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Governance Structures and Their Role in the Success of Utopian Mega-Projects

A Comparative Study of Utopian Mega-projects Governance Within Strong Centralized Visionary Governments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout history, humanity has envisioned utopian societies, with these visionary concepts shaping various city development models to address the critical challenges of their time. While urban utopias have long served as intellectual studies in ideal city planning, the 21st century has witnessed an increasing number of large-scale urban mega-projects that attempt to materialize these visions.

Significant academic research has explored the theoretical foundations of utopias, as well as case studies and implementation challenges of mega-projects. However, a critical aspect remains unexplored: the governance structures that enable or hinder the realization of utopian mega-projects. A key observation is that the most ambitious contemporary mega-projects with utopian visions emerge within highly centralized governance environments. In those cases, visionary governments play a dominant role in initiating, conceptualizing, financing, and executing large-scale transformations for their countries.

This research starts with providing an initial exploration of the development of the utopian concept over time. It further focuses on the analysis of the four international case studies initiated in the 21st century: Forest City (Malaysia), Masdar City (UAE), the New Administrative Capital (Egypt), and NEOM (Saudi Arabia). These projects share characteristics of visionary leadership, large-scale ambition, and a firm reliance on centralized governance frameworks. A comparative analysis of these four mega-projects reveals the following key governance dynamics:

- Centralized authority prioritizes efficiency over inclusivity, enabling rapid execution but increasing concerns about the role and autonomy of local governance.
- Visionary leadership fuels ambition, yet projects remain vulnerable to shifts in power, questioning their long-term sustainability if political leadership changes.
- Top-down approach accelerates implementation but often comes at the expense of thoughtful planning, increasing the risk to create isolated, elite-driven urban enclaves.
- Financial sustainability remains uncertain, as heavy reliance on state funding and external investment exposes projects to economic volatility.
- Governance innovations, such as Special Economic Zones, enhance regulatory flexibility, yet they reinforce hierarchical control and can limit meaningful local integration.

It is important to note that this research was conducted as part of the Executive MSc in Cities Program at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and serves as an initial study rather than an exhaustive analytical assessment. The natural next step would be to present this work to stakeholders and management to gain even greater insights and build upon these initial findings to refine governance models that can effectively balance utopian ambition with pragmatic execution.

AIM & QUESTIONS

This research aims to explore how governance structures influence the development and outcomes of utopian mega-projects within centralized, visionary governments. It examines the interactions between national and local authorities, assessing the role of governance innovations, strategic partnerships, and regulatory frameworks in shaping project execution. Additionally, the study identifies key governance risks associated with implementing highly ambitious, utopian urban visions.

The research is based on a case study of four utopian mega-project examples from around the world and aims to provide answers to the following three key questions:

- 1. How do governance structures influence the development and success of utopian mega-projects?
- 2. What are the key challenges and risks associated with governing utopian mega-projects in highly centralized environments?
- 3. To what extent do utopian mega-projects achieve their visionary ambitions, and what factors contribute to their success or failure?

METHODOLOGY & GAPS

The research methodology is based on a qualitative analysis focusing on governance frameworks for utopian mega-projects within centralized visionary governments. This is achieved through comparative case studies of four selected mega-projects representing different countries.

The data collection process is comprehensive, commencing with detailed literature and online source reviews to establish foundational knowledge. In addition, it includes a thorough analysis of available project documents, providing detailed insights into the implementation and governance of these mega-projects.

This methodology offers a holistic understanding of governance approaches by integrating diverse data sources and perspectives. It is acknowledged, however, that the absence of interviews with project stakeholders and management represents a gap in the analysis despite the thorough literature and document review process.

INTRODUCTION

Definition of Utopia and Its Evolution Over Time

'A Future better than the Present' *

Urban utopian thinking has significantly shaped city planning and design throughout history (Ganjavie, 2014; Crommelin, 2019). Utopians were the first urban planners, and their projects served as research laboratories for urban theorists (Ganjavie, 2012). While famous 20th-century utopian city plans by Howard, Le Corbusier, and Wright were never fully realized, they greatly influenced urban planning (Crommelin, 2019). Utopian approaches in urban design serve two main functions: providing a unified standard for critiquing urban challenges and using catastrophic scenarios to educate citizens (Ganjavie, 2014).

Recent utopian visions focus more on improving urban social processes rather than

NOTE: A common expression used to describe utopian ideals, not attributed to a specific individual.



Figure 1: Image from the movie 'The Power of Utopia. Living with Le Corbusier in Chandigarh'

physical design (Crommelin, 2019). Late 19th-century colonization projects in Spain explored utopian urbanism in industrial, agricultural, and mining contexts (Beneyto Falagán, 2013). Although the programs so far have not achieved this ambition, utopian thinking continues to motivate efforts to improve cities by highlighting current problems and offering aspirational visions (Crommelin, 2019).

Urban utopias are often associated with ideal urban development, but the concept of utopia encompasses broader dimensions than just urban planning. Utopia is often described as an imagined community or society with highly desirable or perfect qualities for its inhabitants. It's a conceptual place where social, legal, and political systems are ideal, often characterized by harmony, equality, and prosperity. Sir Thomas More first coined the term in his 1516 book "Utopia," which depicted an island society with perfect socio-politico-legal systems.

Throughout history, each era has been marked by distinct utopian ideas that reflect the societal challenges of their time, offering insight into the evolving aspirations for a better world. Below is a summary highlighting the key trends and moods in Utopian urban development from the pre-16th century to the present.

PRE-1500S ANCIENT AND EARLY UTOPIAN CONCEPTS

Description:

Various cultures across the world explored and imagined utopian ideals, concentrating on creating perfect societies through governance, social harmony, and innovative urban planning. These early concepts were not just mere fantasies; they laid down the foundational ideas and theoretical frameworks for societal structures that aspired towards balance, moral order, and justice. Each civilization interpreted these ideals according to their unique cultural narratives and philosophies, even if they weren't fully realized as concrete urban plans during that era. These imaginative visions set the groundwork for future thinkers and planners.

Governance:

Various cultures envisioned utopian societies governed by ideals of justice, moral order, and social harmony, often blending philosophical principles with innovative urban planning. While these concepts remained largely theoretical, they influenced future societal frameworks by reflecting each civilization's distinct cultural narratives, as seen in examples like Plato's Republic, Mohenjo-Daro, and Harappa.

1500 - EARLY 1600S RENAISSANCE UTOPIAS

Figure 2: "The School of Athens," 1509-1511 by Raphael

Examples: Plato's "Republic", "The Golden Age" Myths, The "Works and Days" by Hesiod, Mohenjo-Daro and Harapp, and others.



Figure 3: 'The City of Truth' by Bartolomeo Del Bene

Examples: Thomas More's "Utopia" (1516), Francesco Patrizi's "The Happy City" (1553), Campanella's "The City of the Sun" (1602), Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis" (1624), Bartolomeo Del Bene's "The City of Truth" (1585), and others.

Description:

A period of cultural resurgence and intellectual awakening in Europe, characterized by a renewed focus on art, science, and humanism. During this time, thinkers and artists explored the concept of ideal societies, envisioning utopias where harmony, justice, and collaboration prevailed (Pohl, 2010). This period witnessed a revival of classical knowledge and exploration of new worlds, prompting imaginative visions of ideal communities. Influential works, such as Thomas More's "Utopia," challenged existing norms and inspired debates about the possibilities of creating perfect societies.

Governance:

Envisioned societies governed by enlightened leaders or councils prioritizing equality, education, and the rule of reason, as seen in Thomas More's Utopia with its communal property and elected magistrates, or in Campanella's The City of the Sun, which proposed a theocratic and knowledge-based administration. These frameworks challenged their time's hierarchical and feudal norms and advocated for systems that aligned governance with justice and societal harmony.

LATE 1600S - 1700S ENLIGHTENMENT UTOPIAS

Description:

This era marked a significant ideological shift, where reason and rational thought were championed as the guiding principles for human affairs. Philosophers like Voltaire and Rousseau envisioned societies structured on equality, justice, and democratic governance. Their writings sparked debates and inspired movements that challenged traditional authority and sought to reshape societal norms. This period is an emancipation from authoritative conceptions of religion, government, and philosophy (Pohl, 2010).

Governance:

Governance often emphasized egalitarian principles and the rejection of traditional hierarchies, focusing on collective decisionmaking and the rational organization of society. Rousseau's concept of the general will influenced democratic ideals, while Morelly's The Code of Nature proposed abolishing private property to achieve social harmony. Though these ideas were largely theoretical, some implementations reflected their influence. For instance, The French Revolution, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, emphasized commoners' rights as opposed to the exclusive rights of the elites.



Figure 4: French National Library design by Étienne-Louis Boullée

Examples: "The New Atlantis" by Francis Bacon (1624), Voltaire's "Candide" (1759), Denis Diderot's "Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville" (1772), Étienne-Gabriel Morelly's "The Code of Nature" (1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Discourse on Inequality" (1755), and others.

1800S INDUSTRIAL UTOPIAS



Figure 5: 'Ideal City of Chaux' by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux

Examples: Robert Owen's New Lanark (1800s), Charles Fourier's Phalansteries (1808), Étienne Cabet's Icaria (1840s), Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's "Ideal City of Chaux" (early 1800s), The Shakers communities (late 1700s to 1800s), and others.

Description:

The 1800s brought forth Industrial Utopias as thinkers responded to the rapid changes and challenges of the Industrial Revolution. These utopias sought to address the social and economic inequalities that emerged from industrialization, focusing on improving living and working conditions through innovative social and communal structures (Kenneth M. Roemer, 2010). As industrialization spread, thinkers like Robert Owen and Charles Fourier conceptualized utopian communities emphasizing cooperation, improved working conditions, and social equality.

Governance:

Governance by industrialists during the 1800s often reflected a paternalistic approach, where leaders sought to balance profit with social responsibility by directly managing workers' welfare. These efforts were driven by moral concerns and the pragmatic goal of fostering loyalty and productivity. Governance in these utopias often involved strict oversight of workers' lives, with industrialists regulating community norms and behavior to maintain order and harmony.

1900S MODERNIST UTOPIAS

Description:

The 1900s introduced Modernist Utopias, embodying visions aligned with the modernist movement's ethos. These utopias emerged as responses to rapid technological advancement, urbanization, and social change, aiming to reshape society through innovation in design, architecture, and planning. They often focused on functionality, minimalism, and the integration of technology and modern design principles to craft ideal living environments.

Governance:

Governance was deeply intertwined with urban planning and architectural design principles, often envisioning centralized or systematized control to ensure order, efficiency, and equity in rapidly urbanizing societies. The architect's role extended beyond creating buildings to reimagining how people lived, worked, and interacted within structured environments. In addition, governance in these utopias often emphasized the application of scientific and technological advancements to solve societal problems.





Figure 7: The LINE Project, NEOM

Examples: Masdar City, UAE; Auroville, India; The LINE Project KSA; Interplanetary Human Settlements, and others.



Figure 6: Garden City' by Ebenezer Howard

Examples: Le Corbusier's Radiant City (1920s), Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City (1930s), Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (1898), Bauhaus Movement (1919-1933), Buckminster Fuller's Manhattan Dome (1960s), and others.

Description:

Today, utopian visions often focus on sustainability, eco-friendly living, and the development of smart cities, integrating technology and nature in innovative ways to create harmonious urban environments. As we strive for a balanced future, zero-carbon initiatives and renewable energy projects have become central to modern utopias. These visions emphasize reducing our ecological footprint while promoting green architecture and sustainable transportation solutions. Advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, and data-driven governance are revolutionizing how urban areas function.

Governance:

Centralized visionary governments often play a dominant role in governance in modern utopias, shaping the trajectory of development through centralized authority, ambitious planning, and decisive implementation. Governments play a crucial role in modern utopian projects by setting regulatory frameworks, funding initiatives, fostering collaboration between public and private sectors, and being key enablers of implementing contemporary utopian visions.

URBAN PLANNING AS A LABORATORY FOR UTOPIAS

Scholars suggest that urban utopias function as "research laboratories" for urban design, offering external frameworks for critiquing existing urban challenges. They serve dual purposes: diagnosing issues within cities and presenting visions of alternative futures to educate citizens.

Utopian projects often incorporate aspirational qualities that address ecological, technological, and social dimensions. For instance, Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City' aimed to blend the advantages of urban and rural life, inspiring sustainable and livable urban forms. Projects like Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti sought to integrate architecture and ecology, proposing compact urban living spaces that minimize ecological impact.

These speculative designs offer insights into how urban environments can evolve, acting as blueprints for future developments. In essence, urban utopias act as incubators, fostering creativity and bold thinking in urban planning to tackle the complex challenges of modern cities.

MODERN PERSPECTIVES

In contemporary contexts, utopian urban projects integrate sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity. Examples include Masdar City's zero-carbon ambitions and NEOM's focus on redefining livability, business and nature conservation. These projects extend beyond aesthetics to address environmental and social justice goals. While utopias propose ideal visions, critics note potential pitfalls such as top-down planning and exclusions arising from rigid interpretations of perfection. Effective urban utopias must balance visionary ideals with adaptability to real-world complexities.

In summary, urban utopias aim to create cities that address societal challenges and embody aspirations for improved living conditions, equity, and harmony. By envisioning idealized urban environments, these utopian models challenge existing norms and propose radical shifts in how cities are structured and experienced.

By acting as experimental platforms, these utopian ideas encourage policymakers, architects, and urban planners to think beyond the status quo and explore innovative approaches to urban challenges.

These visionary blueprints, while sometimes seen as impractical, are essential in driving forward-thinking dialogues about the future of cities and communities. Each country has its specific context and challenges; it might be congestion, pollution, or any other type of modern urban challenge.

UTOPIAN MEGA-PROJECTS

There isn't a universally recognized, standardized definition of a "utopian mega project," largely because these projects vary widely in scope and application, and the term mainly serves as an umbrella for visionary and idealistic large-scale projects.

Bent Flyvbjerg defines a mega project as a "large-scale, complex venture that typically costs \$1 billion or more, takes many years to develop and build, involves multiple public and private stakeholders, is transformational, and impacts millions of people."

This work refers to Utopian Mega-Projects as ambitious large-scale urban developments designed to address various urban challenges and often offer 'New Ways of Living". These projects often promise to create ideal living environments by tackling key challenges such as sustainability, housing, infrastructure, and social inclusivity.

In the 21st century, sustainability, resilience, and smart cities serve as modern utopian visions, addressing current urban challenges. The rise of electronic communication and information technology fundamentally reshapes cities, just as the automobile and industrial revolution did in the past (Mitchell, 1999).

GOVERNANCE DEFINITION AND VALUE

Governance encompasses the policies, processes, and frameworks through which an organization or project is directed, controlled, and held accountable. In project implementation, governance ensures decision-making aligns with strategic objectives, regulatory requirements, and stakeholder expectations. Over time, the concept of governance has evolved to include the involvement of social actors like private firms, NGOs, and non-profits, extending beyond government to encompass all governing processes (Bevir, 2013). Effective governance is critical for large-scale projects, providing the structure to manage resources, mitigate risks, and maintain transparency (Müller, 2017).

In large-scale projects, governance adds value by mitigating risks, preventing inefficiencies, and ensuring compliance with regulatory and legal requirements. It enables better coordination among diverse stakeholders, encourages collaboration, and resolves conflicts, all of which are vital for successful execution. In mega-projects, robust governance frameworks are essential to instill confidence in investors and stakeholders, ensuring the long-term viability of plans (Flyvbjerg, 2021).

CENTRALIZED VISIONARY GOVERNMENTS

In the current work, a "centralized visionary government" refers to a form of governance where a central authority holds significant power and influence, often guided by a specific vision or set of ideals for the future state of the nation or community. This type of government typically seeks to implement large-scale changes and plans based on a cohesive and often ambitious vision to create a better society, offer a new way of living, and establish their country/ city on the global map.

In essence, a centralized visionary government is defined by its firm central control guided by a transformative vision, aiming for systematic and progressive change. It is a model examined and debated across various academic and policy frameworks due to its potential benefits and inherent challenges. Based on the conducted research, the key characteristics of the centralized visionary government approach are summarized in the following table.

Characteristic	Description
CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY	Centralized governments are characterized by consolidating decision- making power at the national level, often sidelining regional or local governance structures. This centralization is argued to enhance the consistency and unity of policy implementation, reducing the chances of contradictory regional policies. Heywood elaborates on how this structure can facilitate the swift enactment of national policies, as the centralized authority can override local dissent for the nation's broader goals (Heywood, A. "Politics"). The centralization also means that national identity and priorities can be more directly communicated and enforced, enabling comprehensive national strategies without any dilutions by local interests.
VISIONARY LEADERSHIP	Having Visionary Leaders is one of the critical components in centralized governments as they set forth a clear strategic path aimed at long-term socio-economic advancements. These leaders often embody transformational leadership traits, promoting an environment where innovation and systemic change are prioritized. Bass and Riggio highlight that visionary leaders not only set ambitious goals but also inspire and motivate citizens and subordinate leaders to work towards these goals, creating a unified effort towards transformation (Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. "Transformational Leadership"). Their ability to articulate, drive, and, to some extent, enforce a compelling vision is crucial in rallying public and institutional support and pushing the nation toward progressive change.
TOP-DOWN IMPLEMENTATION	In centralized visionary governments, policy implementation predominantly follows a top-down approach. This means that directives and initiatives originate from the central authority and flow downward, with local or regional entities primarily executing established plans. This model can enhance the efficiency of implementing large-scale projects because it minimizes the negotiation and coordination burdens that typically accompany decentralized systems. The governance model literature, including works by Fukuyama, argues that while this approach can expedite policy rollout, it can also perate

local input and adaptability, potentially leading to resistance if local

conditions are not adequately considered (Fukuyama, n.d.).

Description

SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION Centralized visionary governments aim to implement far-reaching societal changes, leveraging their concentrated power to reshape social structures, norms, and priorities. These transformations can include reforms in education, healthcare, and other social services, intending to improve the overall quality of life. For instance, Heywood's "Politics" discusses how centralized governments can effectively direct resources toward national goals. By setting clear national goals and focusing resources accordingly, these governments can address long-standing societal issues more effectively. The actual challenge lies in ensuring that these changes are inclusive, addressing the needs of diverse population segments without alienating minority groups.

ECONOMIC CAPACITY FOR LARGE-SCALE TRANSFORMATIONS

Centralized governments, focused on visionary leadership, are particularly adept at mobilizing resources for large-scale economic and infrastructural projects. Their ability to streamline decisionmaking processes and quickly allocate required resources makes it possible to undertake massive development projects, including those ones that can be considered utopian. The potential to implement such projects can significantly boost the economy by creating jobs, stimulating technological advancements, and improving national competitiveness on a global scale. While these projects are set to boost economic growth, there's a need for careful planning to ensure that economic changes are equitable and that the benefits are widely distributed throughout society.

Figure 8: Key characteristics of centralized visionary government approach

The Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain, are often recognized for their centralized visionary governance structures. Over the past 50 years, these countries have strategically leveraged their abundant natural resources, primarily oil and natural gas, to drive economic and infrastructural development.

The centralized nature of governments like those in Saudi Arabia and the UAE enables streamlined decisionmaking processes, which facilitate the execution of large-scale national projects with notable efficiency. This is discussed in Heywood's "Politics," where centralized authority is linked to effective policy implementation. Umbrella visionary initiatives such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Vision 2021 illustrate their forward-thinking approaches to economic diversification away from hydrocarbon reliance, as explored by Dershowitz in the "Journal of International Affairs." These countries have arguably succeeded in their transformative and somehow utopian ambitions more than others due to their strategic governance and associated economic capacity.

Other examples include select North African countries, such as Egypt, and Asian nations, such as Malaysia and China. As highlighted in Treisman's "The Architecture of Government," these countries often exhibit centralized structures that enable them to undertake ambitious national development plans. Their approach is similar to the above-mentioned UAE and Saudi Arabia, but their economic capacity to implement ambitious plans is somehow more limited. Economic data, such as GDP per capita and government investment levels, suggest variances in financial capability. According to World Bank data, China maintains strong economic growth, driven by its vast industrial base and export economy, making substantial investments feasible. Egypt and Malaysia face more constraints. Egypt, for example, has struggled with economic volatility and dependency on external debt, limiting its ability to finance expansive projects. In contrast, Malaysia, with its robust manufacturing and service sectors, shows moderate capacity but lacks the scale seen in China or the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

This economic disparity affects the extent to which these countries can realize their central governments' visionary goals, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE benefiting from substantial oil revenues, enabling them to invest heavily in diversification and strategic national projects.

Unlike previous centuries, advancements in technology and construction methods have accelerated the transition of New Century Utopias from conceptual designs to implementation phases. Today, we witness the construction of multi-billion-dollar projects globally, mainly concentrated in regions characterized by Centralized Visionary Governments. These projects give us plenty of examples to study what makes them succeed or fail.

We observe a shift from merely dreaming big to emphasizing practical execution. A crucial yet often overlooked factor is the governance and management of these ambitious projects under centralized leadership. This governance is vital for both project delivery and long-term success.

CASE STUDIES

CONTEXT

Having established the theoretical and historical basis of utopian mega-projects and the definition of centralized visionary governments, this research now turns to the more practical realm of governance structures, as applied to four case studies showcasing 21st-century utopian mega-projects.

The four selected projects, Forest City (Malaysia), Masdar City (UAE), the New Administrative Capital (NAC) in Cairo (Egypt), and NEOM (Saudi Arabia), represent various approaches to utopian mega-projects, each aspiring to redefine urban development and offering the new ways of living, through innovation, commitment to sustainability, design and governance frameworks. These projects were shortlisted due to their ambitious scale (both spatial and financial), somewhat utopian visions, and centralized visionary government contexts. Forest City aimed to establish a green, high-tech urban ecosystem in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Masdar City sought to pioneer carbon-neutral urban living in the harsh desert climate conditions of the UAE. The NAC in Cairo aims to reduce congestion and modernize Egypt's administration, and NEOM emerged as the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 framework, aspiring to redefine urban living at an unprecedented scale.

Case study	Area	Invest- ment	Planned Popula- tion	Typology	Governance model	Key stakeholders
FOREST CITY, MALAYSIA	30km²	USD 100 Bn	700k residents	Luxury Eco-City & Special Economic Zone	Centralized with public- private partnerships	Sultan of Johor, Country Garden, Malaysian Federal Government
NEW ADMINISTRA- TIVE CAPITAL, EGYPT	750 km²	USD 58 Bn	6,5 Mn residents	New Capital & Govern- ment Hub	Centralized government- driven	Egyptian Government, local construction firms, foreign contractors
MASDAR CITY, UAE	6 km²	USD 22 Bn	40k residents	Sustainable Smart City	State-led with private sector input	Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company (Masdar), global corporations
NEOM, SAUDI ARABIA	25,500 km²	USD 500 Bn	9 Mn residents	Futuristic Mega-city & Innovation Hub	Centralized visionary governance	Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Public Investment Fund (PIF), international companies

Figure 9: Summary of selected case studies and governance models (see Annex for details)

The selection of the case studies was based on four key criteria: budget and scale, utopian ideology, governance and political frameworks, and typological diversity (see Annex for details). Each project operates within a centralized or blended political context and is initiated by a visionary and influential state leader. Their extraordinary financial scope and scale set them apart as transformative endeavors in their regions and countries. At the same time, their focus on utopian ideas highlights innovative models of urban living, sustainability, and economic diversification. Finally, their typological diversity, from eco-cities to new administrative capitals, ensures a broad comparative perspective on governance structures and provides a solid foundation for analyzing the governance dynamics of the 21st-century utopian mega-projects. Although more modest in scale both spatially and finanially, Masdar City was included for its strong emphasis on sustainability and its development under the UAE's centralized visionary governance, making it a critical case for examining eco-focused utopian urban models.

Utopian mega-projects often arise from visionary goals and urgent socio-economic needs, addressing challenges like urban congestion, environmental decline, and resource dependency. NEOM anchors Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, driving economic diversification after the 2014–2016 oil price drop. Masdar City positions the UAE as a leader in renewable energy amid growing environmental concerns. Cairo's NAC alleviates overcrowding while signaling modernization, and Forest City leverages Malaysia's location to attract global investors. This chapter compares four cases, analyzing governance models, challenges, and successes in turning utopian visions into reality. The analysis is organized as follows:

Sub-chapter		Aim
CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY	$(\begin{array}{c} \bullet \\ \bullet $	Analyze how centralized decision-making structures shape authority, delegation, and execution.
VISIONARY LEADERSHIP		Examine leaders' roles in crafting transformative visions and establishing governance frameworks.
TOP-DOWN IMPLEMENTATION		Assess the use of top-down models to drive execution and align stakeholders.
SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION		Explore how governance strategies aim to foster societal change.
ECONOMIC CAPACITY FOR LARGE-SCALE TRANSFORMATIONS		Consider the financial strategies, investment sources, and economic impact of mega-projects.
GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS		Highlight governance challenges and innovations in addressing them.

Figure 10: Analysis Structure

CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY



Centralized decision-making improves efficiency and streamlines execution but often sidelines local governance and stakeholder involvement.

An assertive power axis and streamlined negotiation framework within centralized governance systems significantly incentivize the initiation of new mega-projects. The diminished role of regional and local administrations and heightened budgetary and fiscal centralization frequently relegate local communities' and administrations' negotiating positions to subordinate status. This dichotomy yields both advantageous and adverse outcomes: on the one hand, centralized governance expedites implementation, streamlines management, and optimizes project budgets; on the other, as widely noted in the literature (Orum & Smith, 2025; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025), such systems often neglect local social, cultural, and economic contexts. This neglect can lead to a decline in residents' quality of life, population displacement, and disruptions to existing economic conditions. In summary, while centralized systems are formally better suited to launching large-scale mega-projects, their execution frequently comes at the expense of local communities.

A review of the selected case studies yields several key insights. Malaysia's more complex and decentralized governance structure proved highly problematic for the Forest City project, which became entangled in the political ambitions of rival factions in the Johor region (Avery & Moser, 2023). Although Malaysia's level of centralization initially enabled the mega-project to be launched, agreed upon, and commenced at the behest of the Sultan of Johor — effectively bypassing local governance structures — it ultimately proved insufficient to surmount the ensuing partisan intrigues.

On the other hand, NEOM has emerged as the quintessential embodiment of power centralization (Ernst, 2023). Its vast geographical and financial scale, complex design, strategic location, and overarching concept are clear reflections of the will of the Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince. Perhaps the most striking aspect of NEOM's uniqueness is the creation of entirely new organizations to manage it. The project transcends conventional entrepreneurial initiatives by presenting a fully corporate model (Aly, 2019), aiming to be independent of the Kingdom's standard jurisdiction in a longer term. It is managed by a CEO rather than a mayor and is overseen by the Public Investment Fund (PIF).

Similarly, the Masdar project was initiated solely by the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi, with its management entrusted to specially created commercial structures under the auspices of the Mubadala Investment Fund (Randeree, 2018). Although Masdar City's infrastructure is now integrated into the broader urban fabric of the emirate due to territorial and population expansion, it continues to function, from a management perspective, as a special economic zone distinct from the rest of Abu Dhabi.

In Egypt, the New Administrative Capital is directly overseen by the President and Cabinet, with key ministries, including the Ministry of Housing, Utilities, and Urban Communities, playing active roles. Like NEOM, the NAC is a flagship initiative under Egypt's Vision 2030, focusing on sustainable urban development, economic diversification, and modern technology adoption. Its planning, development, and management are handled by the Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD), a joint-stock company established by the government and the armed forces' engineering authority. With the government holding a majority stake and having set specific regulations and incentives to attract investment, state control over the NAC remains firmly in place.

A striking feature common to these mega-projects is their fundamentally extraterritorial status. Often serving as physical extensions of existing cities, they are administratively isolated from local and regional jurisdictions (Di Maddaloni et al, 2025; Fadel & Bhaa, 2024). This hybrid governance model combines elements of classical regional administration with business management practices aimed at enhancing profitability.

Nonetheless, the efficiency and resource concentration offered by centralized governance do not automatically yield better conditions for mega-project implementation. Bureaucratic structures frequently lack the requisite experience in managing complex, multi-actor processes. As noted by Chiang (Chiang et al, 2021), authoritarian leadership, with its emphasis on stringent control and a heavy-handed disciplinary approach, can undermine an organization's strategic objectives, potentially hampering the successful pursuit of mega-projects (Zaman et al, 2021). In general, the reduced sensitivity of centralized states to local contexts is exacerbated by the development of mega-projects, leading to heightened tensions and local conflicts.

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP



Utopian mega-projects are deeply tied to political figures, making their success dependent on leadership stability and national branding strategies.

All the studied cases are distinguished by the unique role of state leaders in initiating mega-projects. Official historiography in each case counts the start of the projects from the moment of their public presentation by the national or regional leader (as in the case of Forest City) during major public events. Moreover, the project concept and vision are also attributed to the leaders who initiated them. There is only rare anecdotal evidence of the involvement of external experts in the development and conceptualization of projects (Reiche, 2010).

The mythologization of large-scale project initiation aligns with the centralized logic of governance, emphasizing the leader's proactive role, strategic vision, and problem-solving capacity. Mega-projects serve as political and media tools, consolidating support and, if successful, contributing to a leader's legacy (Syn & Ramaprasad, 2019). A mega-project may reflect personal preferences and subjective risk assessments rather than market realities or political and technological contexts. Yet, a visionary approach enables the launch of high-potential projects ahead of market readiness and promotes proactive risk management — an inherently risky tradeoff between personal responsibility and ambitious development (Pisarki et al., 2011).

In all the analyzed cases, the heads of the respective states (or regions, as in the case of Forest City) acted as the primary initiators and custodians of the mega-projects. In the case of Egypt, this role was assumed by the country's president; in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, these roles were assumed by the acting heads of the ruling dynasties; and in Malaysia, the project was initiated by the Sultan of Johor. However, the rationale behind the projects was very different.

Malaysia aims to establish an economic counterweight to Singapore through an investment-driven real estate portfolio, with technological and urban planning aspects playing a secondary role. Masdar sought to create an innovative cluster to diversify the economy and secure a competitive edge in green technologies. NEOM, due to its unprecedented scale, functions as both a global ideological statement and a national economic diversification project.

Meanwhile, the NAC is a pragmatic response to Cairo's urban challenges, following a neoliberal development model to strengthen regional leadership, attract investment, and foster balanced urban growth. The success of a mega-project within the framework of centralized visionary governments is closely connected with the figures of their initiators. Political struggle and the loss of political weight by the Sultan of Johor have sharply complicated the implementation of the Forest City project. Faith in the project's future is linked to the figures of the leaders and requires constant media, governance, and supervision support from their side.

TOP-DOWN IMPLEMENTATION



Top-down governance and the creation of Special Economic Zones accelerate execution but often create isolated, elite-driven enclaves.

Government structures are a crucial stakeholder in mega-project management (Sallinen & Ruuska, 2011), with centralization further amplifying their role. However, their involvement typically remains at the institutional level (Morris & Geraldi, 2011). The state also plays a key role in shaping a project's vision and creating an effective implementation environment (Gil & Lundrigan, 2012).

The impact of government organizations on mega-project success remains debated. Some scholars argue that «government governance» positively influences project outcomes, citing regulatory oversight, risk management, and public monitoring as critical factors (Zhai et al., 2020). The OECD also underscores the necessity of strong government planning, including clear procedural frameworks and budgetary mechanisms. Conversely, other research suggests excessive state intervention can hinder project success (Patanakul et al., 2016). These divergent perspectives reflect regional differences in public management approaches and project execution.

All studied projects share common governance traits. Each was initiated by national or regional leaders and entrusted to specialized management companies with authority exceeding that of local administrations. Public-private partnerships are central, requiring collaboration between government bodies and private developers to pool resources and expertise.

Most projects (except NAC) rely on mega-project management companies to coordinate stakeholders. The

creation of SEZs further incentivizes investment, streamlines bureaucracy, and enables regulatory flexibility. However, such top-down approaches marginalize local administrations, increasing risks of clashes and governance misalignment. These models «are known for their enclaved characteristics and securitized peripheries» (Gogishvili & Harris-Brandts, 2019, p.13), fostering privatized urban enclaves.

Governance structures differ by case, with varying degrees of centralized control. Beyond mere centralization, top-down implementation reflects an overarching governance model where authoritative leadership enforces stakeholder compliance. In the four selected cases, this structure is mainly characterized by minimal consultation with local actors, a rigid hierarchical approach to decision-making, and limited tolerance for variance. NAC exemplifies the most top-down model, where military-linked government agencies prescript the project planning, management, and development, minimizing foreign contractor influence. Masdar transitioned from a utopian vision to a state-directed business model, where government oversight ensures international partnerships align with strategic interests. Forest City in Malaysia operates under a commercial real estate framework. Yet, the Sultan of Johor's authority remains the dominant force in decision-making, while limited state backing has created governance and operational hurdles. NEOM represents the extreme of centralized governance, with the ruling prince and Public Investment Fund exerting complete top-down control. Ultimately, the top-down implementation approach intertwines centralized authority with compliance-driven execution. While such models enable rapid development and streamlined processes, their key risk is driving efficiency over the inclusivity of stakeholders or society.

SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION



Utopian mega-projects boost national prestige and attract investment but often lack local integration with local communities.

From a societal transformation perspective, the selected case studies differ in their approach to community integration and inclusivity; however, what unites them is that none of them considered extensive social engagement during the planning and design stages. NEOM and NAC faced criticism for displacing local communities (Farag, 2019; Serag, 2017), while Forest City struggled with public dissatisfaction over foreign ownership models and unaffordable property prices for Malaysians. While maintaining a strong focus on sustainability, Masdar City lacked the social engagement needed to attract a reasonably wealthy UAE resident population (Cugurullo, 2016).

As described earlier, the top-down model of mega-project development through the formation of special economic zones and national-level leadership leads to conflicts caused by challenges with integrating the project into the local context. An important problematic core for the application of criticism of such projects is also the isolated nature of their functioning (Caldas & Gupta, 2017). This is accompanied by an orientation towards more high-end segments of the consumer and business markets: premium housing in Forest City, high-end office spaces in NAC and Masdar, and luxury resorts in NEOM. Thus, the four studied utopian mega-projects, although formulating an ideal vision of the future locally, are designed for maximum international integration and reliance on the process of global financial, human, and technological flows. This, in turn, makes them more sensitive to global disruptions and significantly less impactful on the local scale.

Finally, the significant scale of mega-projects forces governments to select vast empty land plots for their construction, most often on the outskirts of urban agglomerations (Turok, 2016). Thus, the integration of mega-projects into the established rhythm and space of urban life requires a great deal of effort from planners and local administrations, which are largely excluded from the process of mega-project development.

On a separate note, all four projects remain transformational for their respective countries' image and society. These projects are not just large-scale developments but ambitious national statements. They symbolize a transformative shift toward modernization, reshaping their countries' global image and societal fabric. Even though the extent of this influence is difficult to assess, these projects serve as a source of national pride and an

important element of regional development policy (De Nito et al, 2024). However, among the cases considered, the NAC project, initially designed to address major urban challenges and improve the quality of life in Cairo, appears most likely to generate a significant and lasting societal impact. While not directly reshaping daily life, Masdar may contribute to societal change by advancing the sustainability agenda and introducing new building technologies that could gradually become embedded in the UAE's urban landscape (Mascarenhas, 2018; Pandita et al., 2024).

ECONOMIC CAPACITY FOR LARGE-SCALE TRANSFORMATIONS

While designed for economic diversification, these projects often depend on state funding, foreign investment, and uncertain financial sustainability.

Despite differing national contexts and strategic objectives, the studied mega-projects share similar themes in their pursuit of bringing positive economic impact to national development. A key factor in the governance of these projects is the state's financial capacity to sustain large-scale transformations, which directly shapes their feasibility, strategic direction, and long-term impact. The ability of governments to mobilize resources, attract investment, and integrate projects into national economic planning significantly increases their chances of success. Financing strategies differ across the four cases, reflecting various economic structures and policy priorities in their respective countries. While NAC is primarily funded through state-backed loans and public-private partnerships, Forest City relies heavily on foreign direct investment, particularly from Chinese developers. Masdar's model combines government funding with international partnerships. NEOM is primarily financed by the Saudi Public Investment Fund for its initial phases, but attracting significant third-party investment remains a clear imperative for its long-term development.

Substantial state investment shapes these projects' feasibility and further economic impact, driving infrastructure, diversification, and innovation. Mega-projects typically drive large-scale infrastructure investments, creating systemic effects on regional development (Chen, 2015). Masdar laid the foundation for the UAE's solar energy sector, the NAC project spurred rail transport development in Cairo, NEOM highlighted tourism potential in previously underdeveloped regions, and Forest City catalyzed economic activity in a strategic border area. Beyond infrastructure, these projects function as instruments of economic diversification (Rizzo, 2016). While diversification is a stated goal for all four cases, it is particularly evident in Masdar and NEOM. Masdar combines renewable energy development with establishing a research and innovation hub, while NEOM targets multiple high-tech and industrial sectors. In contrast, economic diversification in Malaysia and Egypt remains a secondary effect of broader infrastructure investments.

Finally, these projects serve as catalysts for technological development in their countries. Masdar leads in green energy and smart urbanism, Forest City was envisioned as a model for sustainable architecture, and NEOM has positioned itself as a hub for biotech, mobility, and digital infrastructure. The NAC project emphasizes sustainability and cutting-edge construction technologies. However, the degree to which these ambitions translate into actual national advancements remains uncertain. Masdar has gradually influenced sustainability practices across the Gulf, while Forest City has struggled with regulatory and economic challenges, limiting its broader impact.

GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS

The uniqueness inherent in all mega-projects makes their management an extremely complex task, as it forces government structures responsible for the endeavor's success to engage in unfamiliar work in conditions of high uncertainty (Esposito & Terlizzi, 2023). The public-private partnership format, common for mega-projects, is also a non-standard practice for management structures and requires special experience and skills. The



Mega-projects face governance rigidity, leadership shifts, regulatory barriers, and financial uncertainties, testing the longevity of their utopian aspirations.

inherent problems of the PPP projects, such as the conflict between project performance and profitability or the general instability of mega-project consortia, are among the most important obstacles to successful governance (Busco & Walters, 2024). Finally, key governance challenges include unrealistic optimism in the early stages, underestimation of risks, and the vulnerability of financing and construction to external shocks. To varying degrees, all the studied cases faced these challenges.

Governance challenges are better revealed in projects that take a long time to complete. For example, Masdar's governance structure has undergone significant changes in the nearly 20 years since the mega-project was launched. The project suffered major damage during the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the UAE government's extreme caution led to a reduction in the project's budget and a gradual abandonment of its most complex, expensive and ambitious goals. On the other hand, the adaptability of the Masdar team and the flexibility of the UAE leadership allowed the project to find its niche, refining the original utopian concept into a market-sustainable form of a development project with a business core in the field of green energy.

The sheer technological, geographical, and financial scale of NEOM makes it challenging to manage this mega-project. Firstly, Saudi Arabia, being a relatively large state, does not have the necessary number of qualified specialists for the construction, management, and design of the proposed infrastructure. According to Arab News (2024), a massive hiring campaign was required to attract the necessary number of experts to work on the project, with approximately 200k construction workers and over 3k experts and managers within the NEOM head unit, according to the official website (2023). Despite this, there are concerns that centralized management of such a large and diverse project is beneficial to the project. The departure of NEOM's CEO in November 2024 and the subsequent re-prioritization of the project's activities reinforce these suspicions, as voiced by the Guardian (2024).

Although very large in scale, the Forest City project is organized significantly more straightforwardly than its case studies counterparts, the project ownership was split between the Chinese construction company and de-facto the government of Johor, with no other entities playing any major role in the development process. The SEZ, established in 2023 on the basis of the project territory, was an attempt to create additional economic incentives to attract investors to the project, the implementation of which had stalled due to foreign economic and domestic political reasons (UNCTAD, 2023).

The management framework of the Egyptian case is more adapted to the country's realities. The military and construction ministries manage the project. The military, traditionally playing a key role in Egypt's domestic politics, has the necessary resources to build the mega-project and controls 51% of the ACUD management company. To manage its debt more effectively, ACUD has decided to list its shares on the national stock exchange, as was announced by Reuters (2024).

Overall, the studied projects present common governance challenges and innovations. Each involves the creation of a dedicated governing body subordinate to government or quasi-government structures, often accompanied by the establishment of a Special Economic Zone to enhance regulatory flexibility and economic efficiency. Governance transparency remains limited, with a deficit of publicly available information on management structures.

While these projects face governance rigidity, leadership shifts, and financial uncertainty, AI and digital modeling advancements may become vital innovations for utopian mega-projects and present new opportunities for optimizing urban design and predicting project success in refining governance, improving adaptability, and enhancing long-term sustainability.

SUMMARY

The examples of large utopian projects examined allow us to speak of a high degree of similarity between them. For example, the mechanisms of initiating projects that become part of the national mythology are firmly associated with the personality of the current national (or regional) leader who takes responsibility for the mega-project launch. The success of the mega-project's further implementation depends mainly on the stability of the political structure in which it was created. The leader behind the project becomes its informal custodian. The state's political stability plays a vital role in the success of a mega-project. Due to the enormous costs required to complete the project, if unfavorable market conditions or a change in management occur, freezing or radical transformation of the project is highly likely.

The management and governance of utopian mega-projects vary but typically involve a government-affiliated organization and incorporation into an SEZ. Their strategic autonomy depends on national governance culture, past government experience, and the integration of market dynamics with regulatory mechanisms. Given their public-private nature, clearly defining project goals, assembling effective teams, conducting regular assessments, and ensuring budget control are essential. The state's visionary role must be balanced with pragmatism, emphasizing oversight and accountability throughout implementation.

CONCLUSION

The governance of utopian mega-projects within a centralized visionary government context presents an interconnection between centralized authority, visionary leadership, top-down implementation, societal transformation, economic capacity, and governance innovations. Through the analysis of Forest City, the New Administrative Capital in Cairo, Masdar City, and NEOM, this research aimed to identify both efficiencies and constraints of centralized governance models.

Utopian mega-projects are not a new phenomenon. Historically, visionary urban planning has served as a response to societal challenges. While earlier utopian projects often focused on social harmony, order, and functionality, the 21st-century ones tend to showcase economic transformation, technological advancement, and environmental sustainability as their core ideas.

One of the key findings is that **centralized authority** facilitates efficiency but limits inclusivity. It is clear that in all four case studies, central leadership, whether in the form of a monarch (Forest City), a government-backed investment firm (Masdar City), a state-owned development company (NAC Cairo), or a sovereign wealth fund (NEOM), ensured faster approvals, streamlined governance, and financial resources. However, these powerful governance structures minimized the role of local governments and other stakeholders, leading to local community displacement (NEOM, NAC Cairo), regulatory conflicts (Forest City), and limited market response (Masdar City).

Visionary leadership has both benefits and downsides. While charismatic and ambitious leaders play an essential role in shaping a project's vision and securing early-stage investments, the long-term sustainability of such governance remains largely unproven. However, those leaders are pivotal during the utopian mega-project initiation stage, as their political will and desire for transformation drive project ambition and pace. The downside often lies in an ambition to accelerate project implementation ahead of proper planning and design to present achievements to the world.

The top-down implementation approach, observed across all four projects, highlights the general ability of strong centralized governance to coordinate resources. Top-down governance models can help accelerate execution, but their effectiveness depends on balancing centralized control with a degree of flexibility. NEOM's financial oversight by the Public Investment Fund illustrates how institutional innovations can support large-scale execution. However, in NAC Cairo and Forest City, reliance on government-led decision-making created visible regulatory and financial uncertainties.

From a societal transformation perspective, the selected case studies differ in their approach to community integration and inclusivity; however, what unites them is that none of them considered extensive social engagement during the planning and design stages. NEOM and NAC Cairo faced criticism for displacing local communities, while Forest City struggled with public dissatisfaction over foreign ownership models and unaffordable property prices for Malaysians. While maintaining a strong focus on sustainability, Masdar City lacked the social engagement to attract a reasonably wealthy UAE resident population. On a separate note, all four projects remain transformational for their respective countries' image and society. These projects are not just large-scale developments but ambitious national statements, symbolizing a transformative shift toward modernization and reframing their countries' global image and societal fabric.

Economic capacity for large-scale transformations remain among the most important enablers for initiating and further developing utopian mega-projects within centralized visionary governments. The role of governance here is crucial — projects that fail to establish resilient financial models and adaptive regulatory frameworks risk stagnation or decline. Right now, NEOM has the backing of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund (PIF), NAC Cairo depends on debt-financed infrastructure, and Forest City struggles with investor confidence. Masdar City, despite its strong initial funding, has faced challenges in attracting long-term economic diversification beyond government-driven investments.

Governance challenges identified across all four case studies reinforce the importance of maintaining flexibility within centralized frameworks and ensuring investor-friendly regulations to ensure resilience and sustainability. While innovating is important, realistic timelines and more pragmatic policies are essential to maintaining credibility.

To conclude, governing utopian mega-projects within centralized visionary governments presents opportunities and challenges. One substantial key opportunity lies in the fact that central authority enables rapid decisionmaking, large-scale investment, and ambitious urban transformations. However, the success of utopian megaprojects depends on balancing visionary ambition with more pragmatic governance, ensuring that top-down strategies remain flexible and responsive to evolving economic, social, and political contexts. Further research should examine how these governance models adjust over time, evaluate successes and failures, and determine whether initial utopian ideas translate into livable urban environments or remain aspirational blueprints.

ANNEX

Selection Criteria Summary of the Four Selected Cases Case Study 1: Forest City, Malaysia Case Study 2: Masdar City, UAE Case Study 3: New Administrative Capital Cairo, Egypt Case Study 4: NEOM, Saudi Arabia

SELECTION CRITERIA

The selection criteria for the four case studies in this research are as follows:

	Title	Description
01	GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL FRAMEWORK	The study focuses on utopian mega-projects within authoritarian or hybrid states.
02	BUDGET AND PROJECT SCALE	Projects are chosen for their extraordinary scale and cost, significantly exceeding typical mega- projects' financial standards.
03	UTOPIAN IDEOLOGY	Emphasis is on projects with a strong utopian ideology, aiming to transform the future or set global-impact goals.
04	TYPOLOGICAL DIVERSITY	Cases are selected for their varied development models, solutions, and ideological focuses.

Figure 1: Case Study Selection Criteria Summary



SUMMARY OF THE FOUR SELECTED CASES

1. FOREST CITY, MALAYSIA

Description: Promoted as a self-contained ecosystem combining vertical green architecture, renewable energy, and high-tech living for 700.000 dwellers, a \$100B Forest City failed to deliver on its objectives.

Reasons to study: This colossal project for the development of a new city on the water near the international border is interesting both for its scale and promises to create a closed, sustainable ecosystem in the middle of the strait, an attempt to create a project far beyond national capacity using foreign economic power, and for the reasons for its further failure, tied to domestic and international political changes. The project can also serve as an example of the globalist development of the real estate market, speculative urbanism, using utopian images as a marketing tool.

Timeline: First announced back in 2006 as a 20-years project and officially launched in 2014 under PM Hajib Razak. By that time the entire project was set to be completed in 30 years by 2045. The project was abandoned in 2019 and new talks of its revival began in November, 2024.

Ideology and utopian core: A 'smart and green' utopian core of the Forest City resonated well with the most advanced, hyped and widely discussed visions of the future of urban development across the world.

2. MASDAR CITY, UAE

Description: A large-scale \$22B project that has become an important attempt to develop an energy efficient and climate neutral residential area in the most difficult geographical conditions based on new technologies provided by the world's largest companies. Masdar also set goals to create a comfortable living and working environment, but from a utopian point of view, the most interesting is precisely the attempt to develop a carbon-neutral city in the spirit of the modern idea of the cities of the future.

Reasons to study: Masdar was supposed to be the first city in the world to be carbon dioxide- and waste-free — a centre for science, work and living. It was a flagship project for the emirate of Abu Dhabi. Designed as a zero-carbon city powered by renewable energy, serving as a global model for sustainable urban planning.

Timeline: Masdar was conceived before the financial crisis of 2008. In 2006, the UAE government established Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company PJSC (Masdar) to leverage and build on the UAE's

expertise and leadership in the global energy sector, while supporting the diversification of both its economy and energy sources for the benefit of future generations. Masdar City broke ground in 2008 and is still being constructed. The project was reorganized in 2021–2022 as the older development model was no longer sufficient for its evolution.

Ideology and utopian core: Masdar is not a city in the conventional understanding of the term. It is a sophisticated, large-scale real estate eco tech development project, and the physical master plan is essentially an illustrated business model, built by the Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company as a private property with a single owner. The essence of the project, however, is based on an attempt to implement expensive technological innovations in the planned urban development. Masdar is one of the largest innovative urban technologies testbeds created from scratch mimicking utopian self-sufficient cities of the future.

3. NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL CAIRO, EGYPT

Description: Part of Egypt's Vision 2030, aimed at modernizing governance and decongesting Cairo. The NAC is planned to be built in stages across the space of 714 km2) with Phase 1 (2016 —), covering 167km2.

Reasons to study: Unlike many other projects of similar scale, NAC states the most pragmatic goals: to relocate government functions and create a state-of-the-art urban hub, to house 6.5 million people with smart infrastructure, and to stimulate economic growth and foreign investment in Egypt. The scale of the project, which is to become a home for millions of Egyptians, perform the functions of a capital, and include major skyscrapers, temples, parks and cultural institutions, make the NAC the most ambitious project on the continent and, despite all the difficulties, the most likely to succeed as a utopian project in Africa.

Timeline: Began in 2015, with initial phases operational by 2023. The launch of the project was accompanied by major difficulties with the first hired contractors from the UAE and China, which led to the need to attract more of our own construction resources for the construction of the city. At present, the first buildings have begun to be populated, a large number of federal bureaucratic functions have been transferred to new territories, and construction of a railway, cultural and business districts is underway.

Ideology and utopian core: NAC is a new city with a clear vision of order. It is designed to resolve Cairo's overcrowding and inefficiencies. It is based on technological innovations and is positioned as a smart city that features AI integration, high-speed transport, and digitized services in its core. It is also set to become a symbol of contemporary Egypt: a modern, progressive country that can achieve great success on par with such wonders of the past as the Pyramids or the Suez Canal.

4. NEOM, SAUDI ARABIA

Description: NEOM is a \$500B flagship project of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aimed at creating a futuristic, sustainable mega-city in the desert. Encompassing 26,500 km² in the Tabuk region, NEOM is designed to incorporate advanced technologies, renewable energy, and innovative urban planning, including revolutionary concepts such as The Line — a linear city without roads or cars.

Reasons to study: NEOM stands out as one of the most ambitious urban development projects in the history of humanity, re-imagining city living through its unprecedented scale, linear design, advanced green energy infrastructure, and integration of artificial intelligence. At its core, NEOM prioritizes sustainability, incorporating wind, solar, and hydrogen energy, and offers a compelling case for examining the potential of renewable energy in urban ecosystems. Moreover, as a central component of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, NEOM exemplifies the interplay of mega projects with economic diversification, geopolitical branding, and innovation-driven tourism, providing valuable insights into the socio-economic and political dimensions of large-scale urban initiatives.

Timeline: NEOM was announced in 2017 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, with groundbreaking beginning in 2019. Key components such as The Line, Oxagon, Magna and Trojena were unveiled between 2021 and 2023. The first phase of The Line is expected to be completed by 2030, with the full realization of NEOM projected by 2045.

Ideology and utopian core: NEOM is announced as a hub for cutting-edge technology, renewable energy, and a post-carbon lifestyle, aspiring to redefine urban living. Its emphasis on walkability, car-free living, and integration of nature into urban spaces embodies a futuristic utopian ideal.



Figure 3: Forest City. Mohd Rasfan/AFP via GettyImages

CASE STUDY 1. FOREST CITY, MALAYSIA

Forest City, a mega-project located in Iskandar Puteri, Johor, Malaysia, was officially launched in 2016 by Country Garden Holdings, one of China's largest property developers, in partnership with the Malaysian-government-backed Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd. Spanning four reclaimed islands, it aims to house up to 700,000 residents with smart, sustainable infrastructure, marking one of the world's most ambitious urban development efforts¹. However, as of late 2023, the project has faced significant challenges, leading to its characterization as a "ghost town."²

Project Background and Vision

Origins

The project was initiated by the Sultan of Johor, who played a pivotal role in fast-tracking its approval and directly invested in the development. Its strategic location near Singapore leveraged economic opportunities from the affluent neighbor while targeting Chinese investors amidst a cooling property market in China.³

Forest City was designed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — a global strategy aimed at infrastructure development and strengthening connections between Asia, Europe, and Africa. The project was positioned as a symbol of international cooperation and economic integration. Within the framework of BRI, Forest City became not only an investment project but also a platform to showcase advanced urbanization technologies and sustainable development practices.⁴

Vision

The vision for Forest City encapsulates an ambitious plan to create a sustainable, technologically advanced urban environment that serves as a model for future developments. By prioritizing eco-friendly practices, smart technologies, economic diversification, cultural integration, and tourism development, Forest City aims to establish itself as a leading urban center in Southeast Asia.

The main features of this vision are:

• Orientation towards the international elite. The project is aimed at attracting wealthy foreign buyers, especially from China and Singapore. Housing prices in Forest City are not affordable for most residents of Johor, basic studios are sold for 500,000 ringgit, while the average salary in Malaysia is about 55,000 ringgit.⁵

• Luxury and exclusivity. The project offers a wide range of «first-class» amenities and services, including shopping malls, schools, hospitals, golf courses, yacht clubs, as well as smart technologies and security systems. Promotional materials highlight the luxurious lifestyle that will be available to Forest City residents.

• A «green» and eco-friendly city. Despite the controversial actions at the initial stage, Forest City is presented in promotional materials as an «island oasis that grows organically.» The developer promises to use «sustainable and renewable energy infrastructure», create «sustainable green urbanism» and take care of the conservation of seagrasses, wetlands and mangroves.

• Integration into the regional and global economy. Forest City is positioned as a key element in the development of the Iskandar region in Malaysia, which is designed to become an «international metropolis». The project aims to attract investment, create jobs and strengthen ties between Malaysia and Singapore.

YEAR	2016 - ongoing
INVESTMENTS	USD 100 Bn
LOCATION	Iskandar Puteri, Johor, Malaysia
DEVELOPER	Country Garden
AUTHOR OF CONCEPT	Sasaki
KEY STAKEHOLDERS	Sultan of Johor, Federal Government of Malaysia, Local authorities and communities, Country Garden
INVESTORS	Country Garden Holdings Ltd. (China), GG56 Korea Ltd (Korea), Kumpulan Prasarana Rakyat Johor (KPRJ) (Malay- sia), Various Chinese and international buyers
POPULATION (PLAN)	Up to 700,000 residents
AREA	30 Square kilometers

Figure 4: Forest City Key Information

OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

For the purpose of this joint venture, Country Garden Pacific View (CGPV) Sdn Bhd was formed as the vehicle to make Forest City a reality. CGPV is 66% owned by the China-based giant through Malaysian registered subsidiaries Country Garden Waterfront Sdn Bhd, Country Garden Danga Bay Sdn Bhd and Country Garden Real Estate Sdn Bhd.

The state government's share of the project, or more specifically KPRJ, is purportedly through Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, which holds a 34 % stake in CGPV. However, upon closer scrutiny of Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, Malaysiakini found KPRJ only holds a meagre 20 % stake in the company that supposedly represents the state government's one-third interest in Forest City.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The Sultan of Johor is one of Malaysia's nine traditional monarchs, each serving as a steward of Islam within their respective states. Although these Sultans are constitutional monarchs with no direct role in governance, they hold limited discretionary powers. Despite their official role as figureheads, they wield significant influence and frequently engage in the political and economic affairs of their regions. At the federal level, the Prime Minister and his cabinet make executive decisions. Chief Ministers, or menteris besar in Malay, hold executive power at the state level.⁶

In theory, the Sultans in Malaysia function primarily as symbolic figureheads. In practice, however, they continue to wield significant influence over the economic and political matters within their respective states. For instance, in several states, including Johor, the Chief Ministers are appointed directly by the Sultan.⁷



Figure 5: A model of Forest City. Marielle Descalsota/Insider

ROLE OF THE SULTAN

The Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim Ismail (ascended the throne after his father's death in 2010) has been particularly active in business⁸, strategically positioning himself in deals worth billions of dollars. His involvement in economic ventures includes inviting major developers to invest in the state. Following the initial success of a real estate project in Danga Bay, the Chinese developer Country Garden committed to a second major project in Johor. Media reports indicate that the Sultan personally invited the company to undertake this new development.

Under the Iskandar masterplan, formulated by the Iskandar Regional Development Authority (IRDA), the southeastern part of Johor was prioritized for development and investment. Concerned about regional imbalances, the Sultan advocated for development on the underutilized southwestern coast. His efforts convinced investors to focus on a marine site in that neglected area, helping to drive more equitable development across the state.

The Sultan of Johor acquired a significant personal stake in the \$121 billion project, utilizing a combination of direct ownership and investments managed through a close associate. It is believed that he sought to expedite the initial approval process to ensure the project progressed swiftly. Meanwhile, Kayson Yuen, Country Garden's regional president for Malaysia, emphasized that the company thoroughly examined the feasibility of the venture for over a year before making the decision to proceed with their investment.

The Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim Ismail, has played a significant and multifaceted role in the development and implementation of the Forest City project. As a key stakeholder and influential figure in Malaysian politics and business, his involvement has shaped both the project's trajectory and its reception among local communities and foreign investors.

1. Joint Venture Partner

Forest City is a joint venture primarily between Country Garden Holdings, a major Chinese real estate developer, and a Malaysian entity linked to the Johor royal family. The project is operated through Country Garden Pacificview Sdn Bhd (CGPV), where the Sultan holds a substantial stake. Specifically, he is reported to control approximately 64.4 % of Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd, which represents the Johor state's interest in the project. This ownership structure effectively positions him as a co-developer alongside Country Garden, giving him significant influence over project decisions.

PROJECT TIMELINE

WORLDWIDE PROCESSES	Recovery from the 2008 crisis	The growth of global markets	Chinese economic slowdown				
CHINESE POLITICS	Acti	ve growth of the	development se	ctor	Xi J	linping decided	
MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT		Mahathir bin Mohamad					
JOHOR GOVERNMENT			lbrahim (2010	n Ismail -now)			
PROJECT TIMELINE	The idea of the project: In 2013, preliminary discussions and conceptual design of Forest City began, which was to become part of a broader initiative to develop the Iskandar region in Malaysia.	Agreement signing: In 2014, a joint venture agreement was signed between the Chinese Country Gar- den company and Malaysian partners to implement the project. Start of environmen- tal impact assessment.	Marketing launch: The start of active marketing of the project aimed at attracting investors, especially from China. The project was positioned as a "smart city" with high living standards.	Official launch: In March 2016, the official launch of Forest City took place with the announce- ment of plans to create four artifi- cial islands covering an area of about 30 square kilometers. The project was present- ed as one of the largest in the region.	Chinese restrictions: Construction work has begun on the first two islands. How- ever, in the same year, the Chinese government imposed restrictions on invest- ment abroad, which nega- tively affect- ed demand from Chinese buyers.	Sales problems: Declining interest from foreign investors and the lack of significant demand for housing have led to sales prob- lems. The population level re- mained low.	
-	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	

Figure 7: Forest City Project Timeline

2. Advocate for Economic Development

Sultan Ibrahim has consistently promoted Forest City as a vital economic engine for Johor. He has argued that the project will generate substantial revenue for the state government, which can then be reinvested into public services and infrastructure. His advocacy for the project aligns with broader efforts to enhance Johor's economic profile, particularly in attracting foreign investment.

3. Political Influence and Governance

As a prominent figure in Malaysian politics, Sultan Ibrahim's influence extends beyond business interests. He has been involved in discussions surrounding policy changes that could benefit the Forest City project, including advocating for more favorable conditions for foreign investors. His relationship with political leaders, including Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, is crucial for navigating regulatory frameworks that impact the project's viability.

4. Response to Criticism

The Sultan has defended Forest City against criticism from various quarters, including former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who raised concerns about foreign ownership and potential citizenship for Chinese buyers. Sultan Ibrahim has publicly countered these claims by emphasizing that the project is designed to boost local economies rather than undermine them. His defense of the project showcases his commitment to its success despite political challenges.

Global economic slowdown

COVID-19

to impose an annual foreign spending limit of \$50,000 for all Chinese citizens

Mahathir bin Mohamad (2018-2020)		lsmail Sabri Yaakob (2020-2022)		Anwar Ibrahim (2022- now)	
		lbrahin (2010	n Ismail -now)		
Environmen- tal protests: Local resi- dents began protesting against the environmen- tal conse- quences of the project It is estimated that about 15,000 apart- ments have been sold	COVID-19 pandemic: The pandemic has had a significant impact on construction work and sales. Border closures and travel restrictions have reduced interest from foreign buyers.	Price reduction: Developers have started lowering property prices in an attempt to attract buyers. This was also accompanied by improved marketing strategies for local residents.	New initiatives: In response to the low population level, new initiatives have been proposed to attract local investors and create social infrastructure such as schools and medical facilities.	Special Financial Zone: In August 2023, the Malaysian government declared Forest City a Special Financial Zone (SFZ), offering tax incentives to attract foreign investment. This event was an important step towards the revitalization of the project	Development plans: Further infrastructure development and improve- ment of con- ditions for lo- cal residents are expected. Efforts are continuing to attract investment and increase the level of occupancy.
2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024

5. Navigating Local Sentiment

While Sultan Ibrahim has championed Forest City, he also faces pushback from local communities concerned about environmental impacts and social displacement due to large-scale development. The Sultan's role includes addressing these concerns by promoting dialogue between developers and local residents to ensure that community interests are considered in ongoing development plans.

6. Recent Developments

In recent years, Sultan Ibrahim's involvement has taken on new dimensions as the Malaysian government designated Forest City as a Special Financial Zone in 2023. This designation aims to revitalize interest in the project by offering tax incentives and easing restrictions on foreign buyers — moves that align with Sultan Ibrahim's vision of making Johor a hub for international investment.

ROLE OF MALAYSIAN PRIME MINISTERS

Malaysian prime ministers, starting from Najib Razak and ending with Anwar Ibrahim, have played key roles in the development and fate of this mega-project.

1. Najib Razak (2013–2018)

Project Launch: Under Prime Minister Najib Razak, Forest City was introduced as an ambitious project aimed at attracting Chinese investments. Najib actively supported foreign investments as a means to stimulate economic growth and create jobs.

Support for Chinese Investments: During this period, the Malaysian government sought to strengthen ties with China, which increased interest in the project from Chinese buyers. Najib emphasized the importance of Forest City as part of a broader strategy to attract foreign investments.

Criticism and Environmental Issues: Despite initial support, the project faced criticism due to environmental consequences such as the destruction of mangrove forests and impacts on local fisheries. Nevertheless, the government continued to back the project.

2. Mahathir Mohamad (2018–2020)

Change of Course: After returning to power in 2018, Mahathir Mohamad sharply changed his stance on Chinese investments and the Forest City project. He expressed concerns about potential foreign influence on national sovereignty and announced a ban on property purchases by foreigners.

Political Instability: These statements caused panic among investors and negatively affected sales. Mahathir also criticized other Chinese projects, leading to a decline in confidence in foreign investments overall.

Difficulties for Developers: As a result of his policies, developers faced legal and financial challenges, putting the future of Forest City at risk.

3. Muhyiddin Yassin (2020–2021)

Stabilization Attempts: Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin came to power during a period of political instability and sought to restore confidence in foreign investments. However, his government faced the repercussions of previous restrictions on property purchases by foreigners.

Economic Support: Muhyiddin supported the idea of attracting foreign investments to recover the economy after the COVID-19 pandemic, but specific actions to improve the situation with Forest City were not taken.

4. Anwar Ibrahim (2022-Present)

Renewed Interest: Anwar Ibrahim, who became prime minister at the end of 2022, initiated new measures to revive interest in Forest City. In 2023, he announced the establishment of a special financial zone for Forest City aimed at attracting foreign investments and improving the economic situation in the region.

Tax Incentives: As part of this new policy, tax incentives were offered to companies that would operate within the special financial zone, which is expected to help attract businesses and increase employment levels.

Support for Local Communities: Anwar also emphasized the need to consider local residents' interests in project implementations, which could help improve public perception of Forest City.

The role of Malaysian prime ministers in the fate of the Forest City project has been multifaceted and has changed according to political situations and economic conditions. From supporting foreign investments under Najib Razak to criticism and restrictions under Mahathir Mohamad, followed by attempts to renew interest under Anwar Ibrahim — each administration has left its mark on the development of this ambitious mega-project. The prospects for Forest City now depend on the current government's ability to balance the interests of foreign investors with those of local communities.

ROLE OF OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The management of the project is carried out through a joint venture between the Chinese company Country Garden and the Malaysian company Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd (EDSB).

Country Garden Group: The primary developer of the project, Country Garden Holdings, is responsible for investments, construction, and overall project management. The company is actively involved in designing and executing all phases of the Forest City development.

Esplanade Danga 88 Sdn Bhd (EDSB): This Malaysian company, supported by the government, plays a crucial role in obtaining permits, interacting with local authorities, and managing public relations. EDSB also ensures compliance with local regulations and standards.

Planning: The project was planned with the involvement of various consulting firms. For example, Sasaki Associates handled urban planning, while McKinsey & Company conducted strategic analysis. Arup was responsible for researching transportation strategies.

Design: Guangdong Boyi Architectural Design Institute Co., Ltd. developed architectural solutions for the project, including creating unique elements such as vertical greenery and integrating natural landscapes.

CURRENT STATUS

Occupancy and Development Progress

As of now, it is estimated that only about 1 % of the total development is inhabited, with approximately 15 % of the entire project completed⁹. This low occupancy rate has led to the nickname «ghost city,» highlighting the stark contrast between the project's ambitious goals and its current reality. The isolated location of Forest City, built on reclaimed islands and distanced from Johor Bahru, has discouraged potential residents and investors alike.

Financial Challenges

The financial health of Country Garden has been a critical factor influencing Forest City's status. The company has faced severe financial difficulties, accumulating nearly \$200 billion in debt. Reports indicate substantial losses for the company in 2023, raising concerns about its ability to continue funding ongoing projects, including Forest City¹⁰. The Chinese government's support for developers like Country Garden may play a crucial role in determining the future of such projects.

Government Initiatives and Special Financial Zone

In response to the challenges faced by Forest City, the Malaysian government has taken proactive steps to reposition the area as a hub for business and tourism. In August 2023, Forest City was designated as a Special Financial Zone (SFZ). This designation aims to attract foreign investments by offering incentives such as tax exemptions for family offices and other businesses^{11,12}. The Malaysian Budget 2025 has further outlined plans to transform Forest City into a duty-free zone, which is expected to boost tourism and retail activity significantly¹³.

CHALLENGES FACED

The Forest City project in Johor, Malaysia, has faced a multitude of challenges since its inception. These challenges encompass economic, environmental, and social dimensions, significantly impacting the project's viability and public perception. Here are the key challenges encountered during the realization of Forest City:

Economic Challenges

• Dependence on Foreign Buyers: The project heavily relied on affluent Chinese buyers for sales. Chinese residents were motivated to invest their savings in real estate because interest rates on bank deposits did not keep pace with inflation. This boom led to speculative investments as people bought real estate hoping for further price increases¹⁴. However, in early 2017, the Chinese government imposed strict capital controls that limited the ability of its citizens to invest abroad (annual foreign spending limit of \$50,000 for all Chinese citizens). The rapid rise in real estate prices in China, spurred by affordable loans and speculative investments, forced the government to take measures to cool the market This significantly reduced the pool of potential buyers and created uncertainty regarding future sales and project completion^{15,16}.

• **High Property Prices:** The starting price for properties in Forest City is around \$170,000 for small apartments, which is unaffordable for most Malaysians. This pricing strategy alienated local buyers and limited the market to wealthy foreign investors, leading to low occupancy rates¹⁷.

• **Financial Instability of Developers:** Country Garden, the developer of Forest City, has faced severe financial difficulties, including substantial debt and losses. These financial strains have raised concerns about the company's ability to continue funding the project and complete ongoing developments¹⁸.

• **Pandemic Impact:** The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges by disrupting construction schedules and limiting travel for potential buyers from China. This further diminished interest in the project and contributed to its ghost town status^{19,20}.

Environmental Concerns

• Lack of Environmental Impact Assessment: Construction began without a legally required Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA), leading to significant ecological damage. Pressure from Singapore and local protests led the Malaysia Department of the Environment to stop all work on the project. Country Garden was required to complete a Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) and substantially redesign and scale down its project. The overall development area was reduced by about 30%, cutting the project's gross development value by 25%²¹.

• **Destruction of Local Ecosystems:** The reclamation of land for Forest City has adversely affected local marine environments, particularly the Tanjung Kupang intertidal seagrass meadow, which is crucial for biodiversity. The construction activities have led to habitat destruction and increased pollution, further threatening local wildlife²². Forest City is partially built on reclaimed land from the Straits of Johor. Around 163 million cubic meters of sand were dumped into the ocean to build the city²³.

• **Pollution and Habitat Disruption:** The construction process has generated pollution that affects both air quality and local water bodies. This has raised concerns among local communities about their livelihoods and health due to disruptions caused by construction activities²⁴.

Social and Political Issues

• Local Community Discontent: Many residents have expressed dissatisfaction with the project, feeling excluded from decision-making processes that affect their lives. There are reports of villagers facing resettlement without adequate compensation or consultation, leading to a sense of alienation from the development²⁵. Country Garden spent \$25 million in compensation to some 250 fishermen for losses in their catches, according to a 2018 report from environmental site Mongabay²⁶.

• **Perception of Neocolonialism:** The project has been criticized as a form of neocolonialism, where foreign interests dominate local resources and economies. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has described growing Chinese investment in Malaysia as a «new version of colonialism,» reflecting concerns about sovereignty and local autonomy²⁷. By creating infrastructure projects like Forest City, China aims to foster economic ties that could translate into political leverage over host countries.

• **Geopolitical Tensions:** The scale and nature of the Forest City project have raised geopolitical concerns between Malaysia and Singapore. The reclamation works were perceived as a potential provocation that could upset regional relations²⁸.

Forest City, funded and managed by Chinese companies, is seen as a tool to expand China's influence in the region. The project provides China with a strategic foothold in the immediate vicinity of Singapore and promotes Chinese economic interests.

Forest City is conceived as an alternative to Singapore, which is of great value for business. China's investment in port infrastructure in Iskander Malaysia could undermine Singapore's role as a key transport hub in the long term²⁹.

• The varying position of the government: On the one hand, the Malaysian authorities, in an effort to attract investment and develop the country's economy, have granted the project unprecedented concessions and significant autonomy. This includes:

-- Permission to sell the property in full ownership (freehold), which is atypical for Malaysia, especially for foreign buyers.

- -- The creation of privatized security services and uncertainty about the applicable legal system.
- -- Lack of control by the Malaysian police, who are prohibited from entering the territory of Forest City³⁰.

The new prime minister openly criticized the project, calling it a «waste of money» and expressing intentions to ban foreigners from purchasing property in the city. He voiced concerns about an influx of Chinese residents and the potential negative impact on the local population.

Although Mahathir Mohamad was unable to fully implement his plans to restrict foreign involvement in Forest City³¹, his statements negatively affected the project's investment appeal.

With Anwar Ibrahim's rise to power in 2023, the Malaysian government has once again shown interest in the development of Forest City. In August 2023, the project was designated as a special financial zone to attract skilled foreign professionals.

Overall, the role of the federal and state governments in the development of Forest City demonstrates the complex interaction between local and national interests, as well as the influence of geopolitics on large-scale development projects.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The prospects for the Forest City project remain uncertain, despite some signs of potential revival. On the one hand, the project faced several serious problems that led to its actual failure: restrictions on the export of capital from China, political instability in Malaysia, the COVID-19 pandemic and the negative reputation of the «ghost town». On the other hand, some factors can contribute to the revival of the project:

Country Garden Holdings continues to maintain the Forest City infrastructure in working order.

The new Malaysian government, led by Anuar Ibrahim, is taking a more positive approach to Forest City, declaring it a special financial zone to attract foreign specialists.

Sultan Ibrahim Ismail initially supported the project, which may have a positive impact in the future.

The success of Forest City will depend on several key factors:

• Attracting investments: It is necessary to find new investors willing to invest in the project's development, given its problematic past.

• Attracting residents: Forest City needs a significant influx of residents to get rid of its reputation as a «ghost town» and become a truly vibrant and functional city. Focus: There is a potential pivot towards attracting more local buyers rather than relying solely on foreign investments. This strategy could help mitigate some of the backlash against perceived neocolonialism while fostering greater community engagement with the development

• **Political stability:** Further development of the project is impossible without political stability in Malaysia and support from the Government.

• **Economic situation:** The global economic situation and the situation in China will also affect the prospects of Forest City, especially given its dependence on Chinese investors.

CONCLUSION

Forest City represents a bold vision for urban development in Malaysia but faces significant hurdles in achieving its goals. While the project was initially positioned as a model for sustainable living and economic growth, it has encountered severe challenges that have hindered its progress. Political decisions and changes in both China and Malaysia were the key factors that led to the failure of Forest City. Restrictions on investments, political instability and negative statements by politicians have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and risk, alienating investors and turning an ambitious project into a «ghost town»

Moving forward, the success of Forest City will depend on effective management strategies that address environmental concerns while fostering economic growth through targeted investments and infrastructure improvements. As stakeholders continue to navigate these complexities, the future of this ambitious mega-project remains uncertain yet pivotal for Malaysia's economic landscape.

The Forest City project is a prime example of China's growing influence in Southeast Asia. It creates both opportunities for economic development and challenges for regional stability and interstate relations. The further development of the project and its impact on the geopolitical situation in the region require careful observation.

FOOTNOTES

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Figure 8: New Administrative Capital in Cairo under construction, 20 March 2024. Shutterstock via Katiekk

CASE STUDY 2. NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL CAIRO, EGYPT

The New Administrative Capital (NAC) of Egypt is a monumental mega project initiated by the government under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, with the aim of alleviating the chronic overcrowding and infrastructural strain experienced in Cairo. Launched in 2016, this ambitious urban development project is positioned approximately 45 kilometers east of Cairo and is designed to host government ministries, embassies, and residential areas for an estimated population of 6.5 million people¹.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The Egyptian model of governance combines elements of a presidential republic with a strong head of state and a well-developed bureaucratic apparatus. The main governmental institutions comprise the President, the Government (Cabinet of Ministers), Parliament (House of Representatives), the judiciary, and local administrative authorities (governorates). In addition, the security services (armed forces, police, and state security agencies) serve as a further pillar of power.

President

Incumbent: Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who assumed office on June 8, 2014.

- **Commander-in-Chief and chief political figure:** The President occupies a pivotal position in the political system, acting both as the head of state and the supreme commander of the armed forces².
- **Appointment and dismissal of government:** He appoints the Prime Minister and the cabinet ministers and holds the authority to dismiss the cabinet.
- **Strategic agenda-setting:** He determines the country's domestic and foreign policy priorities and oversees national security and defense matters.
- **Influence on legislation:** The President wields veto power over legislation and may introduce proposals via the Government. In certain circumstances, he can issue decrees with the force of law (e.g., when Parliament is dissolved)³.

The President holds the most influential office, concentrating extensive executive, defense, and high-level appointment powers, as well as strategic planning functions. His influence extends well beyond mere formality, exerting direct impact on all branches of government^{4,5,6}.

YEAR	2015 - 2030			
INVESTMENTS	USD 59 Bn			
LOCATION	45 kilometers east of Cairo, Egypt			
DEVELOPER	Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD)			
AUTHOR OF CONCEPT	Dar Al-Handasah, SOM, HOK, Perkins & Will			
KEY STAKEHOLDERS	Government of Egypt Egyptian Armed Forces Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD) International Contractors (e.g., China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), Siemens, Emaar, etc.) Local Developers and Construction Companies (e.g., Ta- laat Moustafa Group, Orascom, The Arab Contractors, Palm Hills, etc.) Private and State Investors (e.g., The Sovereign Fund of Egypt (TSFE), China Fortune Land Development, Gulf funds such as ADQ, Mubadala, etc.) Local Population and Future Residents Civil Society and Urban Ecology Experts			
INVESTORS	Egyptian Government China State Construction Engineering Corporation United Arab Emirates (UAE): - Gulf Investment Corporation - Abu Dhabi Developmental Holding Company German Financial Institutions African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) Private Investors from Egypt International Financial Institutions: - European Investment Bank - European Bank for Reconstruction and Develop- ment			
POPULATION (PLAN)	up to 6 500 000 residents (and 2 million job opportuni- ties)			
AREA	750 Square kilometers			

Figure 10: New Administrative Capital Cairo Key Information

Government (Cabinet of Ministers)

Prime Minister: Mostafa Madbouly, in office since June 14, 2018.

- **Primary functions:** The Government manages the nation's day-to-day affairs, devises and implements public policy, and coordinates the activities of various ministries and agencies.
- Number of ministers: Approximately 32 (as of 2023–2024)^{7,8}.
- Accountability to Parliament: Formally, the Government is accountable to the House of Representatives, which may pass a vote of no confidence in individual ministers or the entire cabinet^{9,10}. In practice, however, the President exerts decisive influence over the cabinet's composition and direction.
- **Budget implementation:** The Government drafts and executes the budget approved by Parliament. Individual ministries handle economic and social planning, as well as other pivotal spheres of state activity¹¹.

The Government is the executive mechanism for both presidential directives and legislative acts. The Prime Minister and ministers largely depend on presidential support and have limited autonomy in making major policy decisions¹².

Parliament (House of Representatives)

- **Legislative body:** Its functions include drafting and passing legislation, amending existing laws, and approving the state budget^{13,14}.
- Speaker of Parliament: Dr. Hanafy Ali El-Gebali, elected on January 12, 2021.
- Number of members: 596, elected through universal direct suffrage¹⁵.
- **Oversight of Government:** Members may launch parliamentary inquiries, summon ministers to testify, and pass motions of no confidence. Parliament's authority to approve the budget provides it with key levers of influence over cabinet policy^{16,17}.
- **Practical constraints:** Although, constitutionally, Parliament can counterbalance the executive branch, in reality it often aligns itself with the President and pro-presidential forces. The President holds the authority to dissolve Parliament under constitutionally defined conditions¹⁸.

Parliament formally exercises legislative and representative powers, overseeing the Government and ratifying the national budget. Nonetheless, when pro-presidential forces dominate the legislature, Parliament's tangible influence over the executive branch is frequently curtailed^{19,20}.

Judiciary

- Comprises general courts and the Supreme Constitutional Court, which reviews legislation for its constitutionality²¹.
- President of the Supreme Constitutional Court: Bolous Fahmy Eskandar²².
- Officially positioned as an independent branch, yet it often experiences executive influence in practice.

Local Administration (Governorates)

- The country is divided into 27 governorates (muhafazat), each led by a governor appointed by the President²³.
- Governors are responsible for implementing state policy at the local level, coordinating with local authorities, and overseeing various agencies within their jurisdictions.

Bureaucratic and Security Apparatus

- Egypt has a far-reaching bureaucratic structure that has its roots in the era of the monarchy and underwent transformations under Gamal Abdel Nasser²⁴.
- Security services (the military, police, and state security) play a significant role in political life and, by virtue of their loyalty to the President, reinforce a firmly centralized authority structure.

In summary, Egypt's governance system is characterized by a high degree of centralization, with the President occupying a dominant position. While Parliament and the judiciary hold constitutionally mandated checks and balances, they frequently operate in accordance with the policies advocated by the head of state and supported by the security apparatus²⁵.

The number of cabinet ministers, parliamentary seats, and certain other data points are accurate as of 2023–2024 and are subject to change depending on cabinet reshuffles and election outcomes.

The number of cabinet ministers, parliamentary seats, and certain other data points are accurate as of 2023–2024 and are subject to change depending on cabinet reshuffles and election outcomes.

PROJECT TIMELINE



Figure 11: New Administrative Capital Cairo Project Timeline

HOW THE IMAGE OF THE FUTURE APPEARED

The vision for the New Administrative Capital (NAC) was presented in 2015 at the Economic Forum in Sharm El Sheikh, when Egypt sought to attract foreign investments and demonstrate economic stability following the events of the Arab Spring and the 2011 Revolution²⁶. The revolution resulted in the downfall of Hosni Mubarak's regime and several years of political volatility, which in turn triggered an economic downturn and heightened domestic tensions.

The initiator of the project, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, announced plans for the new capital in 2015 in an effort to bolster confidence in the country's new leadership — both domestically and abroad²⁷. Below are the principal objectives and the context under which this large-scale megaproject was proposed.

Global economic slowdown

In 2019, al-Sisi initiated

changes to the constitution

that allowed him to extend his

term of office from four to six

years, and also provided the opportunity to run for a new

term in 2024. These changes

were approved in a referendum,

which strengthened his power

continuation of major projects

and provided stability for the

such as the NAC

COVID-19

In 2021, **al-Sisi** made significant changes to the composition of the government, appointing new ministers in key areas such as defense and finance. This change was aimed at improving governance and accelerating the implementation of economic reforms, including the New Administrative Capital project Geopolitical instability

Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was elected President of Egypt for the third time in elections held from December 10 to 12, 2023. His victory was predictable, and he received 89.6% of the vote.

First significant buildings: The first sig- nificant build- ings were completed, including the largest ca- thedral in the Middle East, the Cathedral of the Na- tivity, which opened in 2019. This event sym- bolized am- bitious plans to create a new cultural and adminis- trative center	Construction Continued: Construction continued, but the project faced delays due to economic hardship and the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted the work schedule	Relocation of government offices: Relocation of some government offices to the new capital began, although most staff continued to live in Cairo due to high housing costs in NAC	New initiatives: In response to the low population level, new initiatives have been proposed to attract local investors and create social infrastructure such as schools and medical facilities.	Opening of significant facilities: Opening of the Egyptian Grand Mosque, which has become one of the largest mosques on the continent, and further development of cultural facilities such as the Center for Arts and Culture	Expected completion of the first phase: The first phase of construction is expected to be completed, with more than 10,000 families expected to move into the new capital city by the end of the year. The second phase of construction is also scheduled to begin, which will include further development of residential and commercial areas.
2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024

1. Political-Economic Context (2011–2015)

In the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution and subsequent power shifts, Egypt experienced economic instability, clashes among various political factions, and a decline in investment, particularly in the tourism sector²⁸. The change in presidency in 2013 (from Mohamed Morsi to Abdel Fattah El-Sisi) was accompanied by heightened internal discord. The new administration sought to showcase its capability for strategic planning and long-term projects that could attract foreign capital.

2. Primary Goals of the Project

 Reducing Overcrowding in Cairo: By 2015, the capital was struggling with excessive population density and aging infrastructure. Relocating government agencies to the new city aimed to alleviate pressure on the historic center²⁹.

- **Modernizing Public Administration:** Establishing a «government quarter» equipped with contemporary technologies was intended to enhance efficiency and transparency within ministries and state agencies.
- **Shaping a «New Egypt»:** President El-Sisi sought to demonstrate Egypt's capacity to surmount postrevolutionary turbulence and undertake large-scale innovative ventures indicative of both economic and technological advancement³⁰.
- Attracting Investment: Presented at the 2015 Economic Forum (March), the project symbolized openness to global collaboration, especially with the Gulf states and China.
- **Job Creation**: It was anticipated that massive urban and infrastructural development would generate new jobs, stimulate the construction sector and related industries, and thereby help reduce social tension³¹.

3. Who Proposed It and How

President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi publicly outlined the concept during the presentation of strategic projects at the 2015 Forum in Sharm El Sheikh, emphasizing the need for a new administrative hub under conditions of socioeconomic restructuring. The Ministry of Housing, the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, and international consultants specializing in urban planning and infrastructure were all involved in formulating the concept. Support was provided by Egyptian state funds and foreign investors (China, the UAE, Saudi Arabia), who identified opportunities in real estate, infrastructure, and Egypt's international positioning³².

Hence, the New Administrative Capital was proposed at a juncture when Egypt was grappling with the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution and in need of a symbol of economic recovery and political stability. The country's leadership aimed to resolve Cairo's overpopulation issues, modernize governmental administration, and fortify Egypt's global image as an appealing destination for long-term investment.

HOW THE VISION GAINED A PROJECT FRAMEWORK

The New Administrative Capital (NAC) was initially announced as a strategic concept aimed at alleviating overcrowding in Cairo and showcasing the economic potential of modern Egypt. However, moving from a broad concept to a realized project required detailed work on architectural, infrastructure, and financial solutions, as well as the creation of a legal «superstructure» to ensure the initiative's long-term implementation^{33,34}.



Figure 12: Aerial view of construction development at Egypt's «New Administrative Capital». March 13, 2020

1. Formulating the Project Concept

Coordinating Relevant Agencies

Following the public announcement of the idea in 2015 by the Egyptian government and President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the following entities were quickly mobilized to refine the concept:

- The Ministry of Housing in Egypt
- The Armed Forces Engineering Authority
- Economic and legal advisors (including state funds and state-owned banks such as the National Bank of Egypt)

Master Plan and Urban Planning Studies

- Dar Al-Handasah and other international consultants (AECOM, several European firms) prepared urban planning schemes, identifying zoning guidelines while accounting for future infrastructure needs (energy supply, water supply, transportation corridors, etc.).
- Expert teams from Siemens, Schneider Electric, and other corporations advised on «smart city» implementation and digital services.

Investment Model

- State funds such as The Sovereign Fund of Egypt (TSFE) and foreign partners participated in creating financing mechanisms³⁵.
- A major step involved establishing the Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD), founded by the Ministry of Housing and the Egyptian Armed Forces, to attract investments and oversee project progress.

2. Evolving into a Mega Project

• Establishing a Management Structure

• The **ACUD** company was granted authority to coordinate construction and operational aspects of the future city, as well as access to state land and resources³⁶.

Implementation Phases

- The initial phase involves constructing a «government district,» where ministry buildings, Parliament, and the Presidential Palace are being built.
- Large Egyptian construction firms (The Arab Contractors, Orascom Construction) and international contractors (China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), Emaar) handle the bulk of infrastructure installation and major construction³⁷.

International Consortia

- CSCEC is building several landmark structures, including one of Africa's tallest skyscrapers (the lconic Tower) in the Central Business District (CBD)³⁸.
- Siemens and other European companies are contributing to the development of intelligent citymanagement systems (energy, transport, communications) and the creation of new modes of public transportation (LRT, monorail in partnership with Alstom, Bombardier/Hitachi Rail, Orascom Construction).

3. What the Project Ultimately Encompasses

A Governmental Heart

The plan is for key state institutions (ministries, Parliament, the central bank, etc.) to relocate to the new capital. The Arab Contractors and Orascom Construction are responsible for much of the construction in the administrative cluster³⁹.

Modern Infrastructure

- Expansive roads and transport interchanges are being designed jointly by Egyptian and international engineers.
- Siemens, Schneider Electric, Hassan Allam Holding, among others, supply energy and water solutions, and implement automation systems^{40,41}.

A Multifunctional Megacomplex

- Residential districts and commercial areas are being developed by Talaat Moustafa Group, Palm Hills, and Middle Eastern developers (for instance, Emaar).
- Business parks, shopping centers, educational institutions (schools, universities), healthcare facilities, and recreational parks are being constructed⁴².

• Strategic Hub and Image

- The project serves as a showcase of how Egyptian authorities envisage future urban development: a «smart city» featuring cutting-edge technologies, an innovative transport system, and digital public services⁴³.
- By designating special zones for international business centers, the NAC aims to attract global corporations; foreign funds (ADQ, Mubadala, the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia) are actively considering investment opportunities^{44,45}.

Thus, the original vision—»to move part of the capital's functions outside overburdened Cairo and create a symbol of the new Egypt»—has taken shape as a major infrastructure megaproject4. It is based on a well-defined organizational model (ACUD), government funding and private investments (including CSCEC, The Arab Contractors, Orascom, and Gulf funds), as well as international partnerships^{46,47}. The main ambition is to make the New Administrative Capital a model of a modern, technologically advanced environment that will serve as both an administrative center and a «city of the future» for residents and businesses alike.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

The creation of the New Administrative Capital (NEC) has become one of the most notable examples of largescale projects affecting the political, social and economic spheres of Egyptian life. Below are the main areas in which the implementation of the megaproject has affected Egyptian society:

1. Shifting Focus Away from Historic Cairo

Originally, the government promoted the NAC as a project intended to ease overcrowding in Cairo and address the city's infrastructural challenges⁴⁸. However, some researchers argue that diverting resources and attention to the new capital could lead to reduced interest in «Old Cairo,» particularly in terms of preserving its historical and cultural heritage⁴⁹.

2. New Infrastructure and Quality of Life

The development of modern roads, power grids, water supply systems, and the adoption of «smart city» technologies have generated new jobs, especially in the construction and IT sectors^{50,51}. Nevertheless, concerns persist that housing and service prices in the NAC will target middle- and upper-income groups, potentially making the city less accessible to lower-income residents2.

3. Economic Impact

In the short run, large-scale construction has provided a boost to the construction industry and banking sector (via loans and leasing) as well as to related fields⁵². Proponents of the NAC maintain that, in the long term, the new capital will attract additional foreign investment, expand the labor market, and serve as a catalyst for economic growth⁵³. However, skeptics point to the risk of the city remaining «underpopulated» if it lacks a well-designed urban environment capable of retaining residents and businesse^{s54}.

4. Social Tension and Equity Concerns

Certain experts note that the project predominantly serves the interests of the elite and major contractors, many of whom have ties to the security apparatus⁵⁵. Critics worry that prioritizing funding for the NAC diverts resources away from social programs in healthcare, education, and regional development⁵⁶. At the same time, part of the populace views the NAC as a symbol of modernization, lending support to the current administration by envisioning the new capital as Egypt's «future hub»⁵⁷.

5. Role of the State and National Image

The execution of this megaproject under a centrally organized and influential executive branch highlights the government's ability to marshal resources and manage extensive construction efforts effectively⁵⁸. On the global stage, Egypt projects an image of a country open to investment, with ambitious urban planning objectives⁵⁹.

6. Population Resettlement and Changes in Social Structure

The government is encouraging civil servants and the middle class to relocate to the NAC, which may eventually reshape the nation's socioeconomic landscape⁶⁰. However, questions remain regarding the new capital's accessibility for the broader public, as the cost of housing and living expenses there may be higher than many Egyptians can afford⁶¹.

In sum, the construction of the New Administrative Capital has had wide-ranging effects on Egyptian society. While it brings the promise of improved urban infrastructure, economic growth, and inflows of investment, it also raises debates on the equitable distribution of resources, national funding priorities, and the preservation of historical heritage. In large measure, the long-term outcomes will depend on the extent to which these ambitious plans for building a «city of the future» can be reconciled with the actual needs and means of the majority of the population.

HOW THE PROJECT HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME

Since its announcement by Egyptian authorities in the mid-2010s, the New Administrative Capital (NAC) project has undergone several stages of evolution. Initially, planners envisioned a «city of the future» where key government institutions and millions of residents would relocate in a short period. However, as implementation progressed, ambitious timelines and financial forecasts were adjusted, and the project itself gained additional layers of detail. Ultimately, some declared initiatives received added investment, certain infrastructure elements were completed as a priority, while other components — such as social facilities and housing for the broader population — remain under development or are being carried out in a more constrained format.

Alignment with Realistic Capabilities

According to the official NAC website, the overall budget is estimated at USD45–58 billion, a figure that is subject to ongoing revisions due to partnerships with foreign funds and contractors, mainly from China and Gulf countries⁶². The Egyptian government emphasizes that public funding is complemented by private investments, a combination that could theoretically enhance the project's long-term viability⁶³. Analyses by Bloomberg Middle East suggest, however, that a project of this scale is already placing substantial demands on infrastructure and requires regular reassessment of both timelines and financing models⁶⁴.

What Has Been Achieved

1. Relocation of Government Institutions

- By 2023, construction of several government buildings, including certain ministry headquarters and the Parliament, has been completed; some civil servants have already begun the relocation process⁶⁵.
- The presidential residence and principal ministry complexes are at the final finishing stage, with a gradual transition of personnel expected to extend over several years⁶⁶.

2. Central Business District (CBD)

- With the participation of Chinese corporations such as CSCEC, high-rise buildings are under construction in the CBD, including the Iconic Tower; some structures are already operational⁶⁷.
- The new business cluster aims to attract foreign corporations and serves as a showcase for Egypt's economic potential.

3. Infrastructure and a «Smart City» Approach

- The initial segments of the Light Rail Transit (LRT) system have already been launched, while monorail construction continues⁶⁸.
- Digital government services and municipal management systems are being introduced on a phased basis. Officials have stated that they plan to incorporate full-fledged «smart city» solutions at a later stage⁶⁹.

What Had to Be Abandoned or Significantly Modified

1. Timelines and Project Scope

- Initial plans called for a rapid transfer of most government institutions to the new capital and the creation of a fully functional living environment for millions of residents in a short time span. However, by 2023, it had become clear that the schedule would extend until the late 2020s, or possibly even 2030⁷⁰.

- Various infrastructure projects, particularly social facilities (hospitals, schools, affordable housing), have been slower to materialize, as the main focus shifted to administrative and commercial complexes⁷¹.

2. Housing Cost Policies

- Early plans included housing options at multiple price levels so that the NAC could become a «city for everyone.» In practice, the high cost of real estate has limited the ability of middle- and low-income groups to relocate⁷².
- As a result, developers are targeting more affluent buyers, and the vision of large-scale migration of the general population to the NAC remains questionable.

3. Occupancy Rates for Commercial Buildings

- While skyscrapers in the CBD are being built according to plan, their occupation by international firms has lagged behind initial projections, attributed to broader economic conditions and elevated rental prices⁷³.
- City authorities are seeking to introduce incentives and tax concessions to attract tenants more quickly and to consolidate the business cluster⁷⁴.

CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE PLANS

According to official government data, the administrative cluster (comprising ministries, Parliament, and the presidential residence) has reached an operational readiness stage or is already in use, with civil servants relocating in phases⁷⁵. Major commercial projects in the CBD have also been partially launched; however, the expansion of office space depends on the broader economic climate and investor interest⁷⁶.

Over the coming years, the government intends to broaden transport infrastructure by completing LRT lines and building a monorail, as well as to implement «smart» city-management solutions⁷⁷. It is important to note that timetables for bringing social facilities (schools, hospitals, recreational venues) online remain fluid, given that the primary emphasis is currently on administrative and commercial development⁷⁸.

In summary, while the New Administrative Capital still adheres in principle to its original concept as a hightech administrative and political hub, the timelines have been significantly extended, and many infrastructure plans undergo continuous revisions. Some of the anticipated social services and accessible housing options have been postponed to later phases. The main priority remains the administrative sector and attracting foreign investment, whereas large-scale population relocation and the full integration of comprehensive «smart» systems are expected to occur in forthcoming stages.

CONCLUSION

The governance structure of the New Administrative Capital (NAC) reflects Egypt's highly centralized political system, where executive power is heavily concentrated in the presidency. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, as the central figure, guides the strategic direction of the project, leveraging his extensive authority over the military, ministries, and security apparatus. The NAC is managed through the Administrative Capital for Urban Development (ACUD), a public-private partnership combining state resources, military oversight, and international investment. This governance framework ensures swift decision-making and aligns the NAC's development with Egypt's broader national agenda, including economic diversification and urban modernization, as part of Vision 2030.

This model significantly limits the civic engagement and reinforces a top-down approach to planning and implementation. The project's execution has been shaped by the strong role of the state and its alignment with Egypt's bureaucratic and security structures, which prioritize control and efficiency. The involvement of global contractors and financiers, including China State Construction Engineering Corporation and Gulf investors, underscores the NAC's dual role as a symbol of national prestige and a hub for international cooperation.

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Figure 13: Masdar City public space. Masdar City

CASE STUDY 3. MASDAR CITY, UAE

One of the most impactful and long-lasting flagship development projects conceived in the UAE¹ not long before the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Masdar City was thought of as a new golden standard for sustainable urban growth in harsh desert climates conditions. The project had to showcase the most advanced construction, energy and planning solutions that would make Masdar the first city to actually not produce any carbon emissions, the goal that had to be altered significantly in coming years. Masdar can also be considered a utopian attempt to adapt the principles of classical traditional regional architecture to modern challenges and using new technologies on a moderate scale of 6 km2 of new urban development.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) operates as a federal constitutional monarchy², comprising seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al-Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. Each emirate maintains a significant degree of autonomy, particularly concerning internal matters. However, the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, due to their economic and political weight, are significantly more influential in domestic and foreign policy than the other five³. At the same time, Abu Dhabi is de facto the capital emirate, and also receives the largest profit from the export of mineral resources⁴.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Supreme Council of Rulers

The Council includes the rulers of each of the seven emirates and serves as the highest policy-making body, responsible for electing the President and Vice President from among its members for renewable five-year terms⁵.

President: HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who assumed this position on the 14th of May, 2022

Acts as the head of state, presiding over the Supreme Council, directing its discussions, and overseeing the implementation of federal policies.Current officeholder, HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, is also the Ruler of Abu Dhabi and Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces⁶.

Vice President: HH Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who assumed office on the 29th of March, 2023

Assists the President and assumes presidential duties if the position becomes vacant until a new president is elected. Traditionally, the Ruler of Dubai has held this position however, Sheikh Mansour is a member of the ruling family of Abu Dhabi and is married to Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed Al Maktoum, daughter of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai.

YEAR	2006 - ongoing			
INVESTMENTS	USD 22 Bn (initial plan), USD 10 Bn (claimed)			
LOCATION	Masdar City, 17 km from Abu Dhabi downtown, UAE			
DEVELOPER	Masdar, a subsidiary of the state-owned Mubadala Invest- ment Company			
AUTHOR OF CONCEPT	Foster and Partners, The Mott MacDonald Group			
KEY STAKEHOLDERS	HH Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan Mubadala Investment Company Dr. Sultan Al Jaber (former CEO of Masdar) Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company (ADFEC) Mohamed Jameel Al Ramahi (CEO of Masdar) H.E. Abdulla Ahmed Balalaa (Chairman of Masdar City board) ASGC Construction (Dubai-based construction company) Jones Lang LaSalle real estate consultancy			
INVESTORS	Mubadala Development			
POPULATION (PLAN)	5,000+ (2024) and up to 10,000 workers, 40,000 residents (plan)			
AREA	6 Square kilometers			

Figure 14: Masdar City Key Information

Prime Minister: HH Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who assumed office on the 5th of January, 2006

Leads the Council of Ministers, overseeing the execution of federal laws, policies, and administrative affairs, presides over the Cabinet sessions and controls the overall coordination in between different ministries. Sheikh Mohammed is also the Ruler of Dubai⁷.

Federal National Council

A consultative council with 40 members; half are appointed by the rulers of the emirates, and half are elected by an electoral college. The Council reviews and provides recommendations on proposed federal legislation and policies but does not possess legislative veto power⁸.

ABU DHABI GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Abu Dhabi, the largest emirate, has its own local government, which operates alongside the federal system.

Ruler: His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who was enthroned on the 13th of May, 2022

HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, as a ruler of Abu Dhabi, serves as the absolute monarch of the emirate, holding executive authority over local matters.

Executive Council: Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed Al Nahyan

Chaired by the Crown Prince, it includes heads of key governmental departments and is responsible for formulating and implementing local policies, development plans, and public services⁹.

Evolution of Governance Over the Past 20 Years:

Over the past two decades, the UAE has undertaken several initiatives to enhance its governance structures:

Increased political participation

In 2006, the UAE introduced a limited electoral process for the FNC, allowing a select group of citizens to vote for half of the council's members. This move aimed to increase public participation in governance¹⁰.

Government Modernization

The UAE has implemented various e-government initiatives to improve public service delivery, transparency, and efficiency. Currently, the UAE Government operates under the Digital Government Strategy 2021–2025¹¹. This is just one of the programs operating in the country, along with others aimed at reducing bureaucratic burdens, exchanging international experience in public administration, and eliminating the exchange of paper documents¹².

Legal Reforms

The country has updated numerous laws to align with international standards, particularly in areas like investment, labor, and human rights, to foster economic growth and social development.

Economic Diversification

Abu Dhabi has introduced measures to simplify business processes, such as establishing the Abu Dhabi Registration Authority (ADRA) to centralize business registration, aiming to reduce dependence on oil and promote sectors like tourism, logistics, and manufacturing¹³.

HOW THE IMAGE OF THE FUTURE APPEARED

Origins

Masdar City, located in Abu Dhabi, is part of the broader Masdar Initiative, launched on April 23, 2006, by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. The name «Masdar,» meaning «the source» in Arabic, reflects its mission to drive the UAE's transition from reliance on oil and gas to a sustainable, diversified economy¹⁴. Masdar is wholly owned by Mubadala Investment Company, a state-owned enterprise established in 2017 through the merger of Mubadala Development Company and the International Petroleum Investment Company¹⁵. Before the merger, Mubadala Development Company, founded in 2002, served as Masdar's parent organization, tasked with advancing Abu Dhabi's economic diversification.

It is important to remember that Masdar City is just one component of the larger technology investment initiative, however it is the most visible and well-known part of it. The City was conceived as a testbed for new energy and construction technologies, planning solutions and a hub for the companies that would be driving Masdar and Masdar City in particular forwards. The ability to implement technological and architectural solutions «from scratch» as quickly as possible was supposed to create a large-scale testing ground for green technologies, strengthen the leadership of the companies participating in the project and the UAE in the field of green construction, develop technologies and, ultimately, lead to the formation of a global-scale technological and scientific hub in Abu Dhabi, an analogue of Silicon Valley^{16,17}.

1. Political-Economic Context (2002-2008)

The early 2000s can be considered a golden age for the UAE and Abu Dhabi. Fueled by high energy prices and a significant increase in foreign direct investment, the economy grew at a significantly higher rate than the world average. The rise to power of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed also contributed to the initiation of a number of major infrastructure projects, as well as the gradual liberalization of legislation, which spurred a construction boom in the country¹⁸. Mubadala Development Corporation was founded in 2002 and by 2006 Abu Dhabi introduced its Economic Vision 2030, outlining a roadmap for sustainable development and economic diversification¹⁹.

2. Primary Goals of the Project

- Economic Diversification: Masdar City aligns with Abu Dhabi's Economic Vision 2030 by reducing reliance on oil revenues and promoting knowledge-based industries. The city has generated employment in new industries, supporting long-term sustainable economic growth.

PROJECT TIMELINE

WORLDWIDE PROCESSES				Global financial crisis of 2008					
UAE GOVERNMENT	Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan								
PROJECT TIMELINE	Project initiated: Project conceived and initiated by the government of the UAE	University Launch: Masdar Institute of Science and Technol- ogy starts operating	First Construction: Masdar is set to be- come the first zero carbon entity and city	Masdar spearheaded the UAE's first renew- able energy policy in 2009					
GREEN GOALS	Zero-carbon and zero-v	vaste strategy, the first suc	ch entity globally						
l	2006	2007	2008	2009					

Figure 15: Masdar City Project Timeline

- Sustainability Leadership: Masdar City currently hosts over 1000 companies in sectors like green construction, mobility, and energy efficiency, attracting local and global startups and fostering entrepreneurship. In addition, Masdar City hosts the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), reinforcing the UAE's leadership in global renewable energy policy²⁰.

- Education and Innovation: The Masdar Institute of Science and Technology, now part of Khalifa University, plays a critical role in advancing education and research. The institute focuses on renewable energy, sustainability, and advanced materials, producing graduates equipped to drive innovation.

- Technological Testbed: Masdar City serves as a living laboratory for sustainable urban solutions. Innovative technologies reduce water consumption by 40%, recycling greywater for irrigation. Use of energy-efficient glass, sustainable concrete, and advanced insulation materials helps optimize resource use²¹. The city's Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system, though scaled back, was among the first autonomous electric vehicle systems tested globally²².

- Architectural Experiment: The city's architectural design blends ancient Arabic techniques (like wind towers) with cutting-edge green technologies to reduce heat gain and energy consumption²³. The Siemens headquarters and IRENA building showcase energy-efficient design, achieving LEED Platinum certification. In the course of the city's growth a rigorous proprietary building certification system has been developed, which even surpasses its European and American counterparts.

		COVID-19	Russia- Ukraine War				
(de-facto Ruler sin	Je-facto Ruler since 2014) Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan						
Masdar Reworked: New op- erational structure and business. Masdar City becomes a master de- veloper and integrator, not a project developer. Outsourcing and new partnerships instead of "self-develop and hold".	New Structure: Masdar has 4 main business units: Masdar Capital, Masdar City, Masdar Clean Energy, Masdar Special Projects, and MIST	Simplifying the Project: Only Masdar Clean Energy and Masdar City units remained.	New Ownership: New shareholding structure of Masdar	Attracting Capital: First \$750M green bond issued by Masdar	Second \$1 billion green bond issued by Masdar		
program established							
2010-2013	2014-2018	2019-2020	2022	2023	2024		

3. Who Proposed It and How

Officially, the idea for Masdar was proposed by Sheikh Mohammed in April 2006 to ensure diversification and long-term technological leadership for the UAE and Abu Dhabi in a post-oil future. According to some sources, the concept of a new city and industry technology hub was proposed to the ruling dynasty by unnamed engineers from Lebanon in the early 2000s. This idea received support from both the Crown Prince and the Sheikh, and was announced in 2006²⁴.

Vision

The city was initially conceived as a pioneering eco-city project aimed at demonstrating sustainable urban design and clean technology²⁵. Capital and technology attraction was expected to serve as an economic backbone for the project with the long-term goal stated as the "transition from a 20th Century, carbon-based economy into a 21st Century sustainable economy (Masdar, 2009, p. 1)²⁶". In other words, Masdar and Masdar City were expected to help the UAE with finding ways to transform oil wealth into renewable energy leadership. With an initial investment of \$22 billion, the ambitious plan sought to create a carbon-neutral, zero-waste city powered exclusively by renewable energy²⁷.

However, the 2008 global financial crisis and ongoing assessments led to scaled-back ambitions and altered development approaches²⁸. This has caused many of the plans for Masdar City to be changed multiple times leading to delays, budget revisions, and alterations to its ambitious original plans. Reports emerged worldwide detailing postponed construction phases, a re-evaluation of the \$22 billion budget, and modifications to key design elements. Masdar representatives acknowledged a shift to a more «pragmatic phase,» emphasizing the need for cautious feasibility studies and a thorough reassessment of the project's goals²⁹.

Construction on the Masdar Headquarters, designed by Chicago-based Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, was halted after the initial piling stage and subsequently postponed. Similarly, the winning design for Masdar City Centre by LAVA Architects was never implemented. The innovative Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system, developed by the Italian firm Systematica, faced potential limitations, with its use restricted to the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology (MIST) campus³⁰. This shift raised the likelihood of conventional internal transportation relying on combustion-engine vehicles, contrary to the project's original car-free vision.

Additional sustainability features also underwent significant changes. Plans for natural cooling towers were abandoned, as confirmed by Nawal Al-Hosany, former Associate Director of Sustainability at Masdar. Onsite windmills and the comprehensive installation of rooftop solar panels across the city were also scrapped. In October 2010, Alan Frost, then Director of Masdar, publicly acknowledged that the initial objective of generating all the city's energy onsite was under reconsideration. The timeline for full development of the city has been pushed out to at least 2030 and many of the original sustainability targets for the city have been reduced³².

The original vision and concept for Masdar City included a set of key elements:

• **Zero Carbon Vision.** Masdar City was planned to be the world's first carbon-neutral city, eliminating waste and relying entirely on renewable energy sources. The city was to be powered by solar energy, with the largest photovoltaic plant in the Middle East and extensive rooftop solar panels. Wind and geothermal power were also considered³³.

• **Innovative Transport Planning.** The initial design eliminated conventional cars. Instead, the city would feature a network of personal rapid transit (PRT) pods — autonomous electric vehicles running on a subterranean system of tracks. Pedestrian-Centric Design with narrow streets and shaded pathways would prioritize walkability and cycling, with wind towers for natural cooling. The ultimate goal was to create a car-free city.

• **Resource Efficiency.** Masdar planned to use desalinated water powered by renewable energy and integrate a sophisticated system for water recycling and efficient irrigation. The city aimed for zero waste by maximizing recycling, reusing materials, and composting³⁴.

• Innovation and Education Hub. The original concept involved developing a fully autonomous city on the Masdar site, with hundreds of companies and services operating there, forming the basis for permanent residence of over 40,000 residents. One of the functional cores of the project was the Masdar Institute of Science and Technology (MIST) developed in partnership with MIT this university was supposed to focus on renewable energy and sustainability research. In addition to that, a number of new business and technology clusters would emerge. The city was to become a hotspot for cleantech companies and startups that would foster innovation, with tax-free incentives to attract global firms³⁵.

An important detail of the project's evolution was also the gradual abandonment of the eco-cities rhetoric in favor of positioning Masdar City as one of the most advanced smart city cases in the world. This, to a certain extent, emphasizes the speculative nature of the positioning and information noise accompanying the implementation of such urban development projects³⁶.

OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Masdar City has gone through several changes in its governance structure. At its inception and in the early years of operation, the city had five autonomous units³⁷:

1. Carbon management unit

The department, whose area of responsibility included supporting projects and developing mechanisms to capture and store carbon

- 2. Industries unit
 - Photovoltaics and clean energy production
- 3. Masdar Institute of Science and Technology (MIST)

University created to provide new green energy and technologies industry with young personnel **4. Property development unit**

A unit responsible for Masdar City construction

5. Utilities and asset management unit

Develop a portfolio of renewable energy operating assets and strategic investments



Figure 16: Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum viewing model of Masdar City in 2016. Khaleej Times

The initially conceived management structure of the mega project, however, did not stand the test of time to the best degree. In addition to what is natural for an evolutionary developing project, some of the departments were gradually forced to change their areas of responsibility, reorient themselves to more promising areas of work. Over time, however, mergers and closures of some functional units began, and the structure of Masdar became simpler. For example, by 2014, the manufacturing company Masdar PV under the Industries unit that was tasked with developing new, more efficient solar panels had been closed³⁸. However, like many of the world's manufacturers, it was unable to withstand the pace of competition and progress imposed by Chinese manufacturers who were able to take over the industry. This was followed by a decision that Masdar should not compete in the industrial market with global giants, but concentrate on investment processes and the development of projects in the field of clean energy. The new structure was called Masdar Power, but by 2013 it was combined with Masdar Carbon in a new structure called Masdar Clean Energy³⁹.

More importantly, by 2010, Masdar City's operational role had been strategically rethought, with the business model changing from project management and development to master development and business integrator. From that point on, the city began to rely much more on outsourcing and building new partnerships than on developing and maintaining internal competencies⁴⁰. In other words, already in its fifth year of operation, the dream and vision of Masdar City as a full-fledged alternative to a scientific, technological and business cluster gave way to a much more pragmatic approach to attracting businesses and investments, as well as integrating technological competencies in the current interests of the UAE.

After some initial restructuring, by 2014 Masdar was organized into four primary business units: Masdar Capital, Masdar City, Masdar Clean Energy, and Masdar Special Projects, along with MIST⁴¹. However, by 2019, only the Masdar Clean Energy and Masdar City units were still operational, reflecting a streamlined approach from the original, more diverse and ambitious project management setup.

The mega project's ownership structure, on the contrary, has remained largely unchanged for most of its existence. The development of Masdar City was managed by Masdar, which in turn was controlled by the Mubadala investment fund, which in its own turn, is controlled by the government of Abu Dhabi. However, since 2022 Masdar's ownership structure was expanded to include three major UAE energy entities⁴²:

- Mubadala Investment Company: Continues to be a key shareholder, leveraging its diverse business portfolio to support renewable energy initiatives.
- Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC): Joined as a shareholder to contribute its expertise in the energy sector, supporting the UAE's transition toward sustainable energy solutions.
- Abu Dhabi National Energy Company PJSC (TAQA): Also became a shareholder, bringing its experience in utilities and energy to bolster Masdar's projects.

These changes, as well as the gradual reduction in the number of units included in Masdar City, indicate a gradual abandonment of the grand ambitions characteristic of the project in its early years, as well as a gradual honing of the commercial core of its activities. Now, green energy companies are at the core of Masdar and Masdar City consequentially.

HOW THE VISION GAINED A PROJECT FRAMEWORK

The UAE leadership, entirely within the framework of an absolute monarchy, traditionally implements large projects without open public debate. Thus, the details of the involvement of certain commercial contractors in the projects remain unclear. Also, due to the region's penchant for working with the largest and most reputable companies, it is not surprising that the architectural planning for the project was carried out by the Foster + Partners bureau⁴³, and the engineering work was undertaken by the Mott MacDonald Group⁴⁴ with a long history of work and presence in the UAE.

Also, unlike many other large mega projects being implemented in the Global South, the UAE is in a position where the state is able to independently provide funding for the mega project. With Masdar City, Mubadala has gained a tool to diversify its portfolio both through investments in sustainable technologies and urban development within the UAE and through building international commercial and technology partnerships abroad through Masdar Clean Energy division. The city has thus become a vehicle for the investment fund's financial activities⁴⁵.

1. Formulating the Project Concept

Coordinating Relevant Agencies

- At its inception, Masdar City was developed by Masdar, a subsidiary of Mubadala Investment Company, which is a state-owned enterprise of the Government of Abu Dhabi.
- The Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company (ADFEC), also a subsidiary of Mubadala, played a crucial role at the early stages of Masdar City development with a mandate to drive the initiative.
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT was brought into the project to form its own technology institute, MIST, which operated in Masdar City.

Master Plan and Urban Planning Studies

- The German/Australian-based LAVA Architects' winning design for the Masdar City Centre was initially chosen but got abandoned soon after the financial crisis of 2008⁴⁶.
- Foster+Partners architectural bureau. This renowned British architectural firm was commissioned to design Masdar City, bringing expertise in sustainable architecture and urban planning. Their master plan emphasized a compact, pedestrian-friendly cityscape, integrating traditional Arabic architectural elements with modern sustainable technologies to achieve a low-carbon footprint.

• Financing

- Abu-Dhabi government through Mubadala Group has financed the bulk of Masdar City development. Originally, a \$22 billion investment from Mubadala allowed to create Masdar Venture Capital, Masdar City, and Masdar Clean Energy, with a number of other subdivisions like Masdar Power or Masdar Carbon.
- Data from some sources suggests that the final funding for the project was significantly lower (~\$ 10 billion) than the initial estimate. Largely due to the simplification of engineering and technological solutions used in the construction of the city, as well as the abandonment of ambitions to create a zero-carbon urban environment, and a reduction in the number of departments and funds operating here.

• Engineering

Mott MacDonald Group was responsible for designing the city's infrastructure. Their role encompassed
planning and implementing sustainable systems for energy, water, and waste management,
ensuring the city's infrastructure met the ambitious environmental goals set by the project.

2. Evolving into a Mega Project

Masdar City is currently home to over 1,000 companies, including many in the Fortune 500. Overall, Masdar has played an important role in the development and diversification of the UAE's and Abu Dhabi's business ecosystem, although the final impact of the mega project has not been as significant as originally planned.

• Major Residents⁴⁷

 MIST (now part of Khalifa University): a university founded as part of the Masdar project, also became one of the key residents of the territory. Even though the educational institution was eventually absorbed and lost its autonomy to Khalifa University, the student campus remains the largest core of the functional sustainability of the project.

- IRENA: an intergovernmental organization that supports countries in their transition to sustainable energy.
- Siemens: the regional 25.000sqm headquarters for Siemens is located in Masdar City, housed in a LEED Platinum-certified building designed for energy efficiency.
- Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI): a graduate-level, researchbased university specializing in artificial intelligence.
- UAE Space Agency: the government body responsible for the development of the UAE's space sector.
- The Catalyst: a joint venture between Masdar City and BP, serving as an investor that supports clean-tech start-ups. Catalyst is the first technology startup accelerator focused on sustainability and clean technology in the UAE.
- Honeywell Masdar Innovation Center: the center serves as a living laboratory for Honeywell's latest innovations in energy efficiency, smart building management, and environmental monitoring, demonstrating how these technologies can be applied in urban developments. The center also provides training programs and collaborative opportunities for industry professionals, researchers, and students, focusing on sustainability and intelligent building solutions.

New Infrastructure

- The 100MW Shams 1 Concentrated Solar Power (CSP) plant developed by Masdar, one of the first large-scale sustainable energy projects launched in the UAE⁴⁸.
- The 10 MW solar photovoltaic (PV) plant and 1 MW of rooftop PV in the city. When it opened in 2009, this power plant was the first in the entire country and one of the first in the region. At that time, the cost of energy generation with its help was one of the highest in the world, but gradual development of technology and replacement of panels allowed to reduce the cost to 1.3 cents per kWh, which makes this energy one of the cheapest in the world⁴⁹.
- With 21 LEED platinum graded buildings currently in operation in Masdar, the City is home to one
 of the largest clusters of green sustainable architecture globally.
- A total of 600,000 m2 of real estate is already operational with additional 800,000 m2 under construction⁵⁰.

New Stakeholders

- Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC): Joined as a shareholder to contribute its expertise in the energy sector, supporting the UAE's transition toward sustainable energy solutions.
- Abu Dhabi National Energy Company PJSC (TAQA): Also became a shareholder, bringing its experience in utilities and energy to bolster Masdar's projects⁵¹.

3. What the Project Ultimately Encompasses

Masdar City

Now called Sustainable Real Estate, this is basically the only surviving unit from the original Masdar mega project concept. This unit is in charge of operation and development of Masdar City and the corresponding Freezone. Masdar City currently has a population of over 5,000 and employs over 10,000 people, far below the expected numbers planned at the launch.

Masdar Clean Energy

The economic powerhouse behind Masdar that unites most of the businesses operating in the areas of renewable energy and clean technology hosted in the City. It plays a central role in advancing Masdar's mission to promote sustainable development.

The project also aimed to create an energy-based currency and integrate a comprehensive data vault for consumption monitoring. While presented as an environmental reform initiative, Masdar City is more accurately described as part of Abu Dhabi's economic diversification strategy, subject to the ruling family's political and economic interests⁵².



Figure 17: Shams 1, the World's Largest Concentrated Solar Power Plant in Operation. Masdar City

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

The Masdar project, one of the most high-profile projects initiated in the region at the time, has gradually adapted to changing economic and political conditions and has become noticeably simpler. This should not be considered a negative aspect of project development, given how ambitious the goals initially set were. On the other hand, although not an instant success, Masdar has played a vital role in the development of the country, becoming a flagship, first major project in the field of sustainable development, which had a direct impact on the economy, politics, technology and comprehensive development of the country.

Alternative vision of the future

Masdar City presents a sustainable urban living prototype, envisioning a future where cities operate with minimal environmental impact. It emphasizes renewable energy reliance, car-free mobility, and circular resource management, challenging the dominant, resource-intensive urban models. The city symbolizes a post-oil economy vision, aligning Abu Dhabi's aspirations with global climate goals and positioning the UAE as a leader in sustainable development.

• A new model for urban development

Compact and pedestrian-friendly design of Masdar City minimizes energy use with narrow streets, shaded walkways, and high-density mixed-use areas. It also integrates traditional and modern architecture, demonstrating how cities in hot climates can be designed sustainably. Masdar City is also making possible new urban development projects in the UAE that prioritise the quality of the urban environment over the speed and cost of construction that dominated the construction boom. The city also showcased a new standard for green construction, emphasizing energy efficiency, solar power, and smart systems.

• A platform for gaining new technological and organizational experience

Masdar serves as a testbed for smart city technologies, including autonomous transportation, IoT systems, and renewable energy integration. The city has allowed for numerous engineering, technological and architecture companies to flourish and scale up sustainable development initiatives in the UAE and in the Global South.

• An incubator for innovations and economic growth

By focusing on renewable energy and sustainability, Masdar contributes to Abu Dhabi's transition toward a knowledge-based economy, reducing reliance on hydrocarbons. Hosting over 1000 companies, Masdar City fosters a cleantech innovation ecosystem, attracting startups and global firms in renewable energy and green technology.

HOW THE PROJECT HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME

Like many mega projects of its era, Masdar was born in the context of impressive economic growth and initially represented more a fantasy about a city of the future than a well-thought-out infrastructure and investment mega project. The history of Masdar's development clearly demonstrates both the vulnerability of such projects

to global shocks and their dependence on the current political and marketing environment. As a result, the utopian core of the mega project was trimmed by market mechanisms, turning the self-sufficient eco-city of the future into an architectural and development project aimed at creating a business district implementing investment and research projects in the most promising segment of green energy.

Alignment with Realistic Capabilities

- Within a few years of the project's inception, some fundamental changes had taken place. The initial
 techno-utopian over-engineered concept of a city of the future gave way to plans for a commercially
 viable multifunctional urban core. Secondly, the general approach to managing urban development has
 shifted from an attempt at integrated business and technological development «from scratch» to the skillful
 management of financial resources for the purpose of investment development and attracting existing
 companies to the city through attractive infrastructure, tax regime and earnings prospects in a rapidly
 growing region.
- The mission of the project was not only to address the sustainability challenges of the UAE but also to develop commercially viable solutions in renewable energy and sustainable real estate. However, after more than ten years, the number of residents was just around 1300 and is barely above 5000 in 2024, still far behind the planned numbers⁵³.
- Most of the transport solutions announced in the first years of the project's implementation remained on paper. The implementation of autonomous transport on the territory of Masdar City gave way to more realistic architectural and planning approaches that ensure pedestrian accessibility and permeability of the territories.
- Despite Abu Dhabi's enormous financial resources and the relatively small scale of Masdar City, after almost 20 years the project has not been completed. The main obstacles to completing the construction were the dramatically changed financial and economic conditions in the first years of the project, the decline in global interest in eco-city concepts and, conversely, the growth of interest in «smart cities», and the lack of thought in the commercial sustainability of the original project.

What Has Been Achieved

- With approximately 35% of the City complete, a new residential and working district of Abu Dhabi has appeared, one which accommodates about 5,000 residents and more than 10,000 permanent jobs⁵⁴.
- Masdar constructs and owns buildings based on projected demand, catering to both government and private sector needs. A notable example of this model is the Siemens Middle East headquarters located in Masdar City. This building boasts a 3 Pearl rating and LEED Platinum certification, using 64 % less energy compared to typical office structures in Abu Dhabi.
- Thanks to Masdar and Masdar City, Abu Dhabi has become a regional leader in energy subsidy reform, renewable energy deployment and sustainable buildings. Many of the institutional changes that would have taken longer was Masdar never implemented in the first place. Largely due to Masdar the first national renewable energy policy was developed in 2009⁵⁵.
- Masdar has become one of the largest global investors in green energy, with a presence in 30 markets around the world where it has invested more than \$20 billion⁵⁶.
- By 2016, the city had achieved only 50 % of its zero-carbon emissions goal⁵⁷.

WHAT HAD TO BE ABANDONED OR SIGNIFICANTLY MODIFIED

- Masdar City has abandoned the rhetoric of zero-waste and zero-carbon in favor of a much more achievable low-carbon rhetoric and development model.
- The initial eco-city rhetoric has been abandoned in favor of smart city development. There were four pillars used to base the 'smart city' concept on: clean-tech innovations, sustainable real estate development, research, clean energy infrastructure⁵⁸.

- MIST, a product of the UAE government's cooperation with the legendary MIT, existed as an independent higher education institution for a very short time and was forced to come under the wing of the larger and more established Khalifa University. After 10 years of operation (2007–2017), MIST was converted into a satellite campus of Khalifa University in Masdar City. At that time, it had less than 500 students.
- In fact, it was necessary to completely abandon the focus on developing a self-sufficient and productive business and technological ecosystem in the field of sustainable development. Masdar became, first and foremost, an instrument of financial and architectural development.
- The city's own green building certification system has failed to gain wider adoption, although it has ensured a very high level of sustainable construction at Masdar City.

Current Status and Future Plans

Masdar City has several projects in the pipeline, including Masdar City Square, a cluster of seven commercial buildings with a gross floor area of 50,000 square meters, scheduled for completion in 2024. The development includes Abu Dhabi's first net-zero energy office building. Another project, The Link, is a mixed-use development covering 30,000 square meters, projected to be complete in 2025. The project is continuing to develop, although at a slower pace than planned at launch. Current completion date has been set for 2030 with 1500 businesses expected to operate from the premises⁵⁹.

At the same time, Masdar is working quite successfully to expand its investment portfolio. Several very large investment projects were announced in 2024–2025: \$15 billion in green energy investments in the Philippines, and the construction of a new \$6 billion solar and battery energy facility in the UAE⁶⁰. Masdar aims to expand its wind and solar capacity to 100 GW by 2030, positioning itself as a leading global renewable energy company. The company plans to continue its investments in key markets, including the Middle East, Europe, the US, and Asia, with a balanced focus on both solar and wind projects. Recent acquisitions, such as the purchase of Saeta Yield in Spain for €1.2 billion, reflect this strategic approach.

Finally, it is impossible not to note that Masdar remains a rather closed project. Information about the existing development plans, management structure, strategy and financial indicators of the project is largely hidden from outside observers. For this reason, it is very difficult to assess the level of success of its functioning or to monitor the ongoing development.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the Masdar project is an excellent illustration of the risks and peculiarities of implementing mega projects even in the most favorable financial conditions of almost unlimited political and financial support from the central government. Such projects are extremely sensitive to external shocks, during which they are «optimized», which is what happened in Abu Dhabi.

Conceived as an extremely expensive flagship global project of new urban development to test new methods of green building, autonomous transport technologies, sustainable energy and a circular economy, Masdar has evolved into a more financially sustainable form of a national business incubator for green technologies, a development project with significant use of sustainable architecture and an investment company representing the national interests of the UAE around the world in the field of energy development.

Masdar has largely disappeared from the news, but it has not stopped developing. The dynamics of change and the current structure of the project also reflects how the utopian agenda is being transformed in the context of modern economic and political development. The ideological core of the project has undergone significant changes in order to offer a more financially attractive operating model, while ambitious visionary goals have remained in the past and have given way to more realistic and ideologically similar tasks.

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Figure 18: The LINE, NEOM flagship project. NEOM

CASE STUDY 4. NEOM, SAUDI ARABIA

NEOM is one of the most ambitious urban development projects in the world, designed to redefine living, work, and sustainability paradigms. Initiated as part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) Vision 2030, NEOM is envisioned as a smart, sustainable, and technologically advanced megacity that integrates cutting-edge innovations in energy, mobility, and urban planning. Spread across 26,500 km² in the Tabuk Province, this project represents a forward-thinking approach to creating self-sufficient urban environments¹.

YEAR	2017 – ongoing		
INVESTMENTS	Estimated over USD 500 Bn		
LOCATION	Tabuk Province, Saudi Arabia, bordering the Red Sea		
DEVELOPER	NEOM Company		
AUTHOR OF CONCEPT	Morphosis Architects, LAVA, sir Peter Cook, 10Design, Buro Proberts, BIG, Zaha Hadid Architects, UNStudio, Mario Cu- cinella Architects, Woods Bagot, OMA, and others ²		
KEY STAKEHOLDERS	HRH Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (Chairman of NEOM) Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia (PIF) Tabuk Region		
INVESTORS	Public Investment Fund (PIF) of Saudi Arabia International Private Sector Companies Alfanar Group ³ Investment Banks (HSBC, Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentar- ia, Bank of China, Crédit Agricole CIB, Agricultural Bank of China, Citi, China Construction Bank, J.P. Morgan and Bank of America) ⁴		
POPULATION (PLAN)	300,000 people by 2030, with potential grow to 9 Mn people further $^{\rm 5}$		
AREA	26,500 Square kilometers		

Figure 19: NEOM Key Information

WHO PROPOSED IT AND HOW

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced NEOM during the Future Investment Initiative conference in Riyadh in October 2017. HRH Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was using the devices, an old and a new phone, to depict the past and present in his discussion on NEOM⁶.

Political-Economic Context

(2017–2025)

Saudi Arabia's transformation over the past decade has accelerated significantly, reshaping the nation into a more dynamic and globally integrated society. That, coupled with visionary country leadership and economic capacity to implement new projects, has become a perfect basis for initiation of a number of transformative projects, including NEOM. The Kingdom's transformation can be broadly categorized into three key areas:

- Opening to the World
- Advancement in Human and Women Rights
- Diversification of Economy

Opening to the World

Saudi Arabia has increasingly sought to position itself as a global hub for tourism, culture, and an attractive country for international investment. KSA also recently significantly increased Diplomatic and International Presence:

- -- The introduction of e-visas in 2019 marked the opening of Saudi Arabia to international tourists, with initiatives such as the Red Sea Project and AIUIa's heritage restoration attracting millions of visitors⁷.
- -- High-profile international events, including Formula 1 races, concerts featuring global artists, and cultural festivals like the Riyadh Season, have enhanced the Kingdom's cultural footprint.
- -- The nation has actively participated in global forums, including hosting the G20 Summit in 2020, signaling its commitment to international cooperation⁸.
- -- Regional peace efforts, including brokering ceasefires in conflicts such as Sudan and supporting Gulf Cooperation Council unity, have underscored Saudi Arabia's emerging role as a diplomatic leader.
- -- International peace efforts, hosting International Peace Talks: In August 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted an international summit in Jeddah, bringing together representatives from 30 countries to discuss pathways to peace in Ukraine⁹.

Advancements in Human Rights

Significant strides have been made in enhancing women's rights and participation in Saudi society, as well as a number of significant reforms were implemented to improve human rights in KSA. The Kingdom's Vision 2030 aims to enhance the role of civil society through its objectives, programs and initiatives, which is an acknowledgment of the role played by civil society institutions in the development, promotion and protection of human rights¹⁰.

- **Labor Force Participation:** Female participation in the labor force surged to 35.8% in the second quarter of 2024, up from 16.4% in 2015. This increase reflects broader societal changes and government initiatives aimed at integrating women into various industries¹¹.
- **Legal Reforms:** In August 2019, the Saudi government enacted reforms allowing women to obtain passports and travel abroad without male guardian approval, register marriages and births, and benefit from protections against employment discrimination. These changes marked a substantial shift in dismantling the male guardianship system¹².
- **Personal Autonomy:** In June 2021, Saudi Arabia allowed single, divorced, or widowed women to live independently without requiring permission from a male guardian, further promoting women's autonomy.

Focus on Economy Diversification

By 2017, Saudi Arabia recognized the need to transform its oil-reliant economy¹³. The Vision 2030 initiative was introduced to foster economic diversification, social reform, and infrastructural development. NEOM emerged as a flagship project within this vision, symbolizing the nation's commitment to embracing technological advancements and sustainable development.

Primary Goals of the Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 are as follows¹⁴:

- Economic Diversification: NEOM aims to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil by developing sectors such as technology, renewable energy, and tourism.
- Technological Innovation: The project seeks to integrate cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence and advanced robotics, to create a smart city infrastructure.
- Sustainability: NEOM is designed to operate on renewable energy sources, promoting environmental conservation and setting new standards for sustainable urban development.
- Global Investment Attraction: By positioning itself as a hub for innovation and business, NEOM aims to attract international investors and foster global partnerships.
- Job Creation: The development of NEOM is expected to generate employment opportunities across various sectors, contributing to economic growth and social stability.

NEOM was announced as a pivotal component of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, aiming to diversify the economy, reduce oil dependency, and position the Kingdom as a global leader in innovation and sustainability. Its contributions to the GDP, job creation, and its role as a transformative engine. NEOM is projected to contribute approximately SAR 180 billion (USD48 billion) to Saudi Arabia's GDP by 2030. In addition, the project aims to create around 380,000 jobs by 2030, spanning various sectors including technology, tourism, and advanced manufacturing¹⁵.

Vision

NEOM is one of the five giga projects classified under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, a transformative initiative aimed at diversifying the Kingdom's economy and reducing dependence on oil revenues. These giga-projects are monumental in scale and ambition, each targeting key sectors such as tourism, technology, infrastructure, and sustainability. In summary, those five projects are classified as follows¹⁶:

Project	Description
NEOM	A futuristic region, focusing on innovation, sustainability, renewable energy, and advanced urban living. Its Key Role in Vision 2030 is establishing Saudi Arabia as a global hub for technology, tourism, and sustainable development.
RED SEA	A luxury tourism destination spanning over 28,000 square kilometers along Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, focusing on sustainable luxury tourism, eco-resorts, and marine conservation. Its Key Role in Vision 2030 is enhancing Saudi Arabia's appeal as a global tourist destination.
QIDDIYA	A massive entertainment and cultural destination near Riyadh, focusing on entertainment, arts, and sports. Its Key Role in Vision 2030 is developing a robust entertainment sector and providing recreational options for residents and visitors.
ROSHN	A national real estate developer launched in 2018, ROSHN is focusing on delivering modern and aspirational communities for the citizens of Saudi Arabia and actively contributes to the national goal of achieving a 70% homeownership rate in KSA.
DIRIYAH GATE	A cultural and heritage site near Riyadh, showcasing Saudi Arabia's rich history and traditional architecture, focuses on heritage preservation, cultural tourism, and luxury hospitality. Its Key Role in Vision 2030 is strengthening Saudi Arabia's cultural identity and attracting international cultural tourism.

Figure 20: Summary giga projects under KSA Vision-2030

NEOM's official vision statement is formulated as 'NEOM is the land of the future where the greatest minds and best talents are empowered to embody pioneering ideas and exceed boundaries in a world inspired by imagination'¹⁷.

NEOM AN UMBRELLA FOR MEGA PROJECTS

In essence, NEOM has a role as an umbrella organization and developer, overseeing mega-projects like THE LINE, TROJENA, Oxagon, Magna, and Sindalah Island, which introduces a series of complexities that span strategic planning, governance, resource allocation, operational execution, and most importantly infrastructure provision. These projects collectively aim to position NEOM as a leader in innovation, sustainability, and luxury living. A summary of NEOM projects, announced to date, is provided below:

Project	Description
THE LINE	A revolutionary urban development stretching 170 kilometers, featuring a mirrored facade, standing 500 meters tall and 200 meters wide. It aims to house 9 million residents in a zero-emission environment, integrating smart technologies and sustainable living ¹⁸ .
TROJENA	A mountain tourism destination located 50 km from the Gulf of Aqaba, within NEOM's nature region. Spanning elevations from 1,500 to 2,600 meters, Trojena will offer outdoor skiing, adventure sports, and luxury resorts, capitalizing on its cooler climate ¹⁹ .
OXAGON	Envisioned as the world's largest floating industrial city, Oxagon will serve as a hub for advanced and clean industries, incorporating smart technologies and sustainable practices to revolutionize industrial development ²⁰ .
SINDALAH	A luxury island resort in the Red Sea, Sindalah is designed to be a global yachting hub. Covering 840,000 square meters, it features an 86-berth marina, luxury hotels, fine dining, and world-class shopping, offering unique experiences to guests and residents ²¹ .
MAGNA	NEOM's luxury coastal destination, encompassing resorts, hotels, private residences, all within a nature reserve, where 95% of the land is preserved for wildlife ²² .

Figure 21: Summary of announced NEOM projects

The unprecedented scale of proposed planned cities ensures that Saudi Arabia will become the first country to implement and test fully sustainable technologies that align with Sustainable Development Goal 11 as defined by the United Nations^{23,24}.

The key objectives of the NEOM Project are²⁵:

- Diversify and grow the Kingdom's economy
- · Create a new global destination for innovation and development
- Establish a new model for sustainable living
- Set new standards for community health and environmental protection

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia operates under a unitary Islamic absolute monarchy, with the King serving as both the head of state and government. The governance framework is rooted in Islamic law (Sharia), with the Quran and the Sunnah declared as the official constitution of the country²⁶. The government is structured around three primary powers: regulatory, executive, and judicial, which function collaboratively in compliance with the Basic Law of Governance²⁷. Administratively, the country is divided into 13 provinces, each led by a governor and deputy governor, supported by provincial councils that advise on local development matters²⁸. This governance structure ensures centralized authority while incorporating consultative elements to address regional and national affairs.

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud serves as the head of state and custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, holding ultimate authority in Saudi Arabia, while delegating significant executive power to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to oversee governance, economic reforms, and national development. His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman serves as the Crown Prince, Prime Minister, and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, overseeing the country's economic, political, and social transformation. Since being appointed Crown Prince in 2017, he has consolidated power within the royal family, directing major policy decisions and spearheading Vision 2030.

NEOM Project

NEOM's governance framework operates under the broader structure of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 while maintaining autonomy to ensure agility and innovation. The project's governance structure can be broadly outlined as follows:

National Oversight:

- -- NEOM falls under the jurisdiction of the Saudi government, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, who oversees its development as part of Vision 2030²⁹.
- -- The Public Investment Fund (PIF) is a major financier and stakeholder, ensuring alignment with the country's broader economic diversification goals.

Public Investment Fund (PIF):

- -- PIF serves as the primary financial and investment engine behind NEOM, providing the capital required for its development.
- -- PIF drives the governance framework for NEOM by facilitating partnerships with global investors, developers, and technology providers.

Local Authority, Tabuk Region:

-- Local authorities facilitate land acquisition, zoning, and regulatory approvals needed for NEOM's projects.

NEOM Board of Directors:

-- NEOM's Board of Directors is chaired by His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia. The board oversees the strategic direction and implementation of NEOM's ambitious projects, including THE LINE, Oxagon, Trojena, Magna, and the Islands of NEOM³⁰.

NEOM Advisory Board³¹:

-- NEOM Advisory Board was established and officially announced in 2019. It comprises a diverse group of executives from various industries and backgrounds, who are dedicated to supporting and guiding the development of the NEOM project.

NEOM Senior Management Team³²:

- -- CEO (Acting): Aiman M. Al-Mudaifer, responsible for the execution and strategic alignment of the project.
- -- NEOM Department and Sector Heads
- -- Advisory Committees: International experts in urban development, sustainability, and governance.

NEOM Sectors³³:

-- NEOM is structured around 14 key sectors, each focusing on a specific area of development to drive innovation and economic growth. The sectors are: Energy, Water, Mobility, Entertainment & Culture, Food, Manufacturing, Media, Tourism, Sport, Design & Construction, Financial Services, Health, Well-being & Biotech, Education, Research, and Innovation, Technology & Digital.

NEOM Subsidiaries:

-- NEOM has established several subsidiaries to manage and execute the various aspects, covering industries like energy, technology, tourism, and urban development.

Subsidiary	Focus	Key Role	
TONOMUS ³⁴	Technology and Al	Smart city technology and digital infrastructure.	
ENOWA ³⁵	Energy and Water	Renewable energy, hydrogen, and water management	
NEOM GREEN HYDROGEN COMPANY ³⁶	Energy	Creation of the world's largest green hydrogen plant	
TOPIAN ³⁷	Agriculture and Food Security	Sustainable and innovative food systems	
NEOM U ³⁸	Education, Research and Innovation	A human-centric and interconnected education, research, and innovation ecosystem	

Figure 22: Summary Table of NEOM Subsidiaries

CHALLENGES

The NEOM project is currently encountering some challenges across financial, scheduling, and governance domains, partially triggered by the complexity of governance and project scale, as well as the Kingdom's priorities shifting to less ambitious plans, such as holding the Riyadh Expo in 2030³⁹ and the World Cup in 2034⁴⁰. Both events will showcase KSA as an attractive and progressive destination for tourism, business, and investments; however, they require significant funding to be delivered to the required quality and within the timeframe.

Talent and Technology

- Effective management and availability of human resources: In Saudi Arabia, the high dependence on expatriate workers across various sectors introduces significant risks related to leadership, availability of talent, workplace culture, and team dynamics. The integration of a diverse workforce from multiple cultures and nationalities necessitates adept management to navigate potential challenges⁴¹.
- Technology Availability: NEOM is likely to face significant challenges in integrating advanced technologies like AI and IoT, as many of these are still in developmental stages and may not be ready for large-scale deployment.

Financials and Funding

- Escalating Costs: Initially estimated at USD 500 billion, the project's expenses have surged, with «The LINE» alone now projected to exceed USD 2 trillion⁴².
- Funding Constraints: Despite being a leading oil exporter, Saudi Arabia faces difficulties financing extensive mega projects due to lower oil prices and production levels. This has led to budget deficits, impacting the country's ability to sustain such ambitious initiatives⁴³.

Societal Concerns and Public Perception

- Displacement of Local Communities: One of the most controversial aspects of NEOM is the forced relocation of the Howeitat tribe, an indigenous community with historical ties to the Tabuk region.
- Exclusivity and Social Segmentation: NEOM is marketed as a luxury, high-tech utopia designed to attract wealthy KSA and global elites, foreign investors, and expatriates. This raises concerns about social segregation.

Timelines and Construction

- Extended Timelines: Key components, such as a \$10 billion transport venture with Danish company DSV, have been delayed due to pending regulatory approvals, indicating broader scheduling issues within the project⁴⁴.
- Construction and resources: availability of construction materials and resources to meet the demands of its ambitious development timelines and scale⁴⁵.

Governance

- Leadership Changes: The departure of NEOM's CEO, Nadhmi Al-Nasr, due to budget and scheduling concerns, underscores governance issues. His replacement by Aimen Al-Mudaifer, who has extensive experience working in PIF, reflects efforts to address these challenges.
- Strategic Reprioritization: In response to ballooning costs, Saudi Arabia is now prioritizing elements of NEOM essential for hosting global sporting events, such as the Trojena mountain resort for the 2029 Asian Winter Games, over other components⁴⁶.

HOW THE PROJECT HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME

Project Scope Evolution

Since its inception, the NEOM project has undergone several evolutions in scope and scale. Initially announced in 2017, it was primarily focused on being a high-tech hub of the Kingdom, envisioned as a center for innovation and technology-driven industries. However, over time, the project's vision has significantly expanded to include a broader range of initiatives aimed at transforming urban living.

One of the major additions to NEOM's blueprint is the development of substantial residential areas designed to accommodate a diverse population⁴⁷. These residential zones aim to provide state-of-the-art living conditions, integrating smart technology and sustainable practices to offer a high quality of life. The accommodations are planned with a focus on community living, green spaces, and efficient resource utilization, setting new benchmarks for modern urban residential developments.

In tandem with residential expansions, NEOM has also placed a strong emphasis on hospitality and tourism, recognizing their potential for economic growth and cultural exchange⁴⁸. The project includes plans for luxury hotels, resorts, and entertainment facilities that cater to both global and regional tourists. These hospitality initiatives aim to showcase the natural beauty and unique cultural heritage of the region while providing world-class amenities and experiences in partnerships with brands, such as Habitas, Equinox, Capella, the Chedi, Four Seasons, Anantara, JW Mariott, and others^{49,50}.

A signature element like 'The LINE' highlights NEOM's evolution towards vertical urbanism, featuring a linear city design with zero carbon emissions⁵¹. This innovative approach underscores a shift towards sustainability by optimizing space usage, reducing environmental impact, and fostering efficient transportation systems. Each component of NEOM is integrated to support the overarching goals of sustainability, technological advancement, and improved living standards, reflecting the project's dynamic evolution from a high-tech hub to a future-ready urban environment.

Further enhancing NEOM's industrial and economic landscape are initiatives in sustainable energy and logistics. NEOM includes plans for advanced ports that will streamline trade and transportation⁵². These ports are designed to leverage intelligent systems and automation, improving efficiency and reducing environmental impact. Additionally, NEOM is at the forefront of hydrogen production. It aims to become a leading hub for green hydrogen, utilizing renewable sources to produce this clean fuel. This aligns with global efforts to transition to sustainable energy sources⁵³.

PROJECT TIMELINE



Figure 23: NEOM Project Timeline

In addition, NEOM prioritizes sustainable transport and connectivity initiatives, integrating smart technologies and energy-efficient solutions. This includes a widespread network of high-speed public transport and autonomous vehicles, all powered by clean energy. These efforts demonstrate NEOM's commitment to creating a sustainable, innovative, and interconnected community that sets a standard for future urban development⁵⁴.

What Has Been Achieved

- As of October 2023, NEOM has shared notable developments in its project progress⁵⁵:
- Construction is advancing on key areas such as THE LINE, Oxagon, Sindalah, Trojena, and Magna.
- The workforce at NEOM comprises over 3,000 employees and more than 60,000 construction workers. 583 individuals hired from NEOM and Tabuk region⁵⁶.
- Significant infrastructure, including roads, utilities, and a hospital, has already been completed.
- USD 2 Bn investment is planned for the Port of NEOM, with an advanced container terminal set to open in 2025.
- NEOM has raised USD 6.1 Bn to develop the world's largest Green Hydrogen plant by 2026.
- USD 5.6 Bn investment is being directed to build 10 residential communities designed to accommodate 95,000 residents.

COVID-19 Pandemic		Russia- Ukraine War	Global Energy Crisis	Collapse of Bashar al-Assad's Regime in Syria	Donald Trump Inaugura- tion		
Gulf Diplomatic Crisis			Israel-Palestine Escalation				
Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Appointed in 2017)							
G20 Presidency	Saudi Green Initiative announced		Iran-Saudi Reconcilia- tion				
Green Hydrogen Partnership with Air Products and ACWA Power to establish the world's largest green hydrogen production facility	Unveiling of The LINE Project as NEOM flagship Ground- breaking for The LINE, Oxagon, and Trojena regions of NEOM	Announce- ment of various NEOM subsidiaries and regions (TONOM US, ENOWA, Oxagon, Trojena, Sindalah etc.) Expansion of partnerships with technology leaders	Announce- ment of Magna Region	Completion of Sinda- lah Island, first NEOM region. Appoint- ment of new CEO (Acting).	Neom secures USD 3 billion SACE guar- anteed financing under a mul- ticurrency untied facility from nine international banks		
2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025		



Figure 26: The LINE construction progress, October 2024. NEOM

CONCLUSION

The NEOM project, a transformative initiative in Saudi Arabia, aims to create a futuristic, sustainable city that redefines urban living. Its potential impact on society is multifaceted. NEOM is expected to create thousands of jobs during the construction phase and, upon completion, significantly boost the local economy. Additionally, its commitment to sustainable energy and cutting-edge technologies promises to set new standards for environmental responsibility and innovation in the Kingdom and the whole Middle East. The introduction of autonomous vehicles, smart infrastructure, and renewable energy sources could position NEOM as a global leader in innovative city development.

However, the project has faced significant criticism concerning social and cultural impacts, environmental impacts, delays in construction, and many others. The project governance is complex and consists of multiple layers, including a Board of Directors, an Advisory Board, PIF oversight, multiple subsidiaries, and sectors.

FOOTNOTES

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