

New cities may make millions more vulnerable to climate change

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A forthcoming study of over a hundred new cities being built around the world suggests developers and planning authorities are doing very little to make their projects resilient to climate change. On the contrary, a

boom in new city projects in coastal areas – including some on reclaimed land in the sea – appears to fly in the face of the danger of rising sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events.

When McGill geography professor Sarah Moser mapped 120 new cities under construction across Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, she was struck by how many of them were in vulnerable coastal areas.

"I think this has to do with the fact that a lot of these projects are [real estate](#) projects. Everyone wants to live on the coast and new cities are often geared towards the wealthy – they're investment vehicles," Moser says.

But the short-sighted pursuit of profit may be just one of many forces driving the surge in new cities in coastal areas. Ambitious, eye-catching projects often form part of political narratives in which authorities seek to portray themselves as making a break from the past. In some cases, new cities are billed as a utopian solution to overcrowding and congestion.

Deciphering the politics and ideology behind the development of new cities has been a major theme of Moser's work as an urban and cultural geographer. Now, the data she has gathered on the extent of urban development in coastal areas has compelled her to examine the new [city](#) phenomenon through the lens of sustainability. Her new study will scrutinize the optimistic claims made by proponents of new cities in [coastal areas](#).

"They just keep saying over and over: 'This will solve all our problems, it's going to be great!'" Moser says. "Those involved in real estate, property or construction are making money, but there's no voice of reason stepping in and saying, 'This is not a good idea.'"

With support from the MSSSI Ideas Fund, Moser and her collaborator, Idowu Ajibade of Portland State University, aim to be that voice of reason. Through several case studies, the researchers will examine how [climate change](#) and resilience planning are being integrated – if at all – into the design of new cities. Moser's early findings are disheartening.

"I've determined that there are only about eight cities out of 120 that are even talking about climate change. It's really a minimal effort," she says.

Forest City, a futuristic high-rise project being built on reclaimed land in the narrow body of water that separates Malaysia from Singapore, is one example of a vulnerable master-planned city that Moser has studied closely. If completed as planned, the new city will have the highest density of any population centre on the planet, housing 700,000 people on four artificial islands.

The project illustrates the cavalier attitude some new city builders are taking towards climate change. On a visit to the site, Moser recalls asking her guide if those behind the [project](#) were worried about rising sea levels.

"Oh no," the guide replied. "The sea is not rising in Malaysia – only in other countries."

Provided by McGill University

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