



Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times

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Youth Focus Group (Arabic)

Held on February 24, 2021, via Zoom under Chatham House Rules.

Participants included ten (seven female and three male) Kuwait based students from private and public schools.

On February 24, 2021 the “Sustaining Kuwait in Unsustainable Times” research group at the London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre brought together ten high school students in Kuwait for an open discussion around the central question of the project - “What do Kuwaitis (both citizens and non-citizens) think about, and how do they experience, climate change?” (Full outline of the project, which is part of the LSE Kuwait programme available [here](#)). This Arabic-language focus group was led by Abrar Alshammari and chaired by Deen Sharp, and Kanwal Abdulhameed also assisted in directing the conversation. Participants included 7 female students and 3 male students (including Kuwaiti citizens and non-Kuwaiti citizens) aged 13-17, drawn primarily from various public schools in Kuwait with two from private schools.

Generation Gap, and Experiences of Climate Change

To start the session Deen Sharp explained to the students that in our preliminary research for this project a number of interviewees had cited a generational divide in relation to the issue of climate change. When queried about this assumption by Abrar Alshammari, the majority of participants concurred, pointing out that first, their generation is experiencing the effects of climate change more rapidly and more immediately than their parents’ generation did. They cited experiencing heavy rains in Kuwait that damaged infrastructure, which, some noted, was not built to endure the level of heavy rains that has become more common in recent years. Second, they noticed widespread cases of health issues among their peers such as asthma and breathing irregularities, which become further aggravated by bad weather conditions such as dust storms, which have also grown more common and more severe in recent years. Some attributed these health issues to the environmental impacts of the first Gulf War and Iraqi forces setting fire to Kuwaiti oil wells. Participants added that this has also impacted temperatures, climate, and the ocean across the region, and not just in Kuwait. They expressed a belief that the effects of this environmental catastrophe are ongoing until the present moment.

Considering the reasons behind this generational divide, the participants also alluded to their processes of gaining knowledge; they shared that they rely on social media more than

mainstream media (traditional newspapers and TV) due to the belief that traditional media content tends to ignore issues such as climate change. Through their exposure to social media, they described awareness of how other countries around the world are tackling the issue of climate change, and asked why Kuwait is not addressing it as seriously as others are. One participant shared a conversation with her aunts, in which she inquired how it was possible that people in Kuwait prior to independence used to sleep on rooftops, when ‘the weather in Kuwait is so hot’. Her aunts explained that the weather in Kuwait was not as hot as it is now, and her aunts said that the current high temperatures are a result of global warming.

Awareness and Education

The majority of participants emphasized that their lived experiences and exposure to social media content were the primary sources for learning about climate change. Almost all participants criticized their school curriculums for neglecting discussions on contemporary environmental challenges, with the exception of one student (from a private school) who said he learned about issues of climate change in school, but from an economic perspective- which he did not think was enough. ‘It doesn’t make the student want to go and make a change’, he explained. Others had directly questioned their teachers about the absence of this issue in the education curriculum, and reported receiving the answer of ‘they don’t care’. Another participant asked, “Why don’t they care? We are on social media, we are exposed to a lot, and our curriculums don’t help us learn more about these issues.”

One participant shared that he found there were limited online resources in Arabic discussing the problem of climate change. Given his own fluency in both Arabic and English, he described reading American magazines and watching documentaries in English to educate himself about climate change. He critiqued Kuwaiti magazines, newspapers, and television for having insufficient information around this issue, which he sees as having pressing consequences not only for Kuwait, but for the world.

Some participants shared specific examples of social media content that left a deep impact on their understanding and perception of climate change. One referenced the example of the campaign by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, its viral spread and emotional fear of what was in

store for the future of the planet. Others referenced Instagram accounts promoting vegan lifestyles as a potential solution to mitigating the effects of climate change and global warming. ‘When I ask vegetarians why they are vegetarians, they don’t limit their answers to their love for animals, they also mention that it’s out of a sense of responsibility to our planet and to future generations. Cutting down trees and consumption of meat is contributing to and aggravating issue of climate change a lot.’

Another participant pointed out that in Kuwait, walking is rarely a means of transportation, and most people still rely on the use of cars; she gave the example of a local campaign, Kuwait Commute, which aims to raise awareness and encourage the use of group transportation via buses/public transportation instead of cars.

What is to be Done?

When discussing national priorities and ways of moving forward, there was general consensus that climate change should be a national priority. One participant emphasized the need to raise awareness around ecosystems of wildlife, ocean life and plants in Kuwait, as well as the effect of pollution and littering on these ecosystems. The same participant also emphasized the need to transition towards renewable energy, with another participant expressing his concern about the fact that the only national resource and source of revenue in Kuwait is oil, which is vulnerable to fluctuating prices. Another participant pointed out that these issues of environmental challenges and pollution affect the economy as well as attraction of tourists.

Some participants raised issues that they believe should be made national priorities, citing racism, the plight of Kuwait’s stateless community and lack of access to basic human rights. One female participant pointed out that “honor crimes” are still legal in the Kuwaiti justice system, and that the feminist movement in Kuwait faces a class struggle that makes it difficult to 'unite to address the mutual cause, or make sure to include the community affected by these issues as well as those who are activists but haven’t been impacted by them'. Her belief was that these issues of statelessness and violence against women are more pressing priorities than climate change.

Others connected the issue of climate change to other public concerns, saying that they are intertwined and affect one another. The example given was that 'corruption leads to weak administration, and this affects environmental and health entities and their performance'. They suggested that a top-down approach in which high-level priorities are addressed first would lead to a more efficient approach in resolving mid-level priorities.

Finally, the issue of education was raised once more, with participants arguing that if poor quality education is solved, other issues would be resolved as well. In the opinion of the participants, education could instill a culture of environmental awareness and a culture of public transportation. One participant stated, 'I do think climate change should be a priority issue, as we are already experiencing its effects. It is easier to address it now than to wait until it's too big to control in ten years time.'