

## **Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times**

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### **Youth Focus Group (English)**

Held on February 23, 2021, via Zoom under Chatham House Rules.

Participants included nine (seven female and two male) Kuwait based students from private and public schools.

On February 23, 2021 the ‘Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times’ research group at the London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre brought together nine high school students from Kuwait 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 available [here](#)).

This English-language focus group was chaired by principal investigator Dr Deen Sharp and researchers Kanwal Abdulhameed and Abrar Alshammari. Participants included seven female and two male high school students (including Kuwaiti citizens and non-citizens) aged 14-17 years old, drawn primarily from various private schools in Kuwait but also included students attending public school. The discussion was held under Chatham House rules.

### **Climate Change and the Generational Gap**

To start the session Deen Sharp explained to the students that in our preliminary research for this project a number of interviewees had cited a generational divide in relation to the issue of climate change. They contended that climate change was a youth driven issue and concern, especially for those attending elite private schools. When queried about this assumption, the majority of respondents concurred that there was a generational divide on the issue of climate change. They stated that climate change as an issue that would affect their future in a negative way, as well as insisting on the role of youth in educating themselves, raising awareness, and ‘trying to come up with solutions’. The respondents linked climate change to a number of other areas of their own interest or concern, including fashion, diet, environmental issues, a global population increase, increased traffic and depletion of the earth’s resources. While almost all agreed that climate change was important, the students noted varied levels of engagement with the issues.

One participant stated that prior to the focus group meeting, climate change was something that they engaged with personally, but that they had become more attentive to discussions on climate change on social media platforms, with a growing sense of concern. The speaker linked climate

change to practices they already engaged with, including limiting consumption of water and electricity, recycling, using less plastic, and re-using shopping bags. Another speaker discussed the change in human habits and practices caused by measures to limit the spread of the Corona virus in terms of decreased pressure on the natural environment. Regarding the generation issue, one participant stated that, ‘the older generation, they think that climate change is either a lie, or not as important as other world problems’. They interpreted this as reflecting a deference to authority figures (who themselves 'disregard' climate change) but also, a refusal to change to using renewable energy sources in oil rich countries, due to their financial dependence on oil extraction. This second point was seconded by other participants.

One student compared the approach of the Kuwaiti government (and older generation), describing a UAE programme ‘Connect with Nature’ which they said allowed youth to speak with officials on the issue of climate change. More than one participant noted that among older and younger generations that some people took it very seriously, and others not at all. However, the idea of youth perspectives not being taken into consideration was repeated by a number of participants, with one student linking the idea of climate change as a problem for the future as a reason for this.

Noticeably, most participants described climate change by referring to scientific and environmental phenomena, discussing littering, global warming, air pollution, water pollution, impact on hormones/ reproduction, and damage to the ozone layer – as opposed to material impact on their lives.

### **Awareness and Education**

‘The people should know about this [climate change]’, one participant stated; a sentiment echoed by a number of others. Students described varying access to information on climate change depending on the schools they attended – two students mentioned afterschool clubs at their private school as being forums where climate change was addressed, climate change being part of their curriculum, and another mentioned their school marking ‘Earth Day’. Conversely, two members of the group posed that at the public schools they attended in Kuwait the issue of

climate change was taught in a very limited and repetitive way throughout their education, without specifically pointing to climate change or encouraging students' interest. Global events such as the wildfires in Australia were named as triggering an interest in climate change, and an interest in tackling its impact.

Social media was described as a source of information on climate change, and more than one participant said that they carried out their own research online and followed social media accounts related to climate or environmental issues. Some participants shared sources and accounts, and those shared were English-language Instagram accounts by individuals and organisations based in the USA, as well as the website for the UAE 'Connect With Nature' programme. The internet was discussed as an educational resource as well as a resource for information on ways to address climate change, and the need for action as well as education was stated by another participant. One student said they learned online about vegetarian/veganism alongside turning to renewable energy as a tactic, and another adding that, 'the thing is that we already have solutions to these problems, the only thing we need to do is raise awareness of these problems'.

### **What is to be Done?**

Much of what the correspondents suggested as needing to be done began with individual measures to limit consumption of water and electricity, recycling, participating in beach cleans ups, but also recognised a need to 'raise awareness' in order to develop a community-based response. Public measures were also called for, and these included laws against littering and to enforce recycling, re-using recycled plastic for other products, updating textbooks in public schools, taking the oil industry's impact on production of greenhouse gases 'more seriously', and desalination of water to avoid a water crisis in the near future.

Other issues that the students raised as important included the harassment of women in Kuwait, women's empowerment, bribery and corruption in parliamentary elections and in bureaucratic institutions. Participants shared examples of social initiatives in the form of public campaigns against the harassment of women as leading to the proposal for new laws against harassment,

though with limited success. One participant responded to this saying that they learned about the issue through the campaign, but also saw a need for the male-dominated parliament to address the issue.

There was a broad sense of the need for change among the Kuwaiti community, with one participant stating, 'I think all of us agree on this that it's not really considered a big problem in Kuwait, as it should'. All participants voiced a strong sense that the opinions and participation of youth was either 'looked down upon', not 'taken seriously', 'underestimated' or 'silenced' by both official channels and the older generation. This sense of neglect, in their view, also extended to the issue of climate change itself. 'The government only think about the economy', said one participant, with another calling for the parliament to work for the 'improvement' of life in Kuwait rather than focusing solely on its 'financial side'.