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Planning in the Middle East, moving toward the future

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Abstract

This paper, summarizes the lessons learned in this special issue of Habitat International on Planning Issues in the Middle East. After summarizing the highlights of the papers included in the issue, the paper looks ahead to the challenges facing the region's planners. These include coping with the rapid growth of cities, developing stronger planning institutions, integrating events in urban areas with the rural hinterlands, incorporating consultation with the public in the planning processes and meeting the inevitable challenges that will accompany globalization.

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Over the last 30 years, the Arabian Gulf countries have experienced a construction boom that has been fueled by increase in national revenues from exporting highly priced crude oil. This construction boom resulted in an unprecedented expansion in the size of cities. In responding to this phenomenon, urban planning practice was geared towards physical aspects of the fast urban growth and the rapid changes in the built environment. Its emphasis was on land use, land subdivisions, building regulations and dealing with urban sprawl.

This is quite evident from essence of the papers presented in this issue. Yasser Mahgoub's paper on 'Globalization and the Built Environment in Kuwait' emphasized the architecture aspects of the built environment in Kuwait and the conflicts between global and local forces in shaping it. Mustapha Ben Hamouche's paper 'The Changing Morphology of the Gulf Cities in the Age of Globalization: The Case of Bahrain' discusses the effect of exogenous and indigenous variables on the urban morphology in Bahrain. Faisal Mubarak's paper on 'Urban Growth Boundary Policy and Residential Suburbanization: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia' attributes the dysfunctional pattern of

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urban sprawl on the fringes of Riyadh city to the inefficiency in the urban planning practice, while Shaibu Bala Garba in his paper 'Managing Urban Growth and Development in the Riyadh Metropolitan Area, Saudi Arabia' traces the capacity building within the public sector in the management of urban growth of the city of Riyadh and reaches the conclusion that although this management has improved over time, there is still a need and a room for further improvement due to future challenges. The joint paper by Saleh Al-Hathloul and Muhammad Aslam Mogal entitled 'Urban Growth Management — The Saudi Experience' emphasizes the positive role of the defined urban boundaries on curtailing urban sprawl, reducing the cost of provision of infrastructure and maintaining the natural environment for cities in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed Abdullah Eben Saleh's paper on 'Learning from Tradition: The Planning of Residential Neighborhoods in a Changing World' emphasizes the role of involvement of local residents in planning the physical elements of a built environment in a Southeastern city in Saudi Arabia.

Entering into the new Millennium, the Arabian Gulf Countries will be facing serious challenges due to fast population growth and escalating needs for urban infrastructure; housing and employment opportunities. As such, these countries must pursue a more holistic approach to urban planning and management as to enable them to deal with the macro urban issues and the bottlenecks that will impede their future development. Among these bottlenecks are the inefficiency and non-transparency of their land markets; shortage of affordable housing; lack of effective institutional coordination among agencies concerned with the delivery of services as well as agencies responsible for the protection of the urban environment which will be threatened by cities rapid growth.

What is needed from urban planning and management institutions in these countries is to formulate a long term vision of how to accommodate future growth in population while ensuring both efficiency in the use of resources and equity among citizens and across regions of the national space of each country. Saudi Arabia's initiative in formulating a National Spatial Strategy (Abdel Rahman, Mohamed, Al-Muraikhi, Fadghoosh & Al-Khedheiri Abdulaziz, 1995; Deputy Ministry for Town Planning, Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, 2001; Al-Khedheiri, 2004) that defines the most feasible pattern of spatial development and urban hierarchy that can help achieve these objectives is a step in the right direction.

At the city level, enormous work is ahead for urban planners in all of the Arabian Gulf Countries, as cities will continue to grow, more interdependence and links between the cities across the national boundaries of each country will get much stronger than links between cities and their hinterlands. As such, urban planning institutions will need to direct more emphasis and focus on integrating urban and rural planning. Otherwise, rural areas may be further marginalized and cities may lose their breathing ground in the face of rapid urbanization.

Another area of crucial importance to urban planning and management institutions in these countries is to mobilize communities at large to participate in the local planning practice not only through elected municipal council members but also the involvement of all Non-Government Organizations (NGO) having stakes in the sustainability of urban management and the protection of the environment.

Moreover, once all the Arab Gulf countries become members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the process of globalization, technological change and trade liberalization will strongly affect the fortune of all the cities of these countries. There will be growing competition between these cities and other cities in the neighboring countries. This competition is not expected to be

limited to location and production advantage alone, but will extend to competition in the provision of support for entrepreneurial enterprise. This will put heavy pressure on urban planning and management institutions to be more creative in improving urban governance.

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