

# The Future is Urban: Fostering Gulf-European Cooperation through Sustainable Development.

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REVITALISING **MULTILATERAL** PERSPECTIVE AND POLICY SERIES

POLICY BRIEF

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In recent decades, urbanisation has emerged as a major trend on a global scale. This is particularly evident across Asia, Latin America and Africa, where global megacities with a population of 10 million or more experienced a population increase of 350 per cent between 1990 and 2018. By the year 2030, the urban population is forecasted to increase by approximately 600 million people; by 2050, more than 5.6 billion people are expected to live in cities.

This trend also plays out in the Gulf region. Here, the future is decidedly urban: the region's urban population is expected to increase by [30 per cent between 2020 and 2030 alone](#), and by 2050, [90 per cent of the population](#) within the countries of the

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is estimated to live in cities. While significant, these increases are not altogether surprising: for instance, Saudi cities underwent rapid growth [from 9.3 million in 1980 to roughly 32 million in 2018](#), and by 2030, the share of the Saudi population living in urban centres is expected to rise from [83 per cent in 2023](#) to 90 per cent, with a total populace of 38.5 million. A similar trend can also be witnessed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where Dubai and Abu Dhabi have already emerged as megacities, and in Qatar, where Doha contributed [2.38 million](#) to the country's [total population of 3.11 million in 2022](#).

Driven by rapid changes in daily lives, traditional family structures and transforming job markets, urbanisation characterises the ongoing socio-economic and socio-cultural transition all Gulf states are currently undergoing. Subsequently, growing urbanism poses significant challenges for the respective populations and their national and local governments; as cities have emerged as hubs for business, cultural and political activities across the region, new concepts for liveliness and well-being in urban centres have started to raise more attraction in the public discourses of Gulf states.

Illustratively, megacities such as Dubai or Riyadh have emerged as symbols for Gulf urbanism and have to face growing challenges in fields such as [sustainable housing](#) based on resource efficiency, accessibility of spaces, public transport and sustainable urban planning.

## SMART CITIES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Cities are responsible for [75 per cent](#) of all carbon dioxide emissions from energy usage. The Gulf region in particular faces challenges associated with climate change accelerated by rapid urbanisation, including issues related to [insufficient public transportation](#) and ensuring sustainable well-being for city inhabitants. [Sustainable, equitable and inclusive health urbanism](#) poses a particularly significant challenge for

cities in the region. In many cities, people are negatively affected by their socio-economic circumstances, such as [urban sprawl or lack of infrastructure](#), environmental degradation such as [urban heat islands](#), as well as air and water pollution, which oftentimes limit their access to healthy spaces, homes, neighbourhoods and workplaces. In addition, urban designs in many Gulf cities are driven by a hedonic approach that focuses mainly on consumerism rather than on the [eudaimonic idea](#) of sustainable and ecological human development.

Consequently, interest in [smart cities](#) has surged, with discussions underway to develop innovative concepts of sustainable urbanism. Traditionally, the concept of smart cities has centred around digital technology, smart devices, and urban infrastructure by integrating new digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence, 5G, cloud computing, and Big Data.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have integrated smart cities into their urban development strategies, launching numerous initiatives and programs to implement smart city solutions on a large scale. [Saudi projects](#) under implementation include the Saudi Green Initiative or Green Riyadh, Yanbu Industrial City, Makkah, Jeddah, Medina, Al-Ahsa, The Line and [Neom](#), although the implementation of such sustainable development initiatives and programs continues to move slowly. In response, Saudi Arabia [adopted](#) a new strategy for smart cities in 2022.

Earlier than Saudi Arabia, the UAE has emerged as a [pioneer in smart city development](#), with prominent initiatives like [Abu Dhabi's Smart Solutions](#) and [Dubai Smart City](#). There, urban planning projects now include measures for waste reduction, sustainable construction, energy efficiency, renewable energy, water management, rain harvesting, circular economy principles and community engagement. Similar concepts have been implemented in [Oman's Duqm Special](#)

[Economic Zone](#), Kuwait's [Saad Al-Abdullah smart city](#), and [Qatar's Lusail City](#). These initiatives incorporate innovative concepts that address not only technological advancements, but also social and environmental considerations. Furthermore, it is now recognised that smart city initiatives should [prioritise individuals](#), with technology serving primarily as a tool to enhance the lives of urban residents. Consequently, younger generations are increasingly embracing sustainability as a fundamental aspect of their lifestyle, reflecting the broader societal shift towards environmental consciousness.

## CHALLENGES IN GULF SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Despite some positive developments, significant challenges persist in the realm of sustainable urban development and [smart sustainable cities \(SSC\)](#). Future Gulf cities need to prioritise accessibility, affordability and acceptability. Walkability has often been overlooked in recent urban planning efforts, with Gulf cities predominantly designed for vehicular traffic rather than pedestrians.

[Endemic deficiencies](#) in public transport, green spaces, [affordable housing](#) and accessibility to recreational areas pose serious obstacles and have profound implications for local populations. [Shortages](#) in e-governance, administrative capacities, expertise, and human capital development are further hurdles to sustainable urban development.

Cities like Riyadh grapple with escalating car traffic alongside inadequate infrastructure and public services: despite the launch of a public bus transport system in the Saudi capital, many Saudi nationals still rely on their cars due to perceived inefficiency, slowness, and limited coverage of the bus system; consequently, [traffic jams](#) have become a fundamental challenge. Additionally, the operationalisation of the Riyadh metro, a multi-billion-dollar project initiated in 2014, has oftentimes been [delayed](#) and is yet to become operational. Car-sharing

options are also still limited, as well as cycling lanes and other [smart transport systems \(STS\) including](#) real-time traffic updates and management, on-demand transport, smart ticketing and smart parking systems. Similarly, in cities such as Doha, the metro primarily serves expatriates from Europe or Asia, with Qatari nationals still predominantly using cars. Furthermore, [gentrification](#) in certain districts displaces longtime residents due to rising living costs.

Governmental coordination between different stakeholders is hindered by siloed approaches, mismanagement, and the sometimes self-serving motivations of urban developers, rather than being aligned with the needs of the populace. Marginalised groups, such as [migrants](#) or those living in [poor or informal areas of the urban population](#), are often excluded from sustainable urban development initiatives. While the top-down approach to urban planning offers advantages in terms of rapid implementation, it may stifle the participation of local initiatives, communities, or urban development experts, undermining inclusivity and fostering competition. Indeed, some urban planning projects prioritise elitist marketing objectives and short-term gains to meet governmental Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), neglecting long-term sustainability and excluding non-elite individuals from engagement.

Policy makers and opinion leaders also frequently espouse environmentalism and green urbanism for public relations purposes and to attract foreign investment, rather than genuinely pursuing substantive change. Moreover, the influence of US-style urbanism has led to a diminished awareness of [cultural heritage](#) and a disconnection from traditional urban spaces and identities. As such, criticism contends that megacity projects prioritise over-ambitious dystopic sci-fi architecture over pragmatic needs and fail to incorporate local participation or independent creativity, resulting in inflexible, ineffective designs.

## POTENTIAL FOR TRANS-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Encouragingly, a [diverse range of stakeholders](#) from across the Gulf states in the fields of research, business, architecture, engineering, art, culture, and local community initiatives are actively adopting a multidisciplinary approach to address the complexity of sustainable urban spaces. Notably, concepts like [placemaking](#) and the emphasis on the intricate connection between modern urban landscapes and traditional senses of belonging are gaining traction in [Gulf identity policies](#). There is also a growing trend at the local level to integrate urban livability and sustainability, thus advocating for green urbanism as a pivotal concept for future urban development.

Further, cultural entrepreneurs, artists and startups are actively participating in local community projects focused on cultural heritage, while educational programs are underway to promote environmental awareness and social sustainability. Here, the concept of [education for sustainable development \(ESD\)](#) becomes more prominent. Correspondingly, 'healthy urbanism' is garnering attention, as it offers a perspective that views cities as spaces for well-being and quality of life.

Urban populations require easy [access to parks](#) and playgrounds as platforms for ESD, public gardens, sports facilities, entertainment options, public transportation, and community-centred activities to bolster social resilience and establish sustainable economic models amidst fundamental economic diversification efforts. As such, numerous governmental and non-governmental initiatives aspire to transform cities into platforms for human interaction, innovation hubs, environmental resilience centres, and advocates for the shared economy.

Yet despite increasing awareness of green, healthy urbanism at a national level, there is currently almost no trans-regional cooperation on sustainable urban development. While cities across the Gulf region encounter similar challenges, there is still a lack of mutual understanding regarding collective efforts to tackle issues like urban accessibility and climate action within their respective development plans.

Consequently, fostering cross-border collaboration in urban development could yield synergistic effects and mutually beneficial outcomes. This could be achieved through activities such as exchanging data and expertise on sustainable urban development, establishing academic exchange programs and training courses, organising exhibitions for Gulf artists focusing on urban identities and green spaces, initiating institutionalised city partnerships between Gulf cities, and creating online platforms for urban stakeholders from different Gulf countries to promote mutual cooperation. Indeed, despite the presence of traditional practices and techniques in Gulf societies to cope with harsh weather conditions, there is often a lack of awareness among community initiatives about these techniques, combined with a deficiency in reaching out to potential partners in other Gulf countries.

Recognising the importance of religious sustainability as a fundamental Islamic principle, historical concepts could further be revived on social, cultural, technical, and political levels to intelligently adapt to existing climate conditions. For example, protecting national resources, conserving urban heritage, and reconfiguring traditional water systems offer smart solutions to current challenges.

Additionally, integrating religious and commercial spaces could create flexible and hybrid urban spaces to promote social belonging and togetherness. Similarly, art and cultural initiatives should consider local conditions to strike a balance between promoting art for tourism and preserving local identity; through art, urban spaces

serve as platforms for national identity construction and cultural belonging, reinforcing the idea that cities are spaces for cultural diversity.

Moreover, implementing specific initiatives such as hackathons, workshops, artist residential programs, and mentorship initiatives can help Gulf municipalities promote sustainable urban design, architecture, and youth empowerment within the framework of healthy urbanism. Here, transcultural and transnational initiatives could enhance inter-Gulf cooperation in sustainable urban development by creating synergy effects in know-how transfer, public awareness-raising campaigns, and collaboration in administrative, engineering, infrastructural and educational issues.

In the same vein, organising summer schools, training courses, and educational exchange formats for students from the respective GCC countries, introducing cross-border city partnerships, and developing joint concepts to address challenges such as climate change urban heat islands could create concrete opportunities for a comprehensive Gulf sustainable urban development. Yet still, Gulf urban municipalities are acting mostly in silos delinked from other perspectives. To overcome this situation, new partnerships at non-governmental and governmental levels between Gulf urban administrations, universities, non-profit organisations, health experts, start-ups and artists could increase awareness of mutual challenges in sustainable urban development.

## **POTENTIAL FOR EU-GULF COOPERATION IN SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

Moving further afield, European stakeholders could also exchange on green urbanism from a cultural, political, or economic perspective. Sustainable urban development features prominently in most European countries, and has gained significant attention at the [European Union level](#).



In its [Urban Agenda for the EU](#), the EU promotes the concept of integrated sustainable urban development which aims to address environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions of urban life through an integrated approach. Such an approach is closely interlinked with the [European Green Deal](#) and its Cohesion Policy.

Between 2014 and 2020, more than EUR 115 billion were invested to develop more than 900 cities. Here, the [European Urban Initiative \(EUI\)](#), the [Urban Innovative Actions Initiative](#), the [Urban Development Network](#) or the [New Urban Agenda](#) are some instruments of the EU supporting urban areas of all sizes with innovative actions, capacity and knowledge-building on sustainable urban development in the framework of Goal 11 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). As such, a heightened focus on this critical topic combined with an open, collaborative mindset could establish enhanced cultural and economic networks between the Gulf states and the EU, thereby [promoting mutual understanding, and reducing existing animosities](#).

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Revitalising Multilateral Perspective and Policy Series

This project assesses multilateral measures being implemented by institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union and aims to find more effective policy to end conflict and foster sustainable political solutions.



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