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Impact of Covid-19 on Oman's Construction Industry

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Abstract. COVID-19 is a global pandemic that changed the global economic perspective. The ongoing pandemic is indeed the major cause of project delays in the Middle East. A severe impact is being taken place in all industries. Therefore, this research covers the construction industry of Oman, the Impact of COVID-19 on the construction industry; the global impact of COVID-19 pandemic; the impact of global impact, and the prospects of Oman's economy. The study covers the impact of COVID-19 on global and regional economies. The construction industry and its economic prospects are also discussed in the global pandemic of COVID-19. The secondary research critically insight the impact of coronavirus along with the construction business dimensions of Oman's construction industry.

Keywords. construction management, covid-19, Oman, economy, construction management.

1. Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has a significant impact on almost all areas of economic life in Oman and the world. Now the world community is trying to minimize the spread of the virus and mitigate its effects (Confronting the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East and Central Asia, 2020). Companies in almost all sectors of the economy found themselves in a difficult situation because they are responsible for the major contracts and employees. In an ever-changing situation, the business is faced with a wide range of commercial and legal difficulties (Woertz, 2020).

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world of business will not be the same. Construction Industry will be indeed affected by this pandemic. The shortage of local workforce thrusts the demand for laborers from low-income countries (Al Amri & Marey Perez, 2020; Albogamy et al., 2012). Therefore, a massive inflow of the workforce is made into the country, which is the same case in other high-income GCC countries. According to a study by Price Waterhouse Coopers (2020), there are three main concerns caused by the COVID-19 for engineering and construction. The concerns are regarding financial, international recession, and influence on the workforce. The study has surveyed the current literature to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the construction industry of Oman (Woertz, 2020).

2. COVID-19, A Pandemic

An outbreak of pneumonia caused by a new type of coronavirus, according to the WHO classification, was recorded in December 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan (Woertz, 2020). To date, the number of cases in the PRC has reached approximately 80.5 thousand people; almost 54 thousand patients have been cured. Cases of infection have been recorded in more

than 85 countries, including Oman (Woertz, 2020). The World Health Organization, in connection with the rapid expansion of the virus, has raised its global risk assessment to "very high" (WHO, 2020). On February 27, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that there was a clear risk of a coronavirus pandemic and called on governments to do everything possible to stop the spread of the virus. According to the UN Secretary-General, the coronavirus pandemic can have a devastating effect on the global economy (Woertz, 2020). The most massive outbreaks occur in the United States (> 932 thousand people) and European countries: Spain (> 219 thousand people), Italy (> 195 thousand people), and Germany (> 154 thousand people). In China (> 84 thousand people), the pandemic declined in March, but by the end of April, new cases of the disease were revealed (Woertz, 2020).

In order to prevent the mass spread of infection and overload the health care system, many countries have taken unprecedented measures - the introduction of full or partial quarantine (self-isolation of the population, stopping all non-vital enterprises), and the cessation of transportation (Choudhury, Ghosh & Sindhi, 2020). Such measures will inevitably lead to a slowdown in production, rising unemployment, and a drop-in consumption (Choudhury, Ghosh & Sindhi, 2020).

Unprecedented measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 will have a negative effect on countries' economies regardless of their integration into global value chains (Choudhury, Ghosh & Sindhi, 2020). The experts from The International Monetary Fund (IMF) believes that world GDP will decrease by 3% by the end of 2020 - a much higher indicator than during financial crisis of 2008–2009. A similar fall will make the current crisis worst since the Great Depression I (Choudhury, Ghosh & Sindhi, 2020). It is noted that in the baseline scenario, anticipating a recession in the second half of 2020, expected 5.8% global growth in 2021 as economic normalization activity. Economically developed countries will be hardest hit by the crisis (Cheshire & Hilber, 2020). On average, the GDP of developed countries will decrease by 6.1% in 2020: in the USA will be 5.9%, in the countries of the Eurozone - 7.5%, in Japan - 5.2%. Developing countries will be less affected by the current crisis: their economies, on average, decrease by 1%. In China, an increase of 1.2% is expected (compared with a growth of 6.1% in 2019), Brazil's economy will shrink by 5.3%, Mexico - by 6.6%, South Africa - by 5.8%, Russia - by 5.5% (Cheshire & Hilber, 2020). The drop in industrial production is one of the reasons slowdowns in economic growth. The shock of solvent demand and supply chains, supply chain gaps, reduction investments - all these factors negatively affect several sectors of industrial production (Cheshire & Hilber, 2020).

3. Methodology

COVID 19 has impacted every field of life and results in the disruption of all major businesses around the globe. The study, in particular, is focused on analyzing the impact of the COVID 19 on the construction Industry of Oman. Oman is an Oil-rich country, and the economy majorly is dependent on oil and oil extracts. However, the construction industry is the second major contributor to the economy. Nonetheless, the most recent fewer research articles have analyzed the impact of the COVID 19 on oil and the economy of Oman. Moreover, the lack of literature based on the impact of the pandemic on the construction industry encourages further research.

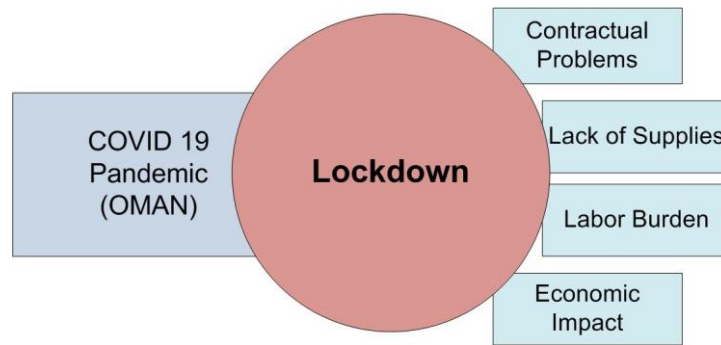


Figure 1. Impact of the COVID 19 on Construction Industry of Oman

Therefore, Secondary research based on the news, governmental statistics, and current literature are conducted to analyze the current situation of the construction industry of Oman. As figure 1 depicts the main elements of the construction industry in Oman that are affected by the COVID 19, the study has analyzed the vulnerabilities, risks, and losses due to the impact of the COVID 19 on the construction industry of Oman. Furthermore, the labor burden and contractual issues due to the pandemic based on the laws of the state of Oman are also discussed. Therefore, the study is not only focused on the economic issues, but also on the major problems faced by the labor and construction-based companies in Oman.

4. Impact of the COVID-19 on Economy of Oman

Oman is known as the pearl of Arabia, and it is attractive for its events. The country boasts a fascinating history, geographical diversity, and cultural heritage, which makes it a distinctive and authentic place. Oman's economy continues to grow due to rising oil prices and serious efforts to increase the contribution to the GDP of non-oil sectors (Ahmad & Masan, 2015). As Oman diversifies its economy to meet the goals of economic growth, the construction industry is becoming an increasingly important factor in attracting domestic investment (Alkalbani et al., 2013).

An outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus infection, also called a new type of pneumonia, continues to actively intervene not only in people's lives but also in the global economy (Maliszewska Mattoo & Van Der Mensbrugge, 2020). It is already known that the virus affects oil prices, exchange rates, airline routes, and large-scale events (Khan et al., 2020). The shock of solvent demand is one of the key factors decline in industrial production. IMF experts note that consumers reduce their spending amid falling incomes, fear virus infection, or increased uncertainty (IMF, 2020). It leads to reduce demand for products and services in many sectors of the economy and industry in particular. The trend has more impact on medium and small businesses: 77% of companies with annual revenues of less than £ 50 million (\$ 62 million) report a drop-in demand. For large companies, this rate is 64%. However, the big construction business is facing great difficulties related to supply chains, compared with medium and small businesses: 44% and 32% companies, respectively (EIC, 2020).

5. Impact of the COVID 19 on Construction Industry

Due to the specifics, the construction industry cannot be transferred to a remote mode of operation and therefore is one of the most vulnerable sectors to coronavirus infection. At the same time, decisions on a complete ban on construction were not made (Alandijany, Faizo & Azhar, 2020), but due to strict quarantine, construction work was almost completely suspended in the USA, Italy, and Spain (KHL, 2020). In other virus distribution centers, only non-critical construction sites were stopped.

The situation with the rapid spread worldwide of coronavirus infection the COVID-19 poses two major threats to the Omani construction industry. The first threat is a decline in consumer activity: in an epidemic, citizens will simply not have time to buy a home. Also, developers may be forced to close quarantine sales offices. The expert pointed out that the spread of coronavirus can hypothetically affect the ability to start and finish construction projects on time. In April, the UK analytical agency Global Data adjusted its forecast for growth in global volumes of the construction sector in 2020 from 3.1% to 0.5% (Williams & Kayaoglu, 2020). This trend of revising forecasts can be seen in many countries (in China, the planned growth in construction volumes decreased from 5.1% to 3.6%, in Italy - from 1% to 0.7%) (Williams & Kayaoglu, 2020). The main reasons for the decline in construction volumes attributed to:

- The suspension of constructing individual projects by the decision of developers or government agencies.
- Interruptions in the supply of materials and equipment.
- The displacement of workers due to the closure of borders between countries
- The suspension of transport links -whereas the main source of materials in China, the labor force in Europe is Eastern countries Europe-.
- Reduced laborers' productivity due to increased security measures.
- Increased financial problems for contractors and suppliers of materials -whereas most companies are small businesses that do not have stocks and/or access to liquidity- (Kahn Lange & Wiczer, 2020).

According to expert estimates, 30% of European manufacturers of engineering and construction equipment are now on the verge of bankruptcy, and another 30% are cutting production. The contracts in the Middle East are estimated to be declined by 75% in March 2020 (Kahn Lange & Wiczer, 2020).

6. Impact of Pandemic on Construction Industry of Oman

6.1. Construction Industry of Oman

Oman is an oil-rich country, and most of its GDP depends on oil and oil products. However, the construction industry is also a major part of its economy (Crosthwaite, 2000). Omani real estate market and construction industry are in crisis due to the departure of foreign workers. However, according to an estimate, about 670 commercial property owners in Oman are facing the problem of bankruptcy. The main pressure has appeared after several foreign workers left the country because of repeated government initiative of replacing them with the locals (Said, 2016).

Officials launched the Omanization into implementation 1988. It aimed to increase job opportunities for the locals by reducing the number of foreign workers in Oman (KC & Nilambari, 2018). The government has shifted or removed most of the privileges and benefits, including free commercial land, preferential business loans, and free training, for the private sector companies who do not nationalize a certain amount of their employees (Said, 2016).

The country is experiencing the most serious labor crisis in the last four decades. According to the World Bank, Oman's unemployment rate is around 17% (The World Bank, 2018). Therefore, the Ministry stepped up the onslaught of nationalization, instructing private companies to generate about 25000 jobs for locals by the mid of 2018 (Times News Service, 2018). Furthermore, according to the Ministry of Manpower, up to 60,000 individuals of Oman, mostly graduates, are currently searching for work (Al Shaibany, 2015). The government's goal

was to create between 40,000 and 50,000 jobs every year for the next five years, half of them in the private sector 2018 (Times News Service, 2018).

Moreover, the adviser to the Ministry noted that if any company does not support innovations, the Ministry will not provide it with the necessary services, including the issuance of work cards and permits and their renewals (Alandijany, Faizo & Azhar, 2020). In April 2018, similar measures were already applied for 199 companies, where 16,544 foreigners worked. However, landlords do not like this initiative, as many of them face bankruptcy and the inability to repay the loans they took to build the property (Alandijany, Faizo & Azhar, 2020). In this case, the property is confiscated by the state and will be sold at auctions. According to an estimation, about 115000 workers left Oman from March 2016 to March 2018 (Alandijany, Faizo & Azhar, 2020). Construction industry experts fear that a market crash is inevitable. However, according to ratings, Oman is among the top countries for ex-pats (Alandijany, Faizo & Azhar, 2020).

Oman Real Estate Sales Fall 78% over the year of 2017. The total value of all real estate transactions in April 2017 amounted to \$ 2.5 billion (NCSI, 2020a). Therefore, it is 78% less than in the same period in 2016. According to the National Center for Statistics and Information of the Sultanate (NCSI), in April 2017, fees for the purchase of a real estate for \$ 78.7 million were collected, which is 20.8% higher than last year (NCSI, 2020a). In total, in April 2017, buyers entered into 21,675 sales contracts (NCSI, 2020a). This is 19.4% less compared to 2016 (26,883 transactions) (Bhatia, 2017). For the indicated period, 83,307 documents confirming the right of ownership were registered (Bhatia, 2017). In the same month last year, there were 4.8% more such documents (87,489). A report on the real estate market prospects of Cluttons' Muscat Spring 2017, reported that rental rates in the capital of Oman decreased by 10.1% in 2016. "The difficult times on the market have prompted homeowners to take a more flexible, innovative approach to attract potential tenants" (Bhatia, 2017).

National Centre for Statistics and Information in Oman indicated that the construction workforce number by the end of December 2019 was 490,206 (Mordor Intelligence, 2020). Likewise, in their last bulletin of May 2020, NCSI revealed that the number was 454,027 in April. Thus, there is around 7.38% decrease in the total expatriate workforce (NCSI, 2020a). Moreover, the number of Omani workers in the Construction Industry has fallen by 2,288. Thus, this is around a 3.89% drop from December 2019 (NCSI, 2020a). Table 1 shows the numbers from January to April 2020 and the numbers of 2019. The decrease is expected to grow if countries announce more lockdown plan in the future. In an industry that already suffers from project delays, the impact of this pandemic on the construction industry would be severe. In his recent study, Umar (2020) investigated the impact of accidents in some GCC countries. The study indicated that accidents annual expenses in Oman are approximated at the US \$ 415,00, and an economic burden exceeded US\$ 2.5 million per annum (Mordor Intelligence, 2020).

Table 1. Number of Workers in the Construction Sector of Oman (NCSI, 2020a & b)

2019		2020			
		Jan	Feb	March	April
Omanis	58793	57841	57901	57026	56505
Expatriates	490206	480108	479022	457483	454027

While the government is trying to diversify the economy, the expectations of more growth in the construction industry were high. According to Mordor Intelligence (2020), the construction industry is anticipated to have a growth of 6% from 2019 to 2024. However, the industry endured a drop of 5.8% (NCSI, 2020). Therefore, the construction industry indeed is going

through the toughest times since WWII. Besides, the pandemic is continuing its tragic influence on every industry.

6.2. Lockdown Situation

Authorities of the Sultanate of Oman decided to close the capital province of Muscat as part of the fight against the spread of coronavirus. Roadblocks were set up between the provinces to control the movement of people (Gulfnews, 2020). Lockdown situation results in reduced commercial activity and newer contracts. The Construction industry of Oman is largely damaged because of restrictions and loss of business focus on the construction industry. Due to the pandemic, market focus is shifted towards the necessities of life, including food and medical facilities. Therefore, the construction industry of Oman is ceased to some extent. The construction volume in Oman is largely decreased, as the contract rate is decreased to about 75 percent in the Middle East during March 2020 (Mordor Intelligence, 2020).

6.3. Contractual Problems and Lack of Supplies

The COVID 19 has impacted the construction industry in a variety of ways, including loss of labor, lack of supplies, increased cost of construction material, and the change in demand (Mordor Intelligence, 2020). Due to pandemic, it is hard to complete most of the construction projects in time as per the set contracts. The running projects need to be settled by both parties because of the inevitable impact of the COVID 19. In such cases, Force majeure can be used. However, Force majeure is not considered by the legislation of the state of Oman. According to the Article 172 of Oman's Civil Transactions Law (RD 29/2013) "in bilateral contracts, if force majeure occurs rendering the performance of the obligation impossible to complete, the corresponding obligation shall be extinguished, and the contract shall automatically be revoked." Force majeure is to excuse the company from delay or failure of its responsibilities because of some inevitable event that is not under the control of the company (Thomas, 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to include the clause of force majeure in the contract terms. Moreover, in case of "impossibility" of contract fulfillment in Oman, the company can follow Article 647 Civil Transactions Law which states that "if an excuse hinders the execution of the contract or the completion of such execution, it may be rescinded or terminated by either of the parties, as the case may be." However, these clauses are needed for the adjustment of contracts in a crisis such as pandemic being faced by the world.

6.4. Labor Burden

According to estimates by the International Labor Organization, countermeasure the COVID-19 has affected nearly 2.7 billion workers worldwide, which corresponds to about 81% of the global workforce. The crisis has led to an unprecedented decline in economic activity and working time: during the second quarter of 2020 is expected to decrease working hours by 6.7%, which equivalent to 195 million full-time workers (at 48-hour workweek). According to the classification of the International Labor Organization, the industry is included in the number of industries where employees are most affected by the effects of the crisis (ILO, 2020). Quarantine measures, closing stores, cancellation of orders, and lower wages reduce consumer demand, which directly affects the situation of the workers' industrial sector.

Furthermore, the negative effects of the COVID-19 lead to a shock in the proposal. The experts believe that, in terms of labor, this is also expressed in a decrease in labor supply due to an increase in mortality, malaise, absenteeism for several other reasons, for example, due to the need to deal with children in conditions of closure schools. Lower supply and demand lead to lower revenues enterprises that are forced to take tough measures related to the reduction of

wages and dismissal of workers (Trowers & Hamlins, 2020). According to some forecasts, the number of unemployed due to the effects of quarantine measures in the foreseeable future may reach up to millions of people. In Oman, most of the labor is utilized in the construction industry that shares the major burden of labor and unemployment (Al Maskary, 2018). Due to the rapid spread of the COVID 19, Oman has added checkpoints and limits the major industrial supplies. Some of the construction projects are suspended, and the others are delayed, which results in heavy financial losses. Due to reduced construction, the rate of unemployment in Oman will be increased. However, the construction industry is suffering from a lack number of skilled laborers (Al Amri & Marey-Perez, 2020). The continuing of the pandemic would certainly reduce both Omani and expatriate construction workers' numbers moreover.

6.5. Economic Impact

Unlike the 2008 situation, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic could be significantly worse for several reasons. Firstly, a crisis may have greater reach, influencing company FDI and capital expenditures not only developed, but also developing countries (Pachura, 2011) Secondly, the delay effect FDI may be less significant as consumer demand shock accompanied by the forced completion and postponement of investment projects. Thirdly, in the event of a crisis in the financial sector, enterprises will not be able to fulfill their financial obligations, which will result in a fall in global investment flows as a result of the "domino effect." Closure of commercial and manufacturing enterprises, as well as construction sites, immediately causes a delay in the implementation of investment projects (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020). Enterprises will continue to bear some investment costs (for example, fixed running costs), but there will be a rejection of costs on other points. The appearance of new investment projects is most likely will be delayed, and the processes of mergers and acquisitions will slow down in Oman.

7. Conclusion

The global pandemic of the COVID-19 has a drastic impact on the construction industry that results in slowing economies. Oman's construction industry is the backbone of the country's economy in a condition of global lockdown that severely impacts the global oil prices. The construction industry is slowed down because of lockdown in Oman that restricts tourism and demand for new facilities. The coronavirus has changed the global demand for development, and countries are more focused on giving relief to the shrinking economic sectors. The construction contracts are delayed, and closed borders are the major issue in critical material supply chains. The construction companies are also reducing their staff, and the workforce is mostly unemployed. The contractual delays are also restricting the construction industry to operate. The critical labor and field specialists are not available because of the global travel ban. The declining economic condition of the construction industry results in challenging conditions for employees and managers to manage the operating cost. The COVID-19 is a global pandemic that changed the economic prospects of the construction industry in Oman, limiting the opportunities and developing new challenges for the economic prospects.

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