



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times

A project funded by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Deen Shariff Sharp, d.s.sharp@lse.ac.uk.

Researchers:

Kanwal Tareq Hameed

Abrar Alshammari

High-Level Political and Policy Focus Group

Held on March 9, 2021, via Zoom under Chatham House Rules

Participants:

Senior United Nations Official

United Nations Staff Member

Scientist at a Kuwaiti University

Architect at a Kuwaiti University

Senior Environmental Specialist

International Urban Expert

Government of Kuwait Advisor

On March 9, 2021 the ‘Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times’ research initiative at the London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre brought together on Zoom six high-level policy and political experts to discuss climate change in Kuwait. The aim was for an open discussion around the central question of the project - ‘*what do Kuwaitis (both citizens and non-citizens) think about, and how do they experience, climate change?*’ (Full outline of the project, which is part of the LSE Kuwait programme [here](#)). The focus group was staged around a series of questions around the experience and understanding of climate change in Kuwait, efforts made and challenges faced by the Kuwait government and parliament in tackling climate change, and linking climate change with sustainable development, national urban planning measures and policy.

The English-language focus group was chaired by principal investigator Dr Deen Sharp and research assistants Kanwal Abdulhameed and Abrar Alshammari. The discussion was held under Chatham House rules and was not recorded, the below comprises a summary of the focus group discussion. Focus group attendees included: two representatives from the United Nations (UN) (referred to as a senior UN official and UN official); a scientist working on climate change and marine biodiversity issues at a Kuwaiti university; a professor of architecture at a Kuwaiti university; a Kuwait based senior environmental specialist working with international organizations; a Kuwaiti government advisor; and a principal from an international design firm working on major public projects in Kuwait (cited as an urban expert).

Keynote Address

In the opening keynote address to the focus group, a senior United Nations (UN) official cited how the Government of Kuwait is working toward an environmental strategy with a focus on renewable energy in its National Development Plan and with UN agencies. The Government of Kuwait plans to generate 15 percent renewable energy by 2030, the official noted. The senior UN official noted some positive trends in Kuwait in relation to climate change and the country's broader environmental performance, with the country improving its position by 14 places on the environmental index. The Official cited the positive focus on renewables by the Government of Kuwait with the opening of the Shagaya Renewable Energy Park, a 3.2 GWe solar power, photovoltaic and wind energy complex. However, the senior official noted the serious environmental challenges that Kuwait faces due to its rapid economic expansion and development, and in turn its high level of urbanisation. These include: pollution and related health hazards, urban waste and handling, marine pollution (particularly in harbors), air pollution, coastal erosion and environmental degradation. The senior UN official highlighted issues related to government coordination on the question of climate change, and specifically in regard to initiatives to harness renewable energy, the inefficiencies in implementation and the inadequacies of the current legislative and regulatory framework.

Experiences of Climate Change

Participants described how climate change in Kuwait is resulting in 'longer summers and shorter winters' as well as 'extreme weather conditions' such as increased temperatures of above 50 degrees Celsius (with Kuwait reporting the highest temperature worldwide in 2016), increased

water surface temperatures, heavy rain events leading to flooding, and dust storms, noting their increased frequency. One participant noted the impact on public health, citing increasing numbers of people suffering from asthma due to air pollution, and another the impact on infrastructure, describing heavy rainfall in 2018 leading to street flooding half the height of cars, and residents using jet skis on the roads. A senior environmental specialist noted that climate change forecasts predict the inundation of entire areas around Shuwaikh and the Northern Islands. They also added that due to Kuwait's reliance on its ports and on imports, climate change will also impact food security in the future. The scientist noted that if 'business as usual' continues, further coral bleaching and destruction of marine life would take place.

Education and Awareness

The importance of education about the environment and climate change was stressed by participants as a critical issue in the discussion. The majority of participants emphasized that education reform was needed to raise awareness and build capacity to tackle climate change by linking the global phenomenon to its impact on people's livelihood, families, lived experiences – and towards changing behavior and practices. But participants also stressed the urgency of implementing policies related to climate change now and that education initiatives, while important, must not inhibit action in the present.

The scientist called for an 'environment thematic' to be structured into education from an early age, and made, 'compulsory at university [learning about] green economy, green architecture'. A government official in the environment sector agreed strongly with this, adding that education was an important tool to 'nudge the youth' to take on climate change as an issue.

A professor of architecture at a Kuwaiti university responded, 'speaking as an educator, we teach sustainability and how to mitigate climate change, so there is a generation coming ... a lot of 'ambassadors' going into local society'. The urban expert, who is engaged in public development projects in Kuwait, stressed the urgency of action: 'we don't have time for that (long-term educational measures) ... it has to happen at the institutional and highest level of government'.

Government Efforts & Approach

A consensus existed among participants that the government is not doing enough on climate change and that this issue was not viewed by the state as a political priority. There was disagreement over whether more legislation by the government was required or not, with some participants noting that the government should focus on implementing existing frameworks. Throughout the discussion participants cited issues within the government, namely a lack of communication, coordination and information sharing between government entities. They also cited a concern about how much understanding there was within the government and the public more broadly over both the science of climate change and its impact.

In the keynote address, the senior UN official noted that: 'The country has only recently started to harness renewable energy.' Adding that renewables are 'at centre and forefront' of UN backed measures to tackle climate change, and that a number of households and business have had solar panels installed through one of KFAS-KISR initiatives. The senior UN official suggested the need for legislative/ regulatory frameworks. In the focus group discussion participants stated that rather than a lack of policies and laws or the need for new frameworks, they were concerned about the lack of implementation of existing policies and the enforcement

of laws posed a much greater challenge. The professor of architecture added that the issue 'is not a lack of policies, or well-designed policies, what we have is non-compliance, and non-compliance is systemic'. Participants added that public officials could not be held to account, they cited the fact that whistle blowers were often punished and the lack of public information on the issues.

Participants also questioned how seriously the government took – and how much it understood - the issue of climate change. One participant noted that “100% the government does not understand the issue of climate change” and that there is no understanding of climate change among the public. They also cited the construction of new roads being built - specifically the ring road that was recently constructed - as evidence of how the government is not taking climate change seriously. “This single construction project alone [the new ring road] is going more damage than all the current initiatives [by the government] to mitigate climate change.” The UN staff member wished to clarify however, that from their perspective and experience there is a general awareness and understanding of climate change. But that there exists, certainly, certain knowledge and capacity gaps in regards to the exact science of climate change, as well as in relation to sustainability issues with certain types of investments or interventions.

The senior environmental official described a ‘lack of incentive’ to reduce carbon emissions, noting that because fines for pollution were not relative to the pollution caused, it was cheaper for entities to pay fines as opposed to reducing emissions. They noted that at the moment current pollution targets are not being met, implying that existing policies need to be implemented before new frameworks are created. They called for a ‘strategic environmental assessment’ in urban planning and development planning and policies. KEPA is ‘sleeping at the

wheel when it comes to climate change’, a participant said, who also critiqued the institution for not updating their targets ahead of the UN climate change COP (Conference of the Parties).

All participants saw the need for greater or alternative measures to be taken at highest levels of government, with the scientist at a Kuwaiti university describing officials joining beach clean ups as being largely used for ‘photo opportunities’, and calling for greater awareness and implementation on climate change related actions in the workplace. The urban expert saw that if action was not taken at the central governmental level, ‘measures will not be able to meet the climate emergency’. They saw the need for the ministerial adoption of departments of environment, ‘with more teeth’ to enforce regulations, and with particular targets to meet.

Urbanisation, Economy and Energy

Ongoing urbanisation projects and the national reliance on fossil fuels were named as key areas of concern with the international urban expert noting that, ‘95% of [current] urban projects are detrimental to climate change mitigation’. Through engagements with members of the public sector, the participant noted a lack of understanding on climate change, exemplified through projects proposing new roads to offset the problem of heavy traffic, and hundreds of kilometers of new roads being built, linking new urban developments ‘that are completely unsustainable’. The professor of architecture described the building and construction sectors as ‘highly polluting’, calling for a discussion on ‘current and ongoing practices’ related to development in Kuwait.

The environmental specialist linked the solutions to mitigate climate change as being conservation and nature-based, adding that, ‘the clear impediment here is that any new

legislation that is perceived to impact the livelihood or economic interests of Kuwait is shut down immediately'. The participant advocated for alternative energy sources, including wind and solar power, adding that to-date Kuwait does not have reduction targets for its reliance on fossil fuels, and that the main challenge to the national economy will be faced when, 'in 20 years nobody wants to buy our oil ... this to me is the real danger'. The call for transition to renewable sources of energy was echoed by the senior UN official, who stated that, '7.5% share of renewables is what looks like success,' according to the National Renewable Energy Action plan, adding that, the Kuwait government has expressed interest in establishing a center to oversee the transition process.

Top-Down or Bottom Up?

Participants opinions differed over whether measures to address climate change should be driven from the 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'. But as the conversation progressed they agreed on the need for a mixture of both. The environment specialist described the Paris agreement as being crucial to a shift in the position of the governments of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia – saying that prior to this, both governments had blocked moves to reduce emissions. A combination of lack of information on pollution from the government, and the penalizing of whistle blowers for reporting inaccuracies were all listed as impediments to tackling climate change. The professor of architecture added that a public information act passed by parliament could be a 'game-changer', by allowing public access to government data as well as necessitating that the government publish them as well.

The UN staff member saw the mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches as needed in relation to the enforcement of laws and enacting policies and building the capacity of institutions, as well as raising the awareness at various levels on climate changes issues. The government advisor called for a political directive from the Emir, with confirmation by the National Assembly as being the most effective means of implementing change, as well as, ‘education, education, education’. This was echoed by the scientist at a Kuwaiti university, who called for an, ‘education, bottom up, right person in the right job, top down’ model.

As a rich country with a small and highly educated population, Kuwait has the means to mitigate the effects of climate change and posit itself as a model on the international stage, the urban expert stated. They suggested looking to the example of Norway (with a similar population, sovereign wealth fund and oil-based economy) for policies. Learning also from the changes in global economic trends was seen as a key issue for the environmental specialist, who said that, ‘we are used to the heat ... What do we do economically?’ They discussed the impact of China (a key exporting partner for Kuwait), Japan, and South Korea switching to low carbon models and reliance on renewables, on Kuwait and its budget deficit. ‘The way to get people’s attention is to switch the conversation to economics, we have one resource and need to speed up diversification – green growth is a job creator,’ the environmental specialist stated.