

Urbanization and Sustainable Cities in Qatar: The Need for Evidence-Based Urban Policy Agenda

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In the past two decades, Qatar has experienced unprecedentedly rapid urban growth. Ninety-nine per cent of Qatar's population currently live in the cities. The unparalleled speed and tempo of urbanization in Qatar and the exponential scale of urban development process presents formidable challenges for urban policymakers and planners. Important challenges are managing future growth and expansion, maintaining the highest standards and above all promoting wellbeing and the quality of urban life. Implementing evidence-based, informed, and inclusive urban policy decisions is critical for Qatar's urban future. Policy makers and planners need to consider three interrelated dimensions of urban development: sustainability, urban behavior, and wellbeing and quality of urban life. Strong co-ordination among the key urban development stakeholders and a cohesive cross-sectoral engagement strategy to determine people's perceptions of the built environment and quality of life are essential for the success of urban policies in Qatar.

More than half of the global population is now urban, driven by rapid urbanization and the advancing demographic transition.¹ Demographic transition - a phenomenon and a theory - refers to the historical shift from traditional agrarian economic regime of high birth rates and high death rates to a modern industrial economic regime of low birth rates and low death rates.^{2,3} By far, the demographic transition theory is considered as "one of the best-documented generalizations in social science".⁴ Scholars have argued the process of urbanization - the transformation from predominantly rural to predominantly urban population - is both an integral component and an outcome of the demographic transition.⁵ Overall, the process of urbanization is known to be accompanied by modernization and sustained economic growth or vice-versa, with wide ranging implications for urban policy and planning and the sustainability of urban life.

Although Qatar's urbanization process is relatively young with the first substantial urban settlement appearing in the 1940s, like many other countries Qatar experienced unprecedentedly rapid rates of urbanization and urban growth.

Qatar's dramatic economic expansion laid the foundation for the speed and tempo of urbanization. As urban environments are inherently temporal, Doha and its neighborhood cities grew exponentially both horizontally and vertically. While in Europe and elsewhere, the urban transformation process from absolute to abstract space occurred gradually over the centuries, Qatar, particularly, Doha and the neighborhood cities, witnessed a rapid shift from a traditional built environment to modern urban structures because of the oil economic boom and post-colonial ties beginning the 1950s.⁶

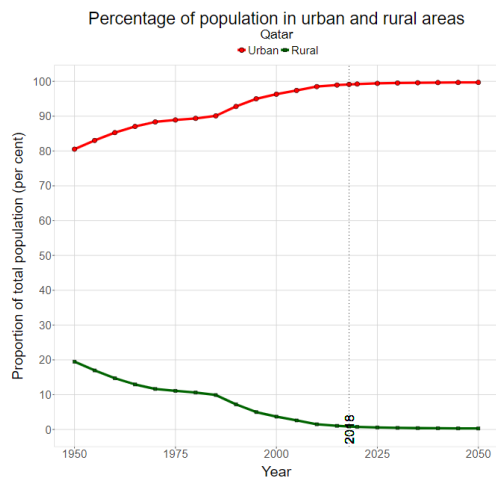
The speed and tempo of urbanization in Qatar are unparalleled, and Qatar's urban development process presents particularly formidable challenge for policymakers and planners. In this policy brief, we a) present an overview of the urban development planning process in Qatar; and b) highlight the need for building new evidence based urban policy agenda.

The speed and tempo of **urbanization** in Qatar are unparalleled, Doha and its neighbourhood cities growing exponentially both **horizontally** and **vertically**.

Urban Development and Planning

Qatar has witnessed dramatic urban development in the last two decades. Ninety-nine per cent of Qatar's population currently live in cities (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Note: Urban and rural population in the current country or area as a percentage of the total population, 1950 to 2050.

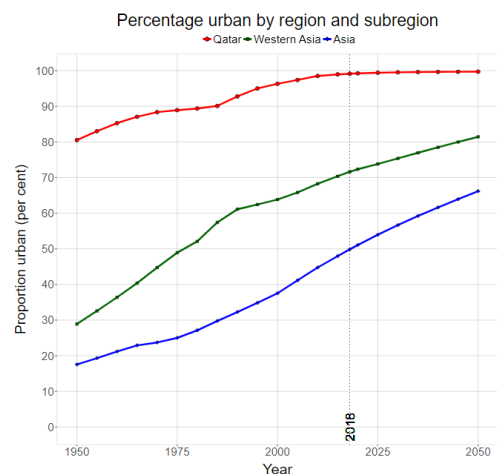
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision.

In relation to this, the Qatari government has set out an ambitious and long-term development plan under the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 to diversify its economy, and build infrastructure related to transport, education, sports, healthcare, telecommunication, and hospitality, both being the key part of this plan.

Guided by this vision and in accordance with its National Development Framework (QNDF), Qatar implemented several flagship infrastructure development projects aimed at reshaping its urban landscape. These include creation of mixed-use in Doha

and neighbourhood cities such as Al Sadd, Suhail, Msheireb Downtown, Education City, Katara; a multimodal transport system, which includes the Doha Metro, and the transit-oriented development (TOD) and many more. These major projects have contributed to reshaping Qatar's current urban landscape and immensely supported the rapidly expanding population and the standards of living. The country has also demonstrated a resilient economic model even in times of weaker oil prices, further consolidating its strategy of economic diversification.⁷ However, the more important challenges are managing future growth and expansion, maintaining the highest standards and above all promoting wellbeing and quality of urban life. This is even more important when, compared to other countries in Asia and Western Asia, Qatar has experienced rapid rates of urbanization and urban growth (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Note: Proportion of urban population in the current country as compared to its subregion and region. The proportion is expressed as a percentage of the total population, 1950 to 2050.

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision.

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The urbanization process is perceived as a fundamental tool for social development and quality of life.

In recognition of these challenges, QNV 2030⁸ has articulated a roadmap indicating how Qatar become an advanced society capable of sustainable development with the goal of providing a high standard of living for all citizens. QNV 2030 also includes a comprehensive urban development plan for Qatar that adopts a sustainable policy with regards to urban expansion and population distribution. In addition, QNV 2030 is built on five guiding principles: human, social, economic, and environmental development.

These are laudable initiatives in line with QNV 2030 regarding urban policy and planning for Qatar. However, historically, urbanization process has been seen as a more fundamental tool for social development and quality of life.⁵ This is because, in general, urban population have higher rates of literacy, lower rates of fertility and mortality, more economic opportunities and mobility, access to health care and modern technology. However, scholars, urban planners, and social scientists have argued that twenty-first century's urban planning must center around a strategy to increase dependence on public transportation, create liveable cities, reduce per capita household expenditure, land-use inefficiencies and urban sprawl.⁹ While creating a more sustainable and improved urban infrastructure is critical for urban quality of life, promoting the highest standards of multidimensional wellbeing consistent with peoples perceived satisfaction is the new norm in urban policy and planning. Qatar faces imminent urban policy challenges in integrating urban quality of life if its economic visions of developing international service hubs are to be achieved. In urban policy planning, social development agenda need to be integrated into articulating and implementing evidence-based urban policy agenda. QNV 2030 seeks to 1) advance social

development agenda focusing on: educational, employment and career opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their background or gender; 2) promote principles of equality; 3) provide high quality service to meet the needs and desires of people; and 4) enhance women's capacities and empower them to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles.

Need for Evidence Based Urban Policy Agenda

Qatar's last two decades of rapid urbanization development and expansion present pressing policy challenges. Policy makers and planners are called upon to consider three interrelated dimensions of urban development: sustainability, urban behaviour and, wellbeing and quality of urban life. Evidence based, informed and inclusive urban policy decisions are fundamental for Qatar's urban future. A policy vision is needed actualize the favourable transformation of cities for future generations.

There is a need for urban planning process to recognise and establish a mechanism for continuous integration of evidence based urban behaviour research outcomes in the urban planning policy process. Involving researchers to seek answers to questions about how people live, work, play and socialize in each settlement area is an important step in guiding more orderly and harmonious development in Qatar's urban neighbourhoods.¹⁰ The UN SDGs and the UN-Habitat's "New Urban Agenda" provides a benchmark for an urban policy agenda. Qatar's current urban development potential and the way forward for a sustainable and intelligent Doha requires novel policy direction and action.

Urban policy makers need to rely on evidence-based research in integrating the multi-dimensional characteristics of urban sustainability, quality of urban life and wellbeing. Understanding the close nexus between sustainability, urban behaviour and quality of life provides a mechanism to observe how policy makers can consider quality of life dimensions when designing and implementing policies for housing settlement, infrastructure development, transport system, common good resources, and social amenities.

Robust research evidence is also necessary to demonstrate how research findings can aid decision-makers to better monitor and address quality of life, and wellbeing issues to secure public acceptance and promote user behaviour change. Climate and health remain a major concern and therefore illustrative models of urban environment behavioural research need to be incorporated into urban policy and planning.

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Policy Recommendations

1. Qatar's urban policy and planning process needs to consider UN SDGs and UN-Habitat's "New Urban Agenda" as the new benchmark for urban policy agenda.
2. New urban policy agenda must consider evidence-based research in integrating the multi-dimensional characteristics of urban sustainability, quality of urban life and human wellbeing.
3. Involving researchers to seek answers to questions about how people live, work, play and socialize is an important step in guiding more orderly, harmonious development in Qatar's urban neighbourhoods.
4. A cohesive cross-sectoral engagement strategy to determine people perceptions of the built environment, and quality of life is essential for the success of urban policy in Qatar.