

Urban Regeneration Practices in Developing Countries: The Case of Libreville, Gabon

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, urban regeneration projects have become important intervention mechanisms in European and American cities. They deal with improving urban areas which are decaying as a result of physical and social problems and disinvestment. In the past four decades, the consequences of these urban regeneration projects have been closely studied and their limitations have been made public by academics publishing their studies throughout the world. These studies have revealed that in order to initiate successful urban regeneration projects, rather than top-down implementations, more inclusive and participatory projects should be implemented. It is also acknowledged as an important fact that tourism-led urban regeneration projects should incorporate the themes of authenticity and local culture by including the local community and their actors in the process. While most of the documented research has focused on the developed countries' experiences, there are relatively few studies which examine the case studies in the developing countries of the African continent. In the case of Libreville in Gabon, urban regeneration which incorporates urban tourism and authenticity appears to be one of the solutions that will allow the local community to both manage finances and structurally improve urban spaces and structures. Therefore, the present study analyses the King's Bay waterfront regeneration project in Libreville, completed in August 2022, with reference to public participation and authenticity via online surveys which were conducted with the local community. A total of 1,009 surveys were answered by the locals, with the results revealing that despite the huge literature produced by scholars in other parts of the world, in the more singular King's Bay urban regeneration project authoritarian and top-down approaches of the local authorities were observed by ignoring the local community's views with reference to public participation. Accordingly, this article discusses the consequences of this approach by disclosing the survey results.

Keywords: Africa, heritage, urban regeneration, public participation

Introduction

Urban regeneration is defined as a vision of comprehensive actions that solve problems in urban areas while bringing about improvements in the economic, social, environmental, and physical fields (Thomas, 2003). It is a process by which the physical, social, environmental, and economic aspects of an urban area undergo momentous changes. The concept of urban regeneration has been widely studied by scholars within America and Europe since the 1980s. This is because the countries of these regions were the forerunners of early urban regeneration projects. The mistakes, failures and consequences of these projects have been extensively documented, with the lessons that should be learned being carefully listed by researchers, shedding light on the implementations of public authorities in other parts of the world (Leary and McCarthy, 2013). An important conclusion of these studies is that the public participation and inclusion of the local community is essential in fostering successful urban regeneration projects rather than the top-down approaches of public authorities. Another extensive worldwide consequence of urban regeneration policies is the lack of context-based approaches, which leads to copy-and-paste projects that produce the same 'clone cities' throughout the world. This has led to 'packaged landscapes' which ignore the heritage and authenticity of the localities and communities. In this article, a waterfront development, the King's Bay project in Libreville/Gabon, will be examined in order to reveal the approaches of local authorities to the problems of urban regeneration in an African context. An online survey was conducted which covered 1,009 respondents between June and August 2022. In addition to the survey, secondary information on the project has been collected from the printed media, online media, and social media (i.e., Facebook).

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The Definition and the Actors of the Urban Regeneration

‘Urban regeneration means improving the quality of life and investing in the future’ (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 9). For Robert and Sykes (2000), such an urban regeneration process serves to solve problems in the area, finding sustainable economic, social, and environmental solutions. They agree that the most important principles of urban regeneration are the need to set clear and measurable goals, as well as the necessity of making the best use of the available economic, human, and natural resources (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 10). Urban regeneration includes the overlapping processes of the rehabilitation and renovation of urban spaces, urban revitalization, redevelopment, and the renewal of urban spaces. All of these related processes are carried out with the aim of improving the quality of life within the identified urban area. It includes adapting the buildings and urban environment to the needs of the community, improving the image of the targeted urban space, and improving the networks of social relations and security (Alpopi & Manole, 2013). Tiyan Shen, Xinyi Yao, and Fenghna established the theoretical ‘Urban Regeneration Engine,’ which is an analytical framework built to shape local government and the urban regeneration operator to increase the social capital and promote the participation of the local government, businesses, local populations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or social organizations, and financial institutions in the process of urban regeneration (Shen, et al., 2021).

It should be noted that urban regeneration goes well beyond the physical aspect of the city. At its core, it should serve the physical, spiritual, emotional, cultural, social, environmental, and economic whole of the city to bring out the authentic values of the locale (Gao, et al., 2020). According to Abass and Küçükmehtemoğlu (2018), urban regeneration as a collective vision or a comprehensive and integrative action aims to solve urban problems by bringing a multi-dimensional approach to the area. This field of action can extend throughout the city and its various peripherals, including slums and anarchic installations (Abass & Küçükmehtemoğlu, 2018). Urban regeneration is seen as an opportunity to strengthen the structure of buildings, making them more resistant and durable, especially in areas where buildings are old or obsolete. Urban regeneration, therefore, provides an upgrade to the energy services and structural integrity, especially in areas where seismic risks are medium or high (Manganelli, et al., 2020).

Urban regeneration can also be associated with sustainability in terms of decreasing a city’s environmental footprint. This is related to the widespread preoccupation with global warming of the modern age. Everything leads to the reorientation of priority centres in cities, through the association of sustainability with urban regeneration, by considering the economic, social, and environmental aspects (Korkmaz & Balaban, 2020).

Partnerships are an important part of urban regeneration projects, as they provide the required financial support in the realization of the projects as well as various other requirements, such legal provisions and technical assistance. In urban regeneration projects, four types of partnerships can be observed: private sector-private sector, private sector-public sector, public sector-public sector, and public sector-Private sector-local community partnerships. Public-private partnerships relate to a partnership where the values are high, but the obligations to be overcome are also large. Although the public sector usually wants to implement the project at the initial stage, it is more likely that the private sector will become the main driving force in the implementation of the project (Özdemir, et al, 2004).

Social and Community Issues in Urban Regeneration

A community is defined as ‘a specific group of people living in the same neighbourhood or sharing a common characteristic that is very specific to them’ (Oxford-Dictionary, n.d.; Roberts, et al., 2017, p. 100). A community can be analysed through various characteristics: ‘Personal attributes like gender, age, ethnicity, and kinship; the economic status; the skills like the education level; the location, which can be a particular neighbourhood, a village, a city, or a nation; and relationship to local service’ (DETR, 1997).

The above understanding of community can easily describe the social and community issues present in urban regeneration. (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 113). It is important to first understand that the community has primary needs which produce a healthy and sustainable living environment. Studies carried out by the World Bank in partnership with the UN (World-Resources-Institute, 1996) reveal that all communities generally encounter the same problems. The public authorities are confronted with the lack of financial means to be able to solve all the basic problems, such as access to affordable health services, social and educational benefits, and many more. The same studies indicate that in every nation, community involvement is essential for success in societal change and to ensure the success of any political program.

Community issues do not only relate to developing countries. All different communities have their challenges, even though the nature of the problem in developed countries is different from those in developing countries. All this is because in developed countries, the community organizes itself into local groups to improve people’s quality of life (Geddes, 1995), by supporting the community, expanding social and economic opportunities for everyone, and promoting the development of local services (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 111). As mentioned above, the community can be of the same race, people of the same age, people of different

sex, people connected by the same past, or the same culture. In this case, this community may experience gender, ethnic, or other types of discrimination because of their membership (Bennington, 1994). This form of discrimination is seen most often in countries where there is an ethnic mix or a diversity of races, especially for ethnic minorities or disadvantaged social groups. In this case, public authorities most often strive to promote a feeling of inclusion and belonging (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 113).

While urban regeneration involves everyone, it is especially important to include disadvantaged groups because they have more problems in urban areas. As the process aims to solve problems in the urban environment and obtain lasting results, it must consider all the problems and suggestions of the affected parties to arrive at an image of the area to be revitalized and shared by all the groups. This kind of action must be supported by local political actors and civil servants, and, therefore, the public and the private sector, and therefore, business leaders and the general population (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 114). For a successful project, the different stakeholders must share the same vision. For that, it needs solid foundations that connect everyone according to their interests and establish a common vision. The different community groups must therefore associate, cooperate, and establish a climate of trust (Taub, 1994).

It should be mentioned that partnerships are factors of empowerment in the urban regeneration community. Urban regeneration is a means of exploiting resources and talents with partners. In partnerships, public partnerships are present, as well as all that they encompass: government, local communities, government agencies, and many others. In private partnerships, we have private companies and financial institutions, in addition to non-profit organizations (such as NGOs) and voluntary associations. To avoid social or community problems, partnerships must respect specifications to be able to achieve the objectives set. On this basis, the partnerships must allow the representatives of the community to work with the local authorities, or the political authorities of the region, private partners, and NGOs; all of this to reach an agreement (Roberts & Sykes, 2000, p. 116).

The community might sometimes face a problem of representation. Different groups may find it difficult to choose someone to represent them because of different conflicts of interest. Sometimes a group of individuals who have gained notoriety can represent the population or local businesses because of their status — because such status is due to their ability to know the region or their skills. Although NGOs or voluntary groups provide services in the community, they are often poorly represented by influential individuals or groups that have gained notoriety. NGOs and voluntary organizations face obstacles in their work because of their representatives, which prevents the delivery of aid to the local population (Atkinson, 1999; Ware, 1989).

There are various types of urban regeneration projects, including: property-led, culture-led, mixed-use-led, design-led, housing-led, office-led, and heritage-led. Among them, property-led urban regeneration projects take a prominent place as they have been implemented repeatedly all over the world.

Criticisms of Property-led Urban Regeneration Projects

After the 1980s, many of the property-led urban regeneration projects in Europe, designed to increase the competitiveness of urban economies and to attract capital (or investors, workforce, tourists, resources, etc.), were criticized not only for the disconnection and selectivity of the spatial environment they produced, but also for their implementation processes. The lack of participation in the public-private partnerships and the inability to make sufficient progress in terms of openness and accountability were the most important shortcomings. In these projects, only certain parts of the city (for example, the centre and waterfront areas) were redeveloped, and since they were carried out on a project basis, a piecemeal approach was adopted, rather than a holistic one. These projects were defined to respond to the spatial demands of the global economy rather than the local, with the needs of the poor and low-income groups, especially in the city centres, being neglected in this process (Harvey, 1989; Newman and Verpraet, 1999; Loftman and Nevin, 1995).

In the face of increasing competition, localities are constantly emerging with new, untested, and innovative projects. However, in this seemingly never-ending, every successful project is imitated and thus many 'copy-and-paste' projects were formed (Turok, 1991; Harvey, 1989). These types of projects were usually designed as eye-catching 'packaged landscapes,' with the themes chosen usually being architectural renovation projects, waterfront developments, or newly designed/renovated urban squares, all of which were implemented in every city almost repetitively (Hall, 1998, p.93). This situation also led to criticism of the proliferation of 'cloned cities' (Loftman and Nevin, 1995, p.308). Moreover, these projects mostly ended up promoting gentrification, and in this way, the concept of state-led gentrification has become a common outcome almost everywhere in the world (Leary and McCarthy, 2013).

Urban regeneration projects appear as one of the major solutions towards solving the multi-dimensional problems of cities that developed under the conditions of deindustrialization. Likewise, they mainly take place within the cities of developed countries rather than developing ones. That is why it becomes more important to examine the specific cases in developing countries. In this respect, analysing the urban regeneration project in Libreville, Gabon is important in revealing the implementation of these projects in developing countries.

Urban Regeneration in Africa: The Case of Libreville, Gabon

Urban regeneration is a way out of the social, economic, and environmental problems that a city may be going through, using two different or opposite perspectives. One perspective can be governmental, in a more holistic sense of the process, and the other can be private, or community, in the sense that initiatives are taken by NGOs, the local community, or private individuals (Abouaiana, 2020). In Africa, according to Miguel Amado and Evelina Rodriguez, urban regeneration should also tell the story and highlight the historical heritage, lest it is extinguished. In this way, urban regeneration can be seen as a major asset for reviving or preserving the pre-colonial cultural heritage, or even the African colonial heritage, the memory of the place, or the identity of the place (Amado and Rodrigues, 2019).

Urban regeneration has different facades in each country. In Luanda, the challenges include preserving the identity, memory, and history of the urban areas. In developing countries, more specifically those of sub-Saharan Africa, the role of cultural heritage is very important when it comes to urban regeneration. All the transformations in the field of urbanization that have taken place in recent years refer to this urban cultural heritage. In this region of Africa, the urban cultural heritage is divided into two parts: the pre-colonial urban cultural heritage, which exists but is very rare because of the massive destruction of all historical traces of black civilization by the colonists, and the urban colonial cultural heritage, which is much more visible in hundreds of former colonial cities. The latter has a similar architecture; one could even call it colonial architecture in another context (Amado and Rodrigues, 2019).

African cultural heritage is enriched with diversity, which combines African, European, and American styles of culture at the same time. All this does not only concern the cities, the urban landscape, and the buildings; it extends to the places of memory, such as the places where the Africans fought on the side of their colonizers during the Second World War, or the quays of no-return, where thousands of slaves left the African coast for various places between America and Europe, or even archaeological sites (Killingray and Rathbone 1986; Solow 1991). Some case studies have shown that community involvement in cultural heritage increases a sense of place and shows an understanding of the potential of a place. In this case, residents have the right to make decisions and monitor the progress of the project. This fosters trust, patriotism, and cohesion among residents while generating an authentic, secure, and honest space (Tolkach 2013).

Urban Cultural Heritage and Authenticity in African Cities: Same Continent, Different Conceptualizations

Talking about urban cultural heritage means discussing the concept of authenticity in urbanization. Authenticity is defined by several scholars, such as Ahmed M. Salah Ouf, who said that authenticity is a concept consecrated by time or history, involving the conservation of streets, buildings, social practices, and community cultural beliefs spread over a large urban area (Salah Ouf, 2001). Yujie Zhu said that authenticity is *'the set of original and subsequent characteristics of a cultural heritage'* (Zhu, 2016). UNESCO also defines the concept as:

'In paragraph 82 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementations of the World Heritage Convention, UNESCO WH Center (2005), a property is said to be authentic if its cultural value is truly credible through a variety of attributes, such as form and design, materials and substance, use and function, technical traditions and management systems, locations and settings, language and other forms of intangible cultural heritage' (Unesco, World Heritage Convention 2005).

In discussions on urban regeneration cases of African cities, the history of colonization cannot be avoided, because Africa's sense of urban heritage is divided into three eras: pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial. For some, decolonization remains a myth because of all the practices of colonial inequalities that still exist in postcolonial times, from which we observe postcolonial populations by law and history but neo-colonial practices and exploitations (Sarmiento, 2023). Art, culture, and the African urban environment have been crossed by different periods in history, starting from indigenization, Islamization, and westernization, which have influenced the expression of craftsmen. Therefore, African cultural heritage is seen as eclectic (Teye, 2009). For many Europeans, like Hegel (1975), Africa has no history. For them, Africa is divided into three parts: one which must be attached to Europe; we speak of the Maghreb; the other, which must be attached to Asia; we speak of the part connected along the Nile; and the last part that lies south of the Sahara, the one most affected by colonization, must be cut off from the world and deleted from the history of culture according to Hegel (1975). African scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop and many others have dedicated their lives to researching the history and origins of black Africans. According to them, ancient Egypt is for all of Africa, including black Africa, what Greece is for Europe (Diop and Cook 2012).

Africa before colonization had a well-established system where the elders, chiefs, and other custodians were the guarantors of the cultural heritage, and the whole community was engaged in cultural, spiritual, and material conservation, up to the point where masons had their way of building and maintaining buildings, and also their way of protecting buildings spiritually. Despite all the cultural, urban, archaeological, and natural sites and the remains of the various great African empires, sub-Saharan Africa is

under-represented in the world’s cultural properties, with only 6% of sites to its credit. Yet Africa is unambiguous, for all humanity, the cradle of humanity, given the two human fossils dating back millions of years, found in two different places on the continent and both telling a different story from that of all of humanity, both being poles of tourist attraction (Sarmiento, 2023). Through the craftsmanship of its people and ancestral cultures, Africa has a valuable heritage. Africa can therefore stand out and establish its own urban identity through the regeneration of urban space. This has been studied in several African cities, such as Libreville in Gabon, where the government has chosen to reinvent an urban area based on its cultural heritage to attract tourists.

Urban Development of Libreville, Gabon

Libreville comes from its English translation ‘Freetown,’ which is a city in Sierra Leone in West Africa. The French wanted to have a city synonymous with freedom for the peoples of French colonial Africa. The name Libreville had been attributed to the village founded to accommodate the Vilis slaves, freed from the Brazilian slave ship named the Elizia, on the 17th October 1849. Lieutenant Parant built 38 huts to accommodate freed slaves. It should be noted that all the neighbourhoods of Libreville were formerly villages and were transformed slowly over the course of time. In 1939, the first urban plan for the city was produced. The urban division of Libreville separated the white city from the African villages (Nziengui, 1981). There were streets, rivers, and villages a little further away. The city plan was drawn up by the colonists in all the cities over which they had control. In the 1950s, Libreville consisted of five groups of districts: Nombakélé, Louis, Mont-Bouet, Montagne Sainte, and Glass (Le Pratique 2022). This organization with the mixed communes were on one side, the neighbourhoods of the government, the administration, and on the other side, the African neighbourhoods.

After the country’s independence in 1960, all urban racial divisions disappeared, and instead administrative neighbourhoods, residential neighbourhoods were adopted. The government of the time had initiated two plans for the urbanization of the city, one by the French architect Henri Pottier in 1962, and the other by the Italian group of Olivo Prass in 1965 (Nziengui 1981, Nziengui 1985) (Figures 1 and 2). The objective of the French architect’s plan was to put an end to the anarchic settlements of the colonial era. It proposed inter-district connection roads and the grouping of urban activities. This plan was executed partially but could not be completed because of the introduction of the Port of Owendo project which was deemed too costly for the authorities (Allogho-Nkoghe, 2006). The second plan by the Italian group, therefore, took over. This required the rallying of the northern suburbs (Cap Esterias) to Libreville, the establishment of port industrial zones south of Libreville, and the partitioning of new districts which should accommodate 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants. This plan also became too expensive to maintain and thus could not be fully executed.

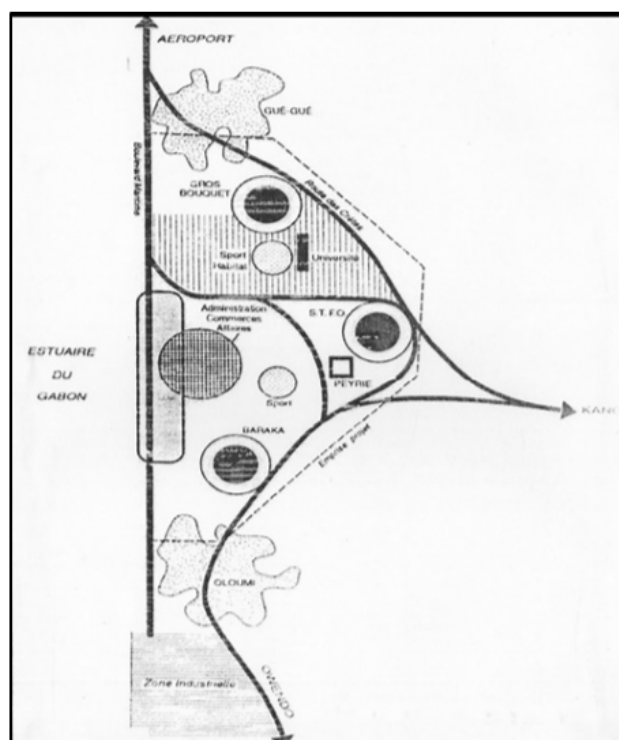


Figure 1. Pottier’s plan for Libreville, 1962 (Engo , Voirie et structure urbaine à Libreville. 2007).

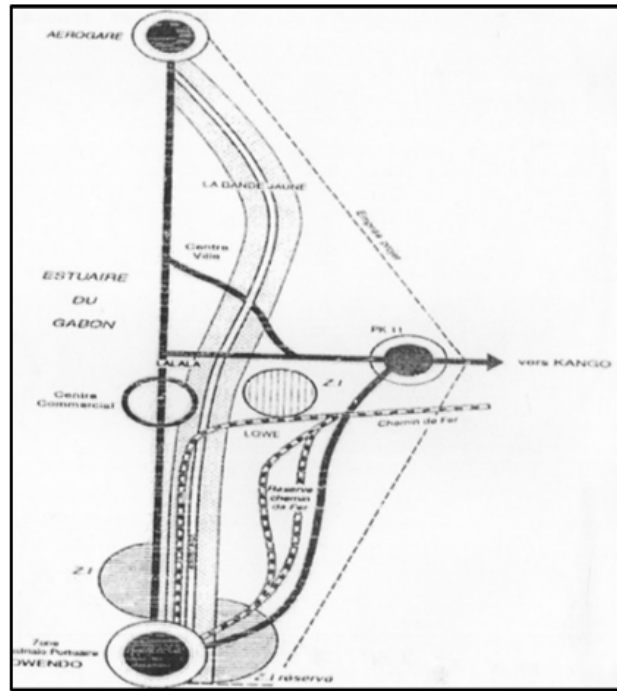


Figure 2. Plan of Olivo-Prass for Libreville, 1965 (Engo, Voirie et structure urbaine à Libreville. 2007).

Libreville was a large block with different structures, with the plans of the architects contracted at the end of independence still in partial execution, when on 4 October 1993, the ordinance N 10/93/PR of 15 February 1994, gave rise to the establishment of an urban commune in the Gabonese Republic (Nguema 2005). The port industrial zone, as proposed by the Italian group, was already in service with a few estates and some 25,000 inhabitants in 1995, when the government established the municipality of Owendo (Nguema 2014). Libreville already had two municipalities with 117 neighbourhoods, six districts for Grand Libreville, and 13 neighbourhoods for the municipality of Owendo at the end of 1997. Thus in 2013, the third municipality in the city of Libreville was founded. This last municipality brings together all the neighbourhoods in the north of Libreville. There are now three communes in the city of Libreville: Grand Libreville, Owendo, and Akanda (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Map of the urbanized territory of Libreville, 2013 (Lydie 2020).

The City of Libreville

Libreville, the political capital of Gabon and the capital of the province of Estuaire, is located on the northwest coast of the country, along the coast of the estuary of Gabon. To the north, it extends to Akanda National Park. To the northwest, it is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, to the southwest by the Gabon Estuary, and the east by the equatorial forest (Sandbox, 2022). This location delimits Libreville the city, which is different from Libreville the municipality. Libreville is made up of three municipalities: Akanda, Le Grand Libreville, and Owendo (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Libreville map location in Estuaire, Gabon, 2020 (Albert 2009).

The municipality of Libreville is located between the municipalities of Akanda, to the north, and Owendo, to the south. It constitutes the beginning of any urban installation in the city. Libreville municipality currently comprises six districts and 117 neighbourhoods in total, the majority of which (around 70%) are precarious neighbourhoods. They are then followed by modern neighbourhoods, which make up around 10% of the area. Then there are mixed-income neighbourhoods. The rest includes administrative zones, industrial zones, etc (Armél 2000-2020). Today, the demographic weight of Libreville makes the city the largest metropolis in Gabon (Table 1).

Table 1. Libreville - Historical Population Data since 1950. (macrorends 2022)

Year	Population	Growth Rate
1950	15.000	0.00%
1960	29.000	93.33%
1970	77.000	165.51%
1980	234.000	203.89%
1990	366.000	56.41%
2000	496.000	35.51%
2010	649.000	30.84%
2020	834.000	28.50%
2022	857.000	2.75%

Implementation strategies in urban management were launched in Gabon in 2010, with constitutional reforms being put in place to enable good urban management. However, these efforts paved the way for even more ambiguous urban management than existed previously. The urban management of the city of Libreville is executed according to the electoral constituencies. Each locally-elected official becomes a site manager and gives start to urban projects on his account, sometimes with very little development, with no consultation from the National Institute of Urbanization, the town hall, or urbanization professionals in his electoral district, to be able to attract the votes of the voters. This unconstitutional way of proceeding has replaced the accepted notion that public institutions should be the primary providers of urban management (Armel 2006).

Moreover, following the anarchy and lack of respect for the Constitution, the urban development program of the city of Libreville was to be constantly interrupted by people and locally-elected officials. This can justify the very limited road network and the lack of services by the municipality or public entities, in the electoral districts of certain elected officials and in the neighbourhoods where all the inhabitants are kings of their piece of land. Officials who are responsible for urban development then move on to the different special zones, like administrative, industrial, and port areas. They also move on to major streets (Engo, 2018). Outside the main roads, apart from the planned districts, most of the secondary or inter-district roads are organically developed according to the pedestrian paths or traces of tracks. From an authentic point of view, the city of Libreville is adorned with pieces of art, local and artisanal, in roundabouts, crossroads, along the seaside road, around public buildings, and in other places. Craftsmanship occupies an important place for the current Gabonese government, as does ecology. The current president was elected in 2009 for his project, 'Green Gabon, Industrial Gabon, and Gabon of Services.' 'Green Gabon' brings together all the national parks, such as the north of Libreville and the national park of Akanda. These are protected zones and preserved in their natural state, with no human interference, with wild animals roaming free in their natural state. The forests are also free of human disruption and are naturally well-maintained. These parks occupy 11% of the territory, or 30,000 km² (Caroline and Rémy, 2017). To demonstrate the authorities' interest in ecology, there are 18 national parks spread across the country. This brings us to the most ambitious project of the current Gabonese government, 'LA BAIE DES ROIS,' or, in English, 'Kings' Bay' (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Part of downtown Libreville seen from above, 2019 (Delrick 2019).

The Kings' Bay Project in Libreville

This project relates to the extension of the old Port Mole, which is in the administrative and port area of Libreville, on the way to the seaside, opposite the triumphal boulevard and the famous Catholic church, 'the Cathedral of Sainte Marie,' built-in 1958. This urban regeneration project includes businesses, and it seeks to promote economic development. The site of Port Mole was constructed in 1952 and served as a departure point for boats to Port-Gentil (the second city of Gabon, and the economic capital of the country) (petitfute 2022) and as a commercial area. Fresh fish and seafood shops, supermarkets, restaurants, and some public entities, such as the Merchant Navy, could be found there.

The site has many stories behind it. It thus constitutes the beginning of the history of colonization in Gabon. It is at this precise place that, in the 16th century, the first settlers in Gabon (the Portuguese) landed. They used it for several purposes, such as trade,

mainly that of slaves. They also used it to help their military establish their domination in the region and for religious purposes, in welcoming Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Accordingly, the bay served as a commercial port, a military post, and a religious centre. Before the settlers, as with most of the territories on this side of the Gabon estuary, the Mpongwé people (a sub-group that derives from the Myènè in Gabon) lived there and called the land ‘Thé Yi Mpongwé’ (the country of the Mpongwé), hence the name ‘The Bay of Kings’ (alluding to the Mpongwé kings). This site, used for the **Kings’ Bay** project, was reserved for the Mpongwé for fishing. They had built a fishing village there, with fishermen passing on ancestral fishing techniques from generation to generation (Fmct-Gabon 2021) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Port Mole of Libreville seen from above, 2013 (Kennedy8kp 2012).

This new project is aimed at redeveloping the seaside and introducing a marina, a botanical cornice, and a living space. It is placed on a site that was previously nine hectares and then extended to the sea, with sand, stones, and earth, to obtain an area of 40 hectares. This project aims to be the living heart of the city, becoming the image of Gabon. The government supported Agence Nationale des Grands Travaux (ANGT), with the French urban and ecological landscape firm, LAND ART, wanting to highlight the accessibility of this site, given all the roads that converge at this place, such as the Triumphal Boulevard, the RN1, and the Independence Boulevard (Figure 7). They also wanted to highlight the tradition and ecology of the plant self-purification technique of the waters of the watersheds that surround the central part of the project by promoting aquatic fauna (LAND’ACT, et al., 2014-2019). This project is supposed to accommodate residences, offices, hotels, and shops (d’information 2021). The project is currently under the supervision of FMCT-Gabon (Facade Maritime du Champ Triomphal), which is a subsidiary of the Gabonese Strategic Investments Fund, specializing in urban planning and development and equipment (Figures 8, 9, 10, and 11).



Figure 7. Independence Boulevard, seen from above 2013 (Bulongu 2022).



Figure 8. Port Mole of Libreville map, 2011, Google Earth Pro.

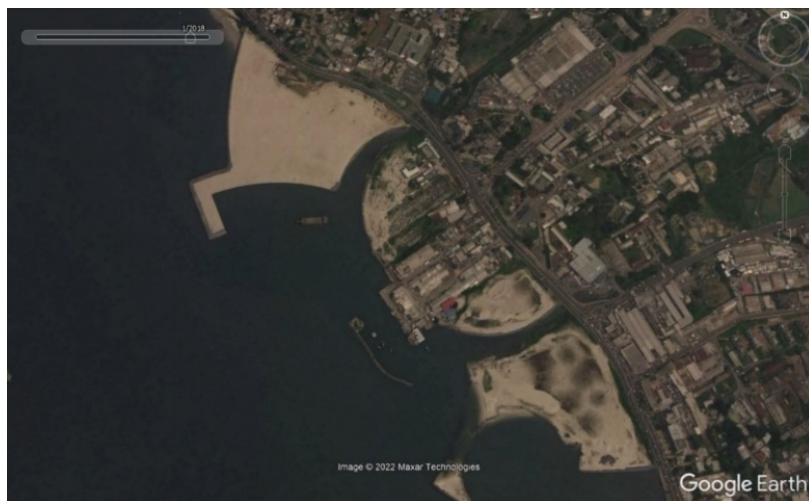


Figure 9. Port Mole of Libreville map, 2018, Google Earth Pro.

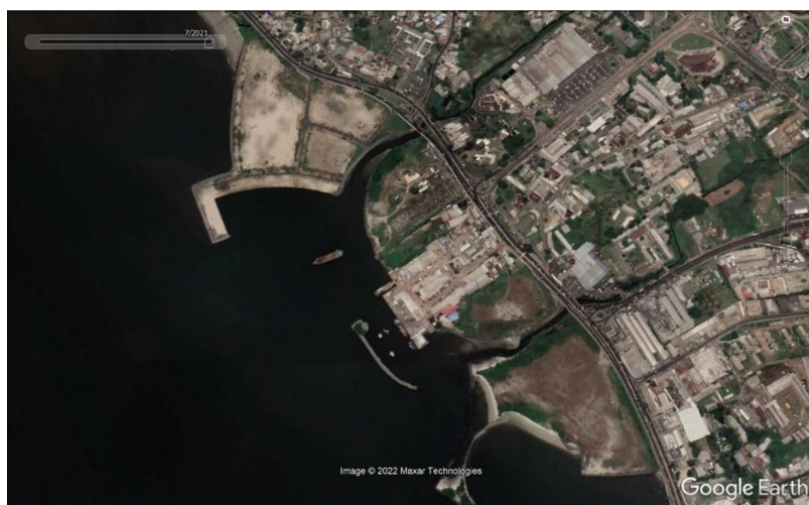


Figure 10. Port Mole of Libreville map, 2021, Google Earth Pro.



Figure 11. Port Mole Project; King's bay, site plan (fmct-gabon 2021).

The Evaluation of the Survey Results of King's Bay Urban Regeneration Project

Research Methodology

In order to understand the King's Bay project from the perspective of the public authorities, an internet search was first carried out, before conducting an online survey between June and August 2022. Before sharing the survey results, the reflections on the project offered by the media will be discussed briefly.

The project began in 2013 (fmct-gabon 2021), four years after the 2009 presidential elections in Gabon. Since then, various pieces of information have circulated in the media to inform the population about the progress of the project. The Gabonese government initiated the project with the primary goal of changing the urban landscape of the city of Libreville. This was done to respect the campaign promise of the current president, Ali Bongo Ondimba, which was 'Emerging Gabon by 2025' (jeuneafrique 2010). The FMCT, the agency in charge of the project, and the government have made multiple media appearances on this subject to reassure public opinion on the progress of the project (Table 2).

Table 2. Table of the different media releases on the KINGS' BAY project

News agencies names	Media Release Dates	Article titles	Web References
Gabonactu	May 17, 2016	Libreville Marina is dead, long live the Bay of Kings	La Marina de Libreville est morte vive la Baie des rois - (gabonactu.com)
L'union	May 18, 2016	Resumption of Works at Bay of Kings (Ex-Marina): A Business District, A Place of History	Reprise des travaux de la Baie-des-Rois (ex-marina) : Un quartier d'affaires, un lieu d'histoire Gabon économie (sonapresse.com)
Gabon Review	May 19, 2016	From 'Triumphal Field' to 'Bay of Kings': The Libreville Marina is changing its concept	De «Champ triomphal» à «Baie des Rois» : La marina de Libreville change de concept Gabonreview.com Actualité du Gabon
L'union	September 21, 2017	The Bay of Kings: The First Marketable Plots	La Baie des Rois : Les premières parcelles commercialisable Gabon économie (sonapresse.com)
Le Nouveau Gabon	July 15, 2021	Bay of Kings: Gabon is looking for operators to build an office and retail building	Baie des rois : le Gabon recherche des opérateurs pour construire un immeuble de bureaux et de commerce - Le Nouveau Gabon
Gabon Review	January 11, 2022	The Bay of Kings: Ali Bongo did not give up!	La Baie des Rois : Ali Bongo n'a pas laissé tomber ! Gabonreview.com Actualité du Gabon
Agence Ecofin	March 19, 2022	Gabon: FMCT raised FCFA 20 billion in bond loans on the financial market for the Bay of Kings construction site.	Gabon : FMCT a levé 20 milliards FCFA d'emprunts obligataires sur le marché financier pour le chantier de la Baie des rois (agenceecofin.com)
Medias241	August 2, 2022	The Bay of Kings is Connected to the Libreville Water Network.	Société: la baie des rois raccordée au réseau d'eau de libreville (medias241.com)
Medias241	August 9, 2022	The North Promenade of The Bay of Kings Has Its Grand Opening.	Grand opening pour la promenade nord de la baie des rois (medias241.com)
Gabon Review	August 19, 2022	The Bay of Kings: A controlled evolution	La Baie des rois : Une évolution maîtrisée Gabonreview.com Actualité du Gabon
Gabonactu	August 22, 2022	The North Promenade of 'The Bay of Kings' is open to the public and investors.	La Promenade nord de la Baie des Rois ouverte au public et aux investisseurs - (gabonactu.com)

According to the FMCT's official brochure, the 'Kings' Bay' project, which began in 2013, meets the specifications (Figure 12). On 18 May 2016, L'UNION, a pro-government public newspaper, published an article in which it was stated that the construction

and redevelopment of the Port Mole in Libreville suddenly stopped in 2014 due to budgetary restrictions (L'union 2016). In 2015, the government handed over the management of the project to the FMCT, a subsidiary of the Gabonese Strategic Investment Fund, because their budget is estimated as 1,050 billion CFA francs (1.6 billion euros) per year, or 78% of the Gabonese State's annual budget (Fgis 2021). When the new general manager in charge of this public entity (FMCT) met with the press after taking office in 2016, he stated that the northern phase of the project would take a decade, and work started immediately, according to Gabonactu, a pro-government online media outlet (Gabonactu, 2016). In September 2017, the newspaper union announced the completion of earthworks in the northern area of the project, which covers 12 hectares, or 30% of the project (L'union 2017). On the same day, the same daily newspaper reported the start of the project's central zone regeneration and fragmentation works.

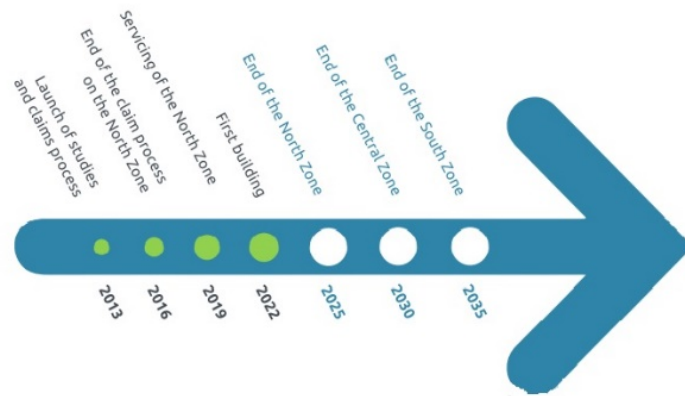


Figure 12. Different stages of the construction of the project over time (fmct-gabon 2021).

On 21 September 2017, the company in charge of the works announced that their service in the area would take 10 months longer (L'union 2017). In July 2021, after the fragmentation of the land in the northern and central areas of the project, the operators in charge of the construction of the project made calls for applications to anyone interested in building or buying a portion of land in the newly cleaned up area. The construction criteria have been made public for any potential candidate, as have the available areas (Lenouveaugabon 2021). In 2022, after agreements between private partners (the candidates who came forward) and public partners, the project managers announced the launch of construction work on several buildings on the site (Gabonreview 2022) (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Different development zones of the project (fmct-gabon 2021).

In March 2022, the project developers decided to base the project more towards ecology. They decided that all the buildings in the project will have a certified ecological footprint. They, therefore, set the objective for themselves to reduce the environmental footprint, in terms of the consumption of water and energy, and also in the use of the construction materials used (agencecofin 2022). To this end, the authorities announced in a public press conference the delivery of part of the construction site of this vast urban area in August 2022 (Alix-Ida 2022). This section will constitute a one-kilometre-long promenade and modern commercial kiosks made of local wood and worked with the expertise of the best craftsmen in the country while emphasising its culture. Gabon has renowned cutting-edge expertise in its African sub-region in terms of wood treatment. For the Gabonese, wood is sacred; it is

what they hold most dear, and it is also how they communicate with their ancestors. To this end, an economic zone solely reserved for wood (Nkok Special Economic Zone) is located 22 km from the project area. This area is dedicated to the wood industry and contains over 85 wood-related businesses, all of which specialize in different aspects of wood processing.

At the beginning of August 2022, the water and energy company of Gabon (SEEG) announced the start of work to connect the northern side of the project to the water network of the municipality of Libreville (Medias241 2022), to allow the site to be served by running water. Shortly thereafter, in the same month, the FMCT announced the opening of the one-kilometre-long boardwalk in the northern project area. To commemorate this event, cultural, artistic, and artisanal know-how exhibitions were held, followed by a concert where several Gabonese artists performed, and finally, a fireworks display for the inauguration of the promenade (Figures 14 and 15). Many Libreville residents, therefore, came to discover the mystery hidden behind this barrier, which dates back nine years. The FMCT did not hesitate to make a press release to state that the evolution is under control and that the project is undoubtedly following its specifications (Gabonactu 2022). The opinion of the FMCT was mainly drawn from media reviews, pro-government daily newspapers, and press conferences of the project developers, because access to the site was banned, and any attempt to communicate with the developers resulted in a single response: ‘We cannot tell you more, we have said everything in the media and on our online sites’ (Société d’Aménagement Urbain (Fmct-Gabon.com).



Figure 14. The northern promenade. The pictures were taken on 20 August 2022, during the opening ceremony.



Figure 15. The northern promenade, with some stands for exhibitions. The pictures were taken on 20 August 2022, during the opening day.

Online Survey and Interpretation of the Survey Results

Gabon is a very introverted country in terms of information on public investments and the management of public heritage. In our research, online surveys were used, with respondents remaining anonymous. A Google survey form was sent through all available social network accounts, mainly to Gabonese living in Libreville, then Gabonese influencers took over for the publications of the form on their different statuses, to encourage the population of Libreville to participate en masse. The number of responses after three months (between June and August 2022) of the form being published increased to 1,009 respondents. The aim of conducting this survey was to identify the opinions of Gabonese living in Libreville, without fear of legal retaliations, on what they sincerely think of the ‘Kings’ Bay’ project.

The Socio-Economic Structure of the Survey Respondents

The socio-economic questions in this survey serve to establish the age, gender, and social position of the participants. The community of Libreville is diverse and varied; there are men, women, and children, of all ages, with different occupations. This survey contains this mix of gender, individuals, or occupations to be able to have approximate answers on what different types of people think about the “‘Kings’ Bay’ project.

The results of the Google survey on the ‘Kings’ Bay’ project were very interesting. Out of 1,009 responses, 48.8% were men and 51.2% were women. According to the results, the age group most interested in this discussion is young people aged 25 to 35 (24.3%), followed by those aged 55 and above (20.3%) and respondents aged between 35 and 45 years (20%) (Figure 16).

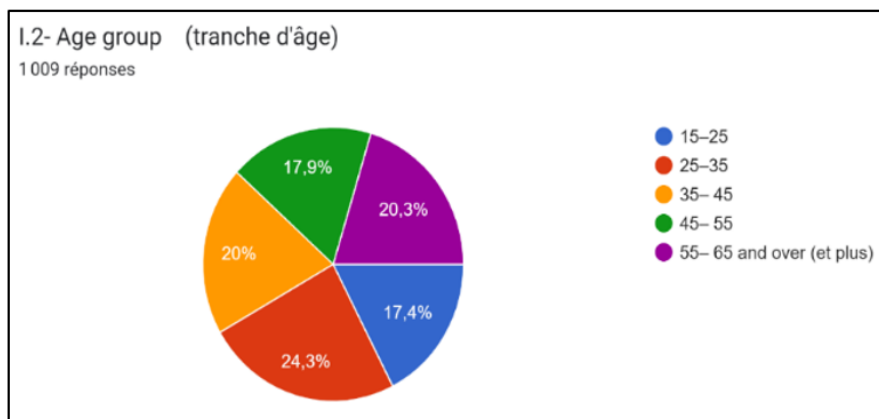


Figure 16. Age Distribution

The largest grouping of survey participants are unemployed (19.6%), followed by those working in the public sector (19%), then by those working in the private sector (16.1%), students (15.1%), and self-employed (13%) (Figure 17).

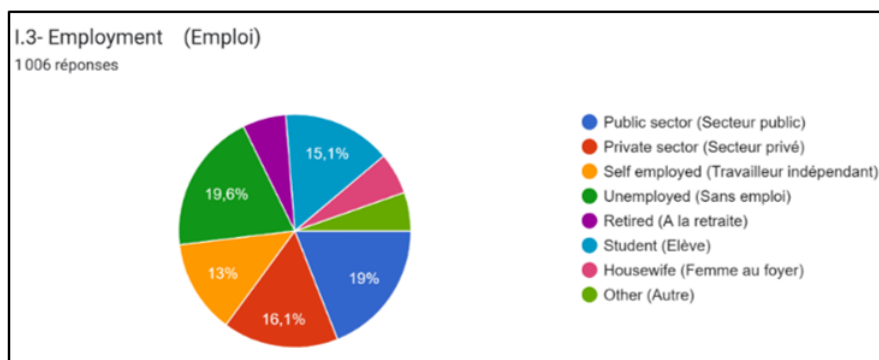


Figure 17. Employment

The Duration of Residence and Attachment

The population of Libreville consists of several types of residents. It is important to signify the duration of residence and attachment to the city. Many of the respondents have lived in the city more than 21 years (58.3%), followed by 16-20 years of residency (19.6%), and 11-15 years (9.2%). In total, 87.1% of the respondents lived in the city for more than a decade (Figure 18). This data is also necessary to assess the consideration that everyone has for the urban development of the city. Some may be concerned about it, others may be less concerned, and some may even ignore the various city development projects, simply because they are not interested in them. In recent urban regeneration projects, community participation is very important. It plays one of the major roles in terms of authenticity. It is important to know to what extent the community of Libreville is involved.

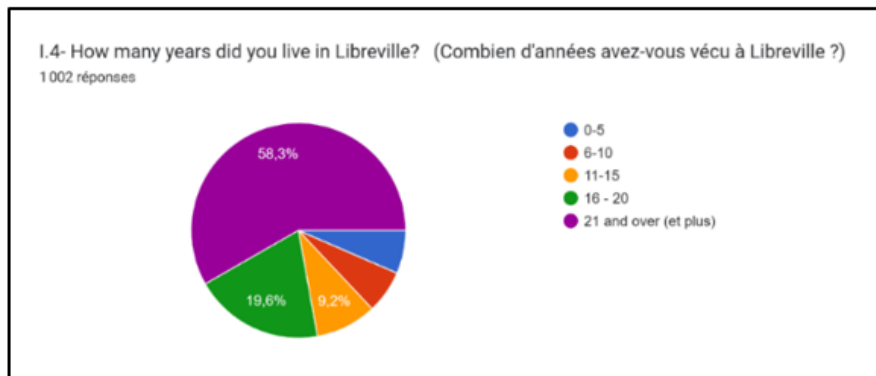


Figure 18. Duration of Residence

Parallel to the duration of residence, the percentage of people who are concerned about the urban development in the city is also high (82.1%). Only a small percentage of people (13.2%) reveal that they are not interested in the developments in the city (Figure 19).

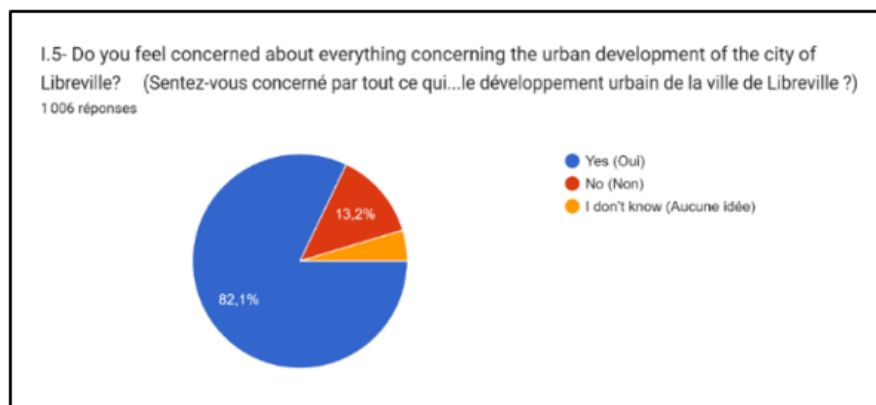


Figure 19. People concerned about the urban developments in the city

Seventy-five percent of the respondents said that they have heard about the project, whereas 70% of them also said they were not consulted about the project. Accordingly, the fact that 58.3% of the participants have spent more than 21 years in Libreville and 82.1% feel concerned about everything concerning the urban development of the city of Libreville is very interesting. According to responses of the online survey, most participants know the 'Kings' Bay' project very well. Some pass by the project area every day on their way to work or on their way home. For the minority (25.2%) who were unaware of the existence of this project, they believe that there is no public access to the project, or they do not live in this part of the city and all their daily activities do not correspond to this area of the city (Figure 20).

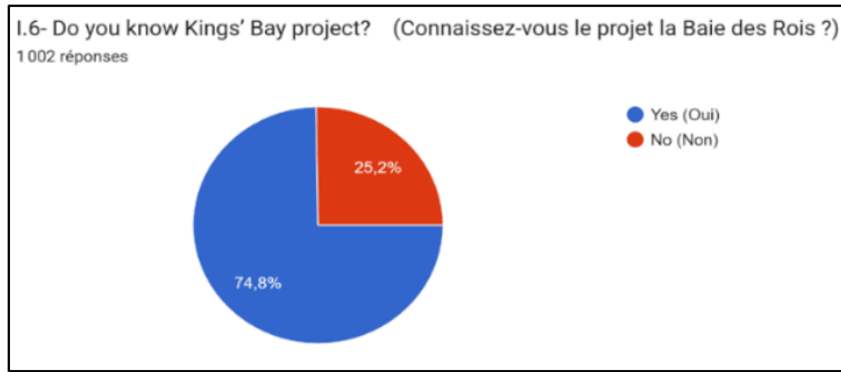


Figure 20. Familiarity with the project

This project was a surprise for the population. Almost 69.8% of the participants state they were not informed or consulted before the start of the work. It should be mentioned that Port Môle, where the project is undergoing development, was a very commercially lively place before the process began. There were many fish and seafood businesses. Accordingly, many of the participants wonder if they will be able to find fish or seafood at Port Môle after the project is finished, or if the prices will remain the same.

The respondents added this concern while answering the question of whether they had been consulted about the project. In this momentum, more than 65.3% of participants revealed that they would like to attend meetings about the future of Libreville to share their expertise and knowledge. Only a very small majority say they do not want to be part of this kind of activity (about 15.5%), because they believe they have lost all faith in the state and want to get away from anything that has to do with the state or the current government (Figures 21 and 22).

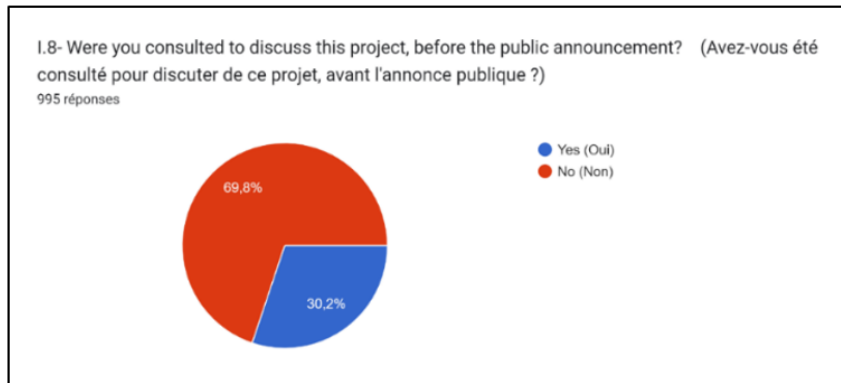


Figure 21. Consultation with the public before the project

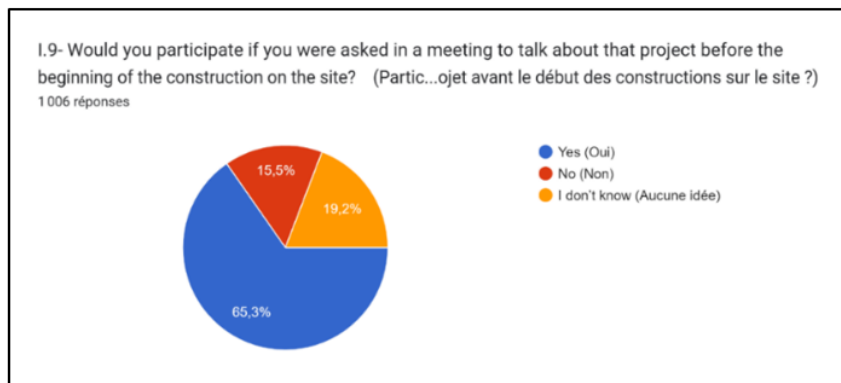


Figure 22. Willingness to participate in decision in the design phase

Environmental Concerns

In this project, another important issue to be discussed is the ecological and environmental consequences. The plan itself is very popular with the participants, and for them, the project area is in the heart of the city, connected to everything. On the other hand, the ideas are divided on how the project interacts with the environment. In fact, only a small portion of the respondents (9.1%) is aware of the environmental destruction caused by the project; according to their view, the project could suffice on the initial nine hectares of the site. Some claimed that to add the additional 36 hectares, the project developers had to destroy a lot of marine ecosystems because they removed the sand that was used for remediation (about 500 meters from the project area at sea) on the coast of Libreville (Figure 23).



Figure 23. View of the sand extraction area for the project in 2014, Google Earth Pro.

Authenticity in the Project

One of the objectives to be achieved in this project, as desired by the authorities, is authenticity. In this project, the designers relied on the 500-year-old history of the place. Hence, the name 'Kings' Bay' is inspired by the three Mpongwe kings who reigned in the area before the colonizers (fmct-gabon 2021). Apart from highlighting the Mpongwe culture, the government also wanted a project that mixed all Gabonese cultures. The population of Libreville nowadays, with all the displacements of the villages towards the cities of the Gabonese population, contains all the ethnic groups and all the cultures of the country (macrotrends 2022). Each, for his part, should therefore recognize themselves or recognize their culture in the project.

More than half of the participants (53.8%) believe that this project is authentic. This is especially true those who lived in Libreville for more than 21 years. They believe that the project is unique, perhaps because it is the first time that such a vast waterfront regeneration project was initiated in their country. For others, especially those who have been in the city for less than 15 years and have travelled a lot, the project has nothing authentic about it. For them, this kind of waterfront project can be seen anywhere in the world, in cities like Dubai, Istanbul, New York, London, and many more. Despite these two opposite opinions, 42.2% of the participants say that they do not culturally identify with the project, even a part of those who found the project authentic (Figures 24 and 25).

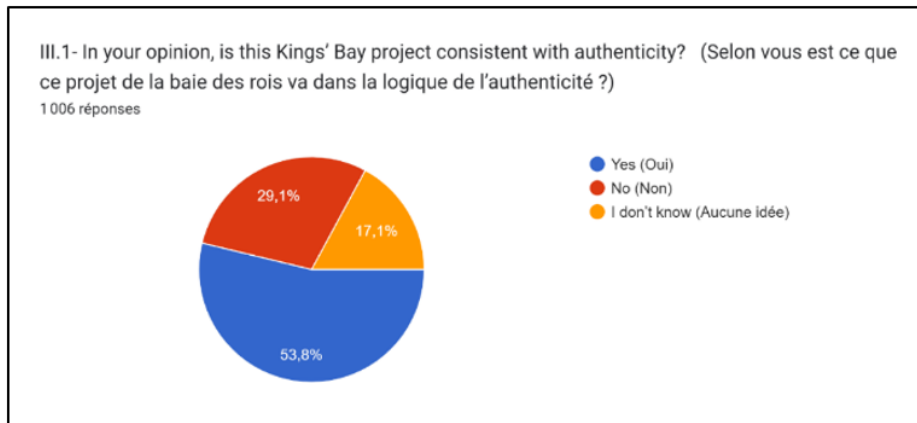


Figure 24. Authenticity of the project

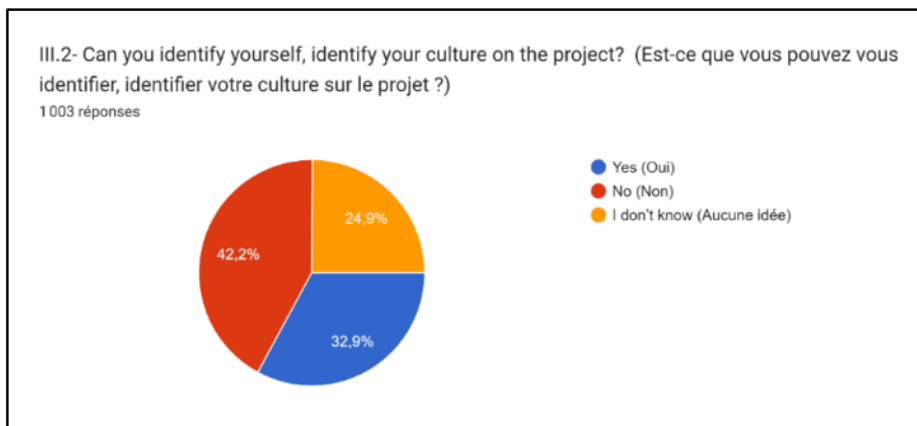


Figure 25. Feeling of identification of local community with the project

General Perspectives on The Project

This project, like all others in urban regeneration, introduces the risk of gentrification. It is important to know if the project will reject the population, the existing traders on the site, or even if the cost of ownership in the area will increase. The population is very divided in its opinions on public investments. Many people are frightened by what will come out of it, because, in any case, the results will either positively or negatively change people's lives. The multiple advertisements on the model of the project and the press conferences to sell the idea of the project to the population have aroused curiosity among the inhabitants of Libreville. Many have waited impatiently for the opening to see if the reality will approach the 3D models, which makes the opening of the project's North promenade on Saturday, 20 August 2022 a strong assistance in the advancement of the present research. The people of Libreville have expressed their feelings freely and anonymously in our online survey.

A strong majority of the participants (51.1%) declare that they will never admit that the project itself is a success if it is not finished (Figure 26). For this, the answers are diverse. Some (30.8%) also say that the project cannot be a success because it does not meet the needs of the population. They believe that the question should be: has the government taken the trouble to study what the population needs before embarking on such a project? Sixteen percent of the people do not identify with this project, and therefore, they do not identify it with their culture. According to them, this project cannot be a success in fulfilling the needs of the public. Twenty percent of the respondents indicated that the project could not be a success because they were not consulted (Figure 27).

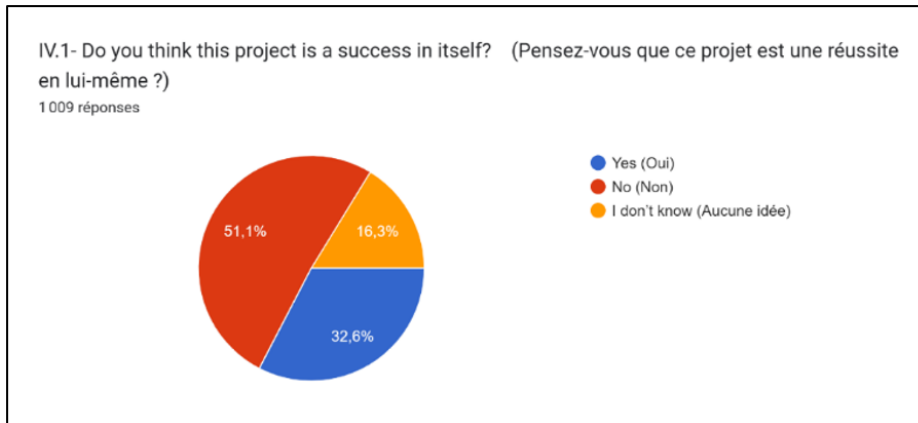


Figure 26. Evaluation of the success of the study

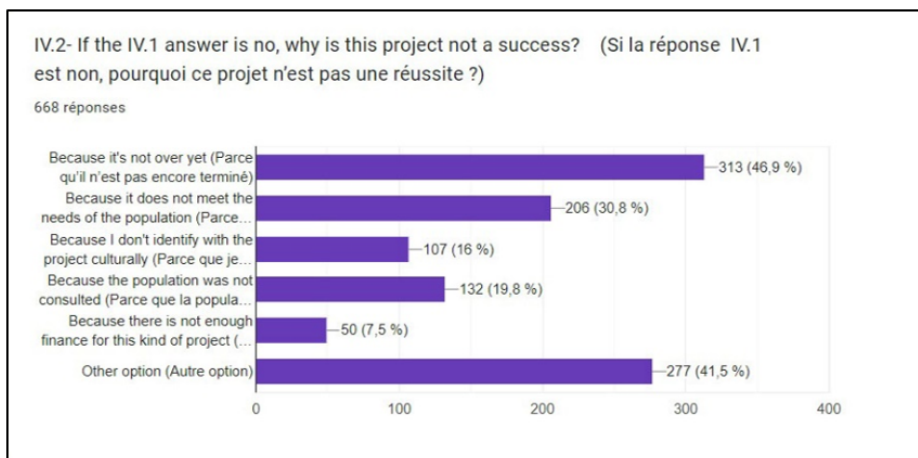


Figure 27. Respondents thinking that project is 'not' successful

Despite the notion of community participation returning as an important point, it did not appear to be a priority for the agency in charge. The authorities may have thought that the population does not care about the state coffers or has little information on the financial realities of the country. However, the case of Libreville is different because of the size of the population: 857,000 inhabitants. Almost everyone is acquainted with each other, and information travels so quickly about everything, which means that the government cannot hide information about the financial realities of the country. Therefore, 7.5% of the participants believe that the project cannot be a success because there is not enough money to finance this kind of project using the funds of the state.

On the other hand, 32.6% of the respondents continue to believe that the project is a success because it will certainly end. Seventeen percent of them declare that the project meets the needs of the population, and therefore see it as a success.

Fourteen percent identify with the project culturally and consider it a success for that reason. Some judge the project a success because they believe that the population was consulted (40 people out of 1,009). A quarter of respondents found that the budget of the country can finance such projects and that the Gabonese State should focus on such projects moving forward (Figure 28).

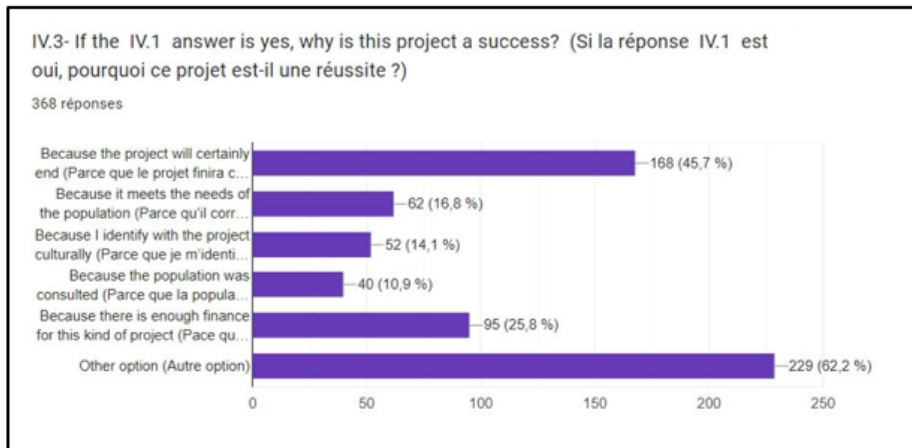


Figure 28. Respondents thinking that project is successful

However, the question remains as to what can be expected in terms of rent or the cost of a property in the project area once it comes to an end. This is the question asked by most of the respondents who believe in the project. For this reason, half of the participants admit that prices will increase, while another group of people refrained from answering this question.

A General Point of View of the Local Population Through Social Networks

After nine years of waiting, the population of Libreville was finally able to see what was hidden behind the walls of the northern zone of the Baie des Rois project.

Several people moved to discover if the dream that was sold to them by the pro-government media was a reality. According to the publications of 'Je N'ai Pas Choisi d'être Gabonais, J'ai Juste De La Chance' (Facebook 2022), a Gabonese media outlet on Facebook with more than 32,565 subscribers, more than 679 Gabonese rushed to give their opinion on the project within the first 24 hours (Figure 29). For the vast majority of comments, the public felt a strong disappointment with the progress of the project. After nine years of work, it is not what they expected to see. 'Just a few aisles, stands, and shelters; it is well below my expectations,' said Yasmine Atouviang in her comment. Mr. Urvis Mondanga said that if after nine years, we have walkways, in 2035, we will surely have two buildings, and that with the same ovations as the marvellous inauguration, with a concert and fireworks.

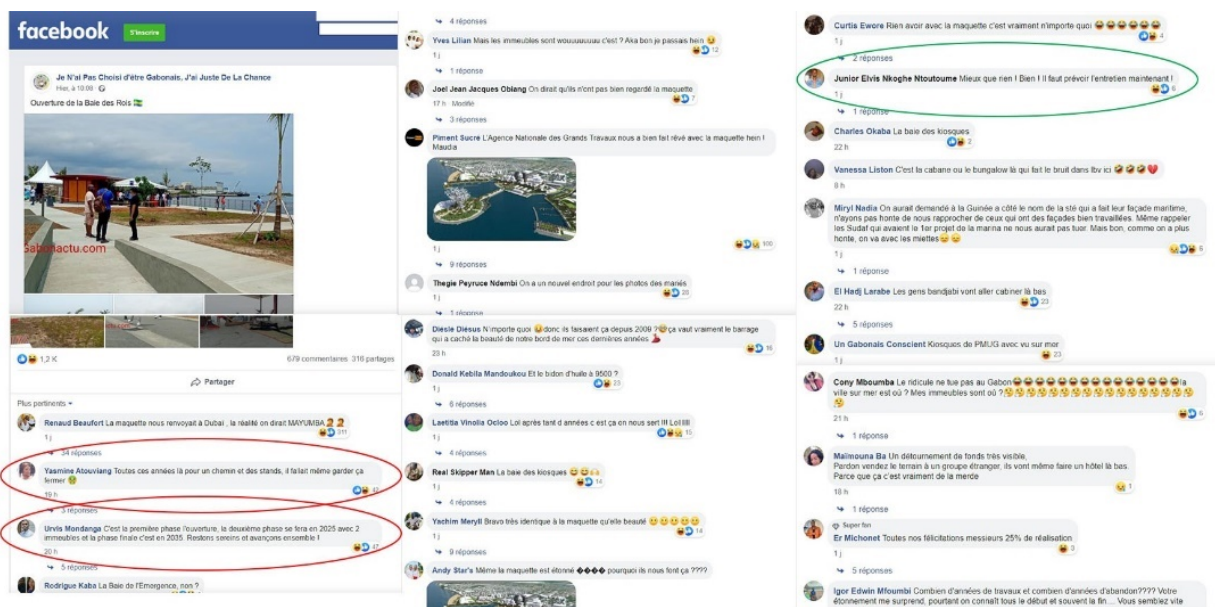


Figure 29. Comments on the publications made by 'Je N'ai Pas Choisi d'être Gabonais, J'ai Juste De La Chance,' a Gabonese social media, on the project 'La Baie des Rois,' on Facebook, 20 August 2022, after the opening of the northern promenade (Facebook 2022).

Some of the comments expressed massive disappointment with the progress. Other comments, such as that of Mxlle Fanny, mention different aspects to be taken into account. For Fanny, if she were a tourist, she would opt for a simpler visit to Libreville, like going to the small culinary shops on the street and eating local cakes. This brings out the desire that the local population have to show tourists what they have to offer, which is unique to them. Graziella Mvouambah launched an emotional cry, saying, ‘Where are the tourists, will they come one day?’ (Figure 30). Gabonese living in Libreville have strong doubts about whether the facilities will bring in tourists or evolve the urban perimeter in the manner promised to them by the government (Facebook, 2022).

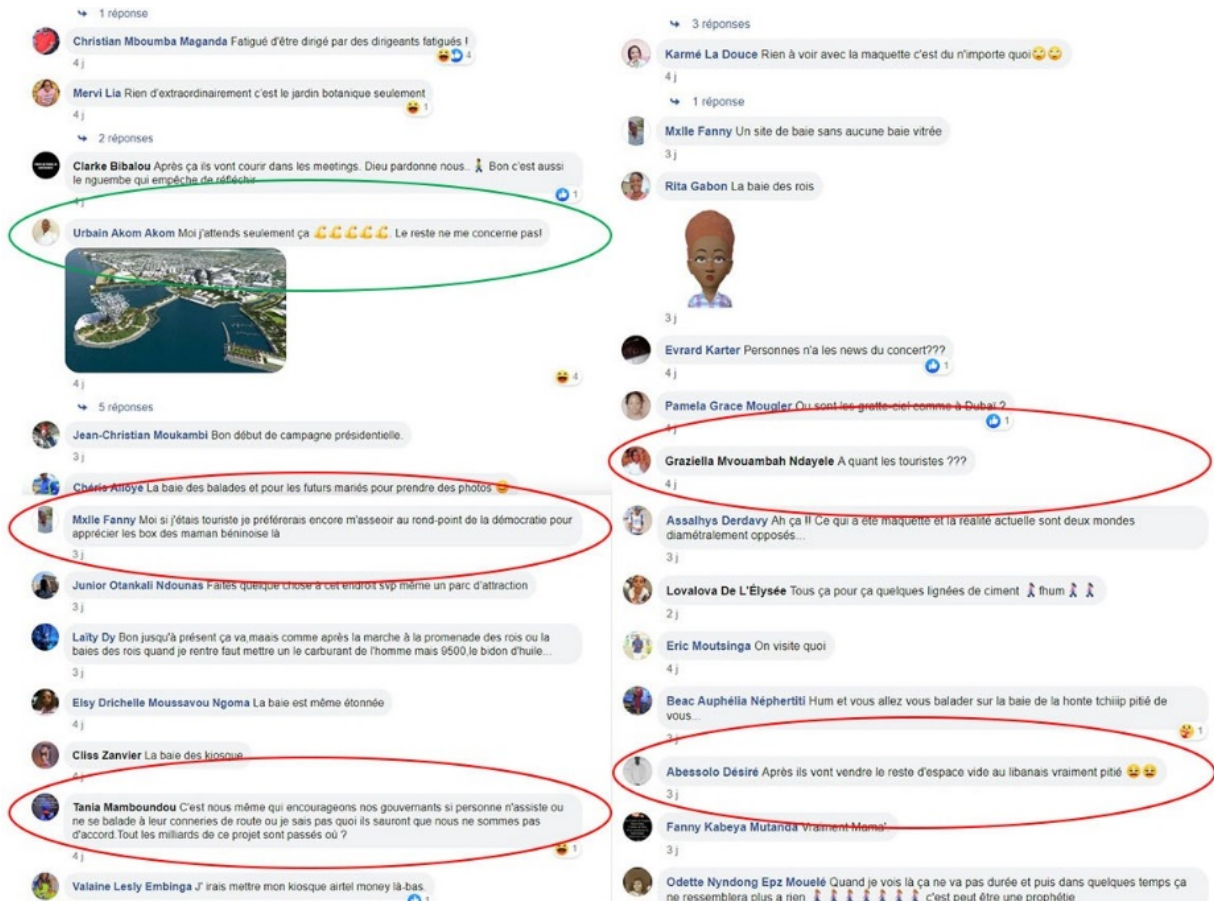


Figure 30. Comments on the publications made by 'Je N'ai Pas Choisi d'être Gabonais, J'ai Juste De La Chance,' a Gabonese social media, on the project 'La Baie des Rois,' on Facebook, 20 August 2022, after the opening of the northern promenade (a continuation) (Facebook 2022).

Conclusion

The neoliberal agenda that has taken over the cities of the world bring with it certain pressures for public administrations to lure mobile capital and investments into their countries. Unfortunately, urban regeneration projects have become the means of the local authorities to gentrify urban areas which do not appear appropriate for the global investment capital. Despite the voluminous literature produced by academics to reveal the importance of public participation and the inclusion of local communities in the decision-making processes of the urban regeneration projects, many large-scale urban regeneration/ development projects have been designed by developer firms and the public sector, with little or no public presence. In our case, Libreville in Gabon has had a long history full of authenticity and local culture which deserves to be presented to the local and international visitors. The colonial history of the country and the dominant French influence in Gabon, resulted in a simple waterfront development urban regeneration project, King's Bay, which contains very little authenticity, local history, and culture. This type of project had already been criticised heavily in the literature, with the project of the Gabonese government also following the scheme, by producing the same unimaginative waterfront development which could be found anywhere in the world.

The survey results reveal that Gabonese people have attachment to their city, and they are ready to participate in meetings regarding the King's Bay project; but they were not consulted. Many of them could not perceive any connection between the new waterfront project and the authenticity of their culture. They think that the King's Bay project does not represent their culture,

and after waiting for almost a decade, and with large amounts of public funds being spent, they were disappointed by what they observed in the project area.

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