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Participation modes and diplomacy of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries towards the global sustainability agenda

Mohammad Al-Saidi , Esmat Zaidan  and Suzanne Hammad 

ABSTRACT

After decades of reluctance, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are now more engaged within the global sustainability agenda. Though they historically sought to coordinate strategies, differences in environmental diplomacy and participation modes currently exist. This article examines these differences and links diplomacy to political and economic considerations during different eras. It maps positions, activism in multilateral agreements, and investigates recent changes in light of increased domestic pressures and the rise of formalised national visions. The increased global environmental engagement of GCC countries can yield better outcomes, but environmental pillars do not feature highly in their current visions.

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Introduction

Since the 1950s, countries around the world have increasingly participated in shaping and implementing global environmental agreements and sustainable development norms. By the end of the twentieth century, the global environmental governance system had taken shape, resulting in large conferences and landmark conventions and commitments. The most significant and recent ones arguably have been the Earth Summit 2012, the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In light of these agreements and the urgency of action on issues such as climate change, international cooperation and diplomacy can be expected to intensify or at least increase incrementally (Keohane and Victor 2016). Not only were states becoming increasingly more active in deliberating environmental outcomes, but non-governmental actors, businesses, markets and networks of actors were also engaging in these spaces of public deliberations and “empowered” (authoritative) decision-making (Dryzek and Stevenson 2011). The global environmental issues on the negotiation table are substantive, ranging from more concrete actions on climate, biodiversity, pollution, and renewables, to broader discussions on development goals, environmental financing, and the future of environmental governance structures. The more contentious issues are those that require immediate national action, cuts or restructuring, such as the climate change challenge. The climate issue is a good example of an area in the global environmental governance where the environmental diplomacy of nation states is fully utilised. It also reflects the wider geopolitics of environmental threats and how countries perceive these threats and choose to react (e.g. Barnett 2007). This article examines the involvement of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in climate diplomacy, alongside their participation in UN-based international environmental conferences such as the Earth Summits, leading to shaping and co-adopting the SDGs. Together, climate change agreements such as the 2015 Paris Agreement and UN-based goals such

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as the SDGs represent the two key pillars of the current global sustainability agenda, and the most relevant international reference points for the national development visions of GCC countries.

The study of participation modes of developing nations in the development of the global sustainability agenda reveals much about national economic and sustainable development priorities. Further, global agreements have some influence on the willingness of states to tackle environmental issues, as well as the content and convergence of adopted policies (Knill 2005; Bernstein and Cashore 2012). For the GCC countries, such an influence might have not been evident in the past. However, the recently adopted ambitious visions and post-carbon strategies that have sought to diversify economies and decrease local consumptions are formally linked to global consensus or referred to in progress reports on the SDGs or the Paris Agreement. Moreover, the environmental diplomacy of GCC countries is even more revealing of their environmental choices. The long-standing opposition of Saudi Arabia to carbon reductions, the engagement of Qatar on climate change by hosting international climate negotiations in 2012, and the interest of United Arab Emirates in promoting renewable energies and hosting international organisations in this area, are some examples of this region's diplomatic stances that have reflected differing local interests. In environment-related negotiations, GCC countries have been participating as a part of the block of developing countries, the G77. In general, developing countries' participation in global environmental governance has evolved from scepticism and opposition, to involvement and engagement (Najam 2005). However, the evolution of GCC countries' participation and environmental diplomacy stand out as a special case due to the strong financial positions of these countries within the group of developing countries, their relative novelty as relevant actors on the environmental diplomacy scene, their carbon-based growth and consumption models, and their relatively coherent positioning on major issues. We highlight these factors in the participation and diplomacy of GCC countries towards the global sustainability agenda, and link recent outcomes to the current economic transformation policies in the region.

The global sustainability agenda and (environmental) diplomacy – origins and terminology

Environmental diplomacy in the narrow sense of political science relates to negotiations over environmental issues by nation states. In a broader sense, it is an interdisciplinary endeavour to analyse environmental conflict resolution and negotiations among different stakeholders, as well as the use of the environment in disputes and peace-making (Ali and Vladich 2016). Although the term is now used in different contexts such as environmental preferences of states, natural resources conflicts, and collaboration modes among environmental stakeholders, its original use was more aligned with negotiations and treaty-making of nation states (Susskind 1994). The use of the term is closely associated with the emergence of the global sustainability agenda, which we understand here as the UN-led efforts to define a consensus and roadmap for action on urgent environmental issues, particularly through commitments, declarations and action plans during sustainable development conferences (i.e. Earth Summits) and international conventions. There have been several historical precursors to the current global sustainability agenda. However, major global sustainability definitions, milestones and agreements date back to the latter half of the twenty-first century, and have emerged from UN-based processes, with the Earth Chapter as possibly the only exception to these UN-dominated processes since it witnessed strong leadership from civil society (see Wass et al. 2011).

The use of the term environmental diplomacy also coincides with major UN conferences. While environmental diplomatic efforts date back to the whaling regulation convention of 1946, the term acquired currency after the UN Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) of 1972 in Stockholm (Ali and Vladich 2016). Its wide dissemination and use can be traced to the period after the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (Earth Summit) (Benedick 1999; Ali and Vladich 2016). Therefore, environmental diplomacy gained attention through the rise of the global sustainability agenda and can be seen as

inseparable from the UN-based multilateral negotiations, Earth Summits and resulting agreements since 1972 (Chasek 2001). This state-centred and UN-led diplomacy is often based on international environmental law and characterised as “global” environmental diplomacy (Tolba, Rummel-Bulska, and Molina 1998).

Since the late 1990s, there has been an expansion of actors and participation modes in environmental policy. Even before the emergence of the modern global sustainability agenda, Caldwell (1988) noted that national governments alone were becoming less able to attain the objectives of international environmental cooperation through diplomacy, and thus a transnational environmental administration was necessary. Global environmental governance is the system through which governments, together with civil society and businesses, regulate and enforce negotiated or self-organised, actions, tasks and functions in order to solve environmental problems of common concern to people across nations. Similarly, the expansion of environmental diplomacy is related to the rise of multinational corporations and NGOs, which both manage strong national operations in some countries and maintain important ties with some states. According to Broadhurst and Ledgerwood (1998), interactions between these three actors have gradually changed the notions of diplomacy, sovereignty, representation and participation. Accordingly, states are increasingly reliant on cooperation, knowledge and services provided by non-state actors, who also influence and participate in negotiated outcomes among states.

There have been several environmental diplomacy studies in the context of specific Earth Summits, conventions or leading countries and regions such as the USA, Japan the EU. While reviewing these is beyond the scope of this paper, one can mention the central notion of nation states changing their negotiation stances by embracing more actions on environmental issues (see Najam 2005 for developing countries). Furthermore, partnerships with non-state actors and regional coalitions seem to be another recurrent and increasingly prominent theme (see Torney and Cross 2017 for the EU).

In this article, we use a rather conventional understanding of environmental diplomacy with a focus on the nation states of the GCC region. Although we also elaborate on the role of international industrial relations in influencing the negotiating stances of certain countries, state-centric diplomacy during the UN-based milestones forming the global sustainability agenda is our focus. The GCC’s environmental diplomacy has been relatively under-researched despite it being a particularly interesting case from the Global South. This case exemplarily shows that environmental diplomacy in developing countries characterised by carbon-based growth and financial prosperity, being practiced as a sovereign function based on national economic interests and in service of other state interests. Using secondary literature and data on global environmental agreements, we illustrate the environmental diplomacy legacies by tracing back participation modes in UN-led initiatives throughout different historic, political and economic transformation periods. This historic view and the state comparisons approach reveal that modern states in the GCC region have been one of the most reluctant participants in sustainability discussions. It is also evident that GCC countries have only recently begun to engage internationally and align the global sustainability agenda to their national agendas, at different paces.

Tracing environmental diplomacy and participation modes

The early beginnings preceding oil dominance

GCC states are characterised by a primarily arid desert landscape with few coastal areas and mountain ranges, limited annual rainfall, scarce groundwater reserves, and high salinity. The region is surrounded by four water bodies – the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman – positioning it as a region with a shared maritime culture based on pearling, fishing, and long-distance trade between Arabs and the African, European, and Asian continents (Kannan 2012; Onley et al. 2016). Despite minimal natural resources, caravan trade was sustained across an inter-linked system with agricultural villages and oases, and maritime trade and seafaring and pearling

continued. Consequently, human settlement and modes of engagement with the environment were dictated largely by this context (Potter 2009).

Literature on how Gulf people perceived and interacted with this natural habitat is scant, yet anthropological accounts relay a rich social fabric and a distinct way of life and tradition (e.g. Al-Ghanim 1998) which transformed dramatically with the predominance of oil in the early 1970s. The use of oil transformed not only the physical environment, but brought with it tremendous repercussions on society, economy, and geography. Unprecedented levels of socio-economic transformation resulted in rapid industrialisation, inefficient use of resources, unplanned urbanisation, and large-scale consumption patterns. The magnitude, speed, and combination, together with limited natural resources, resulted in a set of environmental issues that stand out as distinct to the Gulf countries. High rates of migration occurred as Gulf countries opened up to Arab neighbours and to Western oil companies, alongside extremely rapid urbanisation and soil erosion in the region (Potter 2009). The decline of agriculture had both environmental and social consequences. For example, where the falaj system of collective irrigation was common (in Oman), the abandonment of villages as urbanisation grew led to weakening social bonds and environmental consequences. Elsewhere in the region, landowners with stronger purchasing power began overexploiting underground water reserves with modern drills, an already dwindling natural resource. Commercialised agriculture and intensified world-scale production concentrated in certain areas in Saudi Arabia also led to the depletion of fossil aquifers (Onley et al. 2016). Concerned academics and community leaders began to warn about this rapid untapped growth and its impact on future generations. Riad (1981, 7) was one of the first to warn about what he referred to as *"an aggressive form of Petro-Urbanism"* which, in his view, *"undermined, with unparalleled suddenness, the roots of an ecosystem which reflected a perfect adaptation to an environment many generations old"*.

As livelihoods and human settlements shifted, more complex economies emerged that required increasing regulation. The governments' main concern, however, was to introduce regulatory mechanisms and arbitration regimes to maintain control over commerce and an exponentially growing economy (Onley et al. 2016). The arrival and hegemony of international oil companies also played a role in transforming the political economy and migration/urbanisation patterns in the Gulf, and their share of control (Zahlan 1998). As will be evident in this paper, this preoccupation with economic growth has tended to override attention to its environmental consequences and the responsibility that should accompany it. Once oil concessions were signed, the Gulf region opened up to the world and previous restrictions under the British mandate were lifted.

Reluctance in the era of high-growing carbon economies

The high growth era in the GCC region started in the 1970s and coincided with the emergence of the global sustainability agenda after the first major UN conference in 1972 in Stockholm. The GCC began to exert more control over oil supply and prices as the global demand for oil increased rapidly between 1965 and 1973 (Fattouh 2011). The formation of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960 played an important role in influencing the oil price that was determined by multinational oil companies with an oligopolistic position until the mid-1970s. During the 1960s and early 1970s, OPEC administered the level of oil prices, increased oil output (global oil production share of OPEC countries was around 51% in 1973) and increased equity participation of OPEC governments in oil produced by multinationals (Fattouh 2011). In the late 1970s, GCC countries became even more independent and in control of their supply of oil as, particularly in the aftermath of nationalisation policies of the 1979 Iranian revolution, many countries in the region established national oil companies that replaced some oil multinationals. These national oil companies grew in power and are considered today as the prime revenue generators for the rentier states which also use them to retain power, distribute oil and gas money, or finance sovereign trust funds and investments abroad (Losman 2010). Much of the investment and reserve holdings of GCC countries went to the USA, while oil deals closed in dollars helped stabilised its value. In addition, the US market

was of great significance to GCC countries. The deregulation of the control of oil imports and exports by the USA in the early 1980s, and later by other industrialised states, led to OPEC countries giving up administrated prices and ushered in the era of oil markets (Momani 2008).

Although growth in individual countries happened at different paces and has continued, especially when oil and gas prices are high, between the 1970s up until the early 2000s can be considered as the era where the bulk of economic and demographic growth took place in the GCC

Table 1. Environmental multilateral agreements of GCC countries.

Conventions (dates of adoption, entering force)	Bahrain		Kuwait		Oman		Qatar		Saudi Arabia		UAE	
	S	R	S	R	S	R	S	R	S	R	S	R
Basel Convention (1989, 1992)	1989	1992	1989	1993		1995		1995	1989	1990	1989	1992
Cartagena Protocol (2000, 2003)		2012		2017		2003		2007		2007		2014
Basel Protocol on Liability and Compensation (1999)										2013		
Convention on Biological Diversity (1992, 1993)	1992	1996	1992	2002	1992	1995	1992	1996		2001	1992	2000
Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1973, 1975)	2012	2012	2002	2002	2008	2008	2001	2001	1996	1996	1990	1990
Convention on Migratory Species (1979, 1983)									1991	1991		2016
Kyoto Protocol (1997, 2005)		2006		2005		2005		2005		2005		2005
Minamata Convention on Mercury (2013, 2017)			2013	2015							2013	2015
Montreal Protocol (1987, 1989)		1990		1992		1999		1996		1993		1989
Nagoya Protocol (2010, 2014)				2017				2017				2014
Nagoya – Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol (additional liability rules) (2010, 2018)												2014
Paris Agreement (2015, 2016)	2016	2016	2016	2016	2016		2016	2017	2016	2016	2016	2016
Ramsar Convention (1971, 1975)	1998	1997	2015	2015	2013	2013					2007	2007
Rotterdam Convention (1998, 2004)		2012	1998	2006		2000		2004		2000		2002
Stockholm Convention (2001, 2004)	2002	2006	2001	2006	2002	2005		2004	2002	2012	2001	2002
UN Watercourses Convention (1997, 2014)								2002				
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (1994, 1996)		1997	1995	1997		1996		1999		1997		1998
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992, 1994)	1992	1994		1994	1992	1995		1996		1994		1995
United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982, 1994)	1982	1985	1982	1986	1983	1989	1984	2002	1984	1996	1982	
Vienna Convention (1985, 1988)		1990		1992		1999		1996		1993		1989
Total number of ratified treaties	14		16		14		15		15		17	
Average years between the adoption of a multilateral agreement and ratification (only calculated for agreements ratified by all GCC countries)	8.5		8.5		8.25		9.25		7.8		6	

Notes: Acronyms and full convention names as follows. S: Signature; R: Ratification; Basel Convention: The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal; Cartagena Protocol: The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity; Convention on Migratory Species: The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals; Montreal Protocol: The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer; Nagoya Protocol: The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity; Ramsar Convention: The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance; Rotterdam Convention: The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade; Stockholm Convention: The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants; UN Watercourses Convention: Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses; Vienna Convention: The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer.

Source: Based on data from the United Nations Information Portal on Multilateral Environmental Agreements (informea.org).

region. For most of this time, GCC countries were conceived as indispensable for a reliable supply of carbon resources, and they still currently hold around 30% of oil and around 20% of global gas reserves (BP 2018). In this period of high and “carefree” growth, GCC countries’ attitudes towards global action on emerging sustainability issues, particularly climate change, have often reflected the fear of hurting their carbon industries or a reluctance to engage with what they saw as an unacceptable trade-off between growth and sustainability. Such reluctance should be seen through the lens of the transformation of negotiating positions of developing nations as well as the special role of GCC within that group. Najam (2005) explains that developing countries reluctantly joined the 1972 Stockholm conference and saw environmental concerns as an effort by the Global North to sabotage the Global South’s development aspirations. They questioned the construction of the global environmental agenda, saw development and poverty eradication as a remedy for environmental problems and thus, during the 1980s and the 1992 Rio conference, contributed through this discourse to the emergence of sustainable development as a broader and more acceptable global paradigm (Najam 2005). The GCC positions went even further than the scepticism of developing countries. GCC countries have been, and still are to some extent, an opposing force to global agreements related to low-carbon economic growth or climate change combat. Out of (unjustified) fear for the future of carbon supply and prices, OPEC countries, particularly Middle Eastern ones often represented through the Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), demanded compensation, reduction of carbon taxes in developed countries and, to the detriment of the long-term interests of developing countries and the G77, blocked progress through delay, refusal, doubt and obstruction tactics (Barnett 2008). At the same time, Saudi Arabia heavily dominated the obstructionism bloc to climate action and influenced the G77 group’s attitudes. This continued until the early 2000s when the first signs of reorientation of the Saudi approach emerged, namely the acceptance of participation and acknowledgement of the severity of the climate issue (Depledge 2008).

While GCC countries have led the global opposition to climate change action, there has been some level of participation in other parts of the global sustainability agenda through signing and ratifying environmental global agreements. Table 1 shows participation in major agreements, indicating intensified engagement since the 1990s, and particularly in the last two decades. It took some GCC countries almost four decades to sign agreements from the Stockholm conference era on endangered species or wetlands, while most recent agreements such as climate change, desertification and pollution were joined rapidly. It is important to note that GCC states have exhibited some regional environmental activism towards priority topics such as coastal and marine ecosystems. For example, during the 1970s, Kuwait developed a regional convention known as the Regional Organization for the Protection of Marine Environment (ROPME) for the Gulf region, under the auspices of the 1972-established United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). This topic became even more urgent for GCC countries after several accidents and the 1991 oil spill in the aftermath of the Gulf War (Nadim, Bagtzoglou, and Iranmahboob 2008).

Environmental renaissance, post-growth and the new global agenda

The opposing attitudes of GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia towards carbon reduction agreements continued throughout later conferences such as the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and during meetings of the Conference of the Parties (COPs) of the UNFCCC. For example, Saudi Arabia was one of the few countries to not engage in efforts towards a comprehensive decision during the 2009 Copenhagen conference (COP 15) (Dimitrov 2010; Dryzek and Stevenson 2011). However, as with many developing countries, participation and engagement in the global environmental agenda grew steadily after the 1992 conference in the face of the transformation of environmental discourse driven by environmental professionals as well as new actors such as civil society and epistemic communities (Najam 2005). At the same time, the functions of UN conferences within environmental diplomacy have changed over the last decades, as evident in the perceived failures of the 2002 Johannesburg conference and the 2009 Copenhagen

conference. These conferences have become platforms that incorporate a more constructive agenda geared towards educating governments and exposing new discourses (Haas 2002). This is while the opposition to accords in such summits has been increasingly used symbolically to enact legitimacy and mobilise national audiences, without necessarily distracting from the real business of addressing environmental issues (Death 2011).

For GCC countries, one can postulate a noticeable engagement over the last decade in the global development and environmental governance structures. There are many drivers and manifestations of this engagement. First, GCC countries have reached a high development phase and have started to advance on measures to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and ecologically modernise their economies. Al-Saidi and Elagib (2018) reviewed these measures, which largely rely on engagement in global markets to import clean technologies, set up knowledge industries, increase energy certifications in buildings, and construct low-carbon cities. After decades of growth, GCC countries are increasingly portraying themselves as showcases of modernity, a premise that, if achieved, should also include sustainability and environmental awareness. Furthermore, these countries have emerged as important players in development aid, decades after some countries were still receiving significant aid amounts themselves (Table 2).

Second, GCC countries are now crafting their independence (from Saudi dominance) with regard to environmental diplomacy and global engagement. The prime examples are Qatar and UAE. Prior to the fall of oil prices in 2014, Qatar had been actively engaged in climate diplomacy by hosting the COP18 in Doha and proposing a proactive regional climate of cooperation on research and knowledge production. The fiscal difficulties of GCC countries following the oil price fall might have incited a more cautionary approach of GCC governments, and a change of priority towards gradual change through economic diversification instead of immediate action and ambitious environmental policies. For example, the UAE in 2009 hosted the newly established International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in Masdar City, a megacity originally established to be the world's first zero-carbon city. However, the city did not achieve this as the principles of economic profitability and entrepreneurship in clean technologies began to predominate environmental sustainability (Cugurullo 2016). Still, the UAE has adopted a benefits-oriented approach toward the global environmental governance as it implements key concepts of the global agenda through multiple international partnerships such as the green economy concept, adopted during the 2012 Rio + 20 conference (Luomi 2015).

Third, there are serious internal drivers for GCC countries to decrease national energy footprints, adopt renewables and increase awareness. Above all, due to rising populations and economies, the increasing domestic oil consumption in countries such as Saudi Arabia, combined with subsidised prices, could result in a rapid decline of oil exports and revenues (Gately, Al-Yousef, and Al-Sheikh 2012). Therefore, immediate action on alternative sources, subsidy reductions and efficiency measures are needed since oil revenue dependence is still very high despite four decades of diversification plans in Saudi Arabia, for example (Albassam 2015). In this context, for GCC countries, their

Table 2. Key socio-economic and development aid data of GCC countries.

	Population (millions in 2017) ^a	GDP (Current US\$ billions in 2017) ^a	GDP per capital (US\$ thousands in 2017 with PPP) ^a	Highest 3 years of net ODA and official aid received between 1960 and 2000 (US\$ billions) (constant 2015 US\$) ^a			Development aid (Current US\$ billions) ^b
Bahrain	1.5	35	48	0.655 (1983)	0.605 (1976)	0.5 (1980)	–
Kuwait	4.1	120	72	0.029 (1996)	0.025 (1981)	0.024 (1980)	1 (2016)
Oman	4.6	73	42	1.24 (1977)	0.735 (1974)	0.712 (1998)	–
Qatar	2.6	168	128	0.008 (1999)	0.007 (1989)	0.007 (2002)	1.3 (2013)
Saudi Arabia	33	684	54	0.114 (1982)	0.05 (1960)	0.047 (1992)	3.5 (2010)
United Arab Emirates	9.4	383	74	0.210 (1987)	0.119 (1977)	0.034 (1971)	4.6 (2017)

^aBased on World Bank data (data.worldbank.org).

^bCompiled from OECD (2012) "Multilateral Aid Report", and OECD (2018) "Development Co-operation Report 2018".

contributions to global agreements such as the SDGs or the Paris Agreement are seen in line with their diversification efforts, something that might for the first time create some congruence with the global sustainability agenda. This is despite the ongoing lack of regional coordination, or national policies or strategies that outline commitments to these global agreements (Sever, Evren Tok, and D'Alessandro 2019).

The rise of national visions and the Saudi Arabia factor

Collectively, GCC countries are engaged in reducing dependency on fossil fuels due to the various drawbacks it brings. They have established national visions built closely around the ideals of economic sustainability through diversification, efficiency and long-term rate of return on investments in sectors such as education. In fact, national visions for accelerating reforms are not new to the region, as the next section shows. However, the difference this time might be significant since Saudi Arabia, by far the GCC region's biggest country, has joined the transformation with a bold national plan driven by the need to diversify the economy, reduce domestic consumption and curb waste and inefficiencies. Housing the two major holy mosques and being the world's biggest oil exporter, the political, legal and economic changes of the past few years will have ramifications across the region and could alter diplomacy and negotiation attitudes of the GCC in the global environmental arena. The Kingdom's top officials including the Council of Ministers experienced a major transformation, while various legislation has been considerably modified and regulation of all sectors has been put in place (Al Surf and Mostafa 2017). However, Moshashai, Leber, and Savage (2018) examined this ongoing transformation and noted the existence of major challenges such as the need for transparency and efficiency in public spending, effective decision-making, political stability and trust of foreign investors or multilateral organisations. In this context, the current transition of alliances and tense diplomatic relations after the 2017 GCC crisis following the Saudi-led embargo on Qatar has the potential of increasing instability, cementing regional rivalry, and hampering progress in the GCC region towards a common sustainability and diversification agenda.

State comparisons and national contexts

The GCC region has been quite homogenous with regard to the dependence on economic carbon exports, congruence in the growth trajectory and economic policies since the 1970s and, to a large extent, a unified position in environmental diplomacy. Further, with arguably the most oil-dependent countries of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait now adopting ambitious national visions in 2016 and 2017, respectively, GCC countries seem united in their economic transformation efforts. However, this common approach of national visions has varying emphases and paces of reform implementation. Table 3 summarises the national visions and whether they incorporate key elements of the global sustainability agenda. There are some notable commonalities in the history of the national visions and their accompanying strategies. First, these visions are, more than ever, aligned with the spirit of the global sustainability agenda, in incorporating environmental sustainability as a key development pillar or an instrument to achieve other pillars. Second, there are recurrent priorities represented by the underlying planning principles of increasing diversification, local entrepreneurship, knowledge base and health infrastructure. Third, ecological or sustainability issues such as renewable energies, energy efficiency, clean technologies (so-called ecological innovations) or reduction of subsidies seem to find more emphasis in recently established visions. Alternatively, they were incorporated into subsequent development plans and strategies of older visions. Finally, it is worth noting that the global sustainability agenda, conventions or global agreements like the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, do not feature directly in any of these visions.

Some countries stand out as higher achievers with regard to sustainability issues. Qatar and the UAE were some of the first countries in the region to put sustainability issues as an equal pillar. In Qatar, environmental development constitutes one of the four pillars in its national vision of 2008

Table 3. Sustainability issues in the national visions of GCC countries.

Launch year	Bahrain Vision 2030 2008	Kuwait National Development Plan 2035/ New Kuwait 2017	Oman Vision 2020 1995	Qatar National Vision 2030 2008	Vision 2030 2016	National Agenda 2021/Vision 2021 2010
Main pillars	Economy, government, society	Global position, infrastructure, human capital, public administration, healthcare, economy, living environment	Economic balance and sustainability, human resource development, economic diversification, private sector development	Economic development, social development, human development, environmental development	A vibrant society (culture, urbanism etc.), a thriving economy (competition, employment etc.), an ambitious nation (non-oil revenues, public administration, household incomes)	World-class healthcare, competitive knowledge economy, safe public and fair judiciary, cohesive society and preserved identity, sustainable environment and infrastructure, first-rate education system
Renewable energy targets according to sub-strategies (% of total capacity)	5% (2020)	15% (2030)	10% (2020)	20% (2030)	9.5 gigawatts by 2023 and 54 gigawatts by 2040 (but new announced projects state 200 gigawatts by 2030)	24% (2021)
Reference in the national visions to the following issues						
Environmental sustainability as guiding principle	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Environmental issues as sub-goals or secondary principles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Climate change and warming	Partly (carbon emissions)	No	No	Yes	No	No
Ecological footprints, waste and consumption, awareness	Partly (overconsumption of scarce resources)	Partly (solid waste management)	Partly (under the 9th five-year plan 2016–2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Energy efficiency	Yes	No	Partly (under the 9th five-year plan 2016–2020)	No	Partly (energy mix, renewables)	Partly (clean energy)
Subsidies reductions/ improved targeting	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Ecosystems and marine issues	Partly (nature spaces)	Partly (environmental safety)	Partly (under the 9th five-year plan 2016–2020)	Yes	Yes	Partly (water indicators)
Ecological innovations and sustainable technologies	No	No	No	Partly (advanced technologies to reduce impacts of projects)	No	No
Global sustainability agenda	No	No	No	No	No	No

with some targets being quite unique in the GCC context, such as stressing regional environmental cooperation or aspiring to a “proactive role” in explicit “support for international efforts” towards climate change. The incorporation of these targets can be seen within the earlier-mentioned environmental diplomacy of Qatar prior to 2014. They are rarely reflected in recent follow-ups nor has the envisioned national climate strategy been developed yet. Similarly, the 2010 UAE’s vision has some clear links to international agreements and heavily relies on established global indicators for progress monitoring.

For the other GCC countries, a clear bias towards economic considerations is apparent. This is more evident in the case of Oman and Bahrain, which are comparatively less wealthy due to lower oil and gas resources. Sustainability in Bahrain’s vision is understood as economic sustainability while environmental protection targets are embedded under the third pillar of the living environment of citizens. Oman’s national vision dates back to the mid-1990s and will be replaced by the Oman Vision 2040 later this year. Oman Vision 2020 is less oriented by sustainability concerns, some of which (e.g. energy efficiency and environmental protection) were later embedded in the targets of the 9th Development Plan (2016–20) under this vision. For the revenue-rich countries, and latecomers in terms of their respective national visions, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the focus is rather on bold diversification policies and megaprojects. During the COP 24 of 2018, both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait joined the USA and Russia to block a motion to “welcome” the latest report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was later merely “noted” by the delegates, thus watering down support for the report. The two countries’ priorities are arguably not climate change or carbon reduction. Kuwait’s vision emphasises diversification, human capacities and health, while the large investments under the environmental pillar target refinery capacities. Saudi Arabia’s vision set quite broadly-formulated goals to be implemented through economic reforms, investments and costly megaprojects. A comprehensive list of environmental issues is given under the environmental sustainability goal as a level-2 objective, later translated through only three level-3 objectives on pollution, natural threats and landscapes. In the visions of all GCC countries, there are certain underrepresented topics such as climate change, subsidies and sustainable technologies (e.g. renewables, innovations for carbon reduction etc.). However, even if mentioned, rarely do subsequent strategies systematically reflect critical topics.

Reflections and discussion

The urge to change economic priorities in the GCC has become greater than ever before. In countries such as Oman, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, it represents a race against time as it has become evident that domestic growth and resource use inefficiency will jeopardise the major revenue stream of oil and gas exports. The current reforms could reduce some carbon and energy intensities, and effectively push these countries further down the road of engagement within the global sustainability agenda. For other countries such as Qatar and UAE, global sustainability engagement has a longer history dating back to the era of high oil prices before the 2014 crisis and is also motivated by a rivalry for demonstrating modernity and avant-gardism. Some scholars have put forward other factors behind the current reforms and the global engagement, namely the new generation of “neo-liberal” leaders in Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. These leaders want to reform the old model of fiscal reliance on oil and gas and share a common vision, partly inspired by the “Dubai model” of an economy financed by tourism, property markets, and fees and taxes paid by expatriates (Gengler and Lambert 2016). However, it is doubtful whether these elements of charisma and economic ideology are enough to push the reforms. It is also difficult to conceptualise how economic diversification would have happened without the real politico-economic pressures from the prospect of dwindling resources in the future. Further, the GCC crisis related to the embargo on Qatar invokes the recurrent notion of regional rivalry and increased independence of GCC states’ environmental policies. For example, the UAE opted to build up its nuclear power instead of importing gas from Qatar for fear of dependence and other political considerations (Fattouh, Rogers, and Stewart

2015). This is while both countries are engaged in developing their own energy certification systems for buildings, something that would otherwise be a suitable field for common approaches and cooperation. Furthermore, regional cooperation on climate change policies, carbon trade, capture or sequestration is almost non-existent (Meltzer, Hultman, and Langley 2014). While the UAE has invested heavily in importing clean technologies and enhancing multilateral partnerships on sustainable development planning, Qatar might choose to out-triumph this global outreach in light of the imposed embargo, also through hosting upcoming global events such as the 2022 World Cup.

While the engagement of GCC countries in the global sustainability agenda has notably increased, it remains uneven in terms of topical coverage as well as cautious in terms of official commitments. National visions and diversification pressures have played a positive role in addition to the fact that the global agenda became broader and more acceptable. This agenda expanded from the environment-versus-development debate of the 1970s, to the comprehensive sustainable development agenda of 80s and 90s, to the latter ideas of green economy and growth. The new agenda prioritises industry and envisions win-win outcomes through technologies and innovations. Nonetheless, the commitment of GCC countries to participate and engage with this agenda falls shy of benchmarks set by developed countries and also from the Arab region. For example, Morocco plans to supply over 50% of electricity from renewables by 2030, much more than any GCC country. At the same time, GCC countries do not have clear commitments or carbon reduction targets. Their reporting on agreements such as the SDGs or the Paris Agreement is often merely listing progress indicators from their national visions and strategies, which in turn do not directly link to these agreements or reflect a broader transition towards sustainability. Further, while domestic factors and outside pressures from multilateral organisations have pushed GCC countries to adopt important subsidy reduction reforms, these reforms face serious political challenges and might not alter the rent-distributing nature of the GCC states (Krane 2018). Some of the reductions also only apply to the expatriate population, thus incentives for waste, inefficiency and large environmental footprints still exist.

Conclusions

Environmental diplomacy of GCC countries can be traced back to their participation modes in shaping, joining or obstructing the global sustainability agenda based on their national economic interests. GCC societies have historically utilised and preserved coastal landscapes and limited freshwater resources for sustaining their livelihoods as well as seafaring and trade relationships with other nations. With the discovery of oil, and later in the second half of the twentieth century, the increase of oil production and control, the carbon-based economic model became indispensable for national wealth accumulation and for the global energy supply. The obstructionism and reluctance of GCC countries towards multilateral environmental agreements date back to this era and now represent relics that did not completely disappear. However, over time, particularly due to the broadening of the global sustainability agenda, the decline of oil supply power and the growth consolidation of GCC countries, Gulf states have started joining multilateral agreements, engaging in international development and incorporating certain elements of the sustainability agenda. Despite increased participation, the positions of GCC countries remained unified and dominated by Saudi Arabia's attitudes of obstruction and compensation-seeking towards any action on critical issues such as decarbonisation or climate change. Nowadays, GCC countries have started to join the global consensus and engage with it. This is particularly true for the now relatively autonomous environmental policies of the small and reserves-rich states with global ambitions, for example, UAE and Qatar.

The recent transformation efforts of GCC countries towards a more diversified, low-carbon, knowledge-based and resource-efficient economic model are significant for many reasons. First, they are driven by genuine domestic pressures of rising demands and declining future revenues. Second, they are common to all countries and incorporated in a relatively similar fashion within ambitious national visions. Thus, continuing this track might lead to tangible results in terms of reductions of carbon intensities, environmental footprints and waste. Third, crucial accompanying reforms such

as subsidy reductions and social reforms can help carry this momentum, although they are still not comprehensive. Fourth, GCC countries are using multilateral partnerships facilitated by the global environmental governance systems for imports or clean technologies or developing national strategies (e.g. green growth in the UAE), while they are engaged in tracking progress towards their commitments to global agreements.

Despite these positive signs, the reforms represent a cautious progress towards the global sustainability agenda, which remains uneven across the countries and, generally, finds little direct reflection in their respective national development policies. The region remains an underperformer in regional or global contexts with regard to implementing this global agenda. At the same time, political crises and ineffective regional cooperation among GCC countries continue to pose an impediment for prospects of a speedy implementation of key parts of this agenda such as climate policies, renewables or clean transport.

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