

EmiratesGBC 2024 Congress Briefing

Beyond COP28: The Role of the Built Environment to Deliver on the UAE Consensus.

*Under the Patronage of the **Ministry of Energy & Infrastructure.***

Panel 2.1 Briefing: Empowering the Built Environment Through Data

“Empowering the Built Environment Through Data” panel examined how data monitoring, collection, analysis, and accessibility drive sustainability efforts and inform decision-making in the built environment. It also emphasized the value of benchmarking to help organizations assess their performance, set achievable goals, and develop data-driven strategies for sustainable growth.

Speakers

Ahmed Labeeb, Senior Sustainability Manager, KEO

Jane Boyle, Head of Sustainability, AD Airports

Omnia Halawani, Co-CEO and Founder, grfn

Mohammad Juma, Former EmiratesGBC Employee, Moderator

In today’s rapidly evolving sustainability landscape, data has become a critical tool in shaping how various aspects of the built environment are managed from a project’s initial design to construction and ongoing operations. Data supports informed decision-making at every stage, and benchmarking allows organizations to set realistic targets and drive sustainable progress. In the UAE, data is particularly valuable for comparing local performance against national goals, such as the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and aligning with global sustainability standards. As the field of sustainability becomes more complex, accessible data is essential, with initiatives like EmiratesGBC’s Market Brief and Benchmarking Report making such data available to stakeholders.

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The discussion opened with a question about the personal and professional significance of data for each speaker and its impact on their approach to sustainability. **Grfn** began by emphasizing its extensive impact portfolio and involvement in various building aspects. They noted that without data, achieving the desired impact on sustainable solutions aligned with UAE's targets is not feasible. **KEO** highlighted that data empowers change, enables informed decision-making, and fosters innovation. Data is also crucial for design optimization but requires preparation and collaboration to be effective. **AD Airports** added that while data creates opportunities, it's essential to ask, "What data is needed, how will it be used, and where will it be shared?"

The UAE's latest Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) emphasizes data transparency and specific emissions reduction targets across sectors, raising the question of current data availability for the sustainable development of the built environment. **Grfn** pointed out that there is still insufficient data for energy transition efforts in buildings. Although benchmarking is essential for sustainable development, mandated data disclosure remains limited. However, progress is underway to improve data availability for benchmarking.

KEO added that data can enhance sustainability in the built environment, and COP28 highlighted the real estate industry's need to accelerate emissions reduction. Yet, the industry faces ongoing challenges in data collection, analysis, and application. They noted that clients often lack data on consumption or emissions tracking, making carbon accounting difficult. A unified platform connecting production, procurement, and the supply chain could make tracking and analysing carbon emissions more manageable.

Currently, many buildings only have Building Management Systems (BMS) for monitoring rather than control. **KEO** emphasized that a comprehensive platform infrastructure is needed to support future retrofitting. Although data exists, without enforcement mechanisms, some companies voluntarily take initiatives, while others defer responsibility to the government. Achieving widespread data availability requires collaboration among end-users, city authorities, EmiratesGBC, and the private sector, each understanding their role in data collection and distribution.

The final question for **AD Airports** focused on the role of benchmarking in assessing performance relative to the UAE's net-zero targets. **AD Airports** explained that setting standards is a prerequisite for effective benchmarking. In opening a new terminal and decommissioning an older one, they used data from similar climates to identify gaps and areas for improvement. This approach informed their sustainability initiatives and highlighted the importance of international benchmarking in establishing effective policies and procedures.

Traditionally, decision-making was based on financial return on investment, but assessing a building's lifecycle cost offers a comprehensive view of its sustainability impacts. Coupled with data, this approach enables impactful decision-making across multiple sustainability aspects. To conclude, the panellists offered valuable insights into data-driven sustainability in the built environment, emphasizing the transformative potential of data in guiding sustainable development.