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Knowledge for All

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Workshop 5

Modernization and Socio-Economic Changes in the Gulf Arabic Cities

Workshop Directors

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, the oil-producing Arab countries of the Gulf have undergone a period of radical economic and social changes. This is due not only to the increase in income from oil in 1973, but also to the political changes and economic modernization that has arisen in conjunction for the majority of the states of the region.

The combined effects of these changes have been characterized in later decades by an unconditioned, hasty and even uncontrolled opening to the external world, and especially to the western way of life, both at the level of consumption modes, urbanization patterns and social relationships. “The adoption of the western pattern in Arab countries stems from the feeling of backwardness and from an aspiration to progress” (Ben Hamouche, 2003, 528). In the Gulf, the intensive presence of a multinational foreigner workforce accentuated the process and influenced the shape and the content of major cities. Although the situation and conditions in all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were similar, the manifestation of the recent developments differs from one to other in rapport with the politic choices and the socioeconomic conditions of every country.

As any operation of development is by definition spatial, the various socioeconomic transformations echoed on the space where the greater part of the population lives. These ancient centers were often modest in size, in structures and in functions because of “the lack of water resources, the poor soil, the harsh environment and the limited

opportunities” (El-Arifi, on 1986, 224). In this dry and poor region, the population was often concentrated in oases or near the natural ports in small numbers which the limited resources could bear. Hence, there appeared a multitude of small and dispersed villages. None of these, even the former local capitals, were able to evolve to the rank of a city in its proper term, i.e. with large-scale populations, complex structures, multiple functions and substantial and stable regional authority.

However, given recent demographic trends, the expansion of modern economic activities as well as newly created urban functions, the small fishing or pastoral villages have metamorphosed quickly hastily to large urban areas concentrated especially on the coast areas.

The accompanying transition impacted on the economic, social, cultural and even psychological definitions in these new emerging urban concentrations with the result that traditional spatial structures were upset in a very short amount of time. In Dubai, the real estate boom oriented to an international market revolutionized the shape, the configuration and the functions of the city. Abu Dhabi “was completely raised then reconstructed and reorganized in the American way with a pure orthogonal plan. It is the only big city of the Arab countries of the Gulf which did not keep its former ancient nucleus witness of the history of the human presence.” (Al Khayat, 1988, 302) In the kingdom of Bahrain, the State “adopted a distributive and comprehensive welfare policy, and became a major and unique actor in shaping the city” (Ben Hamouche, 2003, 1). In the Sultanate of Oman which is distinguished by its relatively numerous indigenous population, limited oil resources, and a socializing real estate policy, the changes have much more moderate. However, even here one can notice the symptoms of the social reconfiguration of the capital urban space. The same phenomena can be noticed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.

Workshop Description and Rationale

The socioeconomic changes in the GCC cities are still under-documented and under-researched, and this workshop aims to bring a spotlight to the newly urban reality in connection with the demographic, economic, societal and morphological changes. The historical conditions and the context of modernization and globalization will serve as a background to elucidate the various aspects of the subject. For this purpose, the workshop aims at gathering a multidisciplinary group of scholars and experts. The production of an edited volume in both English and Arabic will constitute the ultimate purpose of this workshop.

The workshop seeks papers on the following topics:

1. The transition to the modern economy in the GCC cities
 - The impact on traditional activities
 - The nature of the new activities
 - Globalization and localization of the modern activities and littoral urbanization
2. The social changes
 - The demographic trends, immigration, population structures, etc.

- The welfare policy and standard of life in the GCC countries
 - Cultural changes
3. The new urban reality
- Patterns of urbanization
 - Structures of urban areas
 - Evolution of urban morphology
 - Evolution of social structures in major cities
 - The new spatial configuration: cities' functions and urban systems
 - Development, vulnerability and resilience in the GCC cities

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Belgacem Mokhtar holds a Ph.D. in Economic Geography (Regional and urban planning) from the University Francois Rabelais, Tours. (France). He taught geography at a number of Higher Education Institutions in Tunisia (Colleges of Sfax and Sousse. 1989-1996) and in the Sultanate of Oman (Colleges of Sur and Rustaq, 1996-2003) and at Sultan Qaboos University (since 2003). Worldwide, he has participated in more than twenty international conferences and workshops and published 2 books and 15 scientific papers in Arabic, French and English. He was rewarded by SQU for the distinguished published paper in 2008-2009. His research has focused on the recent socioeconomic changes in Oman, as a GCC country, and their impact on urbanization, settlement patterns and spatial reconfiguration. His last accepted paper for publication is about the role of real-estate values in the relocation of socio economic categories in Muscat urban area, Oman.

Dr. Montasser I. M. Abdelghani is an Assistant Professor of Social and Urban Geography at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. He was born in 1970 in the province of El-Minya, Egypt. From 1988 to 1992, he studied geography at the University of El-Minya. In 1996, he received a scholarship from the Egyptian government for post graduate studies in Germany. He studied the German language in Frankfurt and Mainz, and obtained his doctoral degree, in social geography, at the University of Bayreuth, in Bavaria. His research has focused on the issues of Arab cities, urbanization, vulnerability, and international migration. From 2003 to 2006, he taught geography at a number of institutions, in Egypt. In 2004, he worked as a visiting professor at the University of Bayreuth, in Germany. He has participated in many international conferences in Germany, Austria and in Arab countries. He has been living and working in Oman since 2007.