



Lens on Dubai's Society: Fragile or Postmodern?

A Socio-Cultural Impact Analysis
[Executive Summary]

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Exploring Dubai's Society

Currently Dubai is one of the most international, if not *the* most international place in the world. A multitude of people from different cultural backgrounds are living together in peace. Appreciation can be awarded to this fact, as well as to Dubai's exceptional economic development over the past forty years. Dubai is a unique place in its own sense.

Dubai : place sui generis

Yet, Dubai is facing challenges, especially in the demanding current times and state of world affairs, which is proving to have a significant impact on Dubai's future. A question to put forward is: how is Dubai's society constituted? Is the rapid economical development accompanied by a comparable social development? Is the society stable or rather fragile, modern or even postmodern? And how does this influence Dubai's future? Multiple development paths are possible. The objective of this study is to explore Dubai's society, revealing possible obstacles and illustrate different pathways for development; pathways of which one has to be chosen consciously or unconsciously.

Research focus: challenges and future pathways

The following key findings represent the summation of an explorative study, conducted between the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 in Dubai. Two approaches were applied:

Research design:
ECA & CIE

___ Explorative Culture Analysis (ECA) and

___ Culture Impact Evaluation (CIE)

ECA is a qualitative, open interview format that explores a social system, in this case Dubai's society, relying upon the stories of its members. For the purpose of this study, twenty interviews with experts, managers and directors from different sectors, as well as the government were held.

CIE utilise the findings of these interviews to develop future scenarios and its respective pathways. Consequently, options can be identified in support of following the pathways, which leads to the preferred scenario.



Key Findings

Socio-Cultural Frictions

- ___ Local culture and traditions seem to have a challenging time surviving, as they are being driven aside by newcomers', expatriates', and immigrants' cultures. Local | Newcomers
- ___ The major part of Dubai's society is constituted by members, who are living there for a period of one to five years only. Consequently, the so called "project workers" have a short-term orientation. Merely, the smaller part of the population has a long-term orientation and is therefore sincerely interested in a sustainable society. Long-term | Short-term
- ___ Within the local Emirati population, a friction looms between the older generation (40+) who is cleaved and socialised in a Bedouin culture, and the younger high technology generation. Old | Young
- ___ The Emirati culture can be described as having two poles: On the one side a cosmopolitan orientation, and a family, tribe and clan driven tradition on the other. Cosmopolitan | Traditions
- ___ A greater role on the importance of the religious affiliation between Shiites and Sunnites may come into play in the near future. Shiites | Sunnites



Predominant Paradigms

- ___ The foundation of the society is not built on a social contract, but on the functionality and logic of a pragmatic marketplace. People complete their intended business and go “home” afterwards, which is to their country of citizenship.

Social Contract |
Pragmatic Marketplace
- ___ The concept of the society is based on transition, not integration. The predominant perception is that all workers are replaceable.

Transition | Integration
- ___ While Bedouin mental models are based on the management of scarcity, the post-oil and new technology generations are driven by the attitude that money can solve all problems.

Scarcity Management |
Money solves all problems
- ___ The enormous focus on prosperity and wealth led to the formation of a “new money elite”, which is endangered to transform to a consumer-focused and “fun” society. Shopping activities, cars and parties are some of the constituting elements. This development might lead to a critical lack of willingness to contribute to society.

New Money Elite
- ___ The tribes and clanships are still a determining factor. Tribes differ in importance and power. Maintaining the equilibrium between those tribes is still an important political issue, which ultimately leads to a “qua consensus-model”, because all interests have to be served.

Tribe Equilibrium model
- ___ Dubai is often said to be governed similar to a corporation. If this comparison is accurate, a representative government might be beside the point. However, Dubai Inc. is lacking a healthy “corporate” culture in order to protect and stabilise its inner organisation.

Dubai Inc.
- ___ Return on Investment (ROI) is the primary approach for evaluating projects and initiatives. Consequently, evaluation methods are once again relatively short-term orientated.

Project evaluation



Scenarios and Future Pathways

___ Scenario one: “Bigger, Better, Faster Now”. This scenario elevates the current observations and pursues them into the future. The foundation of people who contribute to a long-term sustainable society is being reduced to a decreasing ratio of local Emirati citizens. Incentive systems cause even more short-term orientated, predominantly male workers to enter the country. Therefore the ratio of local Emirati, relating to the whole population, is reaching single digits. Second generation residents leave Dubai for their country of citizenship¹. The enhanced abundance of prosperity and wealth has a negative impact on the working morale of the younger generation. As a result they lack in willingness to contribute to society. Consequently, out of the small proportion of local Emirati, an even smaller proportion part of the solid foundation for a sustainable society.

“Bigger, Better, Faster
Now”

___ Scenario two: “Prosperity, but Balance”. This scenario implies to change the chosen pathway. The ambition would be to increase the foundation of people who contribute on the longer-term to society. Long-term residents, who exhibit the attitude of contributing to society, are offered a permanent residency, enabling them to grow their families and providing them with the respective benefits. Incentive systems are established to enable potential Arabic and Western expatriates to reside in Dubai over a longer-term, if not their entire life. These incentive systems are cautiously balanced according to a point system. Dubai subsequently becomes a role model of Islamic modernism in the Arabic world, and of cross-culturalism all over the globe.

“Prosperity, but Balance”

¹ An observation which was already articulated by some of the interview partners



Alternatives and Options

The economic-financial crisis can be seen as a blessing in disguise for Dubai. In times of boom people have become used to the ever increasing profits, margins, scale of constructions, and hilarious developments. People did not hear, or pretended not wanting to hear the warnings and concerns issued. Therefore the crisis can have a very positive effect, as it opens a window of opportunity; the opportunity to set the “right” pathway for the future and to make changes where they are essential. This time for change may possibly be limited, as the window of opportunity will draw to a close again; therefore strong and clear decisions are needed.

Financial crisis as an opportunity

On the one hand the overall strategy should foster prosperity and growth, and on the other hand, develop and guarantee a sustainable stable society.

As a result, the guiding question is: What is needed to create a sustainable society?

- ___ Establish and maintain cultural institutions, such as theatres, museums, opera houses and art galleries, for stabilising and protecting society, especially during difficult times and the current financial crisis.
- ___ Nurture the development towards a long-term orientated society.
 - ___ Initiate an “image” transformation for Dubai to attract high potentials and their families for longer-terms, e.g. “Dubai: Multi-cultural haven connecting the world”.
 - ___ Offer citizenship according to a point system, depending on Arabic language proficiency, years of residency, historic cultural test, testimonial giver, etc.
 - ___ Offer retirement residencies for people, who worked and resided in Dubai until their retirement.
 - ___ Instigate an affordable educational system for families who contribute to the society on the long-term.
- ___ Foster Arabisation as part of an identity strategy and as an instrument for cultural understanding and dialogue.
 - ___ Establish incentives for expatriates to learn the Arabic language.



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