International Labour Organization

United Arab Emirates

The Employment, Environment, Climate Nexus Factsheet

August 2025

Introduction

The **Employment, Environment, Climate Nexus Factsheets** are a series produced for countries and territories in the Arab States region.[i] This Factsheet provides data on labour market and environmental sustainability performance in United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as on vulnerability to climate change and the potential for green job creation.

- **Country overview:** Like many Gulf States, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s labour market is heavily reliant on foreign workers, who make up over 92 per cent of total employment, particularly in low-skilled occupations. Efforts like Emiratization aim to bolster employment of nationals.
- **Environmental performance:** The UAE has taken significant steps toward environmental protection, with 19.4 per cent of land and 15.9 per cent of marine territory designated as protected areas. Conservation efforts include numerous nature reserves and breeding programs for endangered species like the Arabian Oryx.
- **Climate pledges:** The country remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels but is committed to decarbonization. In its Third Nationally Determined Contribution (2023), the UAE pledged to reduce emissions by 47 per cent by 2035 compared to 2019 levels. It also launched a Net Zero by 2050 strategy and is investing in major solar and nuclear power infrastructure.
- **Climate risk:** Although CO_2 emissions per capita are among the highest in the region (20.3 tCO_2 in 2020), the UAE leads the Arab States on readiness for climate adaptation. Its ND-GAIN Readiness Index score is the region's highest, reflecting strong economic and institutional capacity to implement climate resilience.
- **Data sources** include the ILOSTAT Labour Force Survey (2018), World Bank and UN environmental datasets, EPI (2022), ND-GAIN (2022), IRENA Renewable Energy Employment Database (2024), and the UAE's NDC submissions to the UNFCCC.

Country overview

United Arab Emirates is a country of around 71,020 km^2 located in the Arab States (Figure 1).[ii] With Gross National Income (GNI) of US$ 46,070 per capita in 2022, United Arab Emirates is categorized as high income according to the World Bank income group classification.[iii] Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is estimated to have grown 4 per cent in 2024 and forecast at 5.1 per cent in 2025.[iv] This compares to 2.9 per cent per annum over 2014-2024.

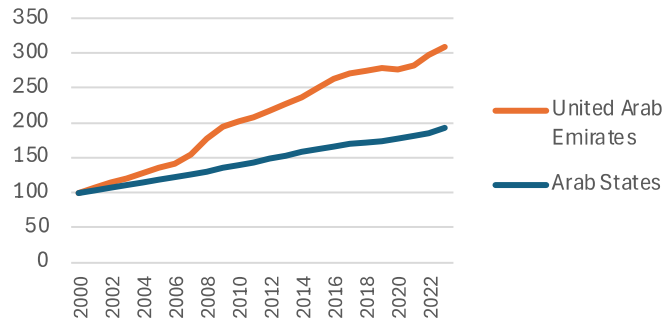
Figure 1. Location of United Arab Emirates



Disclaimer: The boundaries shown on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance by the ILO

The population was estimated at 10.4 million in 2023, representing annual average population growth of 3.2 per cent per annum over the last decade – higher than the regional average (Figure 2).[v] In 2022, a total of 87.5 per cent of the population lived in urban areas.[vi]

Figure 2. Population growth, UAE and Arab States (Index 2000 = 100)

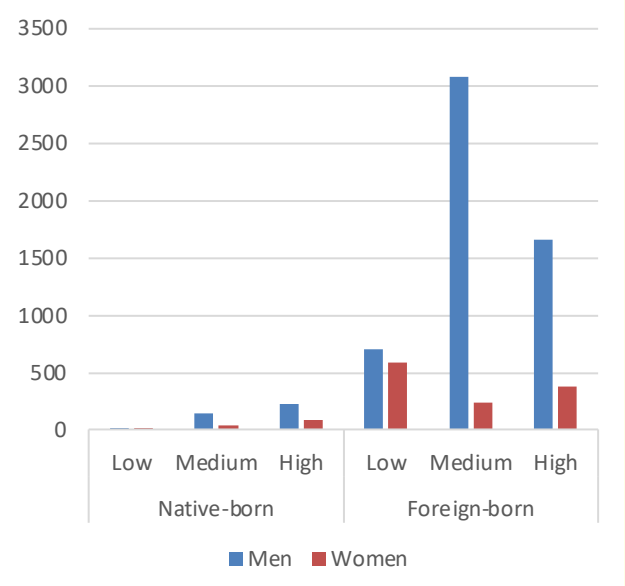


Source: United Nations Population Division's World Population Prospects: 2024 Revision.

Labour market

The labour market in UAE, like many others in the region, is heavily dependent on foreign labour. In 2018, foreign workers accounted for 92.4 per cent of total employment. These foreign workers account for almost all low-skilled jobs (Figure 3), but also many medium and high-skilled jobs. Foreign workers are engaged across sectors, but there is segmentation in the labour whereby national workers are more likely to be in public sector jobs than private sector. A policy of 'Emiratization' is attempting to increase the employment of Emiratis in the private sector, by introducing quotas. This is another example of a policy of localisation that is being applied in multiple countries in the region that are heavily dependent on foreign labour.

Figure 3. Distribution of employment by occupational skill levels, nationals and non-nationals, 2018 (thousands)



Source: Labour force survey, 2018. Accessed via ILOSTAT

The unemployment rate is relatively low at 2.2 per cent in 2023 (1.5 per cent for men and 4.3 per cent for women). But this figure includes migrant workers, which have a low unemployment rate due to the work permit system. Nonetheless, other issues persist in the country, including skills mismatches, particularly new graduates who are unable to find appropriate jobs for their specialisation.[vii] This is particularly problematic for young women graduates.

▶ Environment and climate

Nature and protected areas

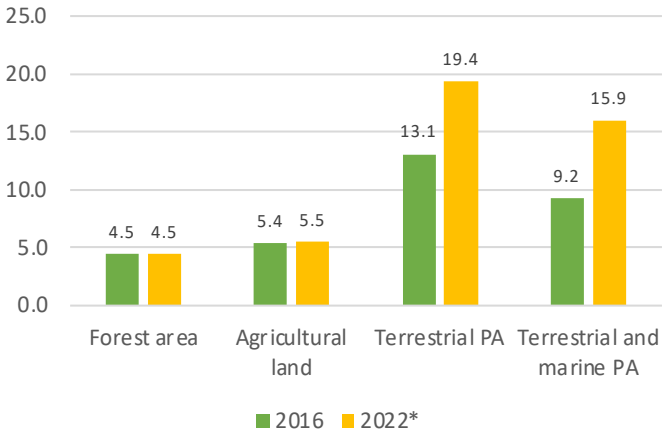
Protected areas are a crucial means of environmental preservation and conservation. In United Arab Emirates, 19.4 per cent of total land area were protected areas in 2022 (Figure 5), compared to 13.1 per cent in 2016.[viii] Terrestrial protected areas in this context are totally or partially protected areas of at least 1,000 hectares that are designated by national authorities as scientific reserves with limited public access, national parks, natural monuments, nature reserves or wildlife sanctuaries, protected landscapes, and areas managed mainly for sustainable use.

The UAE has made significant efforts in land conservation, having already designated 43 protected areas nationwide, with ambition to expand.[ix] Five of these protected areas operate under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlandsx and many are working to breed and reintroduce endangered animals including the Arabian Oryx[xi]. Examples of large and important reserves in the UAE include the Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reservexii (covering 10 per cent of Dubai's land area) and the Yani Bas Island reserve.

Once marine protected areas are incorporated, 15.9 per cent of total territorial area were territorial or marine protected areas (a lower value due to the denominator).[xiii] Marine protected areas in this context refer to areas of intertidal or subtidal terrain--and overlying water and associated flora and fauna and historical and cultural features--that have been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment.

Of UAE's total land area, 5.5 per cent is agricultural land (compared to 7.9 per cent in 2001). Agricultural land in this context refers to the share of land area that is arable, under permanent crops, and under permanent pastures.[xiv]

▶ Figure 4. Forest area, agricultural land, terrestrial and marine protection areas, UAE, 2016 and 2022 (percentage)



*Note: PA = protected area. Terrestrial protected areas (% of total land area); Terrestrial and marine protected areas (% of total territorial area); Forest area (% of land area); Agricultural land (% of land area). *2018-2022 latest available datapoint. Source: World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) accessed via World Development Indicators.*

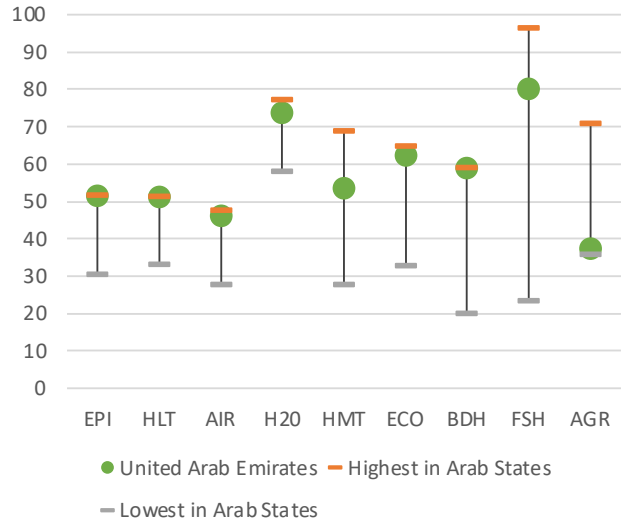
Environmental performance

United Arab Emirates ranks 54th of 180 countries in the latest Environmental Performance Index (EPI), 2022 – where top ranking means the best environmental performance.[xv] The EPI assesses countries on 40 different performance indicators and ranks them according to their national efforts towards environmental health, ecosystem vitality and climate change mitigation.

According to the assessment criteria, United Arab Emirates scores 51.6 points on a scale of 0-100 (where 0 is worst and 100 best performing). For reference, the highest-ranking countries globally were in Europe, and included Estonia, Luxembourg, Finland and Germany, with scores of over 70. At the lower end it included Viet Nam, Pakistan, Lao PDR and Myanmar, with scores of below 30. For the Arab States, United Arab Emirates had the highest rank of the nine countries or territories with available data, with a score of 51.6. The lowest ranked was Iraq with a score of 30.3.

Figure 5 shows a selection of indicators for United Arab Emirates and how it compares to the highest and lowest scores for the Arab States, thereby allowing a gauge of where the country performs better or worse in relative terms.

▶ Figure 5. Environmental performance index and selected indicators, United Arab Emirates and Arab States, 2022



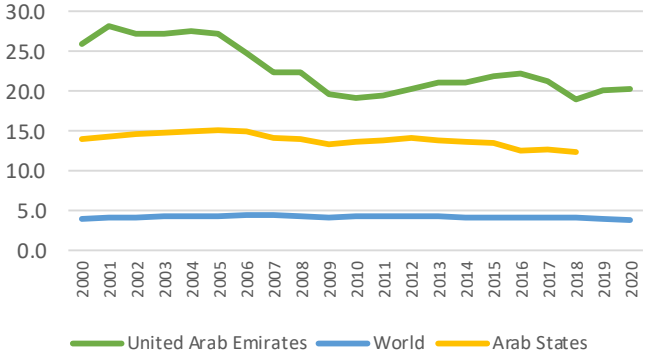
Note: EPI = Environmental Protection Index; HLT = Environmental health; AIR = Air quality; H20 = Sanitation and drinking water; HMT = Heavy metals; ECO = Ecosystem vitality; BDH = Biodiversity and habitat; FSH = Fisheries; AGR = Agriculture. Score 0 (worst) – 100 (best). Values of zero reflect absent data and are not included in the highs and lows. Source: EPI Score 2022. Available at: https://epi.yale.edu/downloads [20 March 2025]

CO2 emissions and decarbonization

The carbon dioxide (CO2) emission levels for United Arab Emirates were estimated at 188,089 kt in 2020.[xvi] This marks a significant increase from 84,729 kt in 2002, representing annual average growth in CO2 emissions of 3.6 per cent from 2000-2022. While total CO2 emissions are largely related to the size of the economy, a per-capita metric serves as a relative measure for comparing countries (Figure 6). In 2020, the unweighted average across countries in the Arab States region was estimated at 12.4 metric tonnes per capita. In United Arab Emirates it was estimated at 20.3 metric tonnes per capita for the same year, more than twice the regional average.

The United Arab Emirates submitted its Third Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) in November 2024, committing to achieving a 47 per cent reduction in GHG emissions by 2035, compared to 2019 levels. This means, reducing GHG emissions to 103.5 $MtCO_2e$, compared to the baseline levels of 196.3 $MtCO_2e$ levels.[xvii]

▶ Figure 6. CO2 emissions, 2000-2020, United Arab Emirates, Arab States and World, (metric tonnes per capita)

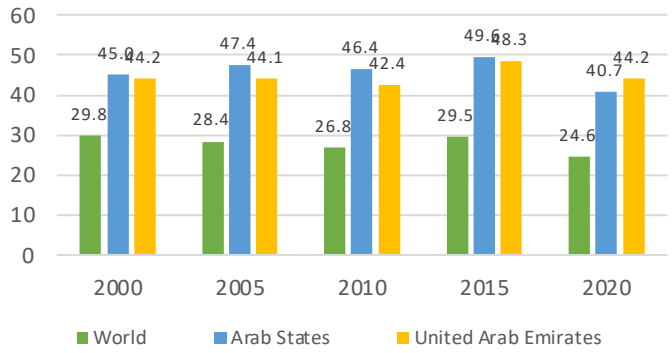


Note: Arab States and World are unweighted averages. Source: Climate Watch. 2024. GHG Emissions. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute [20 March 2025].

Air quality

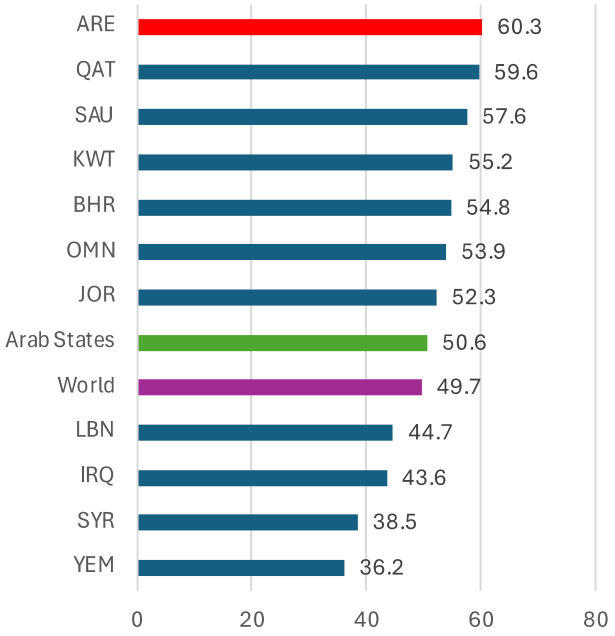
The level of PM2.5 (atmospheric particulate matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres) emissions for United Arab Emirates is estimated at 44.2 (micrograms per cubic metre) in 2020, compared to 44.2 in 2000 (Figure 7).[xviii] It is more than double an unweighted average across countries in the Arab States of 40.7 in 2020. Notably, the World Health Organization's Air Quality Guideline threshold level emission is stated at 10 micrograms per cubic metre. The percentage of the population exposed to ambient concentrations of PM2.5 that exceed the WHO guideline (the lower end of the range of concentrations over which adverse health effects due to PM2.5 exposure have been observed) has been estimated at 100 per cent for United Arab Emirates for all years with available data since 2000.

▶ Figure 7. Air quality PM 2.5 emissions, 2000-2019, United Arab Emirates, Arab States and World (micrograms per cubic metre)



Note: Regional averages are unweighted averages. Source: Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network. 2021. Global Burden Study 2019.) Air Pollution Exposure Estimates 1990-2019 [20 March 2025].

▶ Figure 8. ND GAIN Index, United Arab Emirates, Arab States and World, 2022



Note: Arab States and World are unweighted averages. ISO country codes are used, which depict UAE as ARE. Source: ND-GAIN Country Index. No data available for PSE. Available at: https://gain.nd.edu [20 March 2025]

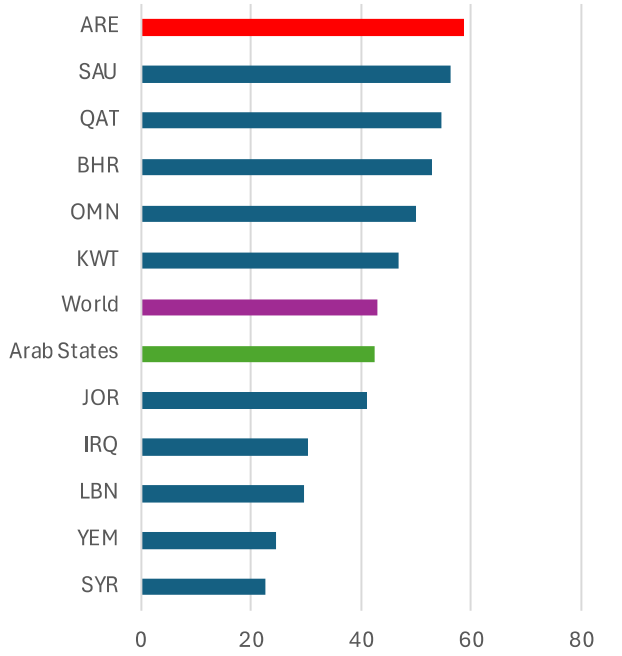
▶ Vulnerability to climate change

The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index (ND GAIN) considers vulnerability to climate change and related global challenges as well as resiliency and preparedness.[xix] As shown in Figure 8, the UAE ranks amongst the best in the Arab States, which means it has the lowest risk to climate change of the Arab States.

The risk score (where 100 denotes lower risk, and 0 highest risk) is higher than Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. With a score of 60.3, it scores considerably better than the Arab States average. The score represents a mix of vulnerability to climate change and readiness to adapt.

The ND GAIN index evaluates the readiness and the vulnerability of countries. The readiness factor of the ND GAIN index (see Figure 9), which refers to the 'ability to leverage investments and convert them to adaptation actions' is assessed in terms of economic readiness, governance readiness and social readiness and their ability to enhance the application and mobility of investment to promote adaptation. Economic readiness captures the ability of a country's business environment to accept investment that could be applied to adaptation that reduces vulnerability (reduces sensitivity and improves adaptive capacity). Governance readiness reflects the institutional factors that enhance the application of adaptation investments. Social readiness indicates the social factors that enhance the mobility of investment and promote adaptation actions. In this regard, the UAE still ranks again the highest of the region (Figure 9). Suggesting appropriate economic, governance, and social readiness factors in place to facilitate climate change mitigation.

▶ Figure 9. ND GAIN Readiness Index, United Arab Emirates, Arab States and World, 2022

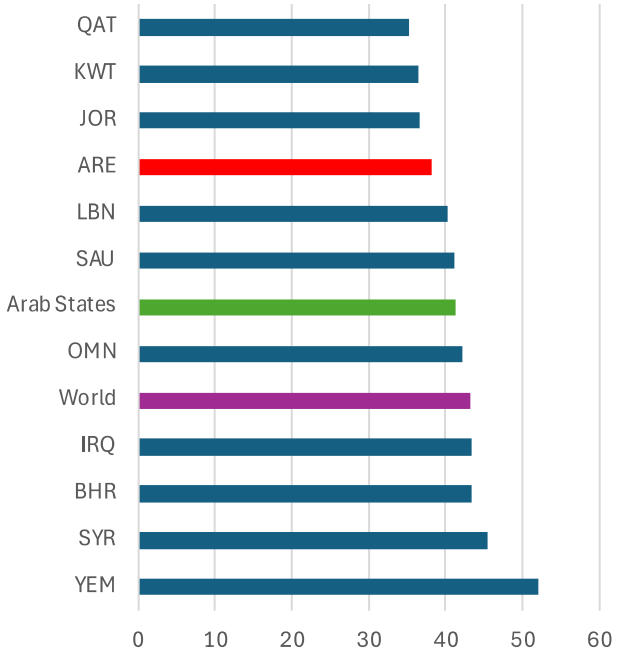


Note: Arab States and World are unweighted averages. Source: ND-GAIN Country Index. No data available for PSE. Available at: https://gain.nd.edu [20 March 2025]

The relative high readiness score reflects the country's high-income status and relatively high GDP. Other factors including the provision of basic services are widely available, reducing the impact even on vulnerable populations. Almost all of the population had access to at least basic sanitation services in 2022, basic drinking water services, access to electricity and access to clean fuels and technologies for cooking.[xx]

The **vulnerability** components of the ND GAIN index looks at 'exposure, sensitivity and capacity to adapt to the negative effects of climate change' (see Figure 10). Accordingly, this is analyzed based on three dimensions: i) Exposure - the degree to which a system is exposed to significant climate change from a biophysical perspective, capturing the physical factors external to the system that contribute to vulnerability; ii) Sensitivity - the extent to which a sector is affected by climate-related hazards; and iii) Adaptive Capacity - the ability of a sector to cope with or adapt to the impacts of climate change.

▶ Figure 10. ND GAIN Vulnerability Index, United Arab Emirates, Arab States and World, 2022

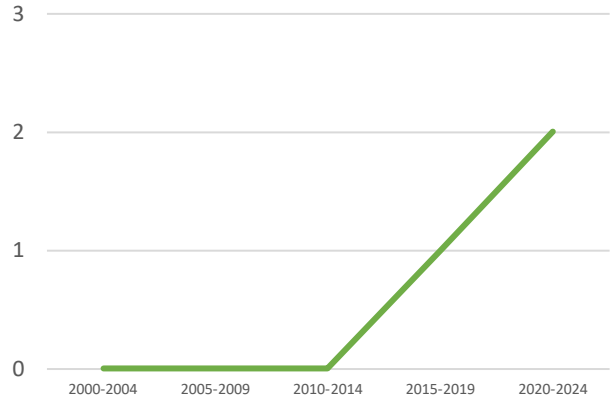


Note: Arab States and World are unweighted averages. Source: ND-GAIN Country Index. No data available for PSE. Available at: https://gain.nd.edu [20 March 2025]

In terms of vulnerability, the UAE ranks relatively low risk relative to other countries in the Arab States region (Figure 10). Despite this, there have been climate-change related natural disasters in the UAE including flash floods and extreme heat (Figure 11).

The Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC) describes the UAE as being situated in a region "extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as warmer weather, less precipitation, droughts, higher sea levels and increased frequency of dust and sand storms".[xxi] As a result, the UAE is investing heavily in climate resilience measures, including in desalination plants and dams (under its 2036 Water Security Strategy[xxii]) and flood defenses.

▶ Figure 11. Number of natural disasters, per 5-year period, United Arab Emirates, 2000-2024

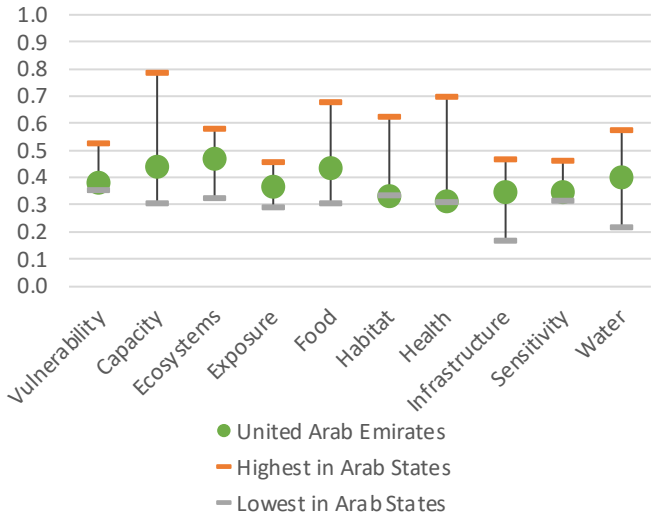


Source: ILO compilation using EM-DAT. Available at: https://www.emdat.be [25 March 2025]

The UAE has also had strict legislation in place for over a decade to protect workers at risk of extreme heat stress, focused on a 'midday work ban' during peak hours between mid June and mid September[xxiii].

Figure 12 provides other comparisons of how the country fares relative to other countries and territories in the Arab States region with respect to different composite indicators of the vulnerability component of the index. For instance, it shows that for ecosystems – i.e. that which provides the natural capital upon which human society builds its economy and social system and include natural resources that are at the foundation of all almost all product value chains – United Arab Emirates has a score of 0.47, relative to highs (least vulnerable) in the region of 0.58 and lows of 0.32. Shifting geoclimes due to changed temperature and precipitation cause stress within ecosystems unable to respond as quickly as these shifts require.xxiv

▶ Figure 12. Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index, Vulnerability and composite indicators, 2023, United Arab Emirates and Arab States (index score)



Note: Arab States is an unweighted average. Source: ND-GAIN Country Index. Available at: https://gain.nd.edu [20 March 2025]

▶ Climate policies and plans

Despite a current heavy reliance on hydrocarbons, the UAE has pledged a strong commitment to its green transition and to diversifying its energy mix. In 2024, the country was among the first to submit their third Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) as part of its commitment to the Paris Agreement, in which it pledged to reduce emissions by 47 per cent by 2035[xxv]. In the third NDC update in 2023, this ambition was increased to plan for a 40 per cent reduction by 2030 compared to baseline[xxvi]. The UAE's 'Net Zero by 2050' initiative outlines how the nation will make transformational changes in the coming decades to meet the country's climate change commitments. To facilitate this plan, the work has focused on core 'enablers', relating to climate finance mechanisms, upskilling and technology development supported by research and development R&D.

The UAE has made significant progress in green financing and has become a key player in the global green bond market, launching a Sovereign Green Bond Program[xxvii] to fund sustainable development projects, with plans laid out in its 2021-2031 Sustainable Finance Framework[xxviii]. The nation has continued to establish

itself as a regional leader in the issuance of green bonds, with the equivalent of $8.7 billion issued in 2023 - a doubling on the previous year and the largest amount issued worldwide after China[xxix]. Beyond the funding of solar and nuclear projects, these bonds are also being used to fund hydrogen sector investments.

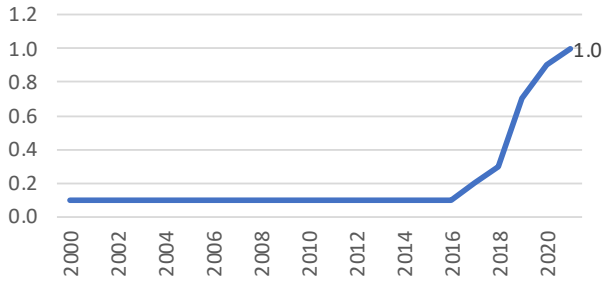
▶ Jobs in renewable energy

Oil and gas continue to be central to the UAE's economy, making up 47 per cent of its GDP in 2023.[xxx] The UAE's state-run energy sector remains a significant driver of wealth, with oil revenues underpinning much of the country's infrastructure and development: in 2023 revenue from hydrocarbons accounted for about 40 per cent of export revenue and 55 per cent of government revenue.[xxxi]

There is a lack of available data on renewable energy generation in the UAE. Estimates suggest that only around 1 per cent of energy consumption in the country is from renewable sources (Figure 13).[xxxii] There is a lack of information from the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) on the sources of renewable energy generated, but other sources do shed light on the main sources of renewable energy.

The country is investing heavily in renewable energy, for example in the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park. This is already the world's largest single-site solar generation facility and, once planned expansions are completed, is expected to save 6.5 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually by 2030[xxxiii]. The UAE is also developing nuclear energy capacity. Opened in 2020, the Barakah Nuclear Power Plant is now the largest electricity generator in the UAE, providing 25 per cent of the country's electricity.[xxxiv]

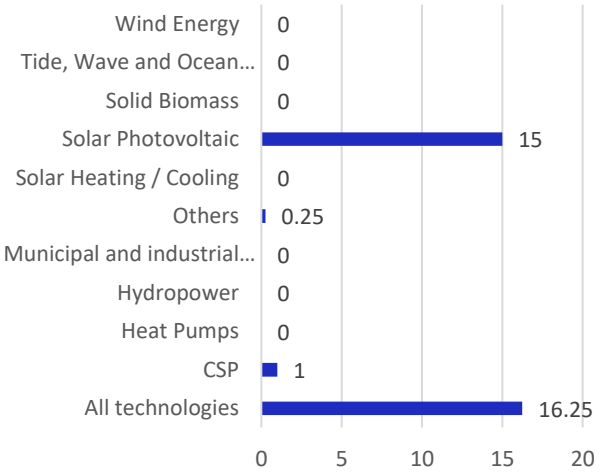
▶ Figure 13. Total renewable energy generation (GWh), 2001-2021



Source: ILO compilation using IRENA Renewable Energy Statistics 2025. Available at: https://www.irena.org/Data [20 March 2025]

According to estimates by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), 16,250 people in the UAE employed in the renewable energy sector in 2023. 'Solar Photovoltaic' accounted for the highest share (92 per cent) of total employment in renewable energy in the country (Figure 15).[xxxv]

▶ Figure 14. Renewable energy employment, by energy source, 2023 (thousands)



Note: 'Others' include jobs which are not technology specific. Source: IRENA and ILO (2024), Renewable energy and jobs: Annual review 2024, International Renewable Energy Agency, Abu Dhabi and International Labour Organization, Geneva. Data available at: https://www.irena.org/Data/View-data-by-topic/Benefits/Renewable-Energy-Employment-by-Country [20 March 2025]

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▶ References and technical information

[i] Arab States in this context refer to the countries and territories covered by the ILO Regional Office of the Arab States: Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
[ii] Source: Food and Agriculture Organization, electronic files and web site. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25]
[iii] World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25]
[iv] International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook, October 2024.
[v] Source: (1) United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects: 2019 Revision. (2) Census reports and other statistical publications from national statistical offices, (3) Eurostat: Demographic Statistics, (4) United Nations Statistical Division. Population and Vital Statistics Report (various years), (5) U.S. Census Bureau: International Database, and (6) Secretariat of the Pacific Community: Statistics and Demography Programme. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25]
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[viii] Source: World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) where the compilation and management is carried out by United Nations Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in collaboration with governments, non-governmental organizations, academia and industry. The data is available online through the Protected Planet website. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25].
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[xiii] Source: World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) where the compilation and management is carried out by United Nations Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) in collaboration with governments, non-governmental organizations, academia and industry. The data is available online through the Protected Planet website. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25].
[xiv] Source: Ibid.
[xv] The 2022 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) provides a data-driven summary of the state of sustainability around the world. Using 40 performance indicators across 11 issue categories, the EPI ranks 180 countries on climate change performance, environmental health, and ecosystem vitality. These indicators provide a gauge at a national scale of how close countries are to established environmental policy targets. The EPI offers a scorecard that highlights leaders and laggards in environmental performance and provides practical guidance for countries that aspire to move toward a sustainable future. Source: EPI Raw Data, available at: https://epi.yale.edu [20.03.25]
[xvi] Source: Climate Watch. 2020. GHG Emissions. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25].
[xvii] United Arab Emirates Ministry of Climate Change and Environment. *The United Arab Emirates' Third Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 3.0)*. Submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Nobember 2024. Accessed on July 09, 2025. https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/2024-11/UAE-NDC3.0.pdf
[xviii] Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network. 2021. Global Burden of Disease Study 2019 (GBD 2019) Air Pollution Exposure Estimates 1990-2019. Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25].
[xix] The Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) Country Index is a measurement tool that helps governments, businesses and communities examine risks exacerbated by climate change, such as over-crowding, food insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and civil conflicts. The Country Index uses 20 years of data across 45 indicators to rank over 180 countries annually based on their level of vulnerability, and their readiness to successfully implement adaptation solutions. Available at: https://gain.nd.edu [22 September 2023]
[xx] Source: WHO UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (washdata.org). Accessed via World Development Indicators [20.03.25].
[xxi] Climate and Clean Air Coalition. "United Arab Emirates." Accessed on March 20, 2025. https://www.ccacoalition.org/partners/united-arab-emirates
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[xxxi] Ibid.
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[xxxv] IRENA jobs database 2024. Figures provided are the result of a comprehensive review of primary information sources by national entities such as ministries and statistical agencies, and secondary data sources such as regional and global studies. For more details refer to IRENA's report 'Renewable Energy and Jobs - Annual Review 2024'.