

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This research examined the NEOM project using the RBD framework and evaluated the extent to which it aligns with the principles of PANEL. Drawing on data from 2020 to 2024, the study finds that NEOM's development departs sharply from the core goals of the RBD approach. Rather than advancing human rights, the project reflects a form of authoritarian development that prioritizes economic ambition and centralized state control at the expense of human dignity and the rights of Indigenous communities.

The gap between NEOM's practices and the PANEL principles becomes evident across all five dimensions. The project systematically violated the Participation principle, as the Howeitat community was excluded from the planning stages, and denied their right to FPIC; instead, authorities used symbolic consultation by co-opting certain tribal figures while presenting eviction orders as non-negotiable security directives. Accountability is absent, NEOM's governance structure, a closed joint-stock company owned by the PIF and led by the Crown Prince, creates an inherent conflict of interest that eliminates downward accountability and leaves no independent channel for complaints, reinforced by the government's refusal to cooperate with UN special rapporteurs. The project also reflects Non-discrimination failures, as compensation procedures were arbitrary and opaque, disadvantaging those without formal land titles and pushing displaced residents into underserved areas like Al-Disa, Shuwaq, etc., thereby exacerbating their socio-economic vulnerability. Instead of fostering Empowerment, state authorities deployed coercive measures, including the use of the 2017 CounterTerrorism Law to criminalize peaceful resistance; the killing of Abdul Rahim alHuwaiti, the detention of at least 47 Howeitat members, and severe prison sentences against 15 individuals have created a climate of fear that suppresses collective agency. The Legality principle is undermined by Saudi Arabia's breach of its international human rights obligations under instruments such as ICERD and

the principles of the ICCPR, while domestic regulations like eminent domain rules and counter-terrorism provisions were strategically used to legitimize dispossession, illustrating how law itself was weaponized to facilitate repression.

The failure of the RBD approach in the NEOM project has broader global significance. It suggests that NEOM should not be seen as an isolated case, but as a representative example of emerging authoritarian development models in which large-scale infrastructure projects are used to strengthen state control and limit dissent rather than improve public. This pattern reflects a shift toward statecapitalist and “hydro-authoritarian” frameworks, where institutions such as the PIF operate with minimal oversight. These models prioritize centralized planning, rapid execution, and financial opacity over community participation, creating an accountability gap that allows self-funded projects to bypass safeguards normally required by international financial institutions. At the international level, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms points to a fragmented global governance system, in which authoritarian states are able to use mega-projects as tools of soft power and reputation management while avoiding accountability for domestic human rights violations. As a result, these structural conditions contribute to a persistent “geography of global inequality,” where the displacement of Indigenous communities is framed as an acceptable cost of modernization. This process undermines their fundamental right to refuse development imposed upon them and signals a troubling normalization of development practices that systematically erode the agency and cultural survival of marginalized populations.

5.2 Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this research, several recommendations are directed to key actors to address the human rights crisis linked to NEOM and prevent similar abuses in future development projects.

5.2.1. Practical

For the Saudi Government, improving human rights practices should be understood not as an obstacle but as a practical strategy to secure long-term stability and investor

confidence in NEOM. Within the broader goals of Vision 2030, the following policy adjustments are recommended:

1. The state should integrate the Huwaitat tribe into the project rather than treating them as a barrier. This can be achieved through targeted training programs that prepare displaced residents for active roles in tourism, cultural heritage work, or security services within NEOM.
2. It is crucial to replace arbitrary cash payments with a transparent, coherent livelihood-restoration framework. Compensation formulas must be based on replacement costs and actual loss of income. Furthermore, relocation sites must function as fully serviced communities rather than isolated housing clusters.
3. To prevent grievances from escalating into political or security crises, the government should establish an internal grievance mechanism, such as an independent ombudsman office under the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (separate from NEOM's corporate leadership). This allows disputes to be resolved administratively rather than through criminalization.
4. Positioning community protection as a core component of compliance with global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards will improve Saudi Arabia's social score, facilitating the attraction of Western investors and reducing the financial reputational risks surrounding NEOM's development.

For International Corporations and Investors: Functioning as moral duty-bearers in a context of weak domestic oversight, international firms face a heightened need for stronger human rights due diligence:

1. Companies working with NEOM, particularly major consulting firms such as McKinsey, BCG, and Oliver Wyman, should carry out and publicly release independent Human Rights Impact Assessments (HRIAs) in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
2. Beyond mere compliance, these corporations must actively use their leverage to push for the protection of affected communities. If the Saudi government refuses to address serious human rights violations, firms have an ethical responsibility to disengage from the project to avoid contributing to, or being associated with, international wrongdoing.

5.2.2. Theoretical

Future studies should critically examine how state-capitalist entities, particularly Sovereign Wealth Funds like the Public Investment Fund (PIF), are reshaping global development norms. Research is needed to understand how these entities operate with significantly fewer accountability requirements compared to traditional multilateral bodies like the World Bank.

Further scholarly work is needed to track the long-term conditions of the Huwaitat families post-displacement. Longitudinal research should investigate how the loss of traditional livelihoods, the weakening of tribal social networks, and drastic changes in living conditions continue to affect their economic and social well-being over time.