Chapter 11
Achieving Sustainable Cities in Saudi Arabia:
Juggling the Competing Urbanization Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the challenges of rapid urbanization in Saudi Arabia and the implications of its burgeoning urban population on urban sustainability. The first section of the chapter reviews the trend of urbanization in the Third World, and Saudi Arabia in particular, and the factors responsible for rapid urban growth. The second section critically analyzes major urbanization challenges in Saudi Arabia and their impacts on the people and the environment. The final section assesses the extent to which some sustainability initiatives being implemented by the government are meeting the competing and sometimes conflicting urbanization challenges. The chapter concludes with some policy implications.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The global urban population has grown rapidly from 746 million (30% of global population) in 1950 to 3.9 billion (54%) in 2014 and it is projected to reach 66% by 2050 (United Nations [UN], 2014). Given that the bulk of world's urban growth will continue to take place in the global South (nearly 90% in Asia and Africa), cities in these countries increasingly face numerous sustainable development challenges including shortage of housing, infrastructure, energy and basic services such as health care, education and transportation. Furthermore, these cities have to meet the challenges of inequality, unemployment, crimes and environmental pollution (UN-Habitat, 2009).

In Saudi Arabia, the rapid rate of urban growth has immensely contributed to a variety of challenges including urban sprawl (Aina et al., 2008; Gamboa, 2008; Mubarak, 2004), high energy consumption (Lahn and Stevens, 2011; Struyk, 2005), shortage of infrastructure and basic services (Hathloul & Mughal, 2004; Garba, 2004), traffic congestion and environmental problems (Abou-Korin, 2011; Alhowaish, 2015; Alshuwaikhat and Aina, 2006). In order to mitigate these challenges and promote urban sustainability, the Saudi government has embarked on several sustainable urban development initiatives. These initiatives include urban greening, tourism development, economic diversification, youth employment, renewable energy, knowledge/economic cities, public transport system and pollution monitoring and control (Aina, 2014; AlHarigi, 2013; AlQahtany et al., 2014; Rahman and Khondaker, 2012; Supreme Council of Tourism [SCT], 2002). However, up to date, there has been little research on the extent to which these initiatives are effective in promoting sustainable urbanization in Saudi Arabia. Hence, this chapter analyses the challenges of rapid urban growth in Saudi Arabia and the extent to which the current initiatives aimed at achieving more sustainable urban development in the country are meeting the challenges. Although some of these initiatives are still at their early stage of implementation, this chapter presents an initial review of the initiatives and the possible difficulties that might affect their implementation.

In this study, the following methods were employed to carry out the analysis of the urban challenges and sustainability initiatives in Saudi Arabia. Firstly, there was a search for and compilation of relevant secondary data (soft and hard copy resources) dealing with urbanization in the country and the initiatives aimed at alleviating the challenges. The sources of the data included textbooks, journals, technical reports, statistics, and website documents collected from library and online sources such as UN Population Division, UN-Habitat, Saudi Central Department of Statistics and Information (CDSI), and other public agencies. Secondly, a synthesis of the data, as well as an examination of the extent to which the initiatives might alleviate the urbanization challenges, was carried out. This chapter is organized as follows. The next section, the background, reviews the trend of urbanization and urban growth in Saudi Arabia. This is followed by section three, which highlights the factors responsible for rapid urban growth in Saudi Arabia, as well as assesses the impacts of urban growth on Saudi cities and residents. Section four critically analyses the sustainability initiatives being implemented in Saudi Arabia with particular emphasis on how the initiatives are able to juggle the various competing urbanization challenges. The last section concludes with a discussion on the way forward.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Urbanization is a process by which a rural society is transformed into an urban one. This process is linked with the socio-economic transformation of a society, which brings greater geographical mobility, lesser fertility and longer life expectancy. Benefits of urbanization, due to the concentration of much of the national economic activities, administration, commerce and transportation in urban centers, include economies of scale in the provision of essential urban services. Urban living is often linked to higher education and literacy levels, better healthcare, and more access to social services, as well as greater opportunities for sociocultural and political participation (UN, 2014). Industries and producers of services also take advantage of higher concentration of suppliers and consumers in cities, which allows savings in communications and transport costs. Cities also provide large, distinct labor markets and help

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