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Beyond the pledges: reflections on sustainability transitions in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region

Suzanne H. Hammad , Mohammad Al-Saidi  and Esmat Zaidan 

Introduction

The adoption of the SDGs is a step, not a success. (James 2015)

On 1 January 2016, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) paving the way towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development became effective, after being adopted by world leaders at a UN General Assembly held in September 2015. States gave themselves the next 15 years to take concrete action towards achieving these new universally applicable goals. Yet to date, it is evident that there remains a discrepancy between the rate of global progress and the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda (UN 2018). We need to move beyond the initial euphoria of endorsement that occurred in September 2015 and focus on what needs to be done to realise the sustainability agenda in the most effective context-relevant ways, given the various different regions. This places a critical responsibility on researchers, policymakers, and practitioners worldwide to take stock of where things stand and the road ahead.

This special issue of *Development in Practice* focuses on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in the Arab region to examine the frameworks, efforts, and transitions that have been instated since their pledges to the sustainability agenda. In recent decades GCC states' national strategies have advanced from a focus merely on infrastructure and state-building projects to more incorporation of issues such as the effective utilisation of natural resources to achieve sustainable development, or the promotion of environmentally friendly technologies and practices (Bryde, Mouzoughi, and Al Rasheed 2015; Al-Saidi and Elagib 2018). This has been reflected in the economic, environmental, and social aspects of policymaking in the region, which have continued to evolve since the endorsement of the SDGs. The SDGs provided these states with a guiding framework and accountability structure, in contrast to previous strategies that had lacked the holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable economic, social, and environmental development encapsulated within the 2030 Agenda (Saab and Sadik 2016).

The papers in this special issue reflect the guest editors' commitment to bring to the fore scholarship about the sustainability transition in the GCC states, a region that has been relatively less debated and published on. The issue provides a platform for sharing insights emerging from research and practice in and about the region in relation to sustainable development, and seeks to bridge the work of academics, policymakers and practitioners – all of whom are essential actors to any real transition towards sustainable development. To that end, we asked contributors to reflect upon a range of questions, including the role of national visions in driving the sustainable development agenda and the extent to which they reflect local, regional and global sustainability pressures and debates; the impacts of sustainability policies and participation arrangements in driving this change; and how these initiatives were being translated in the Gulf context of aridity, energy-abundance and water scarcity. We also encouraged perspectives on practical approaches in terms of innovations, projects and programmes that exemplify the transition to sustainable development or raise issues that could contribute to future, more effective interventions. The contributions collectively are ultimately

concerned with identifying cross-cutting challenges which face the GCC region in the adoption of sustainable development practices, with a view to extracting practical lessons on sustainability as well as social and economic transition that can be shared with the wider Arab region or similar contexts. While the GCC has context specificities that must be taken into account, we anticipate that the insights from this region will nevertheless contribute to current debates and efforts in the drive towards the global sustainability agenda.

The sustainability challenge in the GCC: key considerations and dilemmas

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is described by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2018 (UN 2018) as a framework that “provides a global blueprint for dignity, peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future” (3). Three years into the implementation of the Agenda, this shared vision is being translated into national development plans and strategies, and concerted action at international and national levels has begun to develop systematic databases and evaluate progress rates and bottlenecks. While the progress is significant in certain goals, is outdone by a number of growing challenges. António Guterres, Secretary-General to the United Nations, has called upon countries to act with a greater sense of urgency and work towards becoming more effective, cohesive and accountable. This call applies equally to the Arab region and GCC states.

The GCC region has been enjoying a period of prosperity, and sustaining significant growth at exceptional levels. Rapid advances in economic, human, and social development are expected to continue in the coming years. At the same time, the region’s countries contribute to around half of the total carbon dioxide emissions of Arab countries and have some of the largest per capita ecological footprints. However, some evidence in this special issue indicates that the transition towards sustainable development has started in the region. Recent national visions of GCC countries have ambitiously provided the framework for economic diversification, the promotion of renewable energy, improved energy and water-use efficiencies, and development of a highly educated local workforce. In conjunction with new advances in the global sustainable development agenda, governmental, non-governmental (civil society), and international bodies have taken on this challenge, incorporating the SDGs in a variety of sectors, including the economic, social, and human development spheres.

Despite GCC countries differing from other contexts in regard to sustainability processes and pathways, it is nevertheless important to consider the sustainability challenges confronting these countries in the context of global challenges identified to date. Some resonate with challenges faced in many other countries; for instance, the need for national data collection systems and research that can systematically produce reliable evidence to inform policy-making. According to the UN SDG report (UN 2018), accurate and timely information is not always in place and the most vulnerable remain “invisible”; consequently, many development challenges are still poorly understood. Additionally, much of the research in Gulf countries has tended to be western-centric (Bryde, Mouzoughi, and Al Rasheed 2015), a concern that this issue will hopefully contribute to rectifying. For Arab states in the region engaging in the implementation of the SDGs, it is therefore critical to build an evidence base for action for there is much that needs to be dissected and understood. Only then can SDGs be appropriately integrated into policies and existing projects and interventions aligned towards genuine sustainability.

Global challenges to sustainable development have been driven by a broad set of “megatrends”, such as changing demographic profiles, economic and social dynamics, advancements in technology and trends towards environmental deterioration. A better understanding of the impacts and the interactions among these trends and the associated changes in economic, social and environmental conditions is needed (UN 2013). For example, rapid urbanisation characteristic of several Gulf countries such as UAE and Qatar constitutes a major pressure on coastal ecosystems and infrastructure planning. Such developments are vulnerable to global risks such as climate change, which

threatens to escalate in the absence of adequate safeguards and strategies. There is a need to integrate policies in the region to link socio-economic trends to the sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystems (Saab and Sadik 2018). Further, among the natural resources, scholars advocate linking policies and analysing resource-use patterns from a lens of integrated natural resources management or the similar idea of the water-energy-food nexus.

One size does not fit all when it comes to the SDGs. Despite many commonalities in the region, Gulf and Arab countries each have their distinctive needs, priorities, and economic, political, and social contexts that must be recognised when developing implementation plans. For SDG implementation to be effective, local knowledge needs to be deployed and tailored to the context-specific needs, location, and time (Saab and Sadik 2016). A related point is the backdrop of geopolitical changes that have taken place in the Gulf region, and its impact on the GCC structure and alliance as well as socio-economic and political relations between Gulf countries. These are bound to influence decisions, resources, and policies targeting both local and resident populations.

Finally, defining “success” needs to be well-thought, striking a balance between the spirit of the 2030 Global Sustainability Agenda and local realities and needs. A lesson learnt from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is that reality is complex and measuring progress must take this complexity into account. The temptation to be selective and target low-lying fruit, as in the case of policies that have aim to achieve economic gains, should not be confused with sustainable development planning and the long-term benefits associated with the 2030 Agenda. Furthermore, the interlinked nature of the SDGs necessitates that they not be viewed in isolation when planning or evaluating. Attention to this maximises impact and increases the likelihood of achieving the real transformative potential that the SDGs promise (Allen et al. 2019). Participatory practices that create ownership among communities and across stakeholders count towards that. Partnerships with multiple stakeholders including civil society, decision makers from the public sector, the private sector, and academia need to be established, and citizens in particular must be at the core of any real sustainability transition.

Overview of contributions

The contributors to this special issue discuss sustainable development discourses and their applications within a variety of sectors in the GCC region, focusing on the extent to which these applications are contributing to a genuine sustainability agenda in the region. Authors examine how sustainability discourses have been integrated into policy, practice, and national plans, and tease out context-specific challenges encountered. Mediating factors and lessons to be taken into account in the coming years emerge from the range of conceptual papers, case studies, and practitioner viewpoints.

Mohammad Al-Saidi, Esmat Zaidan, and Suzanne Hammad’s paper draws attention to the different diplomatic trajectories and participation modes among Gulf countries (despite their ostensibly coordinated positions in global sustainability conferences and negotiations), and situates them within their respective national visions and related strategies. This overview usefully maps key development and sustainability conferences and conventions and indicates positions and participation levels of these countries. It also traces these countries’ stances in climate and environmental diplomacy as well as past participation in global environmental governance systems, comparing common action areas and differing priorities related to major issues of sustainable development (e.g. urban sustainability, natural resources, climate change). Using these comparisons, practical policy approaches are explained while policy gaps within country-specific contexts are identified and linked to existing literature.

The paper by **Mazhar Al-Zo’by** draws attention to the central status recently accorded by the UN to “culture” in its universal vision for transformative development. It highlights the limits of the conventional global framework for sustainable development policies, politics and analysis, and places cultural practices, cultural life and material culture at the heart of the SDGs. Furthermore, the contribution examines the challenges and opportunities of culture-based sustainable development in the

GCC region, and critically analyses how prevailing discourse on cultural policy for sustainable development in the region has generated segmentation and differentiation between local and global cultures, heritage and creativity, and cultural consumption and production. Focusing on cultural museums, urban revitalisation projects and heritage sites, the paper examines how globalisation of heritage and culture creates both tension and mediation for creative approaches for identity formation as well as viable sustainable development agendas.

Building on the mediating role of culture and its influence within sustainable development discourse and practice, **Esmat Zaidan's** paper discusses the cultural-based challenges that have faced Dubai's predominantly westernised approach to tourism development. The paper critically assesses Dubai's integration of cultural planning within its urban and tourism development, in light of the city's neglect of local cultural resources in the process. It argues that western-influenced modernisation has sidelined indigenous creative resources in the pursuit of a cosmopolitan urban vision, and calls for more localised forms of cultural tourism as means of maintaining local community and identity in the face of rapid modernisation and westernisation in newly developed modern societies such as Dubai.

Ammar Abulibdeh, Esmat Zaidan, and Mohammad Al-Saidi's paper analyses the water, food, and energy security dimensions in the GCC countries using the water-energy-food (WEF) nexus approach. This innovative focus identifies past and future development-based drivers of water-energy-food integration in the region. The paper reviews the WEF nexus in the Gulf region and identifies links to sustainable development. It points to the importance of integrating water, energy, and food resources within the nexus for GCC nations in order to achieve resource security and sustainable development.

Four further papers follow, presenting case studies from the Arab and Gulf region which illustrate many of the issues and debates raised throughout this special issue, including urbanisation patterns, food security, innovative farming, and urban resilience to climate change.

Talal Al-Awadhi, Yassine Charabi, and B. Choudri's paper looks at the Sultanate of Oman which has been highly vulnerable to climate change, including the recent impacts of Cyclones Gonu in 2007, Phet in 2010, and Mekunu in 2018 on urban areas and the economy. Despite these multiple hazards and high potential risks, no policies or strategies have been specifically designed to build climate resilience for urban cities in Oman. This paper aims to raise awareness among policymakers to develop a national policy framework to addressing urban climate change adaptation and resilience. Based on a review of studies and stakeholder interviews, it suggests a number of possible pathways for the country, including the generation of knowledge on climate change, capacity building, improved governance, and planning.

Ammar Abulibdeh, Talal Al-Awadhi, and Mohammad Al-Barwani analyse contemporary urbanisation patterns in Muscat, Dubai, and Doha cities, focusing on urban land cover change and the roles of governance, globalisation, oil revenues, internal migration, social factors, and urban planning forces in developing these cities. Concurrent changes in urbanisation patterns are identified in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of urbanisation, yielding interesting results regarding unprecedented urban transformation, with high urbanisation and population growth, but with differences in the patterns of development in these cities.

Mohammad Al-Saidi and Nisreen Lahham assess solar energy farming as an innovation from a water-energy-food nexus perspective, using an evaluation of a project in Jordan and reflections from similar international experiences, particularly India. They examine solar energy farming in the Azraq basin, a highly vulnerable groundwater body the overexploitation of which led to loss of biodiversity, a reduction in farmers' incomes, and declining groundwater levels. In response to the resultant threatened water security, public and development agencies have explored options to provide farmers with additional income while protecting groundwater resources – one of which was solar farming.

The fourth case study by **Sudeh Dehnavi and Verena Suß** highlights food insecurity as a major constraint to development efforts and how urban agriculture can play a role as an incubator for sustainable development in urban areas by improving food security statuses at the household level. The

paper exemplifies an urban gardening project in the suburbs of Beirut aiming to provide food security for Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese host communities. It provides insights on the suitability of urban agriculture, highlights potential risks, and constitutes a call for action to stakeholders in achieving sustainable development.

Finally, three viewpoints offer practice-based reflections on critical aspects of sustainability derived from experience. They highlight SDGs which emphasise the crucial roles of civil society and effective partnerships in achieving and sustaining development in multiple sectors, including education for all, social inclusion, and climate change.

The first viewpoint highlights the important role of civil society in efforts to achieve the national development strategies and global SDGs, as critical actors actively engaged at local, national and international levels. **Rachel Hayman** draws on INTRAC's experience of working with not-for-profit organisations and with foundations and public donors that fund and champion civil society across the Arab world. The viewpoint identifies four main roles of civil society within the sustainability agenda: developing global policies, including around climate change and social inclusion; actively monitoring the implementation of the SDGs and ensuring that governments are held to account for their commitments; implementing actions to achieve the SDGs such as plugging gaps with vulnerable groups, campaigning to protect the environment, and aid provision in emergency and conflict situations; and advocating on behalf of people and the planet.

Samah Al Sabbagh and **Esker Copeland** reinforce the role of civil society partnerships with a focus on the trend of multi-stakeholder partnerships, which they describe as a forward-looking approach that strives to achieve transformative partnerships and sustainable outcomes and practices. They exemplify this approach by drawing upon reflections from a 10-year collaboration led by a Qatar-based civil society organisation, Reach Out to Asia/Education Above All Foundation. While the partnership occurred during the MDG era, a reflective study retrospectively considers the relationship between the initiatives undertaken and the present global development goals.

The final viewpoint by **Tareq Albakri** and **Rabih Shibly** highlights the critical role of education in relation to SDG4. It shares the *Ghata* schools project as a case study, an initiative designed from the outset to ensuring sustainable outcomes and equitable opportunity for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It draws attention to the added challenges of fulfilling SDG4, that calls for equitable education for all, within contexts of protracted conflict and large-scale migration such as the Syrian conflict that has generated 5.6 million refugees across the region. The authors share key lessons learnt throughout this five-year project, offering considerations at policy, institutional, and practice levels of value to broader efforts towards sustainable quality education for refugees.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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