



Urbanization in Dubai : Process, Problems and Challenges

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The past 30 years brought about significant economic, political and technological changes, which have influenced the structure and the functions of urban areas in Gulf countries. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a rich, oil-producing nation that has, in the span of a decade or so, become highly urbanized with modern infrastructure. 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. According to the 2005 Human Development Index Report compiled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the UAE has risen in rank to occupy the 41st position among the nations of the world¹. 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.²

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Present paper is an attempt to highlight the process of Urban Sprawl, problems of Urbanization e.g. socio-economic problems, environmental threat, urban crime and challenges for the Sustainable Urban Development of Dubai.

Three main factors have shaped the urban landscape of UAE are: (UN ESCWA, 1999) ³

- the 1973 oil boom
- the large-scale international and intra-regional migration
- and globalization .

Rapid economic growth, which occurred in Dubai after the oil boom of 1973, was accompanied by population growth and increased urbanization. There has been a massive migration of the population from rural to urban areas, as well as immigration of foreign labour into Dubai. Government policies of free trade and to promote issues of globalization made Dubai a dream city for foreign investors, businessmen, and workers in all sectors of economy.

Urban Sprawl

Between 1973 and 2006 dramatic changes along the coast of the United Arab Emirates follow the development of Dubai, one of the country's seven emirates. The country is located along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula where the land tapers to a sharp tip that nearly separates the Persian Gulf to the north from the Gulf of Oman to the south. This trio of images from NASA's series of Landsat satellites shows the remarkable transformation in landscape and urban sprawl.



October 11, 2006



August 28, 1990



January 22, 1973

Source: Satellite Images from Earth Observatory, NASA.

In the image, captured on October 11, 2006, artificial islands shaped like palm trees stretch along the shore. Inland, irrigated vegetation stands out in red (the image is enhanced with infrared light) against the tan-coloured desert. Developed areas, including numerous roads, appear cement-coloured. In the middle image, captured on August 28, 1990, the number and density of roads and buildings is far less than in 2006. The area to the southwest of image centre is particularly less developed. While in the image of 1973, urban development is almost negligible.¹

The city of Dubai is home to more than 1.2 million people, and it is still growing rapidly. The city's emergence as a major metropolis and tourist destination is evident in these satellite images. Land conversion activities in UAE and especially in Dubai for large-scale reclamation projects that extend shorelines into the sea. Dubai city, increased in size by 92 km² by 1985.

The Palm Islands are artificial islands in Dubai, United Arab Emirates on which major commercial and residential infrastructure will be constructed. The islands are the Palm Jumeirah, the Palm Jebel Ali and the Palm Deira. Each settlement will be in the shape of a palm tree, topped with a crescent, and will have a large number of residential, leisure and entertainment centres. The Palm Islands are located off the coast of The United Arab Emirates in the Persian Gulf and will add 520 kilometres of beaches to the city of Dubai. Between the three islands there will be over 100 luxury hotels, exclusive residential beach side villas and apartments, marinas, water theme parks, restaurants, shopping malls, sports facilities and health spas.²

The creation of the Palm Jumeirah began in June 2001. Shortly after, the Palm Jebel Ali was announced and reclamation work began. The Palm Deira, which is planned to have a surface area of 46.35 square kilometre. Construction was originally planned to take 10–15 years, but that was before the impact of the global credit crunch hit Dubai in 2007-2008.³

Dubai is emerging as one of the biggest tourism destinations of the world. Income generating from tourism, shopping and re-export of goods have major share in the total GDP of Dubai. But the question is

what will happen in the time of recession as Dubai's tourism is badly hit. Dubai's economy is mainly tourism based economy, and activities related to tourism mainly hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, tourist resorts and recreational centers etc. are developing very fast.

Problems Associated with Rapid Urban Growth

The urbanization process in Dubai refers to much more than simple population growth; it involves changes in the economic and social structures of the region. Rapid urban growth is also responsible for many environmental and social changes in the urban environment. The city is becoming overcrowded and facing the problems of smooth transportation, unrest among foreign workers, problems of social security. Job opportunities due to fast growing urbanization of the city motivated the mass movement of surplus population from other countries.

At the same time, migrants provided cheap, plentiful labour for the emerging economic activities. Though the industrial development is taking place in Dubai, but main emphasis is on the construction and development of tourist places, hotels and resorts. Here the concentration of investments attracts large numbers of migrants looking for employment, thereby creating a large surplus labour force, which keeps wages low. This situation is attractive to Dubai government as well as foreign investment companies those are in construction business.

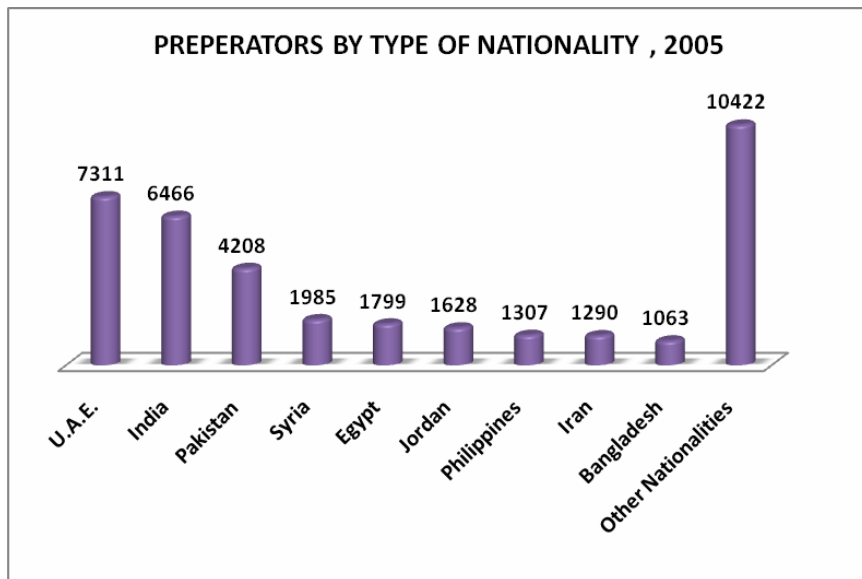
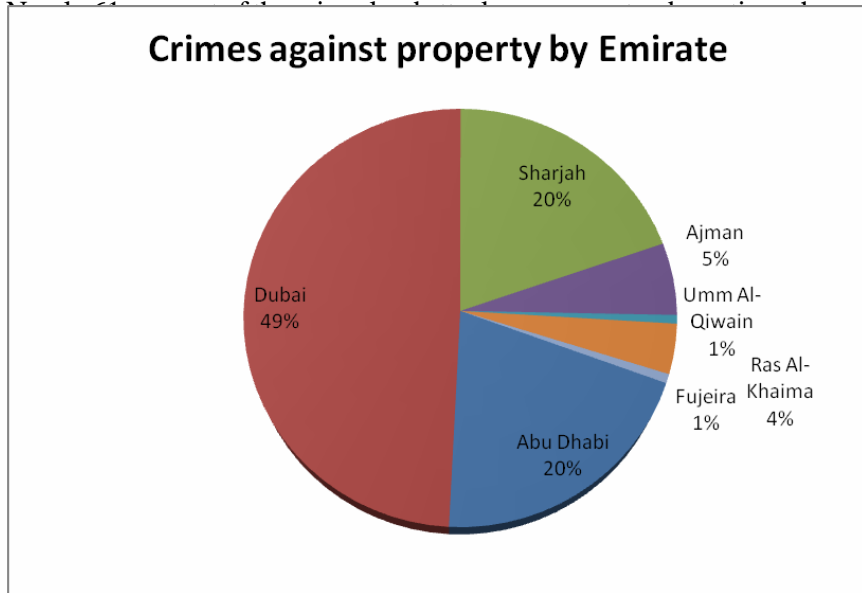
Socio-economic Problems

Though the urban development in Dubai has very shiny picture in front of the world, but it has dark side also. Workers, turning this desert into high-rise towers and luxury hotels, live in cramped labour camps, low pay and increasing desperation. The construction workers' camps, in particular, have been set up even deeper in the desert. That adds an hour or two just to get to the jobsite every morning, in addition to the workers 12 hour shifts. A growing number prefer to suicide rather than return home with empty pockets. In 2005; 84 south Asians committed suicide in Dubai, up from 70 in 2004, in which a large proportion was of Indians.⁴

Therefore, workers fought for their rights and in September 2005, 800 workers staged protest march down a main highway in the heart of the city and set of a national debate about the treatment of foreign workers. Labourers had at least eight major strikes to demand their rights and get

their pay, which is sometimes withheld. In April 2006 Asian workers rioted at the site of the world’s tallest skyscraper.⁵

Increasing urban crime is the result of urban poverty and a new emerging issue in Dubai. Around 65,000 crimes were reported in the UAE in 2005.



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2006

One of seven emirates in the UAE federation, Dubai is witnessing a sharp economic slowdown as oil prices collapse and the global financial crisis takes its toll on real estate prices and the stock market. Real growth in gross domestic product (GDP) in Dubai was set to fall to “slightly less” than 2.5 percent in the beginning of 2009 compared with about 8 percent in 2008, Raed Safadi told an International Monetary Fund briefing in Dubai. Hopefully the worst is behind us,” Safadi said. “We are being challenged on exports, on the real estate sector, construction ... all of these sectors are under pressure here.” In 2007, the government of Dubai, which derives only about 3 to 4 percent of its GDP from oil, said it aimed to grow at 11 percent a year through to 2015. But could achieve between 4 and 6 percent of the target . Dubai is striving to keep its economy growing by expanding public spending despite the slowdown. The emirate said in January it expected to run its first budget deficit ever of 4.2 billion dirhams (\$1.14 billion) this year. But signs of the slowdown are evident. Companies across Dubai have laid off thousands of employees as real estate prices dropped by at least a quarter from a peak late last year after speculators exited the market, analysts have said.¹

Environmental Threats

Economic growth continues at an exceedingly rapid pace, and is frequently at the cost of the natural environment. Marine, coastal, as well as mountain ecosystems of the country support biodiversity that needs urgent protection. The transition between a traditional economy based on subsistence fisheries, oasis agriculture and livestock to a modern, highly urbanized country in less than 30 years is affecting the environment.

The major environmental threats in the UAE are following:

- Habitat for wildlife has been lost due to urbanization and industrial development (oil and gas), over fishing and over grazing. The fast urbanization is bringing problems of waste management. Pollution concerns are rising, especially in the proximity of new industrial complexes; and also on account of the oil trade. Ground water is

being extracted at a very high pace to satisfy the demand of green belt plantations and new farming. Ecological Footprint World resources are being consumed at a rate 25 % faster on average than their availability.²

- Tourism, recreational outdoor activities are now starting to affect the environment, especially in fragile ecosystems such as ‘wadis’ in the Hajjar Mountains where an increasing number of occasional tourists are camping around, and swimming in, the ‘wadis.’ The coastline is also affected by the development of large tourist resorts and several coastal areas of regional importance are being threatened by tourism development. Indirectly affecting the environment is the lack of an organized institutional framework and environmental legislation Awareness. The environment is very much a concern that is being addressed at the government and non-government levels. However, people’s understanding of what needs to be done is still very poor, and the link between lifestyles in the Emirates and its effects on the environment is not understood.³

Challenges

Ultimately the question arises “*this whole huge infrastructure is for whom?*” (around 20% population is national while remaining 80% are non-nationals).

Another question is “*who will maintain and run this ambitious urban infrastructure?*”, (when the policies are not much in the favor of expatriate workers). Moreover a very big chunk of the workers is coming from India. On the one hand India is a fast growing economy and not very much affected even in the time of recession, while the Dubai economy is badly hit.

Above all the major challenge for Dubai government is to face the *nature’s limitations* and to maintain environmental balance.

Conclusion

Urbanization in Dubai is a very ambitious plan of the Government of Dubai. No doubt this is an example of one of the fastest, finest and marvelous urban growth in the world and sometimes looks beyond the imagination. Since the beginning, the urbanization in Dubai is a topic of

debate, whether it would be sustainable or not. Besides shiny picture it has gloomy aspect also e.g. overlooking to the recommendations of human right groups , therefore workers are underpaid, overstressed, and deprived of social life,(these phenomena are resulting in workers resentment, suicides, and strikes).Ignoring the nature's limitations results in environmental degradation . Besides these issues recession also put a question mark on the fragile economy of Dubai depending on others for their sustainability.

Notes and References

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