Participatory planning approaches in development are seen as key methodological approaches to elevate urban poverty and to achieve sustainable development and good urban governance. Discourses on participation in the past have shown the need to consider the political context where participation is used as an instrument to maintain the existing political power and control leading to marginalization and social exclusion in the planning process. In this regard, participatory approaches require appropriate institutional and societal settings in addition to political support to be effectively conducted.

In the Arab region, maintaining authoritarian and centralized planning systems and the ineffective role of civil society entail restrictive urban governance settings for conducting participatory approaches in urban development. Yet, adopting participatory urban planning approaches in the recent past call for an in-depth understanding of the participatory approaches in the Arab context, methods and key actors in the planning process. For this purpose, the research examines participatory planning approaches (PPAs) in the City Development Strategies of Alexandria, Egypt, and Aleppo, Syria between 2003 and 2010, primarily, the governance and planning structures and their effect on the participatory process and vice versa. Through the identification of the challenging and success factors of the participatory approach in the case studies, strategies for conducting participation as an effective tool in urban planning and governance in the Arab cities will be developed. Finally, comparing the two case studies, which despite sharing communalities in their national contexts, also show differences on the local level, can provide a latitude of valuable lessons for learning and exchange in the future.