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The Politics of New Cities: Diversification of Actors and Recentralization of State Power in the Case of Diamniadio

Sina SCHLIMMER

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Abstract

The construction of new cities on the African continent is in vogue. From multifunctional urban hubs to eco-districts, the images that accompany the announcement of these projects promote an African urban future based on modernity and technology. This trend for urban planning that claims to make a clean sweep of pre-existing approaches is not unique to African countries, whose governments are inspired in particular by North African and Asian models. However, the promotion of new cities in Africa is part of the lively debate that has been going on for several years on the rapid urbanization of the continent's countries. The creation of modern cities, organized and corresponding to the urban planning standards of international metropolises, is presented as a means of avoiding haphazard, chaotic urban development.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the policy of new cities based on an empirical study of the new urban pole of Diamniadio (PUD) in Senegal. Two key arguments are put forward in this paper. First, the analysis deconstructs the *ex nihilo* character of these urban projects and emphasizes that they are part of public policy trajectories. Due to its geo-economic and strategic position, Diamniadio has been at the heart of the Dakar region's territorial planning policies since at least the end of the 1990s. Secondly, new towns are far from being neutral and technical urban planning instruments; rather, they are political devices that convey interests and stimulate power games. By delimiting the boundaries of the PUD, which is presented as President Macky Sall's political footprint, the central government regains certain administrative powers, particularly in terms of land planning and allocation. In addition, the PUD reflects competition from foreign actors, both public and private, and the growing importance of emerging actors such as Turkey.

Résumé

La construction de villes nouvelles sur le continent africain est en vogue. Des pôles urbains multifonctionnels en passant par les écoquartiers, les images qui accompagnent l'annonce de ces projets promeuvent un futur urbain africain basé sur la modernité et la technologie. Cette mode d'un urbanisme qui prétend faire table rase avec les approches préexistantes n'est pas propre aux pays africains, les gouvernements s'inspirent notamment des modèles nord-africains et asiatiques. Cependant, la promotion des villes nouvelles en Afrique s'inscrit dans le débat animé en cours depuis quelques années sur l'urbanisation rapide des pays du continent. La création de villes modernes, planifiées et correspondant aux standards urbanistiques des métropoles internationales est présentée comme un moyen pour éviter un développement urbain hasardeux, chaotique.

Cette étude propose une analyse critique de la politique des villes nouvelles en s'appuyant sur une étude empirique du nouveau pôle urbain de Diamniadio (PUD) au Sénégal. Deux arguments clés constituent la trame de fond de cette étude. Premièrement, l'analyse déconstruit le caractère *ex nihilo* de ces projets urbains et souligne que ceux-ci s'inscrivent dans des trajectoires de politiques publiques. Par sa position géoéconomique et stratégique, Diamniadio est au cœur des politiques d'aménagement territoriale de la région dakaroise, depuis au moins la fin des années 1990. Deuxièmement, les villes nouvelles sont loin d'être des instruments d'urbanisme neutres et techniques, il s'agit plutôt d'un dispositif politique véhiculant des intérêts et stimulant des jeux de pouvoir. En délimitant les frontières du PUD, présenté comme l'empreinte politique du président Macky Sall, le gouvernement central récupère certains pouvoirs administratifs, notamment en termes d'aménagement et d'allocation du foncier. Par ailleurs, le PUD reflète une mise en compétition des acteurs privés et publics étrangers et une prise d'ampleur des acteurs émergents tels que la Turquie.

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Introduction

“The global south is apparently entering an urban age at a faster rate than the global north. We continuously see impressive graphs, pie charts and simulations of this impending urban age presented by ‘experts’ from global consultancies [...]. The solution is simple, they say. We should see urbanization as an opportunity, and not as a challenge. We must build new cities to reverse the doomsday predictions. And we must build these cities fast”.¹

On a Sunday afternoon in June, the new “Diamniadio” terminus of the regional express train coming from Dakar is deserted. The vast hall, with its new ticket offices and its curved modern architecture, is empty. The entrance opens onto an avenue, currently devoid of passengers and vehicles. Apart from the noise of traffic coming from the VDN (“voie de dégagement nord” – “northern highway”), the urban hub is quiet. The number of half-constructed buildings covered in dust, the absence of pedestrians and neighborhood life, but also the emptiness between the large new infrastructural facilities (such as the Abdoulaye Wade Stadium, the Dakar Sport Arena and the ministerial district), bring to mind a ghost town.

The Urban Hub of Diamniadio (“pôle urbain de Diamniadio” – UHD) is one of many “new city” projects announced since the late 1990s in multiple countries in Asia, the Middle East, and more recently on the African continent.² Promotional videos showing 3D plans with spectacular architectural forms, international-standard eco-districts or hypermodern financial centers have attracted the interest of the media, experts and the private sector.³ The prospect of building brand new neighborhoods in countries with a reputation for “chaotic”, “informal” and “unplanned” cities is an intriguing idea. Indeed, this model of urban planning is rooted in a

1. A. Datta and A. Schaban, “Introduction: Fast Cities in an Urban Age” in: A. Datta and A. Schaban (eds.), *Mega-Urbanization in the Global South*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-28.

2. Projects for new cities in African countries are often inspired by Asian and Middle Eastern models. Cities in the Gulf States, such as Doha, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, are considered the prototypes of the hypermodern city that African governments are emulating.

3. See, for example, R. Chandran, “Factbox: Seven Cities That Were Built from Scratch”, *Reuters*, August 8, 2019, available at: www.reuters.com, and W. Shepard, “Should We Build Cities from Scratch?”, *The Guardian*, July 10, 2019, available at: www.theguardian.com.

binary – and limited – reading of African cities,⁴ which holds that a possible solution to the challenges of disorderly and uncontrolled urbanization consists in wiping away existing developments and building new neighborhoods from scratch. According to this view, the construction of modern, functional new cities is the key to unleashing the potential of African cities as economic catalysts.

These modern megaprojects, or urban utopias, have been the subject of debate and controversy, particularly with regard to their usefulness and accessibility for a largely poor urban population.⁵ The project to establish the UHD, officially initiated by President Macky Sall in 2014, is no exception. It was initially promoted as a development that would “decongest”⁶ Dakar and provide a large amount of social housing, but the hub is now centered on a few key infrastructural buildings and an industrial zone.

The present study, which contributes to ongoing debates on urban governance issues in Sub-Saharan Africa,⁷ provides a critical analysis of the concept of new cities.⁸ Based on the Senegalese case of the UHD, two key arguments are put forward that call the concept into question. First, the new city model is not a neutral, technical instrument; such projects are implemented for political purposes, which leads to power struggles around the management of the territory. In Senegal, the development of the UHD has been supported by the President and implemented by a multitude of actors, particularly in the private sector. It is conceived as a territorial and administrative enclave that allows the central state, and the Presidency in particular, to exercise power over territories that are managed by their own

4. T. Förster and C. Ammann, “Les villes africaines et le casse-tête du développement : acteurs et capacité d’agir dans la zone grise urbaine”, *Revue internationale des études du développement*, Vol. 10, 2018, available at: <https://doi.org>.

5. See, for example, V. Watson, “African Urban Fantasies: Dreams or Nightmares?”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2013, pp. 215-231.

6. This concept was regularly invoked by the public officials interviewed, as well as in various promotional materials for the UHD.

7. This study contributes to the reflections undertaken in the research program “Governing Africa’s Urban Transitions”, launched in May 2022 by Ifri’s Sub-Saharan Africa Center.

8. The results of this study are based on a literature review and a field survey conducted in Senegal in June 2022 in Dakar and Diamniadio. The qualitative methods applied included semi-structured interviews with various actors involved in different territorial development projects in Diamniadio and, in particular, the UHD, including representatives of the Délégation générale de la promotion des pôles urbains de Diamniadio et du Lac Rose (“General Delegation for the Promotion of the Urban Hubs of Diamniadio and Lac Rose”), academics and consultants, representatives of various private companies, diplomatic actors, technical experts from bilateral and multilateral development agencies, members of NGOs and civil society more broadly, and elected officials and agents of the municipalities concerned. Valuable information was also gathered through informal exchanges with workers at some construction sites in the UHD and with employees of local companies. Finally, official and technical documents concerning the UHD (presentations by the DGPU, development plans, legal texts, etc.) enriched our understanding of the trajectory of this project. The author would like to warmly thank all the people who made themselves available over the course of this research, and in particular Moustapha Cissé Fall and Momar Diongue, who shared their knowledge and opinions, and without whom this publication would not have been possible.

municipal authorities.⁹ Second, the study questions the very idea of building urban districts *ex nihilo* that could exist in isolation from their environment. By tracing the major stages in the development and planning of the territory on which the UHD is built, we demonstrate that it is part of a long trajectory of land use policy that ultimately revolves around the urban hypercenter of Senegal: the capital city, Dakar.

9. This observation was also discussed in S. Schlimmer, “Building a City from Scratch? The Limits of Top-Down Urban Policy Making in the Case of the ‘New Urban Hub’ of Diamniadio, Senegal”, *Megatrends Policy Brief*, No. 6, 2022, available at: <https://doi.org>.

African New Cities: Opening Up to the International Economy?

The practice of building new cities on so-called virgin land is a longstanding one, dating back at least as far as antiquity. In the West, the foundation of cities has been used to establish a political base, to extend the power of the state in a given territory, to facilitate economic exchange and to develop industrial activities.¹⁰ Across the African continent, urban developments had already been established during the pre-colonial period,¹¹ but many cities were newly created by the colonial powers in order to establish administrative centers or economic hubs.¹² In the wake of independence, some heads of state undertook far-reaching projects of territorial (re)organization. There was a wave of announcements of new capital cities, occasionally aiming to leave the political imprint of a president¹³ and recognizing the establishment of the independent nation-state,¹⁴ sometimes with the intention of alleviating the demographic pressure on existing urban centers, but always signaling a break with the former colonial order.¹⁵ Projects for new capital cities have reflected the priorities of governments of independent African countries, striving for modernity and seeking to catch up with Western countries in terms of development. These urban initiatives, often supported by the expertise of international architects and planners, reflect the vision of the developmental state, and it is often in these sorts of

10. More recently, a policy of new cities in France resulted in the construction of nine cities during the 1960s, including Evry, Cergy-Pontoise and Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. See also: J.-C. Fredenucci, "L'urbanisme d'État: nouvelles pratiques, nouveaux acteurs", *Ethnologie française*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2003, pp. 13-20.

11. C. Coquéry-Vidrovitch, "De la ville en Afrique noire", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 61, No. 5, 2006, pp. 1087-1119.

12. For example, the current Kenyan capital, Nairobi, was built by the British colonial administration in 1899 as a drop-off point for the railroad linking the then capital, Mombasa, with Uganda.

13. This was the case in the Ivory Coast, where President Houphouët Boigny decided to locate the capital city in the region where he was originally from.

14. In Tanzania, President Julius K. Nyerere declared Dodoma the new capital. He thereby aimed to contribute to a process of territorial rebalancing in the country and the relocation of economic and administrative activities, which had previously been concentrated in Dar es Salaam, but he also used this urban project to support his project for developing Tanzanian socialism; see P. Siebolds and F. Steinberg, "Dodoma – a Future African Brasilia? Capitalist Town Planning and African Socialism", *Habitat International*, Vol. 5, Nos. 5-6, 1980, pp. 681-690.

15. In Nigeria, the city of Abuja was made the capital with the aim of rebalancing the pattern of population growth, which is heavily concentrated in Lagos.

states that they are pursued and financed, notably through recourse to international lenders.¹⁶

While the concept of the new city is not new as such, lately we have seen more enthusiasm on the part of several African governments for this urban planning tool, which has been manifested in a series of announcements relating to the construction of large-scale urban infrastructure. This recent wave of new cities, which began in the 2000s, is based on new ideological discourses and references that are more focused on the role of cities and technology as engines of economic growth and liberalization. This vision is particularly reflected in the methods used for financing and implementing these projects, which are based on greater recourse by the state to the private sector. In this way, effective urban developments are seen to represent not only catalysts for growth, but also a means for African countries to participate in international economic and technological competition.

A Conceptual Blurring Around a Broad Trend in Urban Planning

In Nigeria, the Eko Atlantic City district is intended to make the megalopolis of Lagos more attractive to investors, particularly in the financial and real estate sectors. The city of Konza Technopolis, located about sixty kilometers from Nairobi, is designed as a center for data processing, hence its nickname of “Silicon Savannah”. In Tanzania, the Safari City project, strategically located between two international airports and near the city of Arusha, targets the tourism sector. Since the early 2000s, around forty projects, ranging from neighborhood plans to the construction of entire cities, have been announced across the continent, including in North African countries.¹⁷ The digital plans that accompany these announcements echo the images of futuristic cities springing from the ground in several Middle Eastern and Asian cities. In addition to the African projects already mentioned, Sarah Moser has identified around a hundred such projects in countries of the Global South, including the artificial island group of Diya Al Muharraq in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the desert city of Masdar in the United Arab Emirates, the Malaysian Forest City, and “The Line”, a real estate initiative extending 170 km across the Saudi desert.¹⁸ The proliferation of announcements of new city projects has given rise to burgeoning literature¹⁹ examining the enthusiasm of African governments for these “urban fantasies”.²⁰ These

16. R. L. Rego, “New Capital Cities in the Global South: Post-Modernist Context, Modernist Layout in Nigeria and Brazil”, *Conservação e reabilitação urbana*, Vol. 42, 2021, available at: <https://journals.openedition.org>.

17. L. Côte-Roy and S. Moser, “Does Africa Not Deserve Shiny New Cities? The Power of Seductive Rhetoric around New Cities in Africa”, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 12, 2019, pp. 2391-2407.

18. S. Moser, “New Cities: Engineering Social Exclusions”, *One Earth*, Vol. 2, 2021, pp. 126-127.

19. For a review of this literature, see also S. Moser and L. Côte-Roy, “New Cities: Power, Profit, and Prestige”, *Geography Compass*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2021, pp. 1-15.

20. V. Watson, “African Urban Fantasies: Dreams or Nightmares?”, *op. cit.*

studies focus on “entirely new cities [that] are built up from scratch as comprehensively planned self-contained enclaves in the outskirts of existing cities”.²¹ However, these debates lack a clear definition of this phenomenon. Some researchers are abandoning the use of the term “new city” and focusing on specific characteristics of the projects, such as their material dimension²² or the speed of their development (therefore designating them as “fast cities”).²³ The term “new city” is thus not so much a scientific concept as a buzzword used for promotional purposes, and particularly to attract the attention of the media and investors.

Nonetheless, the projects that make up this urban trend share a number of characteristics:

- **The territorial dimension:** when these urban projects are not designed as neighborhoods of existing cities (such as Eko Atlantic City in Nigeria), they are often located on the periphery of metropolitan areas, not far from major urban centers. As satellite cities, they are intended to strengthen the economic lungs of the country. These cities, located in peri-urban areas with relatively little previous construction, are built on so-called “unused” or even “virgin” land, and are designed as a relay point for the main zones of economic and industrial activity.
- **The functional dimension:** these urban developments are created with specific functions in view, and are often labeled in relation to these functions. For example, “smart cities” promote the importance of the technology and knowledge sectors, “green cities” prioritize ecological issues, and “cities of the future” convey an image of modernity.
- **The temporal dimension:** the discourses underlying these urban planning projects use a vocabulary of urgency, maintaining that it is essential to build new cities in order to prevent urban socioeconomic crises. Efforts to construct road infrastructure, high-rise buildings and even entire districts in a short period of time contrast with the natural and gradual evolution of cities that expand and transform according to the dynamics of human activity and demographic growth.
- **The ahistorical dimension:** new city projects are presented as development approaches that break with the hitherto dominant and – it is argued – dysfunctional forms of urban planning. They are portrayed as occupying a neutral territory, on which new districts can be built *ex nihilo*, based on models that radically break from urban forms of the past.
- **The solutions dimension:** new cities are often promoted as turnkey solutions to the various challenges raised by rapid urbanization in Africa.

21. F. V. Noorloss, M. Kloosterboer, “Africa’s New Cities: The Contested Future of Urbanisation”, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1223-1241.

22. B. Terrefe, “Urban Layers of Political Rupture: The ‘New’ Politics of Addis Ababa’s Megaprojects”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, pp. 375-395.

23. A. Datta and A. Schaban, “Introduction: Fast Cities in an Urban Age”, *op. cit.*

They are presented as full-fledged, self-contained urban developments containing all the services and functions necessary to evolve independently of other cities. Martin Murray, Author and Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, describes these projects as “instant ‘cities-in-a-box’”.²⁴

Through the construction of new cities, African governments are pursuing a range of objectives that go beyond attempting to respond to the challenges that their populations and economies are experiencing as a result of rapid urban growth.

Participating in International Economic Competition

The growing interest in the construction of new cities is stimulated by different factors, which can be distinguished by their international and national aspects respectively.

African initiatives for new cities are rooted in international urban policies that aim to disseminate solutions applicable to different contexts. These strategies are manifested in models of urban planning produced by experts in international networks²⁵ and disseminated across different countries and regions. For example, some plans for new cities in Africa are inspired by the architectural forms and planning practices of the prestigious urban projects that have emerged in the major cities of the Gulf States, whose governments are sometimes also the source of their financing.²⁶ The desire to build so-called modern, future-oriented cities that meet international urban planning standards is linked to a race by governments to build world-class cities in order to participate in the international economy.²⁷ Cities thus become a nexus where national and international economies interact, facilitated by large-scale infrastructure.

New city projects in Africa particularly proliferated after the financial crisis of 2007-2008, in a period when international financial actors were reorienting themselves toward fixed investments, such as infrastructure and land.²⁸ This moment in the international economy coincided with a paradigm

24. M. Murray, “Frictionless Utopias for the Contemporary Urban Age: Large-Scale, Master-Planned Redevelopment Projects in Urbanizing Africa” in: A. Datta and A. Shaban (eds.), *Mega-Urbanization in the Global South*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 35.

25. P. Haas, “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination”, *International Organization*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 1992, pp. 377-403.

26. A. Choplin and A. Franck, “A Glimpse of Dubai in Khartoum and Nouakchott: Prestige Urban Projects on the Margins of the Arab World”, *Built Environment*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2010, pp. 192-205.

27. N. Brenner and R. Keil, “From Global Cities to Globalized Urbanization”, *Glocalism*, No. 3, 2014, available at: <https://doi.org>.

28. T. Goodfellow, “Finance, Infrastructure and Urban Capital: The Political Economy of African Gap-Filling”, *African Political Economy*, Vol. 47, No. 164, 2020, pp. 256-274.

shift in the development industry toward a greater emphasis on the importance of infrastructure for driving economic growth.

These international economic dynamics are intertwined with ideological, political and socioeconomic transformations taking place within African countries, which all tend to promote the idea of development through urbanization. The projects for new cities are situated within broader public policy programs, such as the “Plan Sénégal Émergent 2035” (“Plan for an Emerging Senegal”), the “Kenya Vision 2030” or Tanzania’s “Development Vision 2025”. These projects are explicitly promoted as instruments of public policy that will help raise investment and achieve certain objectives of these cross-sectoral programs, broadly aimed at stimulating economic growth and reducing poverty rates. This discourse on “emergence” draws on some of the rhetoric used by experts from international organizations who promote cities as drivers of human and socioeconomic development:²⁹ according to this view, urban growth, which can be observed in all African countries, can become a catalyst for economic growth, through the production of carefully planned, efficient and productive cities. Through urban and infrastructure projects, African governments seek to move beyond rhetoric and give tangible form to the idea of emerging economies.³⁰ Moreover, these cities are generally not isolated projects, but form part of larger infrastructure networks, such as special economic zones or development corridors. These exceptional zones target international funding by offering economic incentives such as tax breaks and cheap access to land. Governments may target a range of different types of actors, including foreign investors and the domestic private sector, but also those with higher socioeconomic means. Real estate programs with high-quality housing are designed to appeal both to the middle classes and to members of the diaspora looking for investment opportunities in their home countries. In promoting these projects, governments are adopting new “Afro-optimist” narratives³¹ aimed at shedding the association with poverty.

The New “Urban Hub of Diamniadio” in Senegal

The new Urban Hub of Diamniadio fits perfectly into this urban planning trend. Since 2012, the year in which President Macky Sall came to power, the project has been promoted as Senegal’s “new city”, breaking with

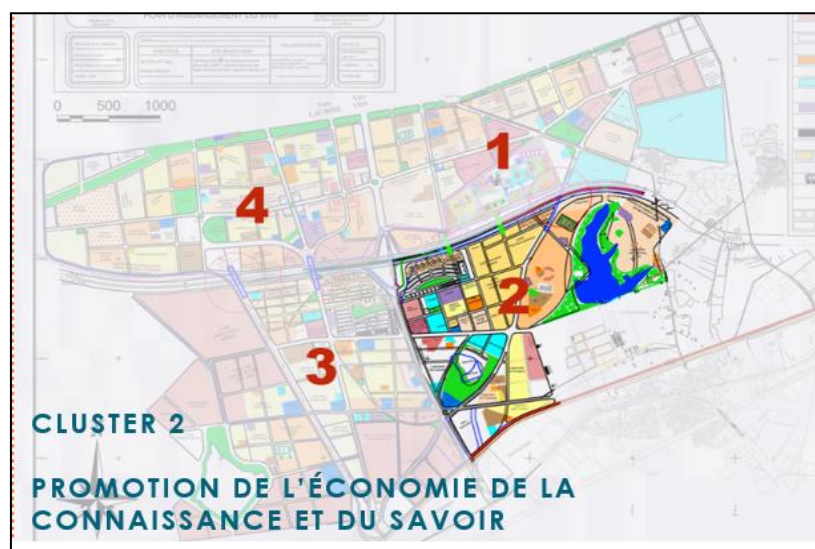
29. S. Lall, J. Henderson and A. Venables, *Africa’s Cities: Opening Doors to the World*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2017.

30. C. Kopf, “Le TER nous met à terre’ : Le Sénégal sur les rails de l’émergence?”, *Critique internationale*, Vol. 89, No. 4, 2020, pp. 115-139.

31. A. Antil, “Afro-optimisme, afro-pessimisme : l’Afrique vaut mieux qu’un discours. Dépasser les discours simples pour voir la diversité et la complexité d’un continent” in: T. de Montbrial and D. David (eds.), *RAMSES 2016. Climat : une nouvelle chance ?*, Paris: Ifri/Dunod, 2015, pp. 84-89.

conventional urban planning approaches by emphasizing innovation, technology, sustainable development, mixed-use, and wealth and job creation.³² These socioeconomic objectives and functions have been integrated into the underlying urban plan: the hub has been subdivided into four thematic clusters, focused on events creation and the management industry (cluster 1), the knowledge economy (cluster 2), logistics and industry (cluster 3), and financial activities (cluster 4) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Presentation of the UHD clusters



© Délégation générale de la promotion des pôles urbains, 2019

The primary objective of this project, which involves building a new urban space on 1,644 hectares of clay soil 30 km from Dakar, is to reduce the demographic pressure on the capital. The existing “macrocephalic” pattern of urban development highlighted by government experts and promoters of the UHD, which consists in the excessive concentration of the country’s population and economy in Dakar (see Figure 1), has been identified as one of the main challenges of urban planning in Senegal. The location of the UHD, covering parts of four neighboring municipalities (large areas of Bargny and Diamniadio, and smaller areas of Bambilor and Rufisque; see Figure 2), is seen as representative of a strategic position between three major urban centers (Dakar, Thiès and Mbour). By 2035, the UHD is expected to provide 40,000 homes and become the primary residence of 300,000 people.³³ The promotion of urban hubs that are more or less outside existing urban centers is intended to bring about a territorial rebalancing. This problem of urban over-centralization, faced by many African cities, is central to the discourse on the need for new cities in Senegal.

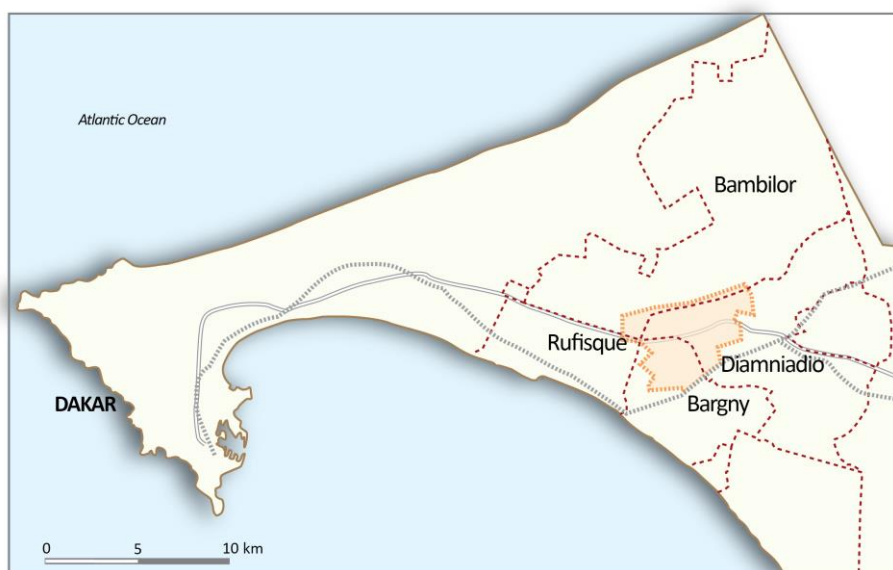
32. Délégation générale de promotion des pôles urbains, “Pôle urbain de Diamniadio : défis et impacts”, promotional video, 2018.

33. Interview with an officer of the Délégation générale de la promotion des pôles urbains (DGPU), Dakar, June 17, 2022.

The UHD represents a tool for implementing the “urban and architectural laboratory”³⁴ envisaged in the ten-year strategy, the Plan for an Emerging Senegal (PSE), launched in 2014 with its programmed finalization in 2035. Through this national development program, Senegal aims to boost and diversify its economy, while giving a larger role to the private sector.³⁵ The objectives of the PSE include the implementation of major infrastructure projects (transport, energy, economic, etc.), sustainable (urban) development, and the provision of social housing, all of which are manifested in the project to create a new city. The construction of the Abdou Diouf International Conference Center, which opened in 2014, is often presented as both the foundation stone of the UHD and the starting point of the PSE.

The definitional ambiguity that is so characteristic of new city projects can also be observed in the case of the UHD, for which experts and government actors use multiple labels: “new city”, “future city”, “satellite city” – the diversity of meanings and terms attributed to Diamniadio show that the objectives and functions of this highly publicized project remain vague and shifting.

Figure 2: The UHD covers territory in four neighboring municipalities



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

Design and production: Marie-Louise Penin, 2022.

-  Urban Hub of Diamniadio
-  Regional boundary
-  Municipal boundary
-  Railway
-  National highway

34. E. F. Samaté, “La promotion urbaine des modèles de ville globale en Afrique subsaharienne : la nouvelle ville de Diamniadio dans la région agglomérée de Dakar, une perspective pour une ‘ville créative et d’excellence’ ?”, *African and Mediterranean Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2021, pp. 112-127.

35. Direction générale du Trésor, “Sénégal: Le Plan Sénégal Émergent (PSE)”, January 18, 2022.

The Senegalese government promotes the urban solution of a “tabula rasa approach to city building”,³⁶ as has been observed in other African countries and other regions of the world. However, the idea that urban formations can emerge *ex nihilo* is misleading insofar as these projects always belong to territorial, social, economic and political trajectories. The case of the UHD is a useful example for understanding how these ever-changing projects take shape within a larger set of public policy and spatial planning initiatives.

36. M. Murray, “Frictionless Utopias for the Contemporary Urban Age: Large-Scale, Master-Planned Redevelopment Projects in Urbanizing Africa”, *op cit.*

New Cities, Territorial Continuities: the (Geo)Political Trajectory of the UHD Project

On July 25, 2013, the President of the Republic of Senegal founded by decree³⁷ the “new urban development hub of Diamniadio North toll highway”, declaring this space to be subject to public interest. Another decree defined the territorial limits of the urban hub, which correspond to “an area of approximately 1,644 hectares”.³⁸ President Macky Sall’s coming into office and the adoption of decree No. 2013-1043 are often presented as the founding moments of the UHD. This political statement reinforced the idea that it is possible to build a city *ex nihilo*, instigated by a top-down political decision. Indeed, during Macky Sall’s two terms in office, major infrastructure projects have been completed that have helped shape the UHD. However, the project to construct an urban hub in Diamniadio was not completely new. It belongs to a series of development initiatives focused on the municipality of Diamniadio and the Dakar region.

Diamniadio, a City at the Crossroads of the Metropolitan Region

Diamniadio is not only the name of the new urban hub, but also that of a “small city”³⁹ composed of nine neighborhoods that obtained the status of a municipality⁴⁰ in 2002. The UHD, however, is established on the territory of several municipalities, including Diamniadio, Bargny, Bambilor and Rufisque. The land on which the municipality of Diamniadio is based has been used since the colonial period for seasonal agricultural practices, and in later years for the groundnut trade, which was organized by the colonial authorities. The construction of the Dakar-Mbour (RN1) and Dakar-Thiès

37. Decree No. 2013-1043 of July 25, 2013, declaring the new urban development hub of Diamniadio North toll highway to be subject to public development, ordering the preparation of a detailed urban plan and prescribing safeguard measures.

38. Decree No. 2014-968 of August 19, 2014, prescribing the registration in the name of the state of a piece of land belonging to the national domain, located in Diamniadio, in the department of Rufisque, forming the Diamniadio urban development hub, with an area of approximately 1,644 hectares and declaring its de-allocation.

39. M. Diongue and P. Sakho, “Diamniadio, une petite ville (carrefour en quête d’une nouvelle identité économique) de la métropole Dakar”, paper presented at the colloquium “Aux frontières de l’urbain”, University of Avignon, January 22-24, 2014.

40. The city therefore has a municipal council and a mayor, each elected for a five-year term.

highways in the early 1950s transformed Diamniadio into a crossroads and a transit zone, with a strategic location within a metropolitan triangle composed of three urban pillars (Dakar, Thiès, Mbour). As a result of these infrastructural projects, the descendants of different ethnic groups (Fula, Wolof, Serer, Jola, Manjak and Moors) gradually and sustainably settled: “in half a century [...], Diamniadio has gone through major qualitative transitions by successively becoming a place of agricultural encampment, a village, a town and a small city”.⁴¹ This location, formerly a buffer zone and peri-urban area, has become a commercial and transport hub linking the Dakar metropolitan area to the rural parts of the country’s interior. The availability of infrastructure, in addition to the proximity of the municipality to Senegal’s capital city, makes Diamniadio an attractive place for economic, commercial, and industrial development. It is therefore essential to interpret the evolution of the municipality of Diamniadio in light of its intrinsic relationship with the capital and, more broadly, with the metropolitan region.

41. M. Diongue and P. Sakho, “Diamniadio, une petite ville (carrefour en quête d’une nouvelle identité économique) de la métropole Dakar”, *op. cit.*

The challenges of urbanization in the Dakar region

With 51% of the population now living in cities, Senegal has accomplished its urban transition.⁴² The annual urban growth rate has been relatively stable since 2000 (about 3.8%), leading to a doubling of the urban population between 2001 and 2021.⁴³ Most urban dwellers in Senegal reside in the Dakar region.

The Senegalese capital is located on the Cape Verde peninsula, bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Because of these natural boundaries to the west, Dakar extends to the east of the country, forming a metropolitan region that encompasses five departments: Dakar, Pikine, Keur Massar, Guédiawaye and Rufisque. The country's population growth and economic activities are largely concentrated in this region, which represents less than one percent of the national territory, leading to what specialists call the "macrocephaly" of Dakar.

Indeed, it is estimated that the Dakar region is home to 23% of Senegal's 14 million inhabitants. Although economic development in Senegal is driven by its cities, whose contribution comprises 75% of the country's GDP, Dakar is the greatest economic catalyst, accounting on its own for two-thirds of GDP.⁴⁴ Dakar accounts for approximately 65% of commercial activities, 90% of industries and 80% of infrastructure.⁴⁵ Faced with this pronounced trend toward demographic urbanization and the spatial inequality between the coastal zone and the rest of the territory, the Senegalese government has undertaken several initiatives to attempt to rebalance this situation.

A City at the Heart of Metropolitan Development Policy Initiatives

Owing to its geoeconomic and strategic positioning, the municipality of Diamniadio has been the subject of a series of urban development and infrastructure projects. This territory has a legacy of involvement in public action, which feeds into the UHD initiative promoted by the Presidency of Macky Sall. The various phases of this public policy trajectory reflect not only territorial changes, but also political transformations: first, they illustrate the new enthusiasm for infrastructure development that has emerged since the political changeover in 2000 and the government's new orientation toward market economy principles. Second, these projects demonstrate the high degree of central government intervention in land use planning. This trend raises questions, since the adoption of decentralization policies in 1996

42. "Senegal", *Africapolis*, available at: <https://africapolis.org>, accessed September 28, 2022.

43. "Urban Population – Senegal", World Bank, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org>, accessed September 28, 2022.

44. O. Cissé, *Les défis de l'urbanisation à Dakar : planification territoriale, assainissement, transport public et logement social*, Dakar: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2022, p. 11.

45. *Ibid.*

provided for the delegation of powers to local authorities, though ultimately, the latter were hardly involved in the urban initiatives around Diamniadio.

The Millennium Platform, or Abdoulaye Wade's Obsession With Infrastructure

The objective of establishing Diamniadio as a hub of urban infrastructure first appeared in the 1999 Diamniadio Detailed Urban Plan. The creation of a “balanced regional urban structure”⁴⁶ and a transport hub between the major cities of Dakar, Thiès and Mbour was planned as a way of reducing the economic and demographic concentration in Dakar. This project, led by the Ministry of Urban and Territorial Planning, fits into the strategy of promoting the development of strategic secondary cities that could act as regional urban hubs. Although the emphasis was on reducing the concentration of industrial and economic activities in Dakar, the idea of building a new city, including a residential area, was included in the 1999 Detailed Urban Plan.⁴⁷

This plan was accompanied by the announcement of a series of large-scale infrastructure projects, driven by President Abdoulaye Wade. His election in 2000 marked the first political changeover in Senegal after forty years of uninterrupted rule by the Socialist Party and triggered the beginning of a transition to a liberal economic regime. Known for his “appetite for infrastructure”,⁴⁸ Wade's Presidency laid the foundations for several ambitious projects that went on to change the face of the Dakar region and impact the dynamics of urbanization between Dakar and Diamniadio: President Wade's government was notably responsible for the toll highway linking Dakar, Diamniadio and the Blaise Diagne International Airport (which opened in 2013), as well as the construction of a mineral port in Bargny.

The desire to promote economic emergence through the creation of urban hubs⁴⁹ and infrastructure was central to the regime of President Wade. In 2000, a 2,500-hectare mixed development zone was planned, which was selected in 2004 for financing by the American foreign aid agency Millennium Challenge Account in order to create an industrial platform, the “Diamniadio Millennium Platform”. The objectives of this undertaking were

46. M. Diongue, “Périurbanisation différentielle : mutations et réorganisation de l'espace à l'est de la région dakaroise (Diamniadio, Sangalkam, Yéné), Sénégal”, PhD dissertation, Université Paris 10, 2010.

47. This document defines the objective of demarcating an area of 4,000 hectares in which to create zones for residential developments (housing 73,000 people by 2025), economic activities, transport infrastructure and facilities.

48. F. de Jong and V. Foucher, “La tragédie du roi Abdoulaye ? Néomodernisme et Renaissance africaine dans le Sénégal contemporain”, *Politique africaine*, Vol. 118, No. 2, 2010, p. 192.

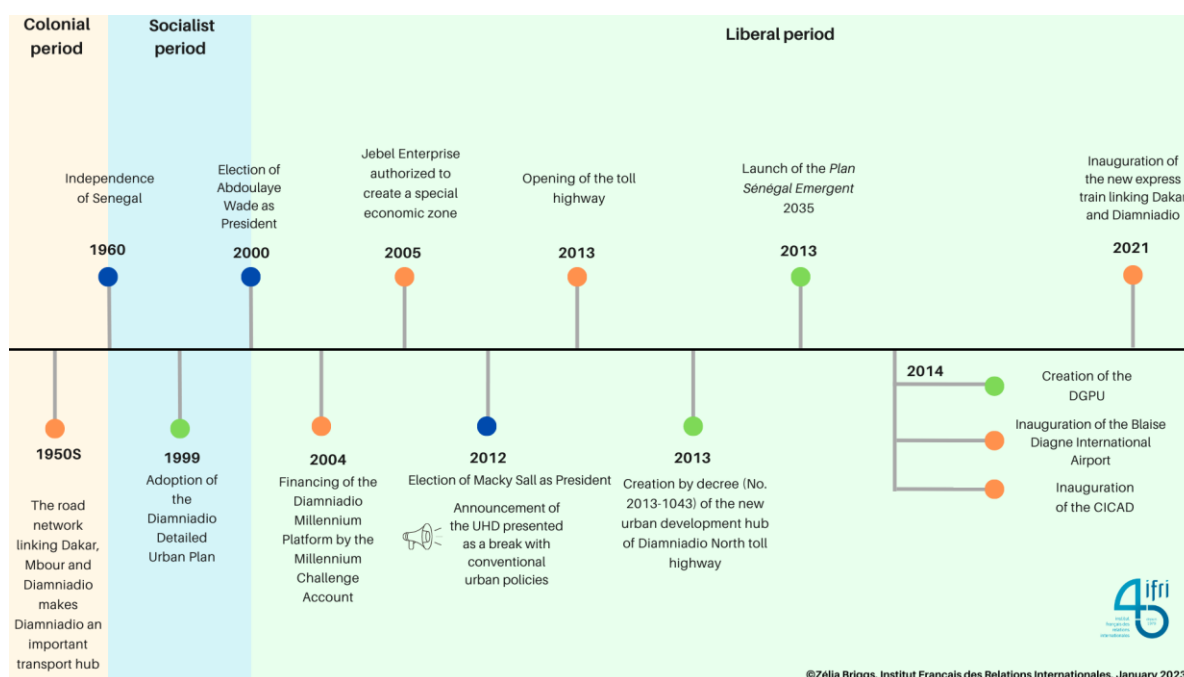
49. The objective of making Diamniadio an urban hub is also included in the “Plan d'urbanisme de Dakar horizon 2025” (“Dakar Urban Plan 2025”), adopted in 2005 and revised in 2009. In this revision, six “development hubs” were planned, including the “Diamniadio-Sébikotane-Yène” hub.

in line with those of the new city project included in the 1999 Detailed Urban Plan. In order to establish Senegal’s place in the competition for international investment after four decades of socialist rule, Wade solicited financing from multiple international sources and pitted them against one another: when, in 2005, he authorized the private Dubai company Jebel Enterprise to build a special integrated economic zone on the same site, the Millennium Challenge Account withdrew from the financing of the millennium platform.

Ultimately, neither the millennium platform supported by the American agency nor the special integrated economic zone supported by Jebel Enterprise came to fruition. However, this series of public action initiatives demonstrates that the Diamniadio area has been at the heart of development policies in the Dakar region for more than two decades. Only a few months before the election of his successor Macky Sall, Wade emphasized his vision of “making Diamniadio one of the most attractive hubs in the country within a few years”.⁵⁰ At the same time, President Wade nurtured the fantasy of creating a “new modern city, the future political and administrative capital of Senegal”,⁵¹ which he envisaged not in Diamniadio, but in his native region of Lompoul-Diogo, located between Dakar and Saint-Louis.

These different urban ideas imagined, initiated and in some cases implemented by Wade, were taken up and updated by his successor Macky Sall, who in turn embraced urban development as the driver of the emerging Senegalese economy.

Figure 4: Development projects around Diamniadio



50. D. Diop and A. S. Timéra, *Diamniadio : naissance d'une nouvelle ville : enjeux et défis d'une gouvernance durable*, Dakar: L'Harmattan, 2018, p. 83.

51 M. M. Diakhate, *L'aménagement du territoire au Sénégal : principes, pratiques et devoirs pour le XXI^e siècle*, Dakar: L'Harmattan, 2011, p. 125.

The New Urban Hub: The Continuation of a Policy of Regional Development from Above

A large billboard situated between the administrative district and the only residential project so far completed in the UHD, the SD City residential complex, depicts President Macky Sall addressing the Senegalese population and investors: “This is my legacy for future generations” (Photo 1). The establishment of the UHD, initiated through Decree No. 2013-1043, is presented as a flagship project of Macky Sall’s Presidency. Through his political messaging focused on the UHD, the President conveys a break both with conventional forms of urban planning and with the previous political regime.

Photo 1: Macky Sall “This is my legacy for future generations”



© S. Schlimmer, Diamniadio, June 2022

Continuity is also apparent in the approaches used for the governance of these mega-infrastructure projects, which are strongly centered on the image of the President. Not only have Wade and Sall used the new city project in Diamniadio to leave a strong political and territorial mark, but through these “major Head of State projects”⁵² they have also consolidated vertical decision-making processes, which limit their involvement of local communities. The UHD was created and is managed by the decree that declares it to be subject to public development. This mechanism allows the Presidency to govern the area without having to involve decentralized actors, such as the municipalities or the ministries responsible for urban issues. Governmental bodies were created with the sole function of facilitating and accelerating the implementation of presidential decisions. In 2014, a decree ordered the creation of the “General delegation for the promotion of urban hubs” (“Délégation générale de promotion des pôles urbains” – DGPU). This body reports directly to the Presidency and is responsible for promoting and managing the UHD⁵³ while implementing presidential decisions.

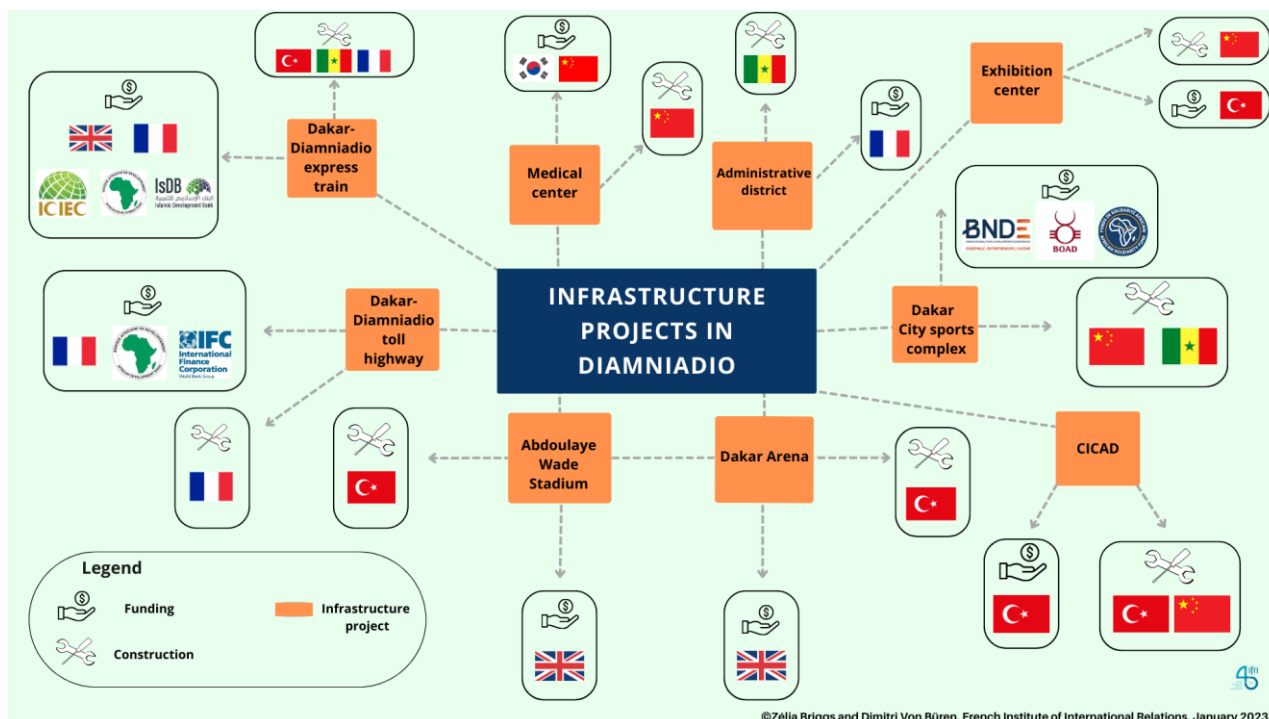
52. M. M. Diakhate, *L'aménagement du territoire au Sénégal : principes, pratiques et devoirs pour le XXI^e siècle*, p.108, *op. cit.*

53. The DGPU is in charge of the management and promotion of two urban hubs, namely the UHD and the Lac Rose urban hub.

The DGPU directly deals with investors wishing to acquire land and carry out projects within the boundaries of the UHD.

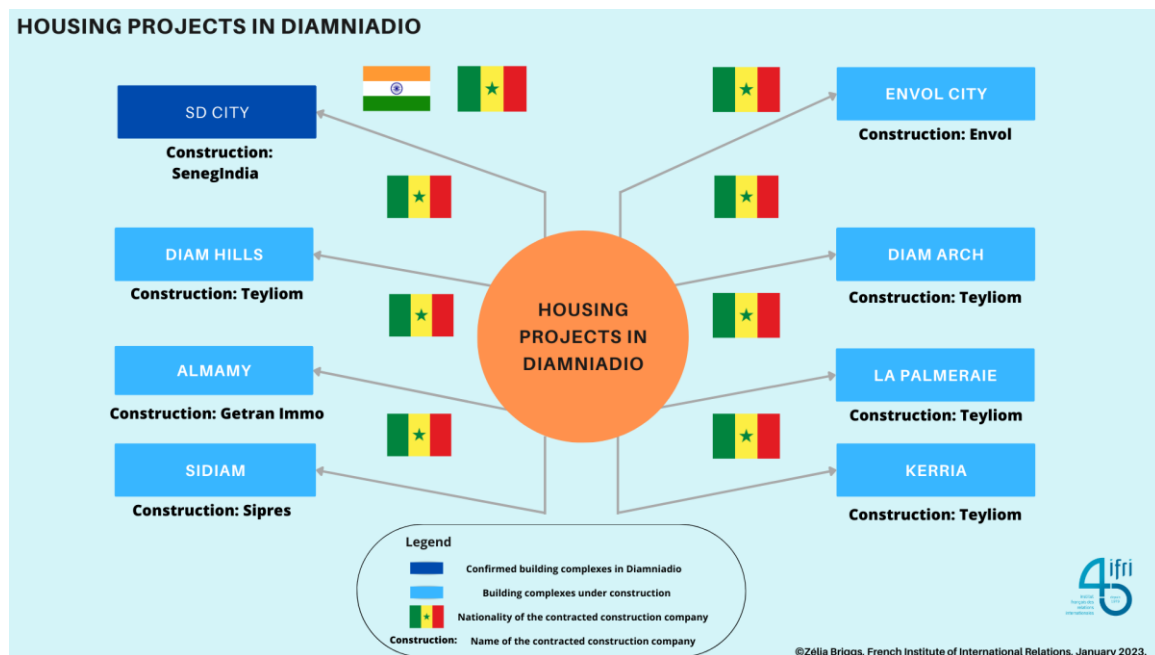
To achieve his main urban project, Macky Sall also surrounded himself with a variety of private and mostly international actors, who, in turn, represent a complex array of actors aiming to deploy their interests and expertise. An industrial park, located northwest of the UHD and financed by the China Export-Import Bank, has been built by the construction group CGC Overseas. French companies specializing in infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, are completing development plans and supporting the still unconfirmed “Smart City Diamniadio” initiative.⁵⁴ A significant amount of infrastructure has been financed, constructed, or at least brought to completion by Turkish actors. After constructing the first UHD building project, the Abdou Diouf International Conference Center, in only eleven months, the Turkish construction company Summa continued with other work in Diamniadio and created many of its largest buildings (see Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: UHD flagship infrastructure projects and their funding



54. “Smart Diamniadio : lancement de la plus grande ville nouvelle d’Afrique de l’Ouest”, *Tactis*, available at: www.tactis.fr.

Graph 6: Real estate projects in the community of Diamniadio



Turkey’s close involvement in the construction of superstructures in the UHD reflects its increasingly close relations with Senegal. Macky Sall and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regularly reaffirm their mutual interest in strengthening their economic partnership. Turkey is seen as a privileged partner that represents an attractive alternative to seeking support through complex relations with traditional partners.⁵⁵

Several results emerge from this analysis of the trajectory of development policies in Diamniadio, which can contribute to discussions of new cities in Senegal, as elsewhere. First, the case of Diamniadio allows us to nuance the claims made by discourses that present new cities as being isolated constructions built *ex nihilo*. The initiatives to transform the municipality of Diamniadio into a regional economic and urban hub date back at least to the end of the 1990s and constitute an urban policy trajectory of their own. These various land use planning projects have always been conceived in relation to the evolution of Dakar. It would therefore be wrong to view the UHD as an “instant city”, detached from its urban environment. Rather, this hub contributes to the ongoing dynamic of the metropolization of the Dakar region.

Ultimately, the project to build a new city in Diamniadio has been used, both by Abdoulaye Wade and then by Macky Sall, as a (geo)political instrument for attracting the interest of foreign investors and placing them in competition with one another, as well as for seeking the support of voters,

55. N. Ertürk, “La MAE sénégalaise, Sarr : ‘La Turquie est un partenaire privilégié du Sénégal’”, *Anadolu Agency*, March 15, 2022.

who are concentrated in the Dakar region.⁵⁶ The high priority given to urban projects around Diamniadio by both of these Presidents has resulted in a strong concentration of power over territorial planning within the Dakar region and, more broadly, around the image of the President. This presidentialism is manifested in a series of “major Head of State projects”, including the mega-infrastructure site constituted by the UHD. The sidelining of local government actors in the design and implementation of the UHD has had an impact on the way in which it is appropriated by the very citizens and consumers who are targeted by it.

Photo 2: International Exhibition Center in Diamniadio



© S. Schlimmer, 2022: preparation of the International Exhibition for Construction Materials and Machinery (June 16-18, 2022) at the Dakar Diamniadio Exhibition Center

56. Interview with a representative of an NGO, Dakar, June 8, 2022.

The Discontinuous Implementation of an Urban Fantasy

Almost ten years after the adoption of the decree related to the creation of the “new urban development hub of Diamniadio North toll highway”, the number of completed construction projects remains limited. Large infrastructure projects, such as the new, brightly colored, Abdoulaye Wade Stadium, the administrative district and the imposing United Nations House, are connected by tarmac roads. Between these scattered buildings, which are located several hundred meters apart, there are empty spaces and a few construction sites. People cover the distances between the different sites by driving (a car or motorcycle), and it is unusual to encounter pedestrians. Although there are buildings and road infrastructure, there is a glaring absence of inhabitants and social spaces – in other words, of daily urban life – which prevents the visitor from conceiving this somewhat austere landscape as a future bustling city. In this section, we return to the question of the limited degree of appropriation of the UHD. There are two main reasons for this: first, there is a discrepancy between the government’s broad urban vision and the social infrastructure needs of the city’s inhabitants; second, the forms of governance used and the transfer of authority for land use planning and allocation from local authorities to the central state have adversely affected the implementation of the UHD.

“The Head of State Put the Cart Before the Horse”:⁵⁷ Limited Local Appropriation

Since 2018, the administrative district in the UHD, and more specifically the area designated “Ministerial Sphere 2”, has been relatively busy from Monday to Friday between the hours of 8 am and 5 pm. To date, seven ministries have had to move their offices from Dakar to Diamniadio and eight more departments are expected to follow.⁵⁸ During the week, the Ministerial Sphere becomes the social and economic lungs of the UHD, during which time the ministerial staff, who mostly live in Dakar, work, consume and travel within the new city. The Sphere is equipped with a mini-mart, cafeterias, and

57. Interview with an agent working in the events sector in Diamniadio, June 13, 2022.

58. Interview with an officer of the company Société d’aménagement du foncier et de rénovation urbaine (SAFRU), June 8, 2022.

other service and retail spaces. In the late afternoon and on the weekends, the city goes back to being a ghost town.

Dakar – A Dormitory City for Public Servants in Diamniadio

The Senegalese government's decision to relocate part of the government administration to Diamniadio has been controversial:⁵⁹ the lack of convenient and affordable transportation is the first problem. Prior to the introduction of the new regional express train in 2021, linking Dakar with Diamniadio,⁶⁰ public officials had only two options, each with its own drawbacks. A free work bus was set up, which picks workers up from their homes, but it takes detours, leading to delays. Most of the staff therefore travel from Dakar to Diamniadio in their own private vehicles or by carpooling, but in doing so they face considerable costs. Meanwhile, the Diamniadio terminus for the regional express train still lacks a regular feeder transit system.⁶¹

The Difficulty of Creating Housing, Infrastructure and Urban Life

The issue of transportation is all the more important because the UHD does not offer housing of sufficient quality to encourage professionals from Dakar to move to Diamniadio. The lack of basic infrastructure (electricity, water, sanitation), but also of health and social services such as hospitals and schools,⁶² prevents these temporary users of the UHD from planning to move their primary residence from Dakar to Diamniadio.

The provision of social housing was central to the first promotional announcements made about the UHD. As an instrument for achieving the objectives of the PSE, the provision of housing targeted at less affluent social strata was initially integrated into plans for the UHD, as conceived by Macky Sall.⁶³ Today, the residential zone remains mostly uninhabited, and the few residential projects that do emerge tend to target the middle and upper classes. Despite the initial enthusiasm of real estate agencies and developers, few projects have been completed. Only the SenegIndia company, responsible for building the SD City residential complex opposite the ministerial sphere, has completed the first part of its project.

59. "Déménagement des ministères à Diamniadio : la Cnts demande des mesures d'accompagnement", *Le Quotidien*, July 2, 2018.

60. M. Ba, "Sénégal : le TER, cadeau de Noël de Macky Sall", *Jeune Afrique*, December 27, 2022.

61. The company Dakar Dem Dikk provides travel connections between the TER terminus in Diamniadio and the various UHD sites, especially on weekdays.

62. Interview with a senior officer of SAFRU, Dakar, June 8, 2022.

63. Even in the development projects promoted by the government of Abdoulaye Wade, the provision of social housing was an important aspect: 400,000 inhabitants were supposed to be housed within the Diamniadio platform.

This company made sure to install basic infrastructure by itself (electricity, water, sanitation) in order to offer its clients suitable living conditions. Nevertheless, most of these apartments are not inhabited. Some units are rented occasionally during events (sporting events, conferences, etc.) in Diamniadio, while others have been purchased by foreigners or by members of the Senegalese diaspora who do not reside locally.⁶⁴

Both the lack of public infrastructure and the difficulty of building in this area – since the soil of Diamniadio is composed of swelling clay, which leads to higher construction costs – have discouraged some real estate companies. As one real estate agent explained: “Diamniadio is a ghost town. At first, we were all excited about investing in the new urban hub. But today, if you want to eventually complete your project, you need a lot of money.”⁶⁵ This critical reaction underscores the doubt and disillusionment that surround the potential of the UHD project to offer a concrete urban alternative.

The discrepancy between, on the one hand, the construction of mega infrastructures and, on the other hand, the low level of appropriation of the urban site by public officials and property owners raises questions about the future of the UHD. The transfer of certain ministries was the first attempt to incite people to move to Diamniadio. The opening of the United Nations House, which is supposed to bring together all 1,800 agents from some thirty UN agencies currently based in Dakar, belongs to the same approach. The lack of housing, schools and social life corresponding to the standards expected by staff employed in international diplomacy is causing a strong reluctance on the part of expatriates to settle in the UHD, who are therefore considering alternative options.⁶⁶

Although the relocation of national and international administrations is aimed at encouraging some of the population of Dakar to settle in Diamniadio, it has so far had the opposite effect: Diamniadio was designed to avoid the dormitory effect that exists between the peri-urban and central areas of Dakar, but the capital has instead become a “bedroom” for public agents whose workplace is located in Diamniadio.

The limited local appropriation of the UHD is not only manifested in the low level of consumption of urban services within its boundaries. It must also be studied in terms of the relations between the UHD and actors in the neighboring municipalities, on which the territory of the UHD was imposed. These relations are characterized by strong uncertainties regarding governance and by tensions over access to land.

64. Interview with an agent of the company SenegIndia, Dakar, June 16, 2022.

65. Interview with an agent of the real estate company Sipres, Dakar, June 16, 2022.

66. One option being considered is residing on the coast in Saly and traveling back and forth between Diamniadio and Saly. Interview with a United Nations staff member, Dakar, June 15, 2022.

Decentralization vs. the Prerogatives of the Central State: Governance and Land Issues

Both the status of the UHD as a political and administrative entity and its relationship with the surrounding municipalities remain unclear. The actions of the government, in defining an area of 1,644 hectares to be subject to public development, resulted in administratively isolating the urban hub. Decision-making power in matters of land use planning then fell to the central government and, more specifically, to the Presidency, represented by the DGPU.

A City Without a Local Authority? The Difficult Question of UHD Governance

The local municipalities do not have authority over development activities and especially land allocation in the area that was claimed by the central government. It falls to the DGPU, acting on behalf of the President of the Republic, to receive, examine and decide on investment projects submitted to the urban hub. Other independent structures representing the vision of the Head of State, such as the “Company for the management of public infrastructure of the urban hubs of Diamniadio and Lac Rose” (“Société de gestion des infrastructures publiques des pôles urbains de Diamniadio et du Lac Rose” – SOGIP), in charge of coordinating public infrastructure, and the “Agency for the management of the State’s property and buildings” (“Agence de gestion du patrimoine et du bâti de l’État”), which is responsible for the Ministerial Sphere, are involved in the decision-making process and contribute to the overlapping of responsibilities.

This administrative isolation, combined with the recentralization of power over land use management, has led to political confusion, but also to social tensions, particularly over access to and control of land. Actors from the municipalities and civil society complain that they have not been involved in key decisions regarding the implementation of the UHD.⁶⁷ These choices include, for example, defining the territorial boundaries of the hub, but also discussions about the administrative and political status of the hub and its relationship with the surrounding municipalities. Municipal leaders report a state of uncertainty about their functions and responsibilities. The UHD extends over part of their former territories, and so it is not clear, for example, which body is responsible for collecting taxes and fees, especially

67. This information is based on several interviews with representatives of associations and the political youth movement “Y en a marre” [“We’ve had enough”], conducted on June 16 and 17, 2022 in Bargny and Dakar respectively.

those from the activities of various foreign companies, part of which should go back to the municipalities.⁶⁸

Then there is the question of political representation and the institutional structure within the UHD. Does a new city require the creation of a full-fledged municipality? Once the DGPU's mission is completed, what administrative and political status will the new city have? Ten years after the launch of the UHD project, the issue of the political representation of citizens who live, work, and move within the urban hub remains an open question. As an official of the municipality of Diamniadio points out: "the citizens – although they are also voters – have no political access to the urban hub, since it has no local authority!"⁶⁹ The political structure of the UHD is thus still undetermined. In 2018, the DGPU commissioned a legal expert who had circulated in international organizations to write a report identifying different possible governance models for this new city. Several proposals were then formulated. These included: 1) the formation of a joint administration in which responsibilities would be divided between different municipalities; 2) a collective approach where the existing local authorities would share all functions; and 3) the creation of a brand-new local authority exclusively in charge of the UHD. Four years after the report was submitted to the DGPU, no decision has been made yet. Like many construction projects in the UHD, the issue of governance is still pending.

Multiple Land Issues

The strengthening of the institution and powers of the Presidency can also be seen in the land sector, which is central to this urban project.⁷⁰ Authority for managing and allocating land, which has been a prerogative of local authorities since the adoption of the decentralization policy, has once again been handed to the central state, in whose name the land is registered.⁷¹ The distribution of land titles to investors, who pay the state a symbolic sum of CFAF 270 (currently €0.41) per square meter per year, is managed exclusively by the DGPU under the direct supervision of the Presidency. All proposals involving the transfer of more than 2,500 hectares of land require direct approval by the President himself.

Since the announcement of the UHD project, which created an expectation that land values would rise, transactions and speculation in the surrounding areas have proliferated.⁷² The implementation of the UHD and

68. Interview with an agent of the Bargny municipality, June 17, 2022.

69. Interview with an agent of the Diamniadio municipality, June 14, 2022.

70. S. Schlimmer, "Gouverner les villes africaines : panorama des enjeux et perspectives", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, February 2022, available at: www.ifri.org.

71. Republic of Senegal, "Décret 2014-968 du 19 août 2014", Dakar, 2014.

72. P. Lavigne Delville and A. Sow, "La ville nouvelle de Diamniadio (Sénégal)" in: B. Bon, E. Denis and C. Simonneau, *Conversions ordinaires des usages des sols liées à l'urbanisation dans les Suds : habitation, capitalisation, mutations de l'agriculture. Volume 2. Études de cas*, Paris: Comité technique Foncier & développement, pp. 36-44.

the imposition of new boundaries have revived disputes over land between municipalities, particularly between Bargny and Diamniadio. Although the leaders of Bargny had previously complained about the expansion of the neighboring municipality of Diamniadio into their territory since the creation of the latter,⁷³ these tensions have increased since the emergence of the UHD project. To address these conflicts, the administrative boundaries of the municipalities concerned were redrawn and consolidated by presidential decree.⁷⁴ This imposition of new municipal boundaries is another example of top-down administrative decision-making in Diamniadio.

There is also an increasing number of conflicts over land in the southeast of the UHD between investors with projects along the border of the zone and landowners from the neighboring municipality of Bargny. The latter are claiming land rights along this part of the border of the urban hub.⁷⁵

In addition to border disputes, expropriations have occurred within the boundaries of the UHD to allow for the project's implementation. Research shows that land within the project site was used prior to the demarcation of the UHD boundaries. The land, which was formerly used for seasonal agriculture, and cultivated according to customary norms by farmers of the Bargny municipality, had already been the subject of allotment schemes and land titles had been approved and granted. Yet following the creation of the UHD by decree, this land became inaccessible both to the title holders and to the farmers.

The insecurity of access to land by the inhabitants of the surrounding municipalities, in a context where land speculation and investment are becoming an attractive economic activity, is a central issue in the implementation of the UHD. Not only is this land market intertwined with political and economic interests, but it also reflects socioeconomic inequalities between, on the one hand, the inhabitants of the municipalities and, on the other hand, investors and speculators.

This centrality of land issues dominates the tasks of officers of the DGPU. The mediation and resolution of these tensions are at the core of the day-to-day operations of its teams, whose offices – ironically enough – are located in Dakar and not in Diamniadio.

Finally, these land issues feed into the question of the governance of the UHD. By transferring land from four municipalities to the control of the state, central government actors – and the Presidency in particular – have

73. The creation of the municipality of Diamniadio in 2002 resulted from an administrative division of the municipality of Bargny (created in 1981) and involved the transfer of part of the latter's territory.

74. A draft decree was prepared in 2021 with the aim of redrawing and establishing the administrative and territorial boundaries of several municipalities, including the municipality of Diamniadio.

75. Interview with an agent of the DGPU, Diamniadio, June 14, 2022.

gained primary decision-making power over the urban hub, while the municipalities have lost their authority over land management and administration.

The implementation of the UHD initiative has been plagued by delivery delays, a lack of transparency,⁷⁶ top-down decision-making and a low level of appropriation of the project by the population, temporary visitors and residents of neighboring municipalities. While there are many variables in this discontinuous process of implementation, governance issues are a key factor. The implementation of the UHD depends on decisions made within the presidential circle, which seems to prioritize links with the private sector, and particularly foreign actors, to the detriment of the participation of local municipalities and populations.

76. Interviews with several private actors regarding market allocation.

Conclusion

New cities are trending, and not only on the African continent. From Dakar to Dubai, governments are competing against one another to propose futuristic urban projects with ever more extravagant infrastructures. Among African countries, Senegal is one of the promoters of this urban approach, of which the most recent iteration – the announcement of Akon City by the Senegalese-American singer Akon – has attracted a great deal of discussion.⁷⁷ This craze for urban infrastructure megaprojects in Africa is driven by the circulation of ideas, models (of urban planning and architecture) and expertise from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, but also from other countries in the sub-region. The new cities effectively constitute an interface between national territories and the international economy.

Despite this internationalization of urban planning, new city projects must be analyzed in light of national political issues. Far from being technical and neutral devices, these initiatives are political instruments attached to certain interests and ideas.⁷⁸ For the academic Aly S. Timera, the promotion of urban hubs marks a new generation of urban planning in Senegal, born from a strong political will to break with the colonial legacy.⁷⁹ This political interest is reflected in top-down decision-making concentrated around the President and the central state. The territorial and administrative demarcation of the UHD, the removal of land from the municipalities and the creation of specific management bodies were all brought about by decree and only marginally involving the concerned communities. The construction of this new city is the continuation of a series of “major Head of State projects” that began during the presidential terms of Abdoulaye Wade and emphasize the person and power of the President. Fremke van Noorloos and Marjan Kloosterboer argue that new city projects are more likely to be promoted in countries with authoritarian regimes.⁸⁰ While the relevance of this concept in the Senegalese case may be debatable, the policy of new cities is consistent with the hyper-presidentialization of that regime.

While the UHD is essentially a presidential project, central government actors – primarily the Ministry of Urban Planning – are aiming to develop some thirty additional urban hubs, based on an approach that is in theory more inclusive, starting with the Daga Kholpa hub. Through these urban

77. R. Ade, “Akon City toujours au point mort”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 22, 2022.

78. On instruments of public action in Africa, see: P. Lavigne Delville and S. Schlimmer, “Saisir l’action publique en Afrique à travers les instruments. Avant-propos”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, Vol. 27, Nos. 2-3, 2020, pp. 9-32.

79. Interview conducted in Dakar, June 7, 2022.

80. F. van Noorloos and M. Kloosterboer, “Africa’s New Cities: The Contested Future of Urbanisation”, *op. cit.*

infrastructure projects, the Senegalese government is seeking not only to consolidate its territorial state power, but also to forge links with new partners (Turkey, Gulf States, China, etc.). As such, these new cities must be considered as eminently (geo)political projects.

Finally, in light of the close connection between the UHD and President Sall's political platform, and given the unfinished state of this urban megaproject, many Senegalese, including government experts, are wondering what the future of this new city will be after his second presidential term comes to an end (in 2024). Although Macky Sall has not officially announced that he will not seek a third term, there is uncertainty about the sustainability of the UHD and the political support for it. This study shows, however, that the UHD represents the continuation of a series of territorial development and infrastructure projects planned for Diamniadio since the late 1990s. While the urban hub bears the political imprint of Macky Sall, the seeds of the project were sown even before the first term of his predecessor Abdoulaye Wade. Political interest in this strategic territory will undoubtedly persist through future presidential terms. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the label of "new city" will be retained to refer to future urban ventures in Diamniadio.



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