

FACING THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

ENCOURAGING SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Habiba Al Marashi

By the middle of the last century one out of three people were living in cities and towns. Back in 1950, only New York City had more than 10 million inhabitants. It is common knowledge today that a majority of the world's population, more than 3 billion people, live in urban places. It is projected that in another 25 years, two-thirds of the world's population will be urbanized. By 2015, there will be 23 "mega cities", and 19 of them will be located in developing countries. Rapidly growing, urban areas in developing nations will increasingly compete for resources. It will be up to urban governments to provide opportunities for economic, social, and cultural well-being. Cities offer much more than jobs and homes. They are repositories of human interaction and exchange, providing facilities for the arts, entertainment, sports, and recreation that allow us to relax and rejuvenate. In this vein, cities also are the catalysts of social, cultural, and intellectual evolution. Thus, cities can play a vital role in facilitating sustainable development both in the local context, and within a wider, global perspective. "If half the urban infrastructure that will exist in the world of 2050 must be built in the next 45 years, the opportunity to design, construct, operate, and maintain new cities better than old ones is enormous, exciting, and challenging", writes Joel Cohen, in *Scientific American*.

Urban regions are known for their extensive use of natural resources and prolific generation of waste substances. They also import goods and services, and export waste products, leaving an impact not only on their immediate environment but also on distant environments over a longer time period. The challenge of civic authorities to provide adequate living conditions, water, sanitation, public transportation, and waste management features prominently in all urban development policies and action programs.

For a country like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), urban development is a major concern of policymakers, planners, public officials, and environmental advocates. The UAE has been progressing steadily on the path of growth and development over the last three decades, propelled by an oil-rich economy. Although not affluent in other natural resources, the country scores high on development indices in recent years due to unprecedented economic growth, high per capita income, and robust social development. Among all the nations in the Arabian Gulf region, the UAE has emerged as a hub of commerce, stability, security, and peace. According to the 2005 Human Development Index Report compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the UAE has risen in rank to occupy the 41st position among the developed nations of the world. Because of its economic growth and relatively open immigration policies, the UAE has attracted large numbers of people from all over the world, particularly from Asia and Europe. The UAE has urbanized rapidly over a comparatively brief time frame. Prominent cities like Dubai have expanded several times their size in comparison with what they used to be, even as recently as the 1970s and 1980s. Today, Dubai features prominently on the global map of emerging places, and is now considered by some experts to be among the "world cities".

The population of the UAE has been increasing by more than 5 percent annually for the past 15 years. The immigrant population in the UAE has grown by more than 6 percent annually during this same time period. One consequence is the UAE's large-scale boom in construction due to the huge expansion of urban areas, facilities, and infrastructure. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region, more than US\$300 billion is being invested in building urban residential, commercial, tourism, leisure, and entertainment projects. Of this, the UAE accounts for US\$36 billion, according to estimates of the Arab Real Estate and Construction Association. In the next five years this amount is expected to double, making the UAE "the pearl of the east".

While construction and real estate is a major contributor to Dubai's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is also among the prime resource-intensive sectors. Thus, growing cities such as Dubai need to plan along

sustainable lines in order to reduce their negative environmental impacts and natural resource depletion. There is ample scope for establishing direct links between environmental and developmental issues in urban growth. By promoting sustainable lifestyles, cleaner production, renewable energy, water resources management, reduction of solid waste and sewage treatment, reuse and recycling of materials, ecological urban design and construction, public health, cultural expression and social responsibility of residents, cities can strive to be magnets for long-term environmental sustainability.

Taking up the cause of sustainable development, the Emirates Environmental Group (EEG), a leading non-government organization (NGO) based in Dubai, has emerged as one of the most active civil society NGOs in the United Arab Emirates. EEG, as it is popularly known, has been a pioneering force behind the mainstreaming of such potent issues as education for sustainable development, waste management, and separation of recyclable materials at source, the three R's (reduce, reuse, recycle), water and energy conservation, renewable energy production, sustainable transportation, public transit, combating desertification by expanding urban green spaces, promoting recourse efficient green buildings, and encouraging corporate social responsibility. EEG's operations are targeted at building effective outreach among key stakeholders including governments, businesses, communities, and civil society groups. EEG's vision is to facilitate a green and sustainable UAE.

EEG has spearheaded community waste recycling through successful collection campaigns for aluminum cans, paper, cartridges, plastic, and glass. By facilitating sorted collection, EEG aims to promote sound cyclical use of materials, reduction of emissions and pollution, mitigating global climate change and reducing the ecological footprint of the UAE. A few years ago, EEG mounted an awareness campaign to popularize the concept of green buildings in an environment that was still unfamiliar with the imperative for sustainability. Raising awareness among policymakers, communications media, professionals, and community leaders, EEG is now the conscience behind the movement to form a green building council for the UAE, to establish minimum environmental quality standards and objective and transparent rating systems, and to build environmentally sustainable structures. EEG has supported various national and local initiatives to improve and expand public transportation systems, by promoting public education on the economic and environmental benefits of urban transit. EEG has enlisted the active support of the corporate sector to steer growth and development in the direction of sustainability. In 2004, EEG launched the multi-stakeholder Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Network in the UAE, bringing together the heads and hands of urban economic development in a single, structured, composite body.

Keeping in perspective that 80 percent of the world's green house gases causing global warming now come from urban regions, EEG has increased the urgency of its campaign to create a cleaner urban environment, one that is based on the participatory efforts of all concerned. EEG's work has received recognition at the international level, and it has been officially accredited by the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), and by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. EEG is the first environmental NGO in the world to earn the prestigious ISO 14001 accreditation for its environmental management systems.

Habiba Al Marashi is Chairperson of the Emirates Environmental Group in the United Arab Emirates, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Dubai Award (UN-Habitat Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment), and a member of the Board of Directors of Global Urban Development. In 2003 she won the Emirates Professional Businesswoman Award.