A Critical Analysis of Sustainable Urbanism and Governance Dynamics: The Case of Zenâta Eco-City in Morocco

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Abstract

The Zenâta Eco-City project stands as a significant example of contemporary sustainable urbanism in Morocco, situated within a neoliberal governance framework and drawing inspiration from development models of Northern countries. It illuminates the tensions between international standards and local socio-spatial contexts, highlighting the challenges of integrating social, economic, and environmental dimensions within the Global South. Positioned within the paradigm of project-based urbanism, Zenâta seeks to address the shortcomings of traditional urban planning, which often struggles with delays, resource shortages, and inefficiencies. The shift in terminology from "new town" to "eco-city" reflects a deliberate effort to distinguish Zenâta from earlier, less successful urban developments, aiming to position it within the growing global market for sustainable cities. This rebranding is further reinforced by the involvement of international funding institutions such as the AFD and the World Bank, whose support is contingent on the project meeting sustainability criteria. However, the process raises critical concerns regarding governance, particularly the exclusion of local stakeholders from the decision-making process. This paper examines Zenâta through the lens of the three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) focusing on the project's potential to promote social justice and redefine urban governance practices. It offers insights into the broader implications of large-scale urban developments, analyzing their impacts on territories and communities while ultimately questioning their capacity to balance competitiveness with social equity.

Keywords

Sustainability, Zenâta Eco-city, urban governance, local resistance,

1. Introduction and background, From urban projects to neoliberal urban planning

In Morocco, urban development has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades, reflecting a major paradigm shift in the way cities are designed and managed. Traditional instruments of strategic urban planning[1] are losing their central role in favor of an operational approach based on the implementation of large-scale urban projects[2]. This change is part of a context in which Moroccan cities must respond to sustained demographic pressures, rapid urbanization and a growing demand for international competitiveness. The Zenâta ecocity project, located near Casablanca, is an interesting illustration of this dynamic. Considered as one of Morocco's showcases for urban innovation and sustainability, it is part of a national strategy for economic and territorial repositioning.

[1] Traditional methods of urban action were (and still are) carried out through urban planning, using regulatory tools (i.e., PA Development Plans, SDAU Urban Development Master Plan, PDAR and other regulatory mechanisms, etc.), where the main actor is the State with all its departments involved in urban action (namely: urban agencies, ministries, whether for housing and urban policy, urban planning and land use, or the Ministry of the Interior via the wilayas, prefectures, and municipalities concerned, etc.).
[2] Although this concept of a project has become increasingly popular with the advent of the 21st century, particularly in Morocco, it first appeared in the discourse and practices of urban policy actors in northern countries around the 1970s (Ingallina, 2002, 2009), reflecting socio-economic and political contexts marked by the first breaks with "spatial Keynesianism/welfare state" and the rise of the neoliberal city (Brenner, 2004, Pinson, 2021).

The Société d'Aménagement de Zenâta (SAZ) [3], a subsidiary of the Caisse de Dépôt et de Gestion (CDG), is leading this project, whose ambition goes beyond the simple creation of an urbanized space: it aims to create a new metropolitan center, a laboratory for "southern ecology," and a tool for territorial marketing. Yet, behind the image of modernity it conveys, this type of project raises many questions about the relevance of imported models, governance mechanisms, and socio-spatial equity.

Urban studies researchers have extensively analyzed this shift in urban planning. Pinson (2006) highlights the decline of planning mechanisms, which are often unable to keep pace with rapid urban transformation and are dominated by private interests. Cattedra (2010) highlights the rise of new operational structures (holdings, semi-public companies, and ad hoc companies) that combine planning, land acquisition, and fundraising functions. Finally, Harvey (2005) and Brenner & Theodore (2002) place these developments in the broader context of neoliberal urbanism, characterized by the financialization of projects, the quest for attractiveness, and the transformation of cities into competitive showcases.

The case of Zenâta is paradigmatic in two ways. On the one hand, it demonstrates the rise of urban projects as instruments of governance and spatial production in Morocco. On the other hand, it illustrates the tensions inherent in the application of global sustainability standards in local contexts marked by significant socioeconomic constraints. The "ecocity," conceived as a valuable label, attracts international funding (AFD, EIB)[4], but its operationalization reveals major contradictions: financial fragility, ecological contradictions, and social protests.

This analysis therefore aims to show that project-based urban planning, although it constitutes a response to the limitations of traditional planning, cannot be considered a neutral or universal solution. On the contrary, its deployment in Southern countries, particularly in Morocco, crystallizes issues of governance, spatial justice, and contextual adaptation, which call into question the real sustainability of the models being promoted.

2. Methodology

This article is a continuation of a doctoral thesis on the Zenâta eco-city, which gives it a solid empirical foundation. The methodological approach adopted consisted of three complementary stages:

- Literature review: An in-depth bibliographic analysis was conducted to situate the concept of the sustainable city in its theoretical and critical dimensions. It drew on work on the circulation of international sustainability standards (Theys, Emelianoff, Hamman, Latouche, Navez-Bouchanine, Barthel, etc.) and highlighted the tensions between globalized discourse and local realities, particularly in the context of Southern countries.
- Collection and analysis of documents: A diverse corpus of documents relating to the Zenâta project has been compiled: impact studies, development plans and schemes, technical reports, institutional brochures, communication materials and press articles. These materials were complemented by field visits, surveys and diagrams carried out in situ in order to understand the project in its spatial, social and symbolic dimensions
- Field survey: semi structured, and Open interviews conducted with institutional actors (such as development companies, local authorities, designers), former residents affected by the project, representatives of associations, and families relocated to the resettlement neighborhood. These testimonies, compared to institutional and media discourse, reveal the gap between stated intentions and actual experiences reflecting the specific tensions to the local context.

By combining documentary research, critical analysis, and empirical investigation, the methodology doesn't aim to evaluate the sustainability of the project: It rather questions how urban sustainability is translated, implemented, and appropriated in a context marked by strong socio-spatial constraints.

[3] The creation of these new structures, such as the SAZ in the case of Zenâta, makes it possible to centralize the completion of studies, the recovery of land through declarations of public utility and royal intervention, and the search for financing through public-private partnerships.

[4] Fundings received from the French Development Agency (AFD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB)

3. Results and discussions:

This paper proposes to examine the foundations and limitations of this new project-based urban development through an analysis of Zenâta, questioning three dimensions that constitute the paradigm of sustainable development:

- the economic pillar, where the tension between the ambition for competitiveness and the fragility of profitability plays out;
- the environmental pillar, which highlights the gaps between ecological discourse and contextual realities;
- the social pillar, which reveals conflicts of appropriation, political realignments, and the risk of gentrification.

3.1. The economic pillar: between the promise of centrality and uncertainties of profitability

The Zenâta eco-city project is part of a broader effort to rebalance the spatial and economic landscape of Greater Casablanca. For several decades, urban expansion and metropolitan dynamics have been largely polarized by the southwestern part of the agglomeration, leaving the east in a position of relative marginality, marked by the predominance of polluting industrial activities, the massive presence of informal neighborhoods, and a glaring lack of infrastructure and structural facilities. The 2008 Master Plan for Urban Development (SDAU) had already identified Zenâta as a strategic hub intended to boost the dynamics of the east and correct these imbalances. The creation of a new economic and urban center was thus to be accompanied by the redistribution of metropolitan functions and an increase in the attractiveness of the area.

in this context, the SAZ has defined a development strategy focused on of four high value-added activity poles (such as commercial, educational, logistic and healthcare), considered growth engines capable of attracting both national and international investment, generating skilled jobs, and strengthening Casablanca's position in the global economy. The project is thus part of a strategy of specialization and territorial competitiveness, in line with trends observed in many emerging cities where major urban projects serve primarily as tools for urban marketing and international repositioning.

However, while the ambition to give the region a new economic center is undeniable, the financial viability of the project raises several questions. From the early stages of implementation, land acquisition and the construction of basic infrastructure have consumed a considerable portion of the available resources. According to SAZ data, more than three-quarters of the initial budget was absorbed by these operations[5], leaving little margin for the development of facilities, strategic hubs, and residential areas intended to ensure long-term profitability. This situation reveals a classic discrepancy in the management of large-scale urban projects: the priority given to land acquisition and infrastructure, although essential, generates additional costs that undermine the rest of the process. Added to this is a marked dependence on international financing. The Zenâta eco-city benefited from a joint loan of €300 million from the French Development Agency (AFD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) over the period 2013-2018, intended to cover initial expenses[6]. While this financial support attests to the project's credibility on the international stage, it also reflects a high degree of outsourcing of the budgetary burden and vulnerability to the conditions imposed by donors. As Harvey (2005) has shown, the financialization of urban projects, characteristic of neoliberal regimes, often places cities in the Global South in a position of dependency, where attractiveness and compliance with global standards determine access to resources.
In the case of Zenâta, the project's designation as an "ecocity"[7] was decisive in justifying this funding. However, this dependence reveals a paradox: sustainability is mobilized not so much as an intrinsic goal of transformation, but as an argument for legitimizing and capturing capital. This logic highlights a structural fragility: the financial balance of the project depends on its ability to continuously attract investment and increase land value through speculation. However, in a context marked by volatile real estate markets and competition from private developers, this profitability remains uncertain.

[5] For the SAZ, the total investment amounts to MAD 21 billion, of which nearly 50% is for land and 25% for primary and secondary development works.
[6] The project has also been awarded a grant of €300,000 (AFD, 2013) and a grant of €4 million from the European Commission under the Neighbourhood Investment Facility.
[7] The Zenâta project has been awarded the "Eco City Label" (ECL) by Cerway (HQE certification body) for its standards (based on six founding principles: naturalness, proximity, optimization, flexibility, co-development, and diversity).

The economic analysis of the project thus identifies several limitations. First, since most of the resources were absorbed upstream, the project's budgetary sustainability is threatened. Second, dependence on international donors places urban governance under external influence, reducing local flexibility. Thirdly, the economic foundation of the project is based on the logic of specialized hubs which, while it may enhance attractiveness, also risks creating a functional enclave that is difficult to integrate into the surrounding urban fabric. These observations echo a more general criticism of large neoliberal urban projects in the Global South: they tend to prioritize showcase and competitiveness at the expense of long-term economic profitability that is truly rooted in and adapted to local needs. As Brenner and Theodore (2002) have pointed out, urban projects thus become instruments of territorial reconfiguration subject to globalized market imperatives, without always guaranteeing the redistribution of benefits at the local level.

3.2. The environmental pillar: between overt ecology and structural contradictions

One of the central aspects of the communication strategy of the Zenâta eco-city project lies in the environmental argument. indeed, the SAZ promote the project as a pioneering experiment of sustainable urban planning, emphasizing the adoption of a so-called "Southern ecology" approach, meant to reflect an adaptation to local cultural and climatic specificities. This strategy reflects a global patten in which ecology functions simultaneously as a legitimizing discourse and a tool for city marketing. here, the "eco" label become a decisive factor in capturing the attention of international lenders (AFD, EIB), seduced by a discourse combining sustainability and innovation.

The announced sustainable measures reflect a clear desire to reconcile urban development with environmental protection. Among the most dominant are the installation of an oblique air circulation system designed to optimize natural ventilation and generate cool spots, the allocation of around 30% of the territory to green spaces, the promotion of collective and soft mobility (public transport, cycle paths, pedestrian walkways), and the recovery of rainwater via a system of retention basins. These strategies mark a difference with traditional models of sprawling, energy-intensive urbanization in favor of a more sustainable and resilient city. Yet, a critical analysis reveals significant contradictions. In particular, the use of an air duct system which raises questions considering Zenâta's actual climate. In fact, Zenata being located on the Atlantic coast, the area enjoys a temperate Mediterranean climate. The direction of the prevailing winds (northeast) is therefore likely to increase heating requirements during the cold seasons, making the "climate ecology" argument less relevant than announced. In other words, a system designed to reduce energy consumption could, paradoxically, contribute to increasing it.

At the same time, the importance given to green spaces raises questions in a national context marked by a structural scarcity of water resources. Maintaining 30% of green spaces requires regular irrigation, even though Morocco is facing recurrent episodes of drought and increasing water stress. This contradiction illustrates the limitations of an approach to ecology that focuses on urban forms and symbolic landscaping rather than adaptation to actual environmental constraints. Another issue concerns the quality of the planned green spaces and vegetated areas. Furthermore, there is also the question of the actual quality of the planned green spaces. A large part of these vegetated areas seems to serve as a landscape belt, creating "green" contours around the eco-neighborhood in order to separate it from the working-class neighborhoods of Aïn Sebaâ to the west, the industrial areas to the east, and the highway to the south. In addition, some green spaces with an emblematic design, such as the central park in the middle of the ecocity district, appear as a vast area of planted grass, dominated by ornamental species (especially maple), with very little shade offering trees with dense foliage. This configuration raises doubts about the long-term ecological viability of these landscape choices in a semi-arid climate, as well as their effectiveness in bringing environmental and social comfort to the inhabitants.

Fig. 1. Central Park of the Zenâta ecocity. Source. Sports fields and playground, https://www.facebook.com/EcoCiteZenata

A comparison between the initial master plan designed by the Urban planners and the approved version highlights a retreat from some eco-design principles initially announced. Whereas the first draft emphasized the harmonious integration of urban functions and a limitation of residential density and motorized mobility, the final version reflects increased densification and classical zoning: relocation and resettlement areas are relegated to the periphery, as are industrial activities. This configuration reinforces the spatial separation between the heart of the eco-city, reserved for valued functions (commerce, services, health, education), and the peripheral areas that accommodate expropriated populations or activities deemed less attractive (industrial activities, logistics, resettled population).

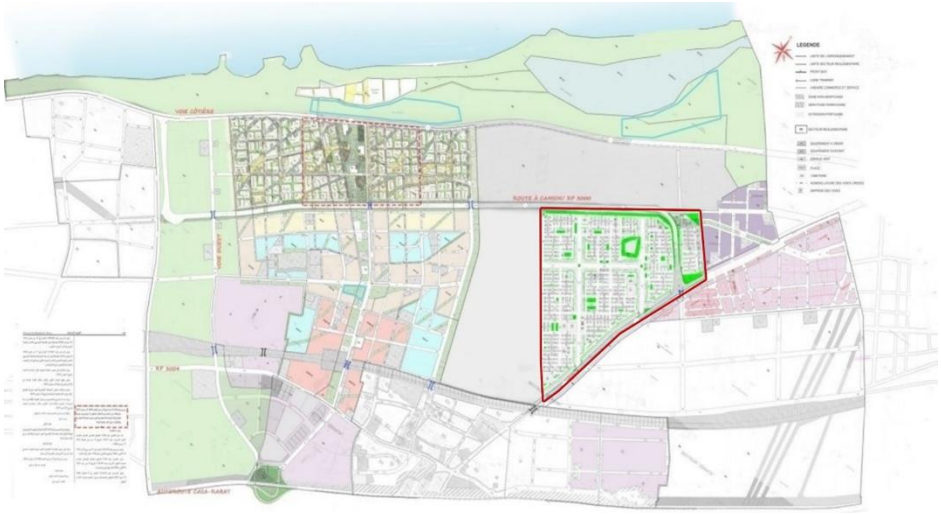

Fig. 2. Development Plan of the Zenata ecocity, Location of the Jnane Zenâta resettlement neighborhood. Source : SAZ Zenata Development company

This situation raises another concern: far from limiting uncontrolled urban growth, the project risks having a powerful pull effect. By densifying Zenâta and equipping it with modern infrastructure, it increases its capacity to accommodate new arrivals, at the risk of triggering new waves of migration to the metropolis. However, without land control and robust regulatory mechanisms, this dynamic could increase demographic pressure on the eastern part of Casablanca and generate additional congestion, contradicting the initial objective of territorial rebalancing.

The Zenâta experience thus highlights a structural ambiguity in neoliberal urban projects in the Global South: sustainability is mobilized as a discursive reference point, but its concrete translation remains largely dependent on land, financial, and political constraints. In practice, "Southern ecology" appears more as a tool for symbolic differentiation, intended to attract donors and investors, than as a genuine strategy for adapting to local realities. This instrumentalization of environmental discourse illustrates what some authors call "imported sustainability": a transposition of global models without sufficient adjustment to contextual constraints, with the effect of reproducing the limitations of Western paradigms in already fragile environments.

3.3. The social pillar: resettlement, protests, and gentrification dynamics

Whereas the environmental and economic dimensions of the Zenâta eco-city project reveal significant tensions, it is above all on the social level that the most marked complexity lies. From the first phases of the project, the designers' intention was to integrate the most vulnerable populations and give priority to their relocation in situ. This requirement, imposed by international donors, was intended to ensure and respect the social dimension of the project. However, managing this issue quickly proved to be delicate and inevitably led to strong protests. Initially, the SAZ conducted impact studies on the affected populations, carried out a sweep and identified four main categories of groups concerned: slum dwellers, shack dwellers, industrialists based on the site and landowners. Each of these categories benefited from specific compensation or resettlement measures. Slum dwellers, who made up the vast majority (nearly 86% of households identified during the 2014 survey), were the first to be targeted by the measures.

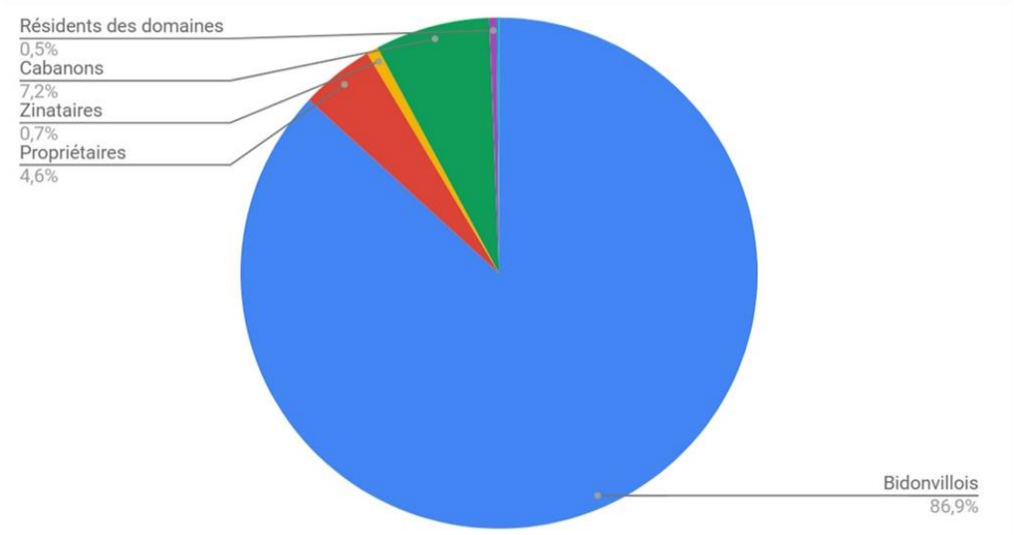

Fig. 3. Percentage of resident households affected by the project. Source: Environmental and Social Impact Assessment of the New Town of ZENATA, October 2014

The initial strategy was based on relocation programs led by Dyar Al Mansour, offering apartments at a price of around 100,000 dirhams, which was considered too high and sparked massive protests. In response to this resistance, an alternative was put in place: the allocation of 80 m² plots to two households under the "third party partner" scheme, on a 142-hectare land base taken from the overall project and equipped with basic infrastructure (roads, green spaces, local amenities). Although imperfect, this mechanism proved to be relatively innovative, as it enabled marginalized families to participate directly in the construction of their homes. To this end, a one-stop shop, created by the SAZ, centralized administrative procedures and facilitated access to technical experts.

The industrialists, for their part, were relocated to a new 78-hectare business park specially developed for them. Finally, the landowners, representing about 70% of the land base, declared themselves to be the most aggrieved, as the compensation offered was considered to be well below the real value of their land.

Social unrest, conflictual governance, and the proliferation of slums

Although the SAZ initially promoted a participatory approach (through communication campaigns and public meetings) social mobilizations intensified, prompting the SAZ to restrict the dissemination of information and favor vertical governance models, which increased the mistrust of residents and advocacy groups. On the other hand, the resettlement policy has contributed to exacerbating the very phenomenon it sought to address: the proliferation of slums and informal settlements. The project's announcement and the expectations of land distribution attracted new households living in precarious conditions to Zenâta in the hope of benefiting from the program. Thus, while the 2012 sweep operation had identified approximately 7,000 slum households, this figure tripled in a decade to reach 21,000 in 2022. This dynamic illustrates the pull effect generated by media coverage of the project and reveals insufficient management of its social dimension.

Another explanation for this proliferation lies in the central role assigned to the SAZ, which had the effect of sidelining traditional actors in urban development, particularly local authorities and elected officials. With expanded powers, legitimized by royal support and a declaration of public utility, the SAZ adopted a technocratic approach, mobilizing international consultants while marginalizing local elites. This top-down governance accentuated the feeling of exclusion among local political actors, who sought to reassert their role by other means. Elected officials thus found a political opportunity in the proliferation of slums: residents of precarious neighborhoods represent a strategic electoral base, and their demands offer useful mobilization capital in public debate. As a result, even residents of slums located outside Zenâta's land base were involved in political mobilization and promises, in the hope of future integration into the project. This interplay of actors further complicated the situation and highlighted the tensions between urban planning ambitions, technocratic governance, and local political issues.

4. Critical conclusion: between modernization and social contradictions

The study of the Zenâta eco-city project thus provides an insight into the profound transformations affecting urban development in the Global South in the era of neoliberalism. By mobilizing the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social) Zenâta appears to be an emblematic laboratory for this "project-based urbanization," centered on autonomous development companies, international financing, and sustainability discourse. Beyond the case of Zenâta, this analysis reveals the strengths and limitations of project based urban development in the context of Southern countries:

Positive aspects of the project	Negative aspects of the project
Acceleration of decision-making processes thanks to autonomous structures (SAZ) capable of overcoming bureaucratic obstacles.	Excessive dependence on donors, leading to the financialization of projects and vulnerability to fluctuations in international capital
Ability to attract international funding by mobilizing sustainability benchmarks.	Marginalization of local actors, exacerbating social and political tensions.
Introduction of conceptual innovations that promote contextualized solutions.	Instrumentalization of sustainability as an urban marketing tool, to the detriment of real social and environmental justice.
Implementation of innovative administrative mechanisms (one-stop shop, third-party partners) to facilitate resettlement procedures.	Increased risk of gentrification and eviction of the most vulnerable populations, exacerbating socio-spatial inequalities.

Fig. 4. Strengths and limitations of project-based urban development in the context of Southern countries, the case of the Zenâta eco-city

Ultimately, this project illustrates the ambivalence of urban development by projects in the Global South. It demonstrates a desire for modernization and integration into the networks of urban globalization, but at the cost of undermining social balances and increasing dependence on donors. The city, conceived as a high value-added product, thus tends to detach itself from its primary function: to be an inclusive space guaranteeing the right to urbanity for all its inhabitants. The Zenâta experience therefore invites us to revisit the fundamental question posed by Lefebvre (1967): who owns the city? If urban development continues to prioritize competitiveness and attractiveness at the expense of equity and inclusion, there is a high risk that, under the guise of sustainability, the same inequalities that it claims to be correct will be reproduced

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