

Enhancing Urban Regeneration and Encouraging Community Participation: Insights from the UAE

Wael Sheta¹

¹The British University in Dubai
Dubai International Academic City, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
wael.sheta@buid.ac.ae

Abstract - Urban regeneration is an integrated approach that requires the cooperation of specialists from numerous professions, as well as the active participation of the community. Urban regeneration entails not just restoring the energy of declining urban neighborhoods, but also making them more sustainable and environmentally friendly. The rehabilitation of cities initiatives should be based on human-centred programs that promote long-term regeneration of places within the context of sustainable urban expansion. The framework for enhancing regeneration in cities emphasizes the importance of Community Capacity Building (CCB), which aims to empower all members of the community. The study focuses at the Al-Karama neighborhood, which is one of Dubai's oldest urban communities and has undergone many rounds of rehabilitation. The study demonstrates the survey findings for a focus group of residents in order to get their perspective on the rehabilitation projects and context of sustainable urban spaces in their neighborhood. This study aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations to policymakers, urban planners, and community stakeholders by delving into the socio-cultural context and analyzing existing urban development strategies and community engagement frameworks. This study suggests that innovative and impactful approaches to enhance urban regeneration include cultivating cooperation with and inclusiveness sustainable strategies, community involvement, investigating underutilized land resources, and improving urban environment quality. Through a comprehensive exploration of urban regeneration dynamics and community participation mechanisms, this study aspires to offer actionable recommendations and innovative approaches to shape the future trajectory of urban development in the UAE and inspire transformative change on a global scale.

Keywords: Urban regeneration, Community participation, Community Capacity Building, Dubai, UAE

1. Introduction

Urban regeneration stands as a pivotal process in establishing the present context of cities, especially in rapidly shifting regions such as the United Arab Emirates. With rising urbanization and the resulting difficulties of sustainability, livability, and social cohesion, the UAE's urban areas are at a crossroads. In response, the notion of urban regeneration has gained popularity as a way of regenerating urban settings, promoting economic development, and improving inhabitants' general quality of life [1]. The urban evolution of the UAE serves as a symbol of its swift transition from arid regions to thriving metropolises, distinguished by iconic skyscrapers, cutting-edge infrastructure, and dynamic localities. Nevertheless, in addition to the notable advancements, pockets of urban deterioration, social inequalities, and environmental stresses have surfaced, emphasizing the critical need for measured interventions in urban regeneration. Given the circumstances, it becomes critical for both academic inquiry and practical application to comprehend the processes that propel prosperous urban renewal endeavors while promoting active participation from the community [2]. Hence, it has become essential to include the community in the regeneration process. Community involvement plays an essential role in regeneration projects. People who reside in the revitalized area are the primary stakeholders, and their input and engagement have significance [3]. This study seeks to investigate the dynamics of urban regeneration in the UAE, with a specific emphasis on increasing community engagement. The study is part of a larger initiative aimed at exploring the UAE's unique socio-cultural, and urban development. The primary goal of this study is to explore and evaluate residents' responses to their neighborhood and local environment. The study's goal is to understand the tactics, problems, and results related with attempts to regenerate urban environments and empower local communities. Furthermore, it aspires to elicit significant insights and lessons that may be applied to urban planning practices, policy formation, and community development projects not just in the UAE but also in other urban environments throughout the world.

2. Urban regeneration in Dubai

Urban regeneration in Dubai has sparked interest and investigation from different standpoints. [4] discussed regeneration of cities and building retrofit as strategies for creating an entrepreneurial culture in Dubai, pointing out the importance of urban regeneration in fostering innovative policies and promoting entrepreneurship in Dubai's built environment. [5] analyzed city branding, sustainable urban growth, and the rentier state. highlighted how Dubai portrays itself in the era of post-oil and global warming, focusing on its economic diversification and urban growth ambitions. [6] investigated how Dubai markets itself via sustainable sport events, as well as citizens' impressions of sustainability practices in these events. Gave insights on the relevance of sustainable sport events in Dubai's branding initiatives and the necessity of engaging locals in sustainability practices. Master planning and the changing urban model of Gulf cities, including Dubai, were explored by [7], evaluated the concepts, policies, and practices for the transition to sustainable urbanism in Dubai, stressing the city's commitment to sustainability and development as a sustainable city. [8] addressed Dubai's contemporary heritage and its significance in defining the city's character. Dubai's constant regeneration and growth in numerous industries, including historical preservation and tourism, were stated. [9] assessed residential sustainability in Sharjah City's old neighborhoods, which is significant to the larger context of UAE regeneration. Dubai's sustainable city was praised as an example of green transit and car-free neighborhoods. [10] reviewed sustainable city indicators in contemporary design, including a comparative research in the United Arab Emirates. Although not particular to Dubai, it provides insights into UAE sustainability measures that may be applicable to Dubai regeneration activities. In the context of Dubai, one can say that urban regeneration is a key to the city's continued status as a worldwide center for commerce, tourism, and innovation, with its fast expansion and development, Dubai must constantly revitalize its urban areas in order to fulfil the changing demands and ambitions of its citizens and visitors.

3. Capacity building for community members

Community capacity building (CCB) aims to empower all members of the community, especially those who are least fortunate and most disadvantaged, to acquire skills and competences that will allow them to take more responsibility of their own lives, while also contributing to inclusive local development. Guiding principles are vital in assisting practitioners in determining how practice should be conceptualized and carried out. These principles are encouraging community participation while emphasizing inter-ethnic-racial relations; adopt and foster community spirit as a central goal; systematically incorporate intergenerational activities into interventions; implement inter-organizational (formal and informal) collaborative goals; emphasize grassroots funding when possible [11]. Many scholars were intrigued by community capacity building due to its direct correlation with urban regeneration. [12] emphasized capacity building for sustainable development, underlining the significance of local and global initiatives aimed at improving institutional capacity. The attempts to revitalize public housing and foster economic and social variety among inhabitants were front and center as [13] discussed the difficulties of planning for diversity in the context of modern urbanism. The relevance of stakeholder participation and capacity development in guiding sustainability transformations is made explicit in [1] assessment of South Korean cities' transformational capability for sustainable regeneration. [14] investigated the influence of urban regeneration megaprojects on inhabitants' quality of life, focusing on the aims of physical and functional regeneration and resident well-being. The focus of housing restoration programmes has shifted from just residential construction to include the creation of walkable, mixed-use communities, as discussed by [15]. [16] looks at global and local changes along the waterfront of a port city, focusing on how cities can develop comprehensive strategies to address challenges and empower residents in the process of urban regeneration in the past and future redevelopment. As seen in Figure 1, capacity building for community inhabitants is an ongoing process that should include involvement in urban regeneration. Authorities must accept the voice and agency of community members as key players in their own development process, as well as their entitlement to communicate with development partners and authorities as co-producers of any intervention, as a core premises of participation.



Fig. 1: Diagram of increasing community engagement, after [17].

4. Al-Karama – A case study from Dubai

Al Karama is part of “old Dubai”. Karama means dignity in English and, in 1968, there was the Battle of Karamah (Battle of Dignity in English) between Arabs and Israelis, which took place in a village in Jordan named Karamah. Al Karama was built between the 1960s and 1980s, firstly as a low-cost residential area for locals in the 1960s [18]. When tens of thousands of Omanis were displaced from Zanzibar in the 1960’s, leaving them stateless and homeless, the late Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum offered 8,000 of them sanctuary in Karama in the Sheikh Rashid Colony (also known as the Hamdan Colony), which was built in 1978 [18], [19]. In the early 1980s, many locals left Karama which developed into a low-income area made up of predominantly public housing schemes [20]. The latest record of Karama’s population is 76,491 and is composed of mainly South Asian, Filipino, Iranian, Lebanese, and European expatriates [18], [21]. There was a lack of more recent academic publications pertaining to the social life of Karama, however, based on grey literature and a desk-based exploration of the area using Google Maps and Google Earth by the author, Elsheshtawy’s depiction of the neighbourhoods seems accurate to this day. Karama is now one of Dubai’s most densely populated neighbourhoods as it houses many immigrants. Karama was still known as a low-income neighbourhood in 2015 [22]. A more recent indicator of this is rent price. In 2018, the lowest rents in Dubai could be found in Karama; as low as 6800 USD/year [23]. Figure 2 shows snapshots from the neighborhood combined with the neighborhood master plan.



Fig. 2: Snapshots from the neighborhood combined with the neighborhood master plan.

5. Methodology

This study is a part of large project aiming to provide proposals for developing a neighborhood that is more than sustainable, becoming regenerative in every respect in accordance with Dubai 2040's urban master plan and vision for sustainable development. The paper describes a survey conducted with a focus group of locals (a random sample of 30 participants). The purpose of this questionnaire is to better understand the relationship between residents' impressions of open urban areas and their involvement in creating and maintaining them. The primary goal is to examine the utilization of public urban and green spaces as a tool for urban regeneration and improved quality of life. The survey's 34 questions were divided into three sections. The first includes anonymous information about the participant such as age, gender, educational level, country, and length of time living in the neighborhood. The second section includes Likert scale and polarity questions (yes/no questions). Additionally, there are three open-ended questions. The findings of Likert scale questions were interpreted using the mean, standard deviation, and weighted average as described in Eqs. (1), whereas polarity questions were analyzed descriptively.

$$W = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \omega_i X_i}{\sum_{i=1}^n \omega_i} \quad (1)$$

Where: W= weighted average, n= number of terms to be averaged, ω_i = weights applied to x values,
 X_i = data values to be averaged

6. Results and discussion

The findings of the first part of the questionnaire indicated that all participants were non-emirates who lived and worked in the same neighborhood. The majority (70%) were between the ages of 25 and 39, with a high school degree (47%), having permanent employment (87%), and having relocated to the Al-Karama neighborhood during the previous five years (67%). Figure 3 illustrates the Likert scale data analysis, which demonstrates that the majority of respondents seemed to agree that people from diverse backgrounds and cultures interact and socialize. On the contrary, they rarely appear at community events, gatherings, or initiatives that encourage social involvement and cultural exchange in their neighborhood. They walk across their neighborhood many times each week and visit local parks, urban spaces, and recreational places at the same rate. In terms of the most common urban places in the neighborhood for walking, parks and plazas ranked first (65%). The majority believed that the neighborhood's urban open spaces are well-connected and readily accessible on foot, with the closest urban open space/park/recreational area being within a 5-minute walk of their

Table 1: Likert scale questions and the analysis measures.

No.	Questions	WA	Mean ²	SD	Interpretation
9	In my urban neighborhood, people from diverse backgrounds and cultures interact and socialize.	1.8	3.73	1.93	Strongly agree
11	How often do you participate in community events, gatherings, or initiatives that promote social engagement and cultural exchange in your neighborhood?	3.73	15.07	11.33	Rarely
12	How often do you walk in your neighborhood?	2.13	6.27	4.13	Several times a week
14	If there are parks nearby, how often do you visit urban spaces and recreational areas within your neighborhood?	2.27	6.53	4.27	Several times a week
15	Which urban spaces in the neighborhood do you frequently visit for walking? (Check all that apply)	2.02	5.67	3.64	Parks and Plazas
16	Are the urban open spaces in the neighborhood well-connected and easily accessible on foot?	1.37	2.50	1.13	Very accessible
17	How far is the nearest urban open space/park/ recreational area from your home? (show on the map)	1.73	3.80	2.07	Within 5 minutes' walk
20	How accessible are public spaces and recreational facilities in your urban area, encouraging community interaction?	1.80	4.00	2.20	Very Accessible
22	What activities do you engage in when you visit open urban spaces in your neighborhood? (Check all that apply)	2.67	6.40	3.73	Walking - Socializing with friends - Exercising
23	In your opinion, what is the greatest barrier to the community's best possible utilization of public spaces and recreational facilities? (please list it in order from the greatest to least great)	1.83	4.97	3.13	High temperature nearly most of the year + Poor design and planning
26	The availability of parks, recreational areas, and green spaces in my neighborhood encourages a sense of community.	1.87	4.07	2.20	Agree
27	Do you think the availability of urban green spaces in your neighborhood encourages sports, physical activity and a healthier lifestyle?	1.77	3.70	1.93	Strongly agree
28	Do you feel safe walking in the neighborhood, especially at night?	1.47	2.53	1.07	Very safe

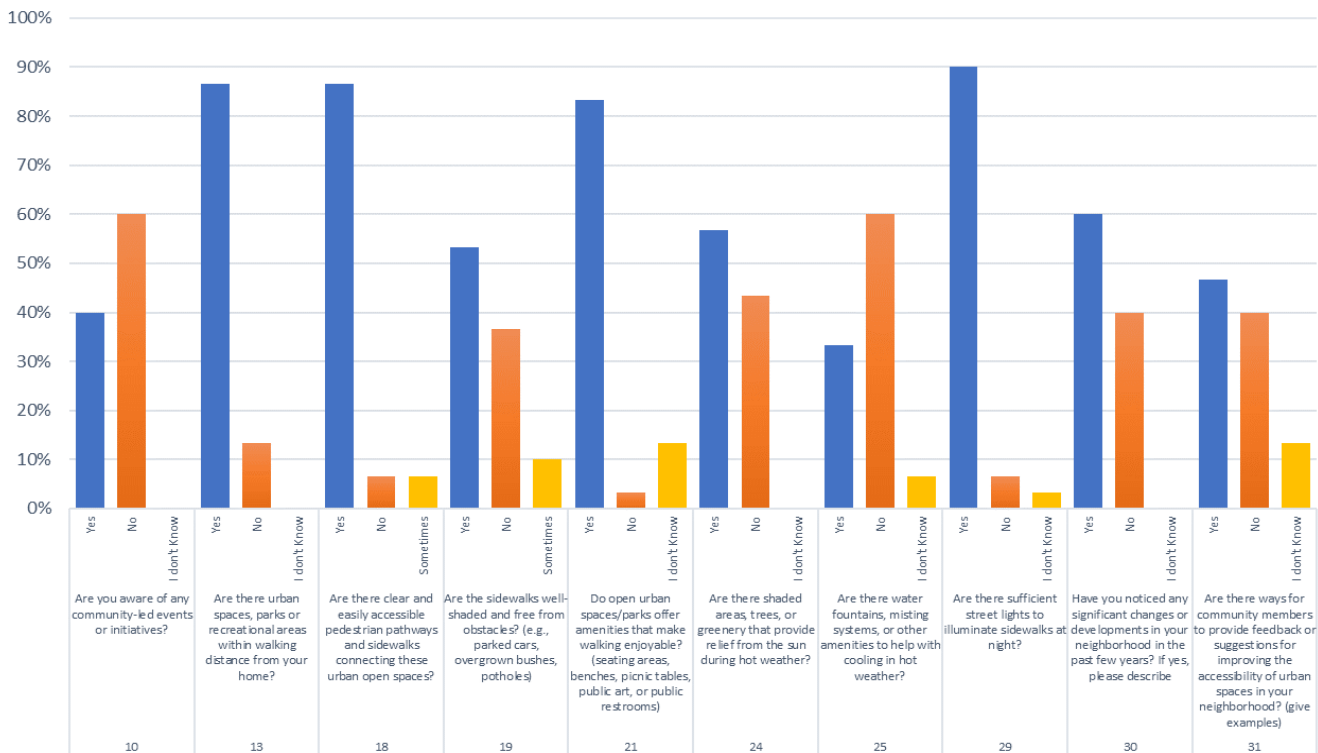


Fig. 4: Polarity data analysis.

The study's results provide weight to the notion that community participation is necessary. Urban public spaces may serve as a model for community activities, gatherings, or initiatives that promote social inclusion and cultural exchange. Furthermore, empowering community members and building community capacity may be an effective method for community members to contribute critiques or recommendations for increasing the accessibility of urban spaces in communities. The results reveal that community members are capable of demonstrating their requirements, suggesting appropriate solutions, and participating in the development process if afforded an opportunity to do so. More research should be conducted in terms of providing shaded areas, increasing vegetation, and incorporating water features to offset the effects of high temperatures that occur most of the year. Authorities, policymakers, and designers ought to involve and encourage community members to participate in the planning and development process in order to create better, more acceptable, and functional areas in cities.

6. Conclusion

The Fundamental aim of this study is to investigate and assess residents' reactions to their neighborhood and surrounding environment. With the implementation of the suggested questionnaire, the study was able to get a deeper understanding of the difficulties and outcomes associated with efforts to regenerate urban environments and empower local communities. Furthermore, the study aimed to elicit major insights and lessons that may be used to urban planning practices, policy formulation, and community development programs not only in the UAE, but also in other urban settings throughout the globe. It is worth noting that involving residents in the planning and decision-making processes ensures that their needs and desires are met, resulting in more successful and inclusive projects. Moreover, the integration of communal spaces and services that are accessible to all residents may strengthen the development's feeling of community. Parks, open urban spaces, and community centers that provide recreational activities and events for people of all ages might be included. Residents are provided opportunity to engage, form relationships, and enhance the social fabric of the community by offering these kinds of activities and spaces. The success of regenerative projects is determined not only by the physical components of the development, but also by the active participation and engagement of the community at large.

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