

Building a City from Scratch?

The limits of top-down urban policy making in the case of the “new urban hub” of Diamniadio, Senegal

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African cities are growing fast¹ and so is the number of initiatives addressing urbanisation. A highly controversial solution is the construction of so-called “new cities”, whereby neighbourhoods, urban extensions, and even entire cities are “built from scratch”.² Based on a study of the new Urban Hub of Diamniadio (UHD) in Senegal,³ this paper unpacks and challenges the idea of new cities as a horizontal, one-size-fits-all solution. The paper argues that the UHD represents an inherently political⁴ policy tool, used to reassert central state power over strategic territories hitherto governed by municipalities. As a political flagship project of President Macky Sall, the UHD is based on presidential decrees, international investment and hasty decisions taken by newly created central institutions. This top-down approach excludes decentralised bodies and citizens from urban policy making. The consequences are social tensions, grey zones in governance and limited appropriation of the project by urban dwellers.

SafariCity in Tanzania, Hope City in Ghana, Eko Atlantic City in Nigeria, Konza Technopolis in Kenya and Diamniadio and Akon City in Senegal – the list of announced and in-progress projects shows that African governments have embraced a vision for a technology-led and so-called modern urban future. They thereby respond to a broader international policy trend, particularly stimulated by regular announcements of futuristic urban undertakings in Southern Asia and the Gulf States (the 170-km-long urban “line” crossing the desert of Saudi Arabia). Even though the underlying discourse promotes the ground-breaking, modern and distinct character of these urbanist approaches, neither the idea nor their socio-economic foundation can be considered as completely new. Building cities with innovative material and social infrastructure has been part of colonial territorial enclosure and postcolonial state formation.⁵ The Kenyan capital city Nairobi’s foundation stone was laid

¹ With an average urban growth rate of 3,9%, the African continent is often presented as one of the most rapidly urbanising regions of the world: World Bank. 2022. “Urban population (% of total population) – Sub-Saharan Africa.” Accessed February 14, 2022.

² Chandran, Rina. 2019. “Factbox: Seven cities that were built from scratch.” *Reuters*, August 8, 2019, and Shepard, Wade. 2019 “Should we build cities from scratch?” *The Guardian*, July 10, 2019.

³ The results of this study stem from research funded by the French Institute of International Relations and the Policy Center for the New South. Field work in Senegal was conducted in June 2022. Interviews were conducted with civil society representatives, municipal and government agents, researchers, real estate agents and bi- and multi-lateral development agents. Official documents and grey literature were collected and analysed.

⁴ Bekker, Simon and Fourchard, Laurent. 2013. *Governing Cities in Africa: Politics and Policies*. Pretoria. HSRC Press. About the political participation of civil society in urban governance see Gutheil, Lena, 2022. “Civil Society Participation in Urban Governance in Africa. Supporting CSO’s Political Voices for a Transformation of City-State Relations.” *Megatrends Africa Policy Brief 05*.

⁵ Scott, James. 1999. *Seeing Like a State*. New Haven. Yale University Press.

Why do African governments launch new cities?

New city projects are promoted as tools to implement broader economic development programmes, such as the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, Kenya Vision 2030 and the Emerging Senegal Plan (2035). As policy instruments, they convey different socioeconomic objectives and ideologies.

- Urban growth is seen as a means to unlock economic potential and growth. Hosting an ever-bigger part of the population, governments promote well-planned, efficient and productive cities as engines of human and socioeconomic development.
- By promoting quality housing for middle-class and wealthy people, including the diaspora, discourses about new cities promote afro-optimist ideologies and aim to get rid of the poverty label.
- New cities are supposed to feed into and promote broader infrastructure initiatives, such as industrial parks, SEZs and transport corridors.
- As exceptional zones offering economic incentives, such as tax exemptions and cheap access to land, new city projects aim to attract international investment, and diverse partnerships, especially private-sector partners.
- Through urban and infrastructure projects, African governments seek to go beyond discourses and to lend palpable materiality to the idea of emerging economies.⁶ New cities are supposed to portray regional and international competitiveness.

under the British East Africa Protectorate and as a part of the Uganda railway infrastructure project.⁷ The area of Nouakchott was chosen in 1957 to establish the new Mauritanian capital city.⁸ In Tanzania, the foundation of entirely new villages in the 1970s has been part of Julius Nyerere's socialist state project, while, in Senegal, the idea of building a new capital city dates back to the mandate of President Léopold Senghor in the 1960s.

Enclave-based territorial planning approaches have informed, since the 1980s, the construction of closed residential areas for wealthy customers, so-called gated communities or compounds, which have shaped urban and peri-urban landscapes in countries like Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa. Similarly, in many African countries, special-economic zones (SEZs) have been demarcated and planned, based on foreign capital injections and in proximity to major urban centres, to promote industrial and economic development.

What is new about the more recent trend of *ex nihilo* urban planning is the speed at which some of the projects are developed,⁹ the variety of financial resources and tools, and the diversity of stakeholders involved in the delivery of infrastructure.¹⁰ Macro-economic factors have created a fertile ground for adopting "urban fantasies".¹¹ In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, international real estate and finance stakeholders were looking

⁶ Kopf, Charline. 2020. " 'Le TER nous met à terre.' Le Sénégal sur les rails de l'émergence ?" *Critique internationale* 89 (4): 115-139.

⁷ Ese, Anders and Ese Kristen, 2020. *The City Makers of Nairobi. An African Urban History*. New York. Routledge.

⁸ Choplin, Armelle, 2006. "Le foncier urbain en Afrique : entre informel et rationnel, l'exemple de Noakchott (Mauritanie)." *Annales de géographie* 1 (647) : 69-91.

⁹ Datta, Ayona. 2016. "Introduction: Fast Cities in an Urban Age." In *Mega-Urbanization in the Global South* edited by Ayona Data, London. Routledge: 1-28.

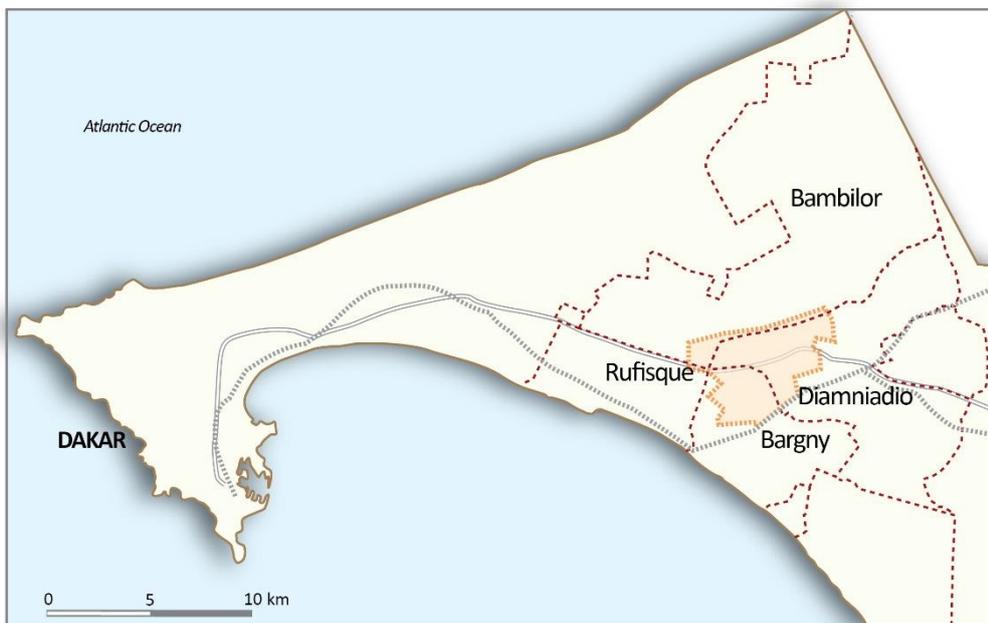
¹⁰ Pieterse, Edgar, Cirolia, Liza Rose and Pollio, Andrea. 2022. *Infrastructure Finance in Africa: Overview, Research Gaps, and Urban Research Agenda*. Cape Town. African Centre for Cities & Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft.

¹¹ Watson, Vanessa. 2014. "African Urban Fantasies: Dreams or Nightmares?" *Environment and Urbanization* 26 (1): 1-17.

for new investment opportunities.¹² Occurring in a period of broader economic growth on the continent, this triggered afro-optimist discourses, for example about emerging middle classes. In this context, several socio-economic motivations have driven African governments to adopt new urban policies.

Diamniadio, a tentative response to urban challenges in Senegal

Out of the roughly 14 million people living in Senegal, 51 percent reside in urban areas.¹³ It is estimated that the Dakar region (see Figure 1) is home to 23 percent of the total population, while representing less than 0.4 percent of the country's territory. The annual urban growth rate has been relatively steady since 2000 (around 3.8 per cent), leading to the doubling of the urban population between 2001 and 2021.¹⁴ The boundaries between the capital city and its adjacent municipalities are blurred. This demographic pressure is accompanied by a concentration of economic activities: while 75 percent of the Senegalese GDP is generated in urban areas, Dakar hosts around 65 percent of business activities, 90 percent of industries and 80 percent of infrastructure.¹⁵ Given this clearly urban demographic tendency and the spatial inequality between the Coastal area and the rest of the territory, the Senegalese government has undertaken several initiatives to rebalance the trend. Urbanisation has been defined as an engine of growth in the overall economic policy



Sources: Municipality of Bargny, 2022.
Urban Master Plan of Dakar and Neighboring Area, 2016.

Design and production: Marie-Louise Penin, 2022.



¹² Goodfellow, Tom. 2020. "Finance, infrastructure and urban capital: the political economy of African 'gap-filling'." *African Political Economy* 47 (164): 256-274.

¹³ Africapolis. 2022. "Senegal." Accessed September 28, 2022.

¹⁴ World Bank. 2022. "Senegal – Urban population." Accessed September 2022.

¹⁵ Cissé, Oumar. 2022. "Challenges of Urbanisation in Dakar. Land-Use Planning, Transportation and Public Housing." Dakar. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

programme *Plan Sénégal Emergent* (PSE), which puts emphasis on the development of infrastructure to decongest Dakar and promote alternative urban agglomerations. The construction of two new “urban hubs” in Diamniadio and Lac Rose is a pioneer project of the PSE.¹⁶

The Urban Hub of Diamniadio (UHD) is a demarcated zone of roughly 1,700 hectares, covering parts of the neighbouring communities – mostly Bargny and Diamniadio and, to a lesser extent, Bambilor and Rufisque (see map). Its relative proximity to the capital city (30 km) and its strategic position between three major urban centres of the Dakar region (Dakar, Thiès and Mbour) are among the main arguments underpinning the selection of the project site. The hub is promoted as a means to remove pressure from Dakar, by relocating some of its economic and administrative activities and by absorbing a part of its population. By 2035, Diamniadio is supposed to provide 40,000 housing units and to become the primary residence of between 300,000 and 800,000 urban dwellers. The General Delegation of the Promotion of Urban Hubs (DGPU), which is in charge of project implementation, presents the Diamniadio urban hub as a symbol of rupture with conventional urbanism, built on the principles of technological innovation, environmental responsibility, efficiency and sustainability and as a place of wealth and employment generation.

These socio-economic objectives and functions have been integrated in the underlying urban plan: the hub has been subdivided into four thematic areas, promoting an event-based economy and business tourism (arrondissement A), scientific innovation and knowledge production (arrondissement B), industrial development (arrondissement C), sports and business activities (arrondissement D). Presentation and discourses through which the government promotes the UHD insist on its technical and development-oriented character. However, its design, implementation and governance reflect inherently political dimensions.

Top-down urban policy making

The trajectory of Diamniadio’s new urban hub is political. The omnipresence of strong presidential will in all the different stages of its design and implementation are but one expression of these politics. The UHD is an example of (re)centralised urban governance, whereby administrative power in key urban sectors has been shifted back to central institutions, freshly created to facilitate vertical decision-making. Local political and civil society stakeholders have remained at the margins, while frustration about the central government’s focus on international players and investors has been increasing.

Making presidential urban footprints

The construction of the International Conference Centre Abdou Diouf (CICAD), located in arrondissement A of the UHD, is regularly mentioned as the official launch site of the new city project. Shortly after his election in May 2012, President Macky Sall made his political mark and assigned the Turkish company Summa to set the hub’s foundation stone, by building the conference centre on a 12,500 m² plot. The political priority status of the

¹⁶ The Senegalese Ministry of Urbanism and Housing is also planning to develop a further 36 urban hubs in different regions of the country, but the pilot projects, among which is the urban hub of Daga Kholpa, are also adjacent to the Dakar region.

project can be felt within CICAD's walls: it contains a presidential office and VIP area, to which Macky Sall withdraws and hosts his counterparts.

The UHD has become one of Sall's political flagship projects, through which he speaks to different social target groups, for instance by disseminating pro-poor housing policies on the one hand, and by attracting middle-class and foreign investors. Lastly, experts stress that by investing in the Dakar region's urban policies, Sall intends to please the "*dakarais*" electors, which represent almost 25 percent of the Senegalese population.¹⁷ This political use of urban infrastructure projects is, however, not new. President Sall somehow walks in the urban footsteps of his predecessor, Abdoulaye Wade, who wanted to transform Diamniadio into an economically flourishing zone. As a pioneer of market-driven policies, and known for his "appetite for infrastructure",¹⁸ Wade conducted negotiations with donors to establish an SEZ in the same area in 2007. He also intended to build a new capital between Diogo and Lompoul, his region of origin. While neither of these projects reached the stage of implementation, Macky Sall, too, used the rhetoric of unprecedented urban growth to attract both investors and political support.

"The UHD is a project through which President Macky Sall seeks to leave his political mark.¹⁹" The central government shows no hesitation in recalling the political priority status of the UHD on the presidential agenda: "This is my legacy for the future generations" is the slogan featuring on a slightly faded but large banner in between empty and unfinished project sites of the hub.

Building new cities and central institutions

To facilitate and fast-track implementation of the president's urban ideas and objectives in Diamniadio, specific laws and decrees were adopted and central decision-making bodies created. Two presidential decrees were published in 2013 and 2014 respectively, which laid the legal groundwork for the administrative extraction and isolation of the UHD from the four communities concerned. The 2013 decree declared the UHD a zone of public interest over which the central state could henceforth govern without depending on decentralised stakeholders, such as the municipalities. Instead, the 2014 decree established the Delegation of the Promotion of Urban Hubs (DGPU), a body which is directly attached to the presidency. The institution has been crafted to take over the promotion and management of the newly delimited areas for urban development in Diamniadio and another centrally implemented new urban hub, the Lac Rose. In fact, the DGPU's mission is precisely to implement executive decisions related to the realisation of these two urban hubs.

This new city approach in Senegal is an interesting example of concomitant building of both city and institution. It reflects a broader trend of African governments to use urban policies as a means to reallocate administrative power over urban territorial pockets. Similar to special economic or industrial zones, new city projects often enjoy an exceptional status. This status materialises spatially, for example by demarcating a specific area, which is then detached from the surrounding territory. They are "designed to be both geographically and administratively separate from established cities, while projecting a distinct brand, architectural identity, and vision of the future."²⁰ This tendency is not new: even

¹⁷ Interview with a civil society representative, Dakar, June 8, 2022.

¹⁸ De Jong, Ferdinand and Vincent Foucher. 2010. "La tragédie du roi Abdoulaye ? Néomodernisme et Renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporain." *Politique africaine* 118 (2): 192.

¹⁹ Interview with a Professor in urban planning, Amadou Mahtar Mbow, June 18, 2022.

²⁰ Moser, Sarah and Côte-Roy, Lawrence. 2021. "New Cities: Power, Profit and Prestige." *Geography Compass* 15 (1) : 2.

in other parts of the world, such as in France during the 1960s, the development of new urban hubs went hand in hand with the innovation of administrative tools and bodies to govern them.²¹

What is striking about the UHD, however, is the clear shift of administrative power from decentralised stakeholders to not only the central level but the presidential office in particular. Macky Sall governs the UHD by decrees, which are then implemented by its direct administrative arm, the DGPU. Investment proposals by foreign and national companies targeting the different sectors of the UHD are submitted to the DGPU, which then declares on the solidity of the projects. All proposals involving a transfer of more than 2,500 hectares of land require direct approval by the president himself. This vertical governance structure regarding the UHD mirrors a more general trend toward centralised politics in Senegal.²² Members of the surrounding communities feel largely circumvented and not involved in the project. Instead, they critically observe the President's focus on international companies and investors who seem to be key players within the UHD.

Partnering with international players

With its focus on modern and large infrastructure projects, such as conference and event areas, an industrial area and a regional campus of the United Nations, the UHD is targeting the international community. As in other African countries and world regions, urban infrastructure initiatives and showcase cities (*villes vitrines*) are used by central governments to emphasise their status as a competitor within the international economy.²³ Accordingly, the Senegalese government has involved various external stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the UHD, by promoting public-private partnerships.²⁴ The UHD is composed of a variety of sub-project sites, which in turn represent a complex map of mostly foreign public and private stakeholders, aimed at deploying their interests and expertise: the integrated industrial park of Diamniadio, situated in the north-west of the UHD, has been funded by the Chinese Export-Import Bank and constructed by the CGC overseas construction group. French hard, and also digital, infrastructure stakeholders, such as the digital development company Tactis, have promoted their expertise in urban planning, for example in the still uncertain smart city project initiative Diamniadio Lake City. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency, which has developed the masterplan for the Dakar region, is keen to develop alternative smart city approaches. Urban planning models and approaches, such as smart or new cities, are increasingly used by different bilateral partners to promote their national expertise and secure investment opportunities.²⁵

Given the multifaceted mosaic-like shape of the UHD, composed of a diversity of financing and constructing stakeholders with different project timelines, it is hard to determine the winners and losers of this geopolitical interplay. Turkey, however, has strong stances in

²¹ Fredenucci, Jean-Charles. 2003. "L'urbanisme d'État : nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux acteurs." *Ethnologie française* 33 (1): 13-20.

²² Kopf, Charline. 2020. *op. cit.*

²³ See also Terrefe, Biruk, 2020. "Urban Layers of Political Rupture: the 'New Politics' of Addis Ababa's Megaprojects." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14 (3): 375-395.

²⁴ Diop, Djibril and Timera, Aly S. 2018. *Diamniadio: Naissance d'une ville nouvelle: enjeux et défis d'une gouvernance durable*. Dakar. L'Harmattan Sénégal.

²⁵ Smart cities are a much controversial model of urban development, which have been promoted internationally since the 2000s. China is one of the countries with the highest number of smart city projects. It has promoted its model in other world regions, especially Africa: Ekman, Aline. 2019. "China's smart cities: the new geopolitical battleground." *Etudes de l'Ifri*. Accessed September 28, 2022.

the UHD and has been one of the key stakeholders both in financing and constructing infrastructure projects. After erecting the first building of the UHD in 2012 (the CICAD) within a timespan of only eleven months, the building company Summa never left Diamniadio. The Turkish firm, whose national workers live in container homes next to the Summa-built Radisson hotel, have since realised the construction of most of the major buildings (e.g. the CICAD, the Abdoulaye Wade Stadium, an exposition centre, the Radisson Blu Hotel, the Dakar Arena), based on funds from the Turkish Exim Bank. Some projects initiated by others, including Senegalese firms, such as the construction of the Diamniadio campus of the Amadou Mahtar Mbow University, have been handed over to Summa by the Senegalese government for finalisation. This occurred, when delays in the construction process have been noticed. In a similar way, Summa finalised the construction of the Diamniadio terminal of the Regional Express Train, operated by a subsidiary of the French SNCF (National Railway Society) and delivered in December 2021. The Turkish firm took over after allegedly accumulated delays by the company in charge of construction, the Senegalese Getran.²⁶

The significant involvement of Turkey in the realisation of UHD's superstructures reflects its growing relationship with Senegal. Macky Sall and his Turkish counterpart Recep T. Erdoğan have reaffirmed their mutual interest in strengthening business partnerships. Turkey is presented as a privileged and neutral ally, and as an attractive alternative to complex relationships with traditional partners carrying colonial legacy.²⁷

The focus on new foreign investment partners substituting and replacing domestic companies in the realisation of the UHD has led to local incomprehension. Some municipal leaders and civil society stakeholders see the UHD as an unrealistic project, favouring external partnerships rather than local needs.

Limited local appropriation of the new urban hub

Centralised decision-making regarding the objectives of the UHD and the stakeholders involved impacts not only the pace, but also the social acceptance, of its implementation. Ten years after laying the foundation stone of the CICAD, the overall project site is shaped by empty spaces and remains largely uninhabited. Whereas the hampered realisation of the UHD could be explained by a variety of technical²⁸ and financial factors, the political and social variables certainly play a role, too. The non-inclusive character of the project's design and construction results in limited local appropriation. Furthermore, administrative uncertainty created by the power shifts from the municipal to the central level make the daily governance of social, and especially land, issues difficult.

A lack of local urban life

Today, the UHD's landscape is dominated by dispersed large-scale buildings that serve administrative, industrial, event or leisure purposes. The new ministerial sphere, the colourful

²⁶ Soumaré, Marième. 2021. "Sénégal: comment le TER de Macky Salla a déraillé." *Jeune Afrique*, July 2, 2022.

²⁷ See for example the statement of the Senegalese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aïssatta Tall Sall, during the Antalya Diplomatic Forum in March 2022: Ertürk, Nur A. 2022. "La" MAE sénégalaise, Sarr: 'La Turquie est un partenaire privilégié du Sénégal'" *Anadolu Agency*, March 15, 2022.

²⁸ One major technical obstacle is the swelling clay, which the soil of Diamniadio consists of. Specific and costly techniques are required to make this terrain suitable for building on, especially for individual houses and smaller constructions. This increases construction costs.

Abdoulaye Wade Stadium, the Dakar Arena, and the unfinished House of the United Nations are some of the outstanding buildings of the project area. In between these scattered buildings are empty spaces or unfinished construction sites, making it difficult to picture these buildings as part of a dense and dynamic future city. A road network facilitates traffic between the different zones and sites, mostly used by private and company cars, some motorbike taxis and few buses carrying public servants from the regional train station to the ministerial sphere on workdays. So far, seven ministries have had to move their offices to the administrative zone of Diamniadio. From Monday to Friday, the “*sphère ministérielle 2*” becomes the social and economic lung of an otherwise motionless city, when mostly Dakar-based ministerial agents work, consume and move within the UHD between 8.00am and 5.00pm. The lack of basic infrastructure (electricity and water, but also shops, social venues, etc.), public transport, available accommodation and social activities – which are all features necessary to the creation of urban life – hinder these temporary users of Diamniadio from leaving Dakar and settling in Diamniadio. Instead, they contribute to an opposite inter-urban dynamic: while Diamniadio was conceived to avoid the dormitory effect between peri-urban areas and Dakar’s commercial and administrative centres, the capital has now become a “bedroom” for public servants whose duty station is Diamniadio.

The provision of affordable and social housing has been central to the early announcements made about the UHD. Yet the area remains mainly uninhabited. Despite the initial enthusiasm by real estate agencies and developers, few projects have been finalised. High construction costs and apartment prices²⁹ are regularly mentioned reasons. The target groups of these real estate products are the Senegalese middle class and diaspora and, to a lesser extent, the unprivileged urban dwellers living in Dakar.³⁰

Unclear power relations and local (land) conflict

The administrative isolation of the UHD from the surrounding communities that had previously been responsible for it, and the recentralisation of decision-making authority led to political confusion and social tensions, especially around the access to and control of land.

The municipal leaders and civil society from the affected communities have not been involved in key decisions regarding the UHD, such as its territorial perimeters or future governance models. The implications of this administrative isolation for the previous responsibilities of municipal stakeholders have not been defined: thus, it is not clear, for example, who oversees tax collection in the UHD, especially from operating investors. Furthermore, the question of the political representation of citizens living, working and moving within the UHD remains open. As an agent of the Diamniadio municipality puts it: “Citizens – although they are also voters – have no political access to the *pôle urbain*, since it does not have any mayor!³¹” The UHD’s political structure is yet to be determined. In 2018, the DGPU commissioned a report with the aim of coming up with different governance options. Several proposals were made, including a subdivision of responsibilities among different municipalities, a collective approach, or the set-up of an entirely new municipality in charge of UHD – but no decision has yet been taken. As with many construction projects, the governance question is pending.

²⁹ The cheapest apartments of the developing company SenegIndia, one of the most advanced real estate projects, is sold at 30 million FCFA (around 60 000 euros).

³⁰ Extract from an interview with a real estate agent from SenegIndia, Dakar, June 16, 2022.

³¹ Extract of an interview with an official from the municipality of Diamniadio, June 14, 2022.



Bird's eye view of the construction work in Diamniadio. The construction process is slow and fragmented.
© 2022 Maxar Technologies

One of the major responsibility shifts from the municipal to the central state level is land allocation and management. Through the 2013 and 2014 presidential degrees, the UHD area has been declared state land, which gave the central government exclusive decision-making rights over land allocation. Since the decentralisation policies in the late 1990s, land allocation has been a prerogative of decentralised bodies. The top-down drawing of territorial boundaries has rekindled land disputes among municipalities, especially between Bargny and Diamniadio. Leaders of Bargny have complained about continuous attempts by the Diamniadio administration to extend its boundaries over their territory.³² These tensions have been amplified by the UHD project, partly due to rising competition over increasingly attractive land by investors and speculators. To bring about an end to boundary conflicts, the administrative borders of the concerned municipalities will be redesigned and consolidated by presidential decree,³³ which is another example of the vertical use of state power in Diamniadio. Besides inter-municipal border issues, DGPU agents are frequently called upon to settle land conflicts between investors of the UHD and members of the surrounding communities claiming the legitimate (and sometimes customary) land rights along the boundaries of the *pôle urbain*.

Land governance is not only the foundation of so-called “new city” planning, but also a breeding ground for political and socio-economic tensions.

Conclusions & Recommendations

“To realise the UHD, the government has put the cart before the horse.³⁴” This is a frequent expression used by the *Dakarois* and individuals working on the UHD site to describe the limited success of a premature project implementation, with vertical decision-making. Modern and visible built infrastructure, based on agreements with mostly foreign partners, was given priority, neglecting the role of social utilities and basic services. The animation of

³² The municipality of Bargny was created in 1981, while Diamniadio was founded in 2002, leading to an administrative division and a loss of parts of Bargny's territory.

³³ A draft decree was developed in 2021 to redraw and fix the administrative and territorial boundaries of several communities including the municipality of Diamniadio.

³⁴ Interview with an administrative agent working in Diamniadio, June 13, 2022.

today's ghost city depends on decisions taken by Dakar-based DGPU offices, while the municipal leaders of the surrounding communities are confronted with their citizens' frustration over limited involvement in the project and limited access to land. As in other African countries, the new city of Diamniadio has been promoted as a technical solution to growing urban challenges. However, the related decisions and consequences have important social and political dimensions, with the reassertion of the central state authority mostly coming at the expense of local participation and democratic accountability.

The experiences of new city projects in Africa and other world regions are diverse. However, some lessons for stakeholders involved in reflections on, or concrete implementation of, such initiatives can be drawn from the Senegalese UHD.

- 1. Build inclusive cities based on participatory approaches.** Affected citizens and leaders need to be involved in the earliest stages of city-planning. Not only should communities be consulted about the economic interests of building new urban hubs, there should also be space to address concerns about land and border claims, shifting responsibilities and the future governance models for the area.
- 2. Create infrastructure that responds to realistic and existing urban needs.** In the case of the UHD, the objectives of social housing slid into the background, while emphasis was put on the construction of mega-infrastructure. Today, Diamniadio is considered as an area for industries, investment and mostly attracting the middle class, while basic and social infrastructure are still lacking.
- 3. Consider the inherently political nature of large-scale urban initiatives.** Oftentimes, large-scale urban infrastructure initiatives are flagship projects of political leaders and heads of states. Personal and political interests are at stake and can have a direct impact on the sustainability of such projects. Their lifespan can depend on election outcomes and finish at the end of a presidential mandate. Sustainable urban development initiatives should go beyond the objectives of leaving political marks and winning elections and, rather, become part of broader urban policies.
- 4. Reflect on the temporality of project implementation.** The construction of "new" cities is often based on a rhetoric of urgency. They are supposed to provide quick (material and infrastructural) solutions to imminent risks of urban growth. This image of speed contrasts with the time needed to plant the seeds for a dynamic urban life, which depends on the city's appropriation by its inhabitants.
- 5. Approach urban projects as part of their broader environment.** The "city-in-a-box" thinking around "new" cities is misleading. It ignores the extent to which each urban project needs to interact with its surrounding communities, local authorities, infrastructures and territories. Inclusive integrated planning should address the connections between new urban development sites and surrounding municipalities.

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