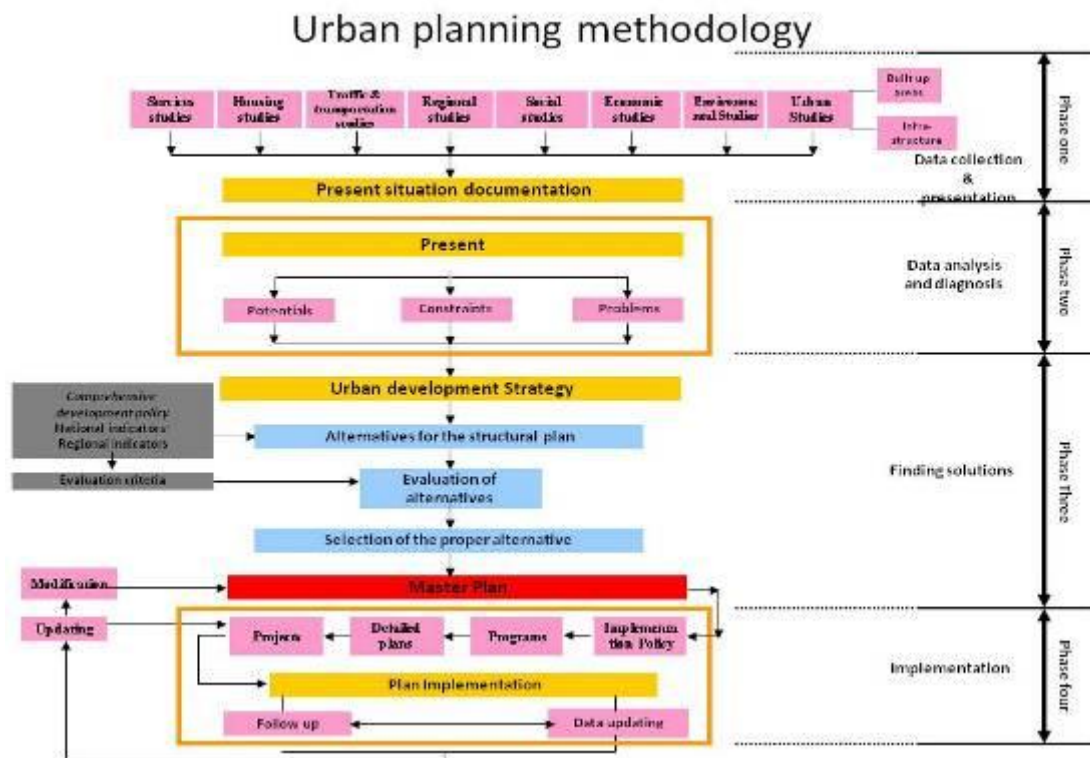
Fig2: Urban and regional planning methodology

In order to do so the first phase of current situation documentation required an enormous budget of sending expert teams to Darfur for present situation surveys and data collection, a budget that is not available with the poorly equipped alliance. Moreover, the field visits to Darfur region were considered difficult owing to the fact that there was no support teams on the ground or local experts in Darfur to deal with and that the conflict in Darfur is still ongoing, as such, the necessity of having fresh up to date information could not be realized. Accordingly, the consultancy team had one of two alternatives, the first is to reject the assistance call from the alliance and to turn down its intervention, or the second is to simplify its intervention and to narrow it down to formulate a development outline rather than a full detailed regional strategic plan. This was coupled by reducing the phases that should be followed in a normal strategic plan.

7- Blind planning for Darfur

The planning process was conducted by holding a series of short workshops either with members of the alliance or internally within the consultancy team. There were four main milestones in the process:

First, there was the phase of **knowing the region** as a whole and understand its broad administrative divisions as well as understanding how naturally rich of resources it is, despite the fact that these resources are not used in the region's development as explained earlier.

Second, **workshops** with members of the alliance were organized, in which they discussed with the consultancy firm, their **vision for the development of the region**. At this point they used the mental mapping approach in which they sketched, how they see Darfur, in terms of its resources and main cities, as well as , what they considered development projects. At that point, the development projects they had were a bit unconsolidated, since they could only think of constructing factories to directly use the available resources, together with some services. However, they did not consider having these projects within a regional dimension.

Third, internally, the consultancy team started the **blind regional planning** for the region. Why blind? Because the whole process from this point onwards relied on using the survey maps and satellite images to make a spatial regional planning outline incorporating the information obtained from earlier workshops and meeting.

The steps for this phase could be briefly summarized as follows:

-   Obtain a clear and a detailed survey maps for the region. Such a step could not be made in Darfur of course; however, with the use of the internet it was possible to obtain a good survey map prepared by the CIA in 2007[5] showing the capital cities of the provinces, the other settlements in the region, airports, railways, and the existing tracks and road networks.
-   Using this map, the main human settlements in the region as well as the main and secondary cities were identified. Such a step was then verified using the Google Earth service for satellite imagery and finally revised with members of the Darfur alliance.
-   The regional tracks and roads existing in the region were then identified, with a special focus on those who act as provincial and international links.

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[5] http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sudan.html , July 2012.

- The consultancy team, found that using the regional development concepts of growth poles and regional development axes were the most appropriate for Darfur based on the available data.

- Accordingly, North-South and East-West axes were proposed along which, the growth poles are situated which included the capital cities of the provinces. The proposal of these axes was based on the existing road and track networks, which passed through several cities of the region.

- Based on the existing resources identified by the alliance and from further information online, the cities along the development axes were assigned main functions based on their possible economic base that could be developed according to these resources.

- Finally each of the three provinces was identified with one or more main development objective. As such, the Province of North Darfur host the beginning of Darb El Arbeen ancient desert track between Sudan and Egypt, this is proposed to be redeveloped within the new regional development proposal, especially that similar development has been taking place on the Egyptian side for several years. The province of South Darfur has its importance within its Oil fields and its relative proximity to Abyei region the disputed region between Sudan and South Sudan; such situation gives a great promising future for the oil industry in the province. The same province also could have a prosperous future should agriculture get further developed using the Nile water coming from its branch of Bahr EL Arab. Finally West Darfur is famous with its natural reserve Mara Mountain, which could be among other factors the driving force of development in the province.

- It is also important to mention that the two provinces of Darfur region have international borders, East Darfur with Chad and central Africa, while South Darfur with South Sudan. Consequently, within the regional development outline, it was proposed to have regional border markets and logistic zones on the border settlements of the region.

The development outline was finalized and reviewed by senior members of the alliance, who acknowledged it as a "preliminary development outline" that could be further consolidated once proper resources for such a process are secured.
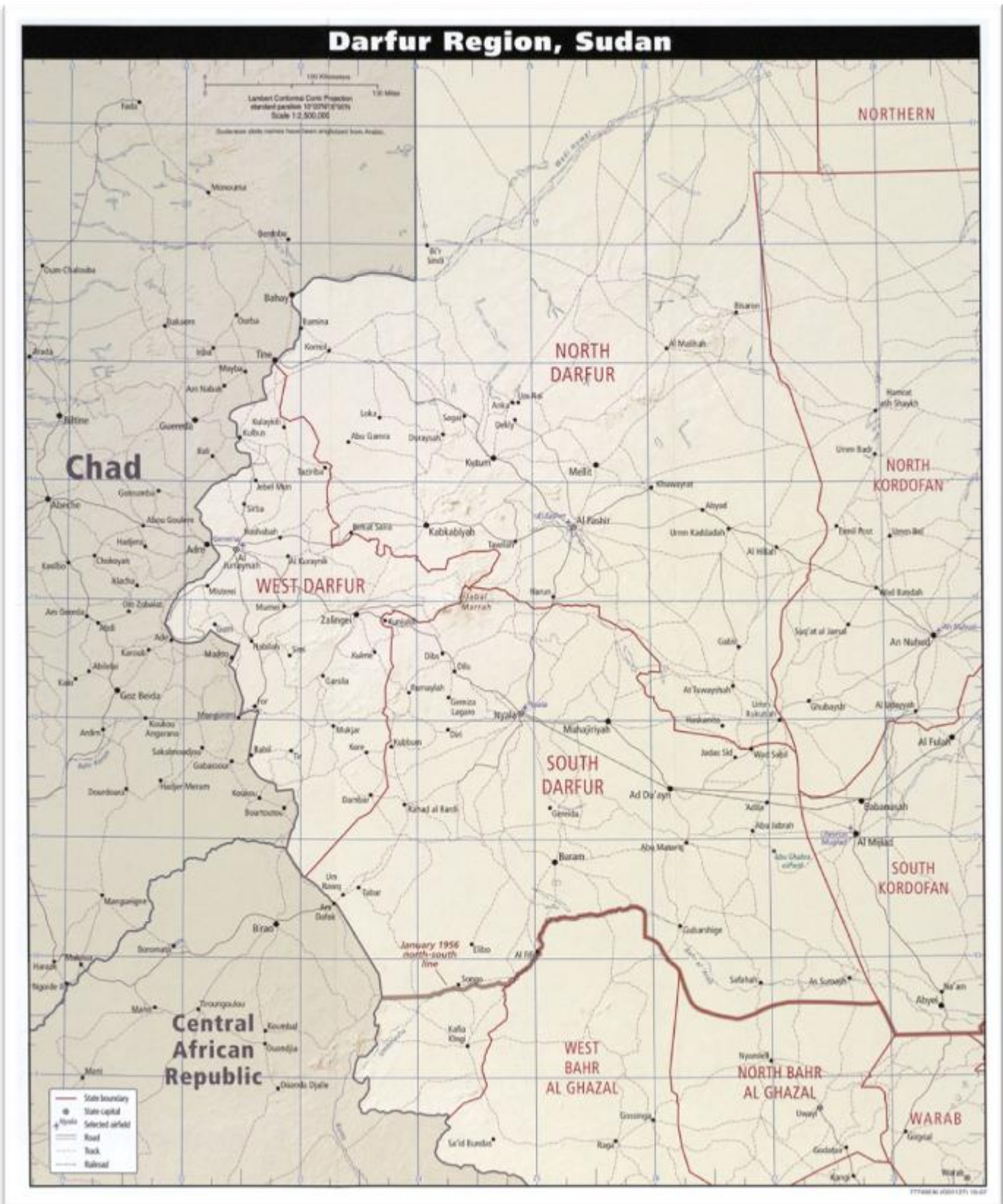
Fig3: Basic Map for Darfur, showing the main settlements and main road networks.
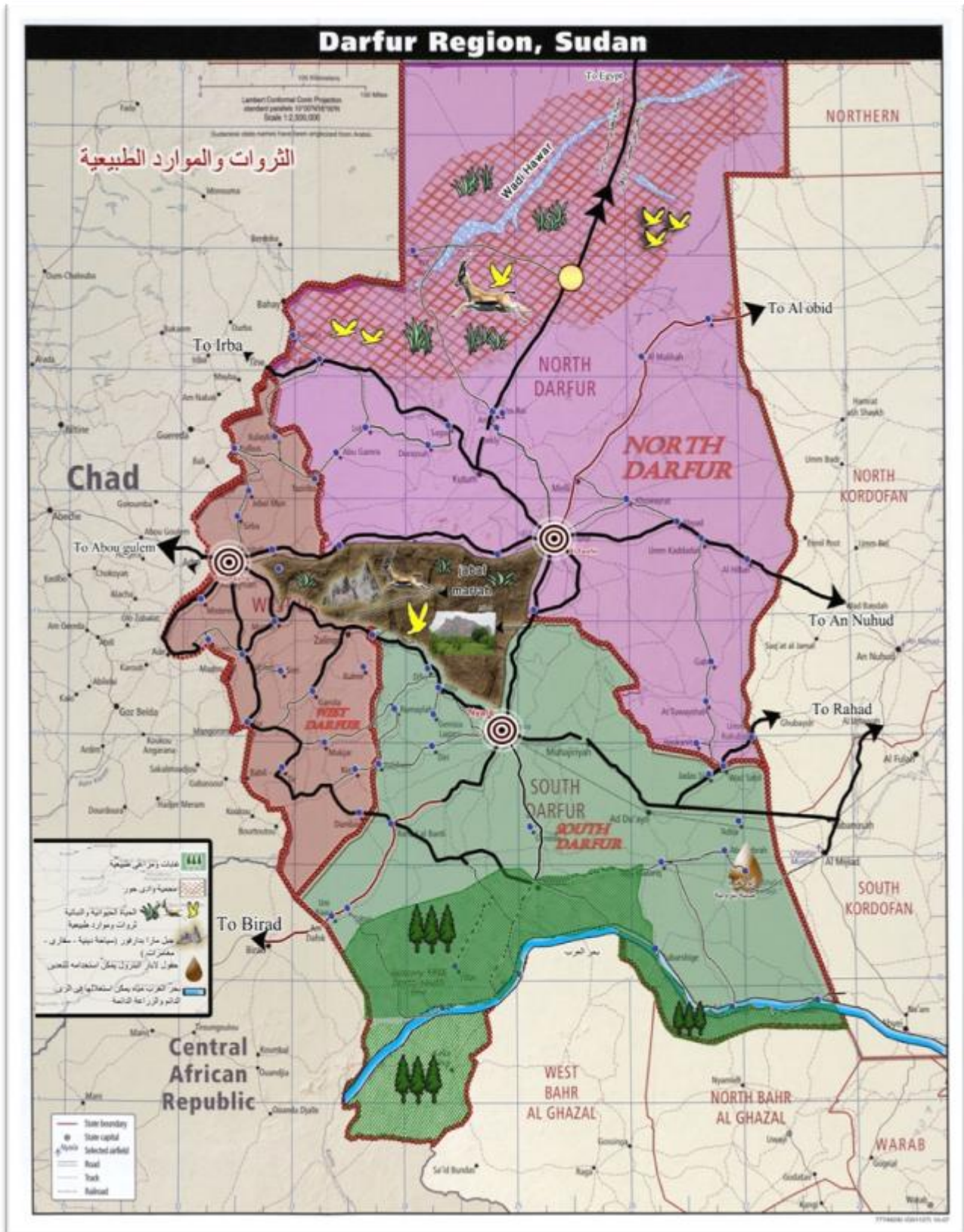
Source: CIA, 2007

Fig.4: General Outline for the Natural resources in Darfur
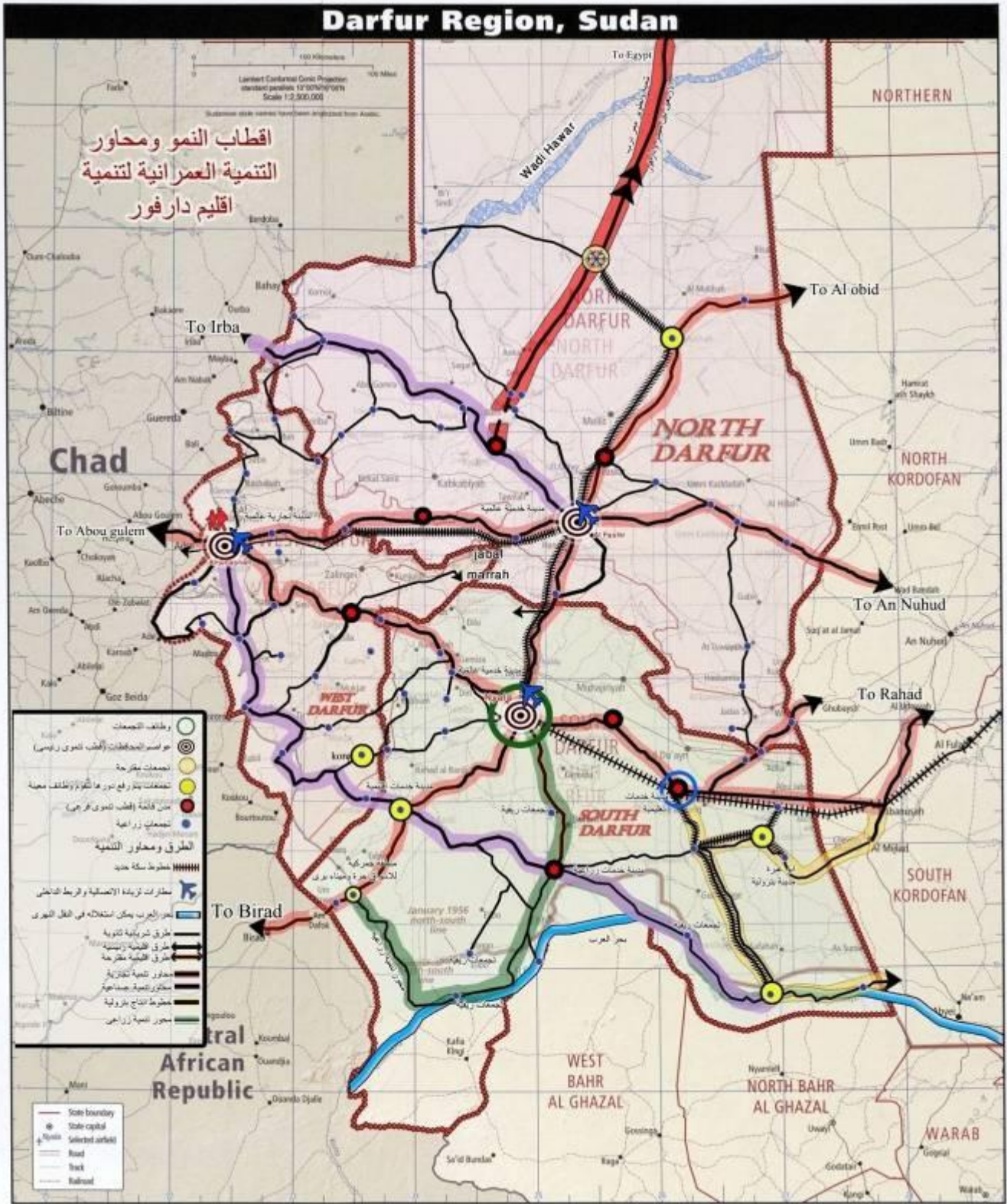
Source: ECOPA, 2011

Fig5: Proposed Development axes AND growth poles in Darfur
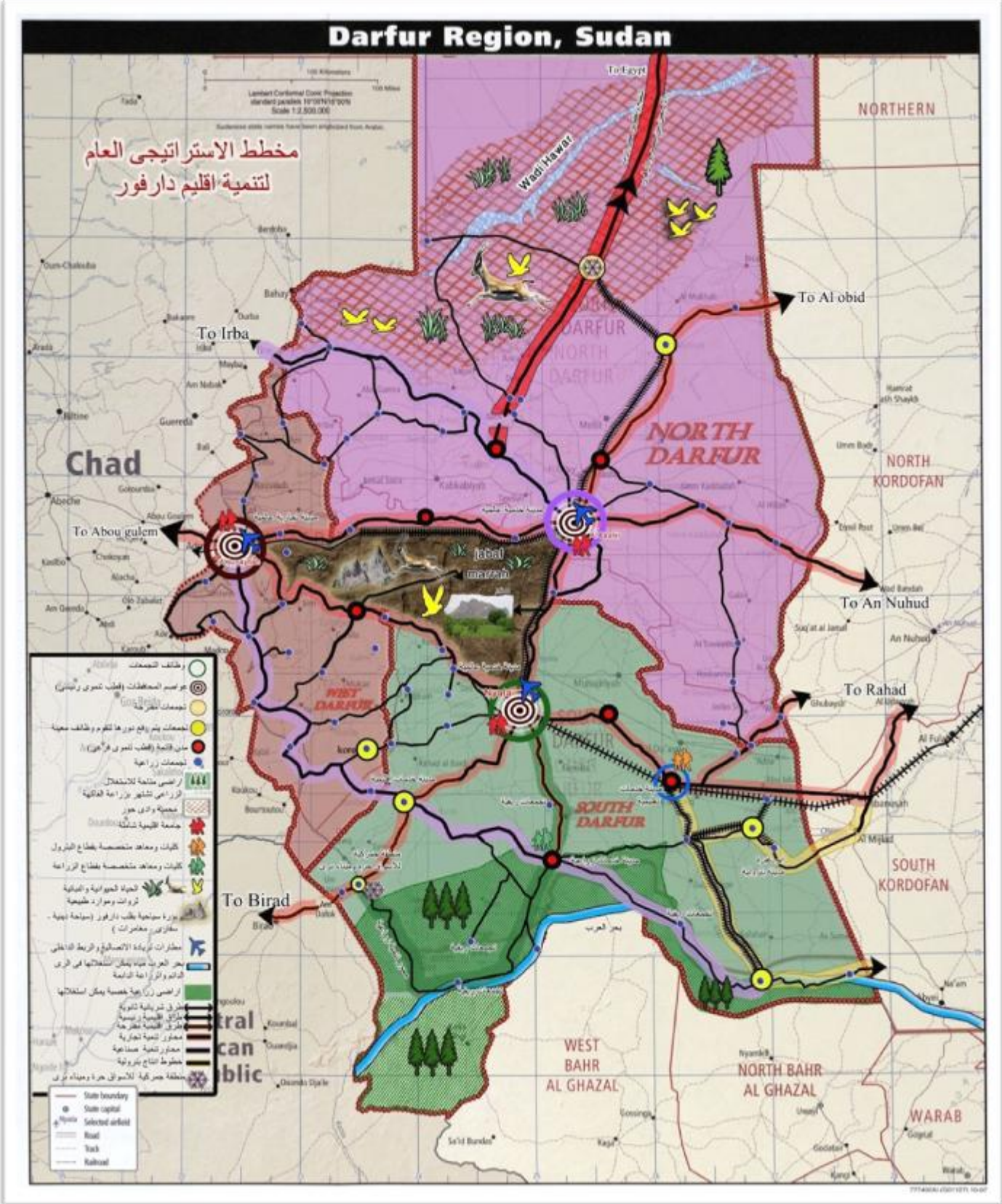
Source: ECOPA, 2011

Fig6: Proposed Strategic Development outline for Darfur

Source: ECOPA, 2011

8- Concluding Notes

The regional planning attempt for Darfur region is not considered a complete process. This is obvious when relating the three planning phases for Darfour to the regional planning methodology outlined by EL Wakil (2007) as shown in figure 7. Most of the first phase was not conducted, only through workshops with members of the alliance as well as using satellite imagery that general background information on regional, social , urban and economic settings were reached; in addition to mapping of existing settlements and main transportation networks.

The second phase dealing with data analysis and diagnosis was abridged to mapping and analyzing existing potentials, mainly through existing natural resources. However, for defining problems and constraints, discussions with the alliance members, shed some general outline on that. Instead of having regional development strategy and alternatives in the third phase, only regional development outline was elaborated.

As for the final phase that is the strategic master plan development, this will never take place unless the proper regional planning process is re-conducted with sufficient data, as well as sufficient funding.

Accordingly, the regional development outline which is elaborated through a blind regional planning process is only used as a document to apply for international and regional support to Darfur. Once this funding is secured the outline can be used as a decent start for a serious regional development planning process in the region.
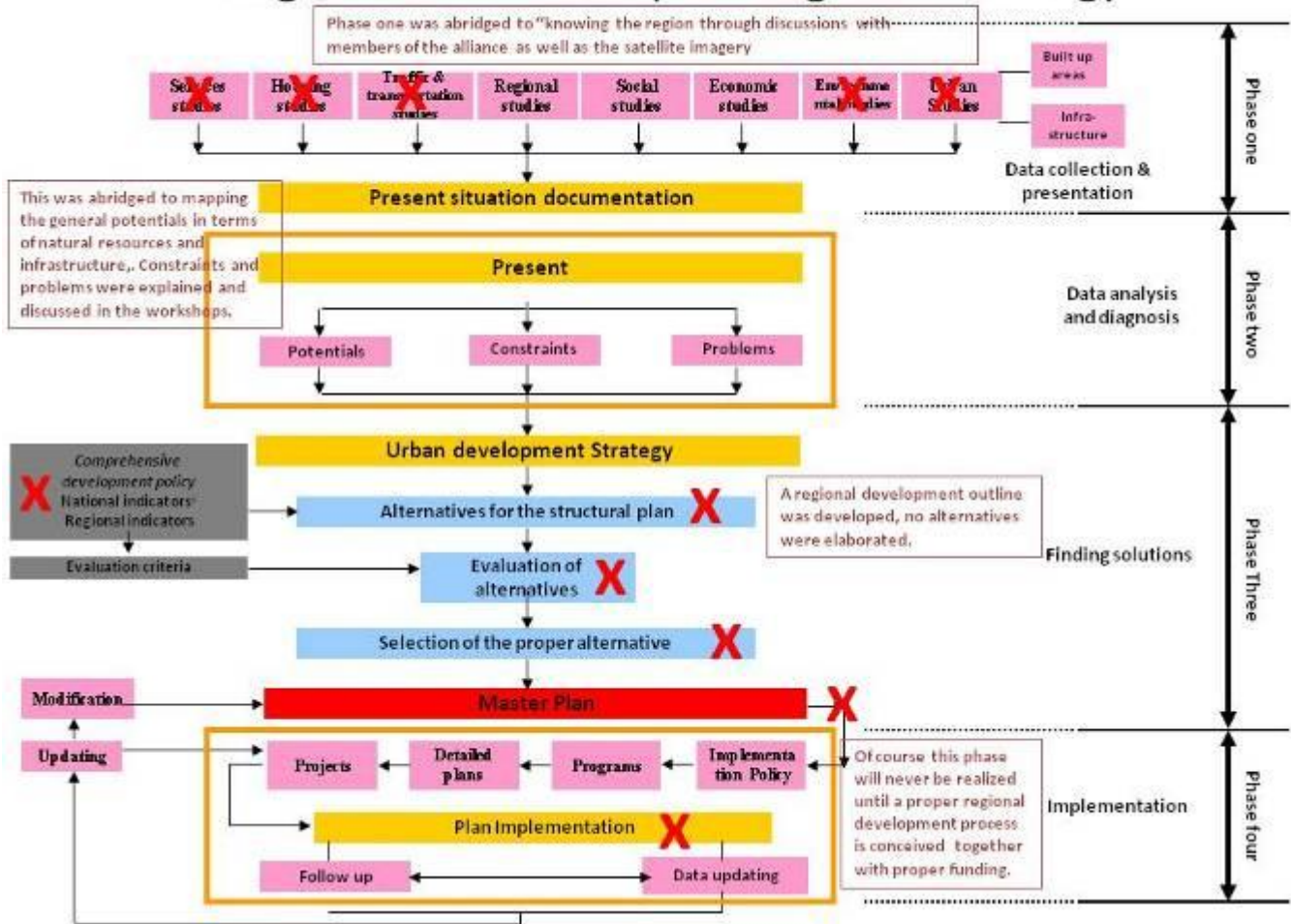
Fig.7. Conducted and omitted parts of the regional and urban planning methodology within the process of the blind regional planning.

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