

# City branding in a multi-level governance context: comparing branding performance across five institutional models for urban development in Saudi Arabia

City branding

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Abdulrhman Alsayel

*Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands and Department of Urban and Regional Planning, College of Architecture and Planning, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia*

Jan Fransen

*Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and*

Martin de Jong

*Rotterdam School of Management and Erasmus School of Law, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands and Institute for Global Public Policy, Fudan University, Shanghai, China*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to examine how five different multi-level governance (MLG) models affect place branding (PB) performance in Saudi Arabia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In hierarchical administrative systems, central governments exert control on PB, influencing its effectiveness. While PB as such is widely studied, the effect of MLG on PB performance in centralized administrative systems remains understudied. The study is approached as a multiple case study of nine cities.

**Findings** – The study reveals that different MLG models indeed affect PB performance differently. Direct access to central leadership and resources boosts branding performance, while privatization promotes flexibility with similarly positive effects. Study findings, furthermore, show that some cities are considered too big to fail. Cities such as Riyadh and Neom are of prime importance and receive plenty of resources and

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leadership attention, while others are considered peripheral, are under-resourced and branding performance suffers accordingly. Emerging differences in PB performance associated with different MLG models are thus likely to deepen the gap between urban economic winners and losers.

**Originality/value** – This paper introduces five MLG models based on the actors involved in PB, their interactions and their access to resources. For each model, this paper assesses other factors which may influence the effectiveness of PB as well, such as access to the national leadership and staff capacity. This research thereby adds to the literature by identifying specific factors within MLG models influencing PB performance in hierarchical administrative systems.

**Keywords** Saudi Arabia, Place branding, Multi-level governance, Branding performance, Hierarchical administrative system

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Following the trend towards increased use of renewable energy, the oil-rich states of the Middle East and North Africa have seen billions of dollars in possible revenue vanish since the second half of 2014. Governments throughout the region have implemented policies to redress their economic dependency on oil. In light of this transformation process, place branding (PB) is rapidly gaining traction as a prevalent public policy tool for governments to express their city's image and realize urban development objectives (Dinnie, 2010a; Lucarelli, 2018; Oguztimur and Akturan, 2016; Prilenska, 2012). PB offers each city the opportunity to market and brand its specific economic, social, environmental and cultural assets. To capitalize on them, whether they be located in a nation, region, city or rural area, PB is applied across sectors and government situations. However, many oil-rich states have centralized government systems, which may influence the ability and freedom of cities to develop locally specific place brands.

Multi-level governance (MLG) has evolved as a concept to analyse the dynamic interactions between multiple levels of government and governance (Bache and Flinders, 2004; Peters and Pierre, 2001). Whereas MLG influences PB in every country, the impact of higher level policies and intentions on PB is likely to be stronger in hierarchically administered countries such as China and Saudi Arabia where higher tiers of government exert influence on local urban planning and development. This practice is especially conspicuous in the non-Western world either through top-down government planning structures or because of disjointed interaction across government institutions (Björner, 2014; Wei *et al.*, 2006). Hence, we perceive a need to identify and understand the mechanisms and influential factors by which MLG affects PB performance in centrally administered countries. PB performance may be defined as the capacity of local governments to enhance themselves and their policies by co-creating and executing a new vision of the place in partnership with stakeholders.

While the performance of PB is widely studied (Dinnie, 2010; Kavartzis and Ashworth, 2008), the effect of MLG on PB performance in centrally administered countries remains understudied. To fill this research gap, the specific objective of this study is to examine how MLG affects the performance of PB in centralized administrative systems. Saudi Arabia offers a unique opportunity to examine this relationship, as it pilots five different MLG models and applies PB within the context of its 2030 vision. Saudi Arabia is the largest centrally administered oil-exporting country and has extensively introduced PB policies and strategies since the announcement of its 2030 vision in 2016. Its 2030 vision describes an encompassing economic and administrative reform to diversify the economy (Bafarasat and Oliveira, 2021), reduce reliance on oil, uplift three Saudi cities to be among the top hundred competitive cities in the world, increase participation of the private sector and enhance the quality of life (CEDA, 2018). Saudi Arabia has adopted new MLG models to achieve these goals, whereby cities with different levels of importance and capabilities fall within different MLG models.

Although similar transformations have been described for Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha in [De Jong et al. \(2019\)](#), literature on MLG in much vaster Saudi Arabia is missing. Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, no empirical studies analyse how specific MLG models affect the implementation of PB policies in centrally administered countries. In this paper, we introduce five MLG models based on the actors involved in PB, their interactions and their access to resources. For each model, we assess other factors which may influence the effectiveness of PB as well, such as access to the national leadership and staff capacity. This research thereby adds to the literature by identifying specific factors within MLG models influencing PB performance in hierarchical administrative systems.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers state-of-the-art insights of the literature on PB and MLG with a focus on centrally administered countries. Section 3 describes the research methodology, including a summary of the brand identities of the selected cities. Section 4 constructs and describes the five MLG models, after which PB performance of the nine cities is analysed and scored. Section 5 analyses how the MLG models affect PB performance and compares the findings to the international academic literature. Section 6 concludes and offers policy implications.

## 2. Theory: the connection between city branding and multi-level governance

### 2.1 Place branding and multi-level governance

Over the last two decades, the concept of PB has been prevalent in academic literature. [Kavaratzis \(2004\)](#), [Anholt \(2008\)](#), [Ashworth \(2009\)](#), [Braun \(2012\)](#) and others introduced the notion of PB, which has subsequently been extended to a variety of fields, including public policy, urban planning and the environmental sciences ([Lucarelli and Olof Berg, 2011](#); [Ma et al., 2019](#)). However, there is no agreement on a single definition of the phrase, which may be linked to its complexity and multi-disciplinary roots. Among the many definitions that have been proposed, definition of PB by [Zenker and Braun \(2017, p. 5\)](#) embraces the complexity of place brands by describing it as:

a network of associations in the consumers' mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the goals, communication, values, and general culture of the place's stakeholders and the overall place design.

On the other hand, other attempts to define PB are primarily focused on the travel and tourism sector, making PB appear to be identical to place promotion with a primary emphasis on the creation of a visual identity and on the marketing of a location in the media ([Govers, 2013](#)). A communication-oriented perspective on place brands argues that the place has a single, unchanging identity that must be cogently conveyed to multiple audiences to increase brand recognition and foster favourable connections with the location ([Kalandides, 2011](#)). In yet another perspective, PB is used as an instrument of urban governance. To obtain a competitive edge over other cities, PB entails a comprehensive set of actions to develop a favourable image of a city and convey it to diverse target groups via images, narratives and events locally and globally ([Vanolo, 2008](#)). [Anttiroiko \(2014\)](#) argues that cities increasingly engage in city branding to strengthen their economies by attracting talents and financial capital. The latter definition approach will be used in this contribution in light of its suitability to the research question that links urban governance models and PB performance.

Academic study in marketing and urban studies increasingly focuses on the application of PB in the Western world ([Houghton and Stevens, 2011](#)). Nevertheless, cities cannot independently decide how to brand themselves as they operate within the context of MLG. MLG is defined as political practices that address interdependencies between territorial entities in policymaking ([Benz, 2004](#)). [Pierre \(1999\)](#) identified four models of MLG based on

the actors, aims, tools and outcomes. The classification of governance based on centralization, public engagement, partnerships and consensus-building is an alternative way of describing government systems. Traditional “government” is hereby defined by centralization, limited or no public engagement and private partnership, whereas modern “governance”, is characterized by decentralization, public participation, partnerships and consensus-building and is considered desirable (Evans *et al.*, 2006). Obeng-Odoom (2012) echoed this typology, arguing that urban government should be viewed as “a cluster of meanings” that includes decentralization, entrepreneurialism and democracy. Partnership and collaboration among stakeholders should be stressed as part of decentralization, not only deconcentration or delegation (*ibid.*). In our contribution, MLG systems refer to the systemic configurations of actors with resources interacting at multiple levels. The interactions capture the level of centralization and consensus-building. A place-based/territorial governance structure or model is given substance through the cross-fertilization generated by interaction between the public and private sectors, as well as civil society.

Coordination across various tiers of government is imperative in MLG to prevent local activities that may conflict with national or regional policies (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2005). The United Nations Economic and Social Council has stated that critical enablers are required to achieve sustainable urban management, regardless of urban governance style (UN-ECOSOC, 2014). Strong leadership of local authorities, broad-based participatory mechanisms and processes of civic engagement, strong public-private partnerships and alignment of national and local government policy objectives and interventions are among the key enablers, and these are similar to the components of good governance mentioned above (*ibid.*).

The link between MLG and PB is not frequently discussed in the literature. Some studies tie branding to governance at the national level, in the form of nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power (Anholt, 2006; Nye, 2006; Olins, 2014; van Ham, 2008), while other studies focus on branding and governance at the city level (Eshuis and Edwards, 2012; Hall, 1998; Harvey, 1989). With a few exceptions (Syssner, 2010), little study has looked at city branding as an integrated discipline directly connected to how the country is governed, allowing more research in this field. We feel that Syssner (2010) is correct in asserting that PB must be understood on a multi-level basis. There is, however, some research linking MLG to PB in a relatively centralized system. Lu *et al.* (2020) and Lu *et al.* (2017) have examined the relationship between MLG and PB in the Chinese context. They found that the national government plays a more significant role and tends to create direction from the top down, while lower tiers of government add their own stakes and ideas, but only within the parameters set by the national government. On the other hand, prosperous and economically vital provinces or cities do not look to the national level for direction in the same way, as they have more political clout and resources of their own.

### *2.2 Place branding performance*

Measuring PB performance is challenging but important (Hankinson, (2015). Scholars measure performance from various perspectives, such as urban policy (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008), tourism (Pike, 2007, 2009) and investment (Jacobsen, 2012), and they advise the inclusion of various indicators and metrics (Dinnie, 2010; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008). According to Zenker and Martin (2011), the current measuring methods sometimes provide inferior information, and they ignore unique aspects of places, such as diversity in the target audience and the intricacy of the product. Therefore, one idea would probably be insufficient, but a mix of many strategies may provide rich data regarding the efficacy and efficiency of PB initiatives (*ibid.*). The Global Competitiveness Index, the Travel and Tourism Competitive Index, the Global City Index Report, PricewaterhouseCoopers Cities of Opportunity and The Economist Quality of Living are examples of the former. The

Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index and the FutureBrand Country Index, both produced in 2005, and The City Brand Barometer measure PB from an image perspective. [Lucarelli \(2012\)](#), on the other hand, examines academic research on the impact of city brands and divides it into three categories: socio-political, economic and identity-image. [Noori and De Jong \(2018\)](#) measure the credibility of PB practices as developed by local governments. Other authors propose methods for to illustrate the complex background of measurement. Some of these methods are derived from traditional management, such as KPIs, budgetary control, benchmarking and the balanced scorecard ([Arnaboldi et al., 2015](#); [Jørgensen, 2015](#)). Other approaches originate from marketing and branding [e.g. perception-oriented measures, place brand equity, brand value ([Jacobsen, 2012](#); [Sinclair, 2004](#); [Zenker, 2014](#))].

To select an appropriate measurement for this study, the measurement should relate to MLG and urban transformation, as ongoing in oil-rich centrally administered countries. We therefore adopt the definition and measurement developed by [Ma et al. \(2021\)](#), who define PB as an urban governance tool to achieve urban transformation goals. They identify three PB strategies, city promotion, city marketing and city branding, and claim that they are all related to urban governance. One-way communication to a large audience is referred to as promotion. Promotion is merely one component of marketing, which includes a wider variety of tactics for exchanging information with target populations. The capacity of local governments to enhance themselves and their policies by co-creating and executing a new vision of themselves in partnership with stakeholders is referred to as branding. Their definition will be used here because their framework is linked to urban governance and operationalizes PB performance. Other branding performance measurements are less applicable, as they do not distinguish between the three branding strategies in the urban governance domain and/or do not directly relate to urban transformation.

### *2.3 Analytical framework*

Multi-level perspectives are rarely used in branding studies, but they are intriguing to further investigate in the context of centrally administered countries, partly because urban governance systems are characterized by strong leadership ([Al-Khouri, 2010](#); [De Jong et al., 2019](#)) and because PB strategies are influenced by multiple scales (national, regional and municipal). PB in MLG is problematic due to the governing structures. In light of the context given above, it is crucial to understand how cities brand themselves when there are several stakeholders and impactful leadership at the top (national government) as well as how a city can be branded in such an institutional context. Despite that MLG may hinder the advancement of PB, it might also offer advantages as a result of a multi-level participatory process.

Hence, in this contribution, we explore the interrelations between MLG and PB at the urban level in Saudi Arabia. Saudi MLG has not been unified into one consolidated model but can instead be seen as consisting of different MLG models. In examining how different MLG models affect PB performance, we thus first inductively construct MLG models based on the actors, interactions and resources engaged in the branding of specific cities. Moreover, based on our study, we will look for determinants influencing PB performance. [Figure 1](#) illustrates this paper's conceptual framework to explain the relationship between the five models of Saudi MLG systems and their divergent impact on PB performance.

## **3. Research methodology**

### *3.1 Research design and case study selection*

Saudi Arabia provides an interesting research setting due to its combination of a coordinated administrative system with various MLG models and its wide application of PB aiming at economic and social transformation. We approach this as an exploratory multi-level case study considering the national and regional levels and nine cities.

The cities were selected to represent the variety of MLG models (i.e. actors, resources and interactions involved in city branding within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [KSA]). The sample varies in city size, importance and historicity. Supplementary Table 1 specifies the main brand identities of the selected cities as expressed in the urban or regional plans, the official city branding websites or as articulated by the Crown Prince in interviews, and Figure 2 depicts their locations. In 2019, the overall population of the selected regions and cities was estimated at around 19 million people, accounting for nearly 55% of Saudi Arabia's total population.

### 3.2 Operationalization

The operationalization consisted of four steps. The first step distinguished different MLG models based on a multi-level analysis of the actors, their interactions and the resources involved in Saudi city branding. We first identified and described each involved actor on

Figure 1.  
Analytical  
framework

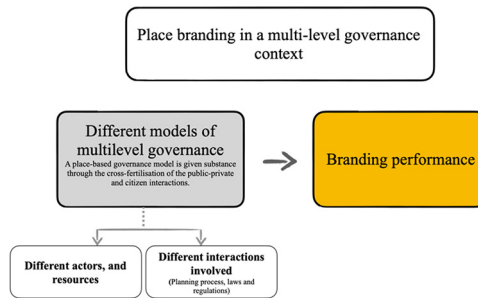


Figure 2.  
Locations of selected  
cities



each geographical level: national, regional and urban. As mentioned in the theory section, there is no suitable framework in the literature that indicates how MLG models influence PB performance in centralized countries. Hence, we inductively composed models by grouping cities with similar actors, interactions and resource compositions based on a document analysis of basic urban laws and regulations, regional, urban and strategic plans as well as advisory reports, such as an overview of the institutional framework for urban planning in the KSA (FSCP, 2016). This led to five MLG models. We subsequently scored the factors that may influence PB effectiveness for each model and described how models operate and can be differentiated from each other. These factors include access to national leadership, coherence of the organizational structure, private sector influence, flexibility of regulations, ability to attract talented staff and access to funding. Each factor was scored on an ordinal scale of five levels from “very high” to “very low” (Table 1). For example, the factor “access to national leadership” implies that city governments do or do not have communication channels with the national government. The score was calculated based on the number of levels between the city and national leadership: “Very High” indicates that there is no level between them city, “High” indicates one level, “Medium” two levels, “Low” for three levels and “Very low” indicates more than three levels. The scoring was conducted by a research team member and followed by two validation and discussion sessions with the rest of the research group members to reach a final agreement on the scores.

In the second step, we conducted a content analysis to assess the PB performance of the nine cities (consulted documents in the Supplementary Table 2). Using various sources when obtaining data allowed the researchers to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study and the context in which they occur (Cassell and Symon, 2004).

We used the list of indicators developed by Ma *et al.* (2021) to guide our data collection on city branding practices. As mentioned in the previous section, we selected their framework as they link branding performance with urban governance in a centralized system similar to Saudi Arabia. They distinguished three branding strategies (promotion, marketing and branding) and operationalized them with specific measures. The following indicators were used to measure the branding performance: the existence of professional branding organizations, specialized staff, branding policy documents, professional branding websites, stakeholder participation, being centred in urban planning and mega-events. Furthermore, as the focus of this paper is PB and not marketing and promotion, we only used the indicators for PB in our case studies to measure the branding performance. Table 2 depicts the indicator framework we employed to evaluate PB performance (indicators CB1–3 and CB5). Summaries of city identities and visions were gathered from each city’s Urban Master Plan (indicator CB4). An examination of the government work reports, which detail municipal government operations, revealed the particular policies and initiatives implemented by cities in the context of city branding (CB6). If we take CB1 as an example, a city will get a score of 5 if it owns an updated PB website, a scores of 3 if it owns the PB website and a score of 1 if the city does not own a PB website. Similar validation sessions were conducted with the research group members as well as with local PB and urban planning experts to review and finalize the given scores.

In the third step, we compared the scores taken from the MLG models with the PB performance scores of the nine cities to determine the nature of the relationship between them. This led to three groups with different levels of PB performance. The group with high scores was labelled as advanced, with medium scores as medium and the group with low scores as having low PB performance. In the final step of our research operationalization, we

**Table 1.**  
Multi-level  
governance  
indicators

|  | Measurements            |                    |                    |                      |                           |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
|  | 5                       | 4                  | 3                  | 2                    | 1                         |
| Decisive determinants (MLG indicators)                                       | Very high               | High               | Medium             | Low                  | Very low                  |
| Access to the national leadership  | Very high direct access | High direct access | –                  | Poor indirect access | Very poor indirect access |
| Coherence of the organizational structure                                    | Very coherent           | Coherent           | –                  | Fragmented           | Very fragmented           |
| Private sector involvement   | Very high involvement   | High involvement   | Medium involvement | Low involvement      | Very low involvement      |
| The flexibility of the regulations and the ability to attract talented staff | Very high flexibility   | High flexibility   | Medium flexibility | Low flexibility      | Very low flexibility      |
| Access to funding  | Very high               | High               | Medium access      | Low access           | Very low access           |

| Code | Indicators                                      | Data source                 | Evaluation standard of indicators                   |  |                     |                           |  |
|------|---|-----------------------------|---|--|---------------------|---------------------------|--|
|      |   |                             | 4   | 3                                      | 2                   | 1                         |  |
| CB1  | Specialized PB website                          | Official gov. website       | –   | Not updated                            | –                   | No website                |  |
| CB2  | Specialized PB department                       |                             | –   | Specialized department                 | –                   | No specialized department |  |
| CB3  | Documentation of PB policy                      |                             | Several publications                                | –                                      | Few publications    | No publications           |  |
| CB4  | The cohesion PB identity                        | Urban master plan           | Cohesive identity                                   | Medium cohesive identity               | Fragmented identity | Very fragmented identity  |  |
| CB5  | Participation of stakeholders in PB initiatives | Official government website | Selective participation                             | Controlled participation               |                     |                           |  |
| CB6  | Specialized PB activities                       | Gov. report                 | Acknowledgement participation<br>National festivals | No participation<br>Regional festivals | Local festivals     | No festivals              |  |

Source: Adapted from (Ma *et al.*, 2021)

**Table 2.**  
Indicators framework

analysed the associations between MLG and PB performance. We identified for what factors the groups show overlap and for what factors the groups differ.

#### 4. Multi-level governance systems and place branding in Saudi Arabia

This section first composes the MLG systems that exist in Saudi Arabia and then describes and analyses PB performance of each MLG systems.

##### 4.1 Multi-level governance models

This section describes and analyses the existing MLG models based on the mix of involved actors, resources and multi-level interactions. Supplementary Table 3 summarizes the actors involved in PB for each level, their roles, responsibilities and reference authority. The data of this section are extracted from the document analysis of Saudi national, regional and urban plans.

Not all the actors mentioned in Supplementary Table 3 are involved in PB of all cities. This differs across cities, a direct consequence of the existence of different MLG models. Based on a document analysis of regional, urban and strategic plans (Supplementary Table 2), we identify five different interactions that emerge among different actors, offering local actors more direct or indirect access to central resources and leadership. Figure 3 shows the different MLG models in Saudi Arabia and the positions of the nine case studies. The remainder of this section describes the defining characteristics of each model (actors, interactions and funding).

*4.1.1 Ministry of municipal, rural affairs, and housing (MOMRAH) model: Tabuk and Buraydah.* This model is characterized by indirect interactions between local and national government, including four layers at the regional and national levels (see Figure 4). At the national level, MOMRAH develops regional plans supervised by the Council of Ministers. At the regional level, the central municipality AMANAH subsequently implements the regional plans for these secondary cities under the supervision of the Regional Council. National Ministries' Regional Offices supervise the implementation of sectoral plans such as those for tourism, culture and entertainment plans supported by council of economic and development affairs (CEDA). The local community's involvement with the city occurs directly through "Municipal Councils", the public's voice in the provincial government. At the local level, the sub-municipality conducts urban management tasks and implements its roles as drawn in the regional plan. Funding for this model is entirely from the national government (UN-Habitat, 2019).

*4.1.2 Regional Development Authority model: Abha and Dammam.* In this MLG model, the city also interacts indirectly with the national government. This model differs from the previous one because the city vision and plans are developed comprehensively by all regional players through the "Regional Development Authority", with support from CEDA (see Figure 5). While MLG is more strongly coordinated and supervised, operations are still fragmented between AMANAH, sub-municipalities and regional offices of various ministries (AbouKorin et al., 2020).

*4.1.3 City Development Authority model: Diriyah Gate.* In this MLG model, the city interacts directly with the national government, while regional players do not have a role. In addition, the number of interactions with regional offices of national ministries is reduced (see Figure 6). As in the previous model, actors collaborate in a City Development Authority, but in this model, it concerns one city only. Another difference with previous models is that a private city developer is contracted to develop and operate the city with highly qualified staff. In addition, the model enables direct assistance from National Ministries' Regional Offices if needed (DQA, 2020).

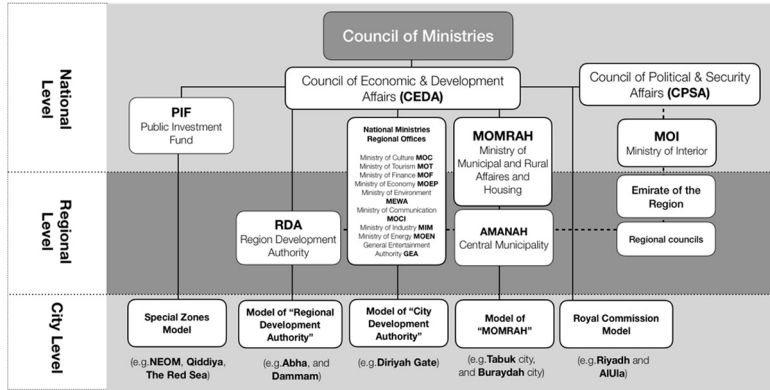
| Decisive determinants  | Planning models | MOMRAH model |          | Regional Development Authority model |        | Royal Commission model |        | City Development Authority model |      | Special Zones model |  |
|--|-----------------|--------------|----------|--------------------------------------|--------|------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|------|---------------------|--|
|  |                 | Tabuk        | Buraydah | Abha                                 | Dammam | Alula                  | Riyadh | Diriyah Gate                     | Neom | The Red Sea Project |  |
| Access to the National leadership  |                 | 1            | 1        | 2                                    | 2      | 5                      | 5      | 5                                | 4    | 4                   |  |
| Coherence of the organizational structure                                    |                 | 1            | 1        | 1                                    | 1      | 2                      | 2      | 4                                | 5    | 5                   |  |
| Private sector involvement   |                 | 1            | 1        | 2                                    | 2      | 3                      | 3      | 4                                | 5    | 5                   |  |
| The flexibility of the regulations and the ability to attract talented staff |                 | 1            | 1        | 2                                    | 2      | 4                      | 4      | 3                                | 5    | 5                   |  |
| Access to funding  |                 | 1            | 1        | 3                                    | 2      | 5                      | 5      | 4                                | 5    | 5                   |  |

|           |      |        |     |          |
|-----------|------|--------|-----|----------|
| 5         | 4    | 3      | 2   | 1        |
| Very high | High | Medium | Low | Very low |

Table key:

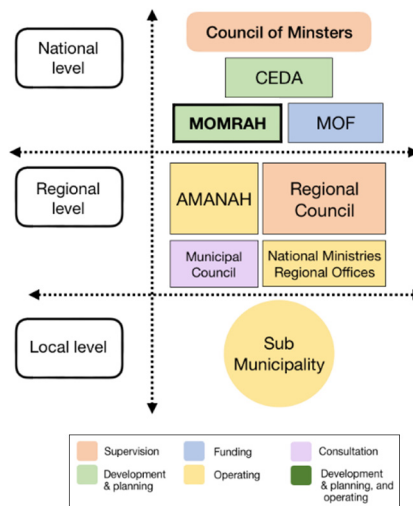
**Table 3.**  
Evaluation of MLG models based on institutional determinants

**Figure 3.**  
Institutional  
framework of urban  
planning in Saudi  
Arabia

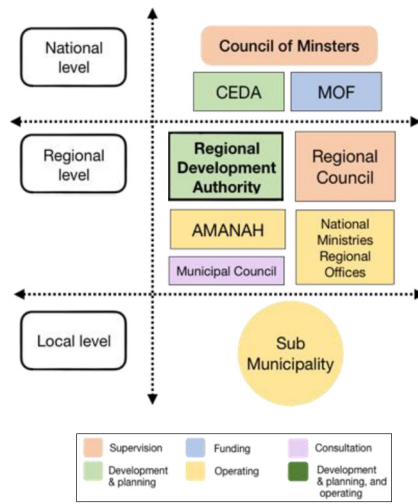


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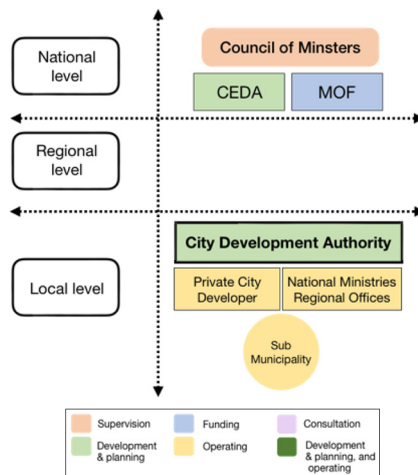
**Figure 4.**  
MOMRAH model



*4.1.4 Royal Commission model: Riyadh and Alula.* As the name suggests, this system has the most delegated powers. In this system, cities have a direct connection with the national government. There is also direct contact with the regional government through the region's Governor and the region's Mayor (see Figure 7). In addition, the delegated powers of this system allow the Royal Commission to interact with whomever it wants from government agencies to support the city. Moreover, where the previous systems followed the legislation and regulations of the national government, this system has been exempted, so the local administration has more flexible access to funding and resources. What also distinguishes this system is the presence of a private city developer for the construction of megaprojects. In addition, the city has the right to directly benefit from local revenues and fees, unlike the previous models (FSCP, 2016).



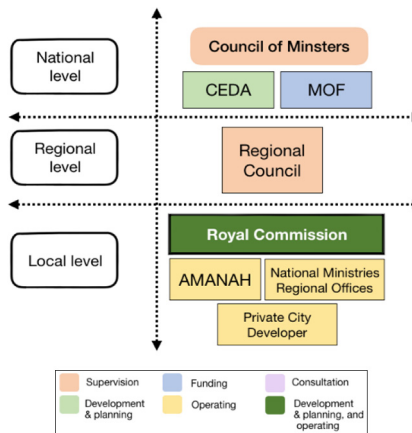
**Figure 5.**  
“Regional Development Authority” model



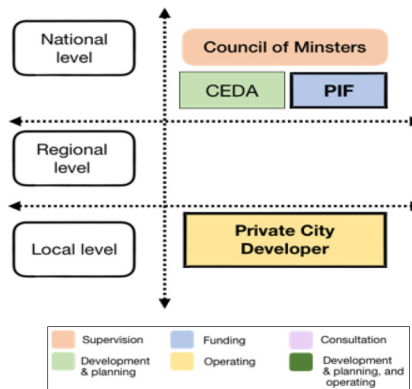
**Figure 6.**  
“City Development Authority” model

4.1.5 *Special Zones model: Neom and the Red Sea project.* This model is based on private companies established by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF). In this system, cities are new and maintain no interaction with regional governments or branches of other ministries (see Figure 8). As private companies, they hire talented people with sufficiently high salaries to build and operate special zones. This model is unique due to the flexibility in applying regulations, absence of influence from external players and high-quality staff. The state does not fund these cities, as the PIF undertakes this task. Examples of this system include the city of Neom, the Red Sea Project, Qiddiya, AMALA and Al-Soudah (CEDA, 2018).

**Figure 7.**  
“Royal Commission”  
model



**Figure 8.**  
Special Zones model



*4.2 Indicators of the multi-level governance models*

Specific indicators can be derived from the above analysis that can characterize the planning models. These indicators include access to national leadership, coherent organizational structure, private sector influence, flexibility in applying regulations and ability to attract talented staff. This section scores the indicators which may influence PB for the five MLG models (Table 3). Regarding access to the national leadership, the Royal Commission and City Development Authority models obtain a score of 5 as they have direct access. Alula, Riyadh and Diriyah Gate have direct access via the existence of the Crown Prince as chairman of the board of each city. Four points have been given to Special Zones, as cities have only one level to national leadership via PIF. The Regional Development Authority model obtains a score of 2 because cities such as Abha and Dammam have to go through three levels, while the MOMRAH model only scores 1, because cities like Tabuk and Buraydah have to go through more than three levels.

Concerning the coherence of the organizational structure, the Special Zones model is very coherent and scores 5 as there are no external or internal players on the regional and local

levels that influence a city's PB. The City Development Authority obtains a 4 for coherence as Diriyah Gate has few internal players such as National Ministries' Regional Offices (NMROs) that may influence its direction. The Royal Commission model offers a fragmented organizational structure with a score of 2, as various external and internal players like the Regional Council, Central Municipality and NMROs influence a city's PB. The MOMRAH and Regional Development Authority models are "very fragmented" because many external players' influence PB, such as the Regional Council, Central Municipality, Municipal Council and NMROs.

In terms of private sector involvement, the Special Zones score 5, as the private sector is very highly involved in the planning, consultation, funding operation, construction, supervision and monitoring of cities such as Neom and The Red Sea Project. The private sector is also highly involved in the City Development Authority model, but less so in its funding, which gives Diriyah Gate a score of 4. The Royal Commission model obtained a score of 3 as the private sector is involved in planning, consultation, operation, and construction. Two as a score was awarded to the Regional Development Authority model, as the private sector is involved only in planning and consultation. Finally, the involvement of the private sector in the MOMRAH model is only consultative, hence a 1.

Regarding the flexibility of the regulations and the ability to attract talented staff, a score of 5 was given to the Special Zones as their cities operate through private companies that offer high incentives to attract talents which the government sector cannot provide. The Royal Commission model scores a 4; it also offers high flexibility as its cities are fully exempted from national regulations. The City Development Authority is partly operated by private city developers and partly by government authority, hence a score of 3. A score of 2 is given to the Regional Development Authority model, as it is a semi-government authority that offers flexibility in applying regulations and ability to attract talented staff. The MOMRAH model once again obtained a 1 as it follows Public Servant Law that allows very low flexibility.

Concerning access to funding, a score of 5 is given to the Special Zones and Royal Commission models as they have flexible budgets from the PIF and the government and the ability to benefit from investment returns and revenues. The City Development Authority scores 4 as it has a significant budget from the government and the ability to benefit from investment returns and revenues. The Regional Development Authority has medium to low access as there is no specific budget for the city, but they can be funded within the regional budget with support from CEDA and PIF projects inside the region. The MOMRAH model again scores 1 as its cities have no significant share within the regional budget and no ability to benefit from investment returns and revenues.

#### *4.3 Place branding performance*

In this section, we evaluate PB performance of the selected cities by consulting their documents and websites (consulted documents in Supplementary Table 2). [Table 3](#) scores each city in terms of sophistication of their city branding websites, departments and staff, policies, identities, stakeholder participation and activities. Based on the framework in [Table 2](#) in the methodology section, each indicator will be given a score of 1–5.

Regarding the existence of a specialized city branding website, Alula, Riyadh, Diriyah, Neom and the Red Sea Project have obtained the highest score (5), as they have professional and updated PB websites and active social media accounts. Dammam, Abha, Tabuk and Buraydah obtained the lowest score (1) as they do not have any PB website in place. This

finding also applies to the existence of a professional city branding organization. The first group has specialized and high-quality PB departments and professional staff as they have direct support from CEDA. In contrast, Tabuk and Buraydah are branded by several national ministries with different branding objectives, such as tourism, investment and cultural purposes, without a particular city branding organization and qualified staff. Dammam and Abha have an investment department responsible for branding the investment opportunities for the whole region and not at the city level; hence, a medium score (3) has been given.

Concerning the documentation for PB policies, Riyadh scores 5 as it publishes significant publications related to PB policy planning and delivery, such as the Green Riyadh Project, Riyadh Art initiative and the Sports Boulevard project. Neom, Alula Governorate and Diriyah also score 5, as they published several publications on transforming the place brand into an urban code and building patterns and investment policies. The Red Sea Project scores 2 as it has published few documents because it was newly established at the beginning of 2021. Tabuk and Buraydah have not issued any PB policy planning and delivery publications, hence a score of 1.

Regarding the existence of a place's brand identity and a cohesive strategy, objective, policy, vision, or plan, Alula, Neom and The Red Sea Project obtain the highest score (5) as they have focused perceptions of their urban development process. They all have identities distinguished from various target groups and aligned with the city's features, resources and conditions. Diriyah Gate obtains 4 points, because the city has an integrated perspective on urban development, where the city's identity is distinguished from those of other cities. Although Dammam is a major city, the degree of distinction across city identities is low, and vague notions are mentioned in the urban plan as achieving "the best place to live". As for the Tabuk, Buraydah and Abha, other types of development are encouraged from the regional level despite the dominance of agricultural and tourism identities; hence, a 3 is given.

In terms of stakeholder participation in shaping the city brand, cities differ according to the role assigned to them by the Saudi central government. Riyadh, Neom, Alula, the Red Sea Project and Diriyah Gate score 3: the cities facilitate stakeholder participation in PB initiatives while governmental viewpoints prevail. In the case of Tabuk and Buraydah, stakeholder participation is limited through the Municipal Council, which is made up of 14 members, seven of whom are elected and seven appointed. Their involvement concerns prioritizing and monitoring the implementation of projects, and branding the city is not among their tasks, hence a score of 1 for engaging stakeholders in the PB process. In the case of Abha and Dammam, stakeholder involvement in city branding processes is highest, with a large number of parties involved. Nevertheless, this process is specific to the region's brand, of which the cities are part. They score 4, as they facilitate selected stakeholder participation in city branding initiatives.

Activities, conferences and forums are essential policy tools that cities use to implement brands. In Saudi Arabia, these activities are primarily led by the General Entertainment Authority, in coordination with the Ministries of Tourism and Culture and the regions' municipalities. Riyadh, Alula, Diriyah and Neom obtain a score of 5 as they organize a significant number of major international and domestic festivals. Dammam and Buraidah score 4 as they organize fewer international festivals and focus on activities at the regional or local levels, such as celebrating National Day and the Buraidah Date Festival. Abha and Tabuk organize a small number of international and regional festivals; hence, they score 3.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

This section relates MLG to PB performance. Based on the branding performance results in [Table 4](#), we can relate the MLG models to three levels of place brand performance: models with high scores have been labelled as “advanced PB performance”: The Royal Commission, City Development Authority and Special Zones models. The Regional Development Authority model obtained a medium score and has been classified as having “medium PB performance”. The MOMRAH model has been ranked as having “low PB performance”.

### 5.1 Multi-level governance and successful place branding

Our findings show that all determinants for MLG models enable publicly and privately managed cities to advance PB performance within Saudi Arabia’s centrally administered governance system. These factors include medium to very high direct access to the national leadership, medium to high coherence in organizational structure, medium to very high private sector involvement, medium to very high flexibility in applying regulations and high to very high access to funding. The ability to mobilize resources from the national government for any particular city plays a central role in obtaining good PB performance. The funding preference expressed by the national government is probably due to the economic importance Riyadh represents and the historical value and potential for tourism of Dirayah and Alula have to offer. These results confirm that national governments directly support the PB of cities or special economic zones like Dubai, Doha, Hong Kong and Macau which are too big to fail in hierarchical systems such as China, UAE and Qatar ([Lu et al., 2017](#); [Ye and Björner, 2018](#); [De Jong, 2019](#)). The study thereby shows that in centrally administered systems, other determinants matter than in decentralized systems, particularly access to national leadership and mobilization of resources ([Aina et al., 2019](#); [Liesbet and Gary, 2003](#)). This national support correlates with a significant amount of funds, qualified staff and low dependency on weak players in fragmented networks, which jointly allow a city to put itself boldly on the map.

Privatization of Special zones also boosts PB performance. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, they have relatively direct contact with higher tiers of government. Secondly, they can develop place brands rather independently, because they are not linked to state regulations and do not intersect with other layers of local and regional government. Thirdly, private companies are experienced and skilled players and specialists in real estate and investment marketing practices, unlike publicly managed cities that have started practicing PB in Saudi Arabia only since 2016. The emergence of new private cities with strong brands, real estate development and smart technologies is widely discussed and practised worldwide ([Kolotouchkina and Seisdodos, 2018](#)) in Songdo IBD, Masdar and Skolkovo. Despite frequent criticism raised against these practices, their PB performance is often superior, because as [Pasquinelli \(2014\)](#) has mentioned, their brand authenticity tends to be higher as it stems from within the place and not copied or reproduced from experiences in other global cities. Likewise, [Ooi \(2014\)](#) has argued that despite possible international sophistication of a city brand, disregarding regional aspects, country contexts and values of the local population in exchange for investment value may eventually result in major developmental challenges.

### 5.2 Multi-level governance and unsuccessful place branding

On the other hand, city branding performance is negatively affected by very poor indirect access to the national leadership, very fragmented organizational structure, very low private sector involvement, very low flexibility in applying regulations and very low access to funding. The branding performance of the Region Development Authority and MOMRAH models that allow for more horizontal and vertical participation are low to medium.

**Table 4.**  
City branding  
performance  
evaluation of five  
MLG models

| Indicators                                      | Planning Models |                           | MOMRAH model |           | Regional Development Authority model |           | Royal Commission model       |           | City Development Authority model |           | Special Zones model |                                |  |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|--------------------------------|--|
|   | Cities          |                           | Tabuk        | Buraydah  | Abha                                 | Dammam    | Alula                        | Riyadh    | Diriyah Gate                     | Neom      | The Red Sea Project |                                |  |
| Specialized city branding website               |                 | 1                         | 1            | 1         | 1                                    | 1         | 5                            | 5         | 5                                | 5         | 5                   | 5                              |  |
| Specialized city branding department            |                 | 3                         | 3            | 3         | 5                                    | 5         | 5                            | 5         | 5                                | 5         | 5                   | 5                              |  |
| Documentation of PB policy                      |                 | 1                         | 1            | 4         | 4                                    | 4         | 5                            | 5         | 5                                | 5         | 5                   | 2                              |  |
| The cohesion place brand identity               |                 | 3                         | 3            | 3         | 3                                    | 3         | 5                            | 4         | 4                                | 4         | 5                   | 5                              |  |
| Participation of stakeholders in PB initiatives |                 | 1                         | 1            | 4         | 4                                    | 4         | 3                            | 3         | 3                                | 3         | 3                   | 3                              |  |
| specialized PB activities                       |                 | 3                         | 4            | 3         | 4                                    | 4         | 5                            | 5         | 5                                | 5         | 5                   | 3                              |  |
| <b>Total PB score</b>                           |                 | <b>12</b>                 | <b>13</b>    | <b>20</b> | <b>21</b>                            | <b>28</b> | <b>27</b>                    | <b>27</b> | <b>27</b>                        | <b>28</b> | <b>28</b>           | <b>23</b>                      |  |
| <b>PB performance classification</b>            |                 | <b>Low PB performance</b> |              |           |                                      |           | <b>Medium PB performance</b> |           |                                  |           |                     | <b>Advanced PB performance</b> |  |

Two reasons can explain this finding. The first reason is that their organizations are less well-equipped and their staff less experienced with PB. In addition, there is still an overlap in the tasks between this system and other systems, which hinders the efficient functioning of the model (FSCP, 2016). These results are in line with those of Oliveira (2015), who also found that the “recipe” for effective PB initiatives includes a vision for the place, a broad strategy that can define what the place is and what it aims to become over time, along with a thorough definition of who will be involved in the process, the financial and human resources, the projects and the creative communication.

The second reason is that the political support in this model has been placed mainly on the region’s central city and those cities supporting the national transformation goals. The literature on PB has acknowledged the problem of a lack of political support. In research comparing four European cities, Braun (2008) discovers that PB’s integration into larger urban government might be hampered by a lack of political support. This finding is consistent with that of Eshuis *et al.* (2013) and Lu *et al.* (2017) in the Netherlands and Chinese context, who both found that lack of financial resources is considered as one of the leading “bottlenecks” for PB success and may result from a lack of political importance. This finding is in line with the cautionary statement made by Boisen *et al.* (2011) on the selective nature of the city branding instrument. National ministries and regional offices attempt to brand intermediate and small cities with seasonal activities and festivals. Nevertheless, these initiatives are sectoral and do not integrate with all components of the city and therefore are not adopted by all partners and local residents. Our findings and those of others raise the question of a widening gap between winners and losers or regional disparity between large, medium and small cities. Riyadh’s monopoly and that of other big cities with the largest share of development in their region may well increase disparities (FSCP, 2018). In addition, the findings of this investigation complement those of earlier studies that a PB approach that does not include all stakeholders in its mechanism may affect loyalty to the place (Berg and Björner, 2014; Hughes, 1995).

Figure 9 summarizes the causal relations between the five Saudi MLG systems, their PB performance and the determinants that connect the two.

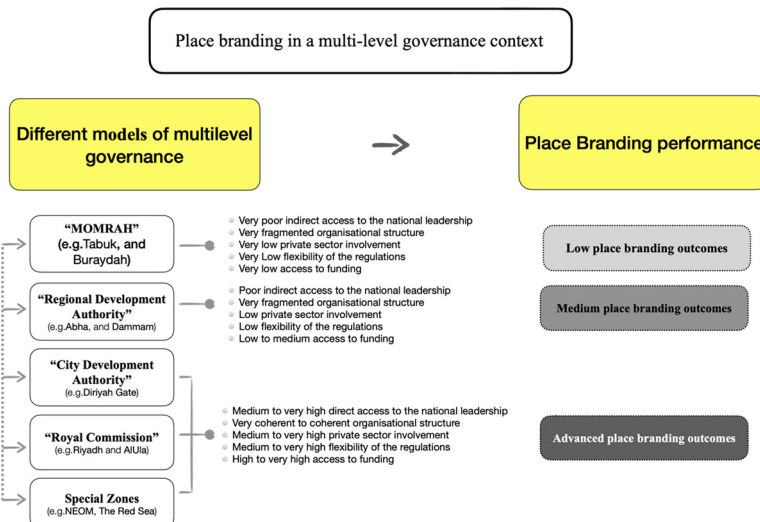


Figure 9. Multi-level governance models and place branding performance

## 6. Conclusions

As a rentier state, Saudi Arabia has piloted different MLG systems aiming at urban transformation, and this variety enables us to learn how PB is differentially affected by them. This contribution examined how the different institutional determinants within MLG models affect the performance of PB in centralized administrative systems. We developed a theoretical framework to evaluate the branding performance in different MLG models as well as how the two were connected. In this exploratory study, we found that differences in MLG influence city branding practices. The five models have been categorized according to their branding performance: advanced, medium and low (quality) PB. Our analysis shows how specific determinants can affect branding performance in MLG contexts. Some determinants matter more in countries such as Saudi Arabia and China than in less hierarchical countries, such as access to leadership and mobilization of resources. Hierarchical systems have fewer checks and balances and set priorities in the cities and regions they favour. Some cities are of prime importance and get everything; others are considered peripheral and struggle to get anything done; they are under-resourced in many ways, and therefore their branding performance also suffers.

The evidence from this study suggests that the existing MLG models create several challenges to PB practices and increase the gap between winners and losers. This implies that relying on the national government substantially affects the success of a city brand and prosperity of a city or region. This may have significant implications, as the absence of a unified MLG system reinforces leakage of local expertise from underprivileged cities and regions towards constituencies in MLG models that offer more generous financial rewards, leading to rising regional socio-economic disparity.

A reasonable approach to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of branding performance could be to enhance the coherence of the organizational structure in each model. The central government regulates local urban operations, and it therefore can alter levels of fiscal autonomy that local essentially executing agents enjoy. It may therefore be commendable to revise governance structures through decentralization to improve PB performance among the currently underperforming ones MLG models. This is supported by the New Urban Agenda, which specifies that local administrations should lead territorial planning processes. However, their implementation will require coordination with all spheres of government and the participation of civil society and other relevant stakeholders (UN-Habitat, 2016). Such planning decentralization could thus only be undertaken effectively if it took place within the context of a fiscal decentralization, which allows every tier of government to source and use its own revenues for development purposes.

In addition, capacity building among players in the underperforming models is required. While MOMRAH often makes city-level plans in conjunction with local governments, there is also a need to strengthen local staff competence and introduce monitoring mechanisms such as performance indicators to measure the level of completion of PB projects. There is, therefore, a definite need for increasing urban government capacity development, taking into account institutional capacities, individual technical and professional skills and local leadership skills.

Another important practical implication is that those MLG models which rely more on top-down support from the national government manage to find substantially more resources to support their PB initiatives and thereby further urban development, although this may come at the price of having to give up some of their freedom of action and identity. A bottom-up approach, on the other hand, is more likely to keep original identities in place, but to suffer from limited availability of resources which may constrain the quality and implementation of PB. The study thus concludes that there is a need to better amalgamate

PB to urban plans, identities, strategies and finance for all MLG models, thus using PB as a strategic planning tool to improve place assets, stakeholders and community's involvement in the process (Oliveira, 2015).

The main contribution of this article is, in our view, that it demonstrates how different MLG models affect PB performance differentially and which determinants come into play for explaining these differences in centralized administrative systems. There is as of yet no knowledge whether these same determinants also matter in other countries, but our findings can be a starting point to study MLG models in other countries and verify them. A limitation of this study is that only two case studies were conducted for each system, and the evidence was based on document analysis and websites. More cases and other types of evidence could qualify the results. A future study may focus on one of the systems or one region and conduct in-depth interviews with stakeholders to define their essential roles in the city branding process and its relationship to the regional and the national levels. That would allow us to find out more about the human drives underlying the branding practices in various institutional structures and why they lead to the results we have witnessed above.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

### Corresponding author

Abdulrhman Alsayel can be contacted at: [alsayel@ihs.nl](mailto:alsayel@ihs.nl)

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