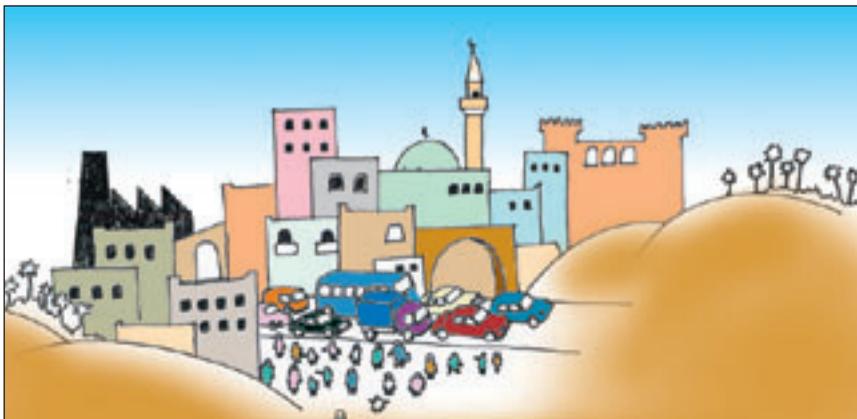




PROTECTING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT IN THE ARAB WORLD



Features of the urban environment in the Arab world

Despite what some people think, the Arab world is not populated by bedouin tribes and nomads. For thousands of years, most people in the Arab world have in fact lived in towns or villages and urban centres. This is still obvious today when you look at the famous archaeological monuments of the Arabian peninsula or North Africa. The rate of urbanization in the Arab world will, it is estimated, be 80% in the year 2010.

The main features of the urban environment in the Arab world are the following :

1. The historical dimension. Most of the urban centres of the Arab world are very old indeed. Parts of the towns contain remains from various historical periods, and very varied ecological conditions exist.

2. The cultural dimension. Arab towns were always in the days of their glory centres of cultural influence. Several Arab towns have for centuries played -and still play today-an eminent part in preserving the Arab cultural identity, fashioned by contact with the neighbouring environment.

3. The environmental dimension. Mainly seen in the use of differing types of building material according to the climate, which gives the Arab towns their personality and originality of architectural style.

The town: a coherent ecosystem

Towns are coherent ecosystems which include material and immaterial entities. In the towns are all kinds of building - from the oldest to the most up-to-date. The nerve- centres of these towns are the streets, roads, boulevards and cul-de-sacs along which people and goods are transported. And in the big squares and gardens and public parks the town residents find the necessary space to walk about and have fun.

Inside this multi-dimensional environment people - its basic element - can live and go about their business; using the many resources of their environment, to make products and commodities or to create services, men both influence and are influenced by their environment.

The town brings in from outside food, building materials and the raw materials needed for industry, and sometimes even drinking water, and exports to the countryside its solid and liquid waste.

The town also exports its products, and many of its residents go to the country for holidays or vacations, while the country-folk come to the town in search of jobs, services, care, education and leisure activities.

Thus the town constitutes a pole of attraction and centre of influence which enables people to satisfy their cultural needs and

aspirations to happiness and peace. But the town is also a place which gives rise to conflicting values, disintegrating family ties, and the acute stress of daily life, which increases factors such as loneliness, isolation, despondency and despair, and eventually leads to crime.

The main ecological problems of the Arab world

High demographic growth rates, on the one hand, and the rural exodus of people looking for a better life in the towns, on the other, are the main challenges the Arab town is faced with. Rising town populations are causing a very large number of ecological problems:

1. Dissipation of natural resources, caused by the growing demand for these resources, which are usually not renewable, such as oil and water resources in a large number of Arab countries .

2. Pollution and degradation of the environment under the strain of human activity, which spawns pollutant, non-recyclable household and industrial waste, which spews out into the atmosphere, the water and the soil.

3. The reduction or disappearance of agriculture land, in the face of the growing expansion of the towns, plus the extinction of settled plant and animal species.

4. The inability of big towns to satisfy the elementary needs of all their residents, principally housing, education, medical care and jobs, which leads to the breaking up of social structures, and the rise in the crime rate, delinquency and psychopathological behaviour.

5. The degradation of sanitary and environmental conditions in poorer areas due to the lack of commodities, infrastructure and services such as drinking water supply, waste water treatment and household refuse collection, which further complicates the living conditions of the people living in such places, which in their turn become refuges for the homeless and the second-class citizens.

What steps must be taken to protect the urban environment?

1. Provision of the necessary commodities (drinking water supply, waste water treatment, treatment of solid waste, transport) to satisfy the needs of the people as cheaply and efficiently as possible.
2. Provision of green areas, public parks and recreational and leisure areas.
3. Recycling of waste, control and rationalization of energy consumption.
4. Encouraging use of local raw materials and traditional techniques in building and environment protection.
5. Encouraging self-development and self-management projects to help people's creative faculties to flourish, and responsible private initiative projects to guarantee the success and correct functioning of public interest enterprises and projects.

What can you do?

1. Public interest association: enquire about the associations, organizations and enterprises operating in the urban environment protection field in your country. Take part in their activities, or join in setting up a new association.
2. Education: education plays a fundamental part in urban environment protection. The various media aids, conferences and seminars, alongside the schools, are effective vectors in this field.
3. Information: the news organs (newspapers, radio, television) can actively help encourage people to join in an environment protection programme. Many of these media have journalists and correspondents specializing in environmental problems, and are quite ready to collaborate on covering activities linked to protecting the urban environment.

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