

Qatar: Changing the way we build

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Every country should make a serious commitment to mitigate the impact of climate change as well as to develop and implement effective climate policies to ensure a more sustainable national development. Planning for climate change today is less expensive than rebuilding an entire network after a catastrophe. In fact, failing to plan for the effects of climate change now will prove to be an expensive mistake in the near future. There is an urgent need to develop a critical response strategy to reduce carbon emissions and address other environmental impacts.

Residential and commercial buildings account for more than a third of total energy use and its associated greenhouse gas emissions in the world. A report by the United Nations Environment Programme and Sustainable Buildings & Construction Initiative (“UNEP-SBCI”) shows that the “huge potential of the building and construction sector for combating climate change remains virtually untapped”. The UNEP-SBCI report further states that greenhouse emissions from buildings worldwide are set to increase sharply over the next 2 decades and a major contributor is the construction industry. The building and construction sector has the largest potential for cutting greenhouse emissions responsible for global warming.

The way we design, build, manage and operate buildings has a major impact on the environment and this planet.

Accountability and Responsibility

Whilst collectively we may proclaim in public that we are conservationists, just because it is in vogue to say so nowadays, yet in our daily lives we continue to make choices which do not reflect this.

Left to their own devices, environmental protection and preservation are not foremost in the agenda of most construction companies and property developers. Maximisation of profits is usually the key criteria and “going green” is perceived as an expensive indulgence. Similarly for the buyers and investors of the end product – they are more concerned with the cost of the product and fiscal returns on their investment. Investing in the future should not just be about financial gain. There must be a balance in life and our focus should shift to investing in environmental management and sustainability for our children and future generation.

Government Impetus

Recognising the compelling need to take positive action, environmentally conscious governments around the world have devised various strategies to encourage the private sector to build and invest in sustainable development. These incentives come in the form of stimulus packages and enactments of distinct legislation and regulations to curtail environmental pollution and damage.

In light of these circumstances, Qatar must be lauded for the emphasis placed in sustainable development in the Qatar National Vision 2030 (“QNV2030”). It highlights Qatar’s determination to be a role model and the green capital, amongst the Middle Eastern countries, in sustainable development and in addressing climate change – showing a firm commitment to combating the alarming decline of our environmental conditions. QNV2030 outlines Qatar’s strategies for balancing economic growth with social and environmental progress.

As a further attestation to its commitment, Qatar has formed the National Committee for Climate Change (“NPCC”) under the Ministry of Environment and it has also strongly supported the establishment of the

Qatar Green Building Council (“QGBC”). Whilst the rest of the world is preoccupied with either economic woes or civil unrest, Qatar remains relatively unscathed and is pressing on with its ambitious development plans. In line with its determination to safeguard the environment, Qatar is seriously looking at implementing various strategies to curb environmental deterioration and reverse its impact. Those responsible for the establishment of the QGBC understand that implementing its mission to encourage green development requires special impetus through Government action.

It is inevitable that the implementation of the policies and strategies developed by these bodies will require either a revamp of existing related legislation or the enactment of new legislation to supplement the existing legislation. The Government of Qatar has a critical role to play in setting regulatory standards and creating incentives for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Specific laws should be enacted on sustainable development, focusing on energy efficiency and greenhouse gas mitigation. In addition, the Government should strengthen and empower the relevant Government agencies and local authorities charged with enforcement of these regulatory standards. Poor enforcement of these new policies, programs and legislation developed and enacted will curtail all the efforts made to mitigate, adapt to and counter climate change.

A carrot and stick approach could be adopted to encourage developers and construction companies to design, develop and build green buildings and infrastructure. Existing environmental laws should be scrutinised and if need be, revamped, to impose more stringent provisions to curb environmental abuses. As mentioned above, enforcement of the laws must also be addressed as it is pointless enacting such laws if implementation is lax.

Certain jurisdictions have already enacted laws to impose levies and penalties on companies which use toxic materials. In fact, incentives are given to encourage the use of non toxic materials and “green building materials”. A green building stimulus package to spur responsible development could include the following incentives:

- Tax exemptions and reductions
- Capital subsidies, grants, subsidised loans, rebates
- Priority in building permit processing and expedited plan review
- Increased Floor-to-Area ratios, which allow a developer to construct more building area than allowed by applicable zoning
- Incentives for procurement and use of recycled materials and building materials which are environmentally friendly
- Publicity and awards given to companies which undertake and promote green projects.

Financial institutions should also be encouraged to participate in green building and infrastructure projects and development. Incentives could be given to financial institutions to provide financing for projects which focus on sustainable development at a more attractive rate than the financing rates given for projects which do not emphasise on sustainable development.

In fact, obtaining the relevant certification for compliance with the green building criteria should be made a material obligation under these financing agreements. Failure to obtain such certification could then trigger a default provision in the financing agreement.

Changing the Way We Think

Being environmentally conscious is not and should no longer be perceived as an expensive indulgence. Making the right choices is a responsibility incumbent on all of us to undertake for the future of this planet. A balance must be achieved between development and preservation of the natural beauty and heritage of this earth. Wanton and reckless development at the price of destroying the environment should no longer be tolerated. Apathy is a luxury we can no longer afford. We can choose to be the caretakers of this earth or its destroyers.

Sustainable development is the way of the future. Opting for this choice of development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [United Nations 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development]. The time for change is now.

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