Received: September 29, 2026
Revised: October 25, 2026
Accepted: October 26, 2026
Published: November 11, 2026

Elicit Journal of Economics and Management Studies
eISSN: 3121-634X
pISSN: 3093-0529

https://elicitpublisher.com

EMPIRICAL PAPER

Socio-Economic Determinants of Construction Project Performance and Project Administration in The United Arab Emirates

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DOI
https://doi.org/10.65820/ejems-9vol2-issue2-2026

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the direct effects of external socio-economic factors on project administration and project performance (time, cost, and quality) within the UAE construction sector.

Methodology: Data were collected from 384 construction stakeholders via a structured questionnaire and evaluated using multiple regression and correlation analyses.

Results: Socio-economic factors significantly predicted project performance, explaining 41.7% of the variance in project time, 48.0% in cost, and 54.6% in quality. Inflation and labour availability significantly influenced project time, while inflation, regulatory environment, and labour availability affected cost. Economic stability was the sole predictor of quality and showed the strongest correlation with project administration ($r = 0.585–0.654$).

Novelty and contribution: This research fills a critical gap by empirically quantifying the direct, measurable impact of macro-level external factors on internal administrative success and specific project performance outcomes in the UAE.

Social and Practical Implications: Practitioners must integrate macroeconomic indicators into early planning, budgeting, and workforce management. Socially, addressing these factors secures industry employment stability and prevents costly infrastructure delays.

Keywords: Socio-economic factors, construction project performance, project administration, project cost, UAE construction industry

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How to cite this article:

Abdullah, M. A. A & Nurul, F. H. (2026). Socio-Economic Determinants of Construction Project Performance and Project Administration in The United Arab EmiratesTheory. *Elicit Journal of Economics and Management Studies, 2*(2), 139-149. https://doi.org/10.65820/ejems-9vol2-issue2-2026

1 Introduction

Construction is one of the most economically significant sectors in any national economy, generating employment across a wide network of professionals, tradespeople, manufacturers, investors and regulators, and acting as a key driver of infrastructural and urban development (Pheng & Hou, 2019). Because of this economic weight, the performance of individual construction projects, most commonly assessed against the triad of time, cost and quality, carries consequences that extend well beyond the immediate project stakeholders to the wider economy (Mustapha et al., 2023). Yet despite decades of research and the widespread adoption of formal project management methodologies, construction projects around the world continue to be delivered late, over budget, or below the specified standard of quality with striking regularity.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) offers a particularly instructive context in which to examine these dynamics. The UAE construction sector was valued at approximately USD 40–46 billion in 2025 and is forecast to keep expanding at an annual rate of roughly 4–5% through the remainder of the decade, driven by government-led infrastructure programmes, economic diversification strategies, population growth and a substantial pipeline of residential, commercial and industrial developments (Mordor Intelligence, 2026). This scale and pace of activity make the UAE construction industry highly visible economically, but it also means that the sector is unusually exposed to swings in material and labour costs, financing conditions and regulatory requirements, all of which can ripple quickly through a large and active project pipeline. Construction project outcomes in the UAE are therefore exposed to a range of external socio-economic pressures that lie outside the direct control of individual project managers, even as those same managers are held accountable for delivering on time, on budget and to specification (Cherian, 2020).

Fluctuations in economic conditions, inflation in material and labour prices, shortages or turnover of skilled labour, and an evolving regulatory landscape governing approvals, permits and compliance have all been identified by industry stakeholders and researchers as forces capable of disrupting project schedules, inflating budgets and compromising the quality of delivered work. Inflation, in particular, has been shown to be a persistent and frequently underestimated driver of cost overrun in construction budgeting internationally (Musarat et al., 2021), while skilled-labour shortages have been linked to measurable, trade-specific deteriorations in both cost and schedule performance (Elbashbishy & El-adaway, 2026; Van Tam et al., 2021). Regulatory and permitting processes, meanwhile, are a recurring feature of the broader literature on factors inhibiting effective cost and time control in construction practice (Olawale & Sun, 2010).

At the same time, project administration, encompassing planning, coordination, cost monitoring, regulatory compliance management, communication and decision-making, functions as the organisational apparatus through which projects are actually delivered, and effective administrative and contractual practice has itself been linked to reduced disputes and improved delivery outcomes (Seboka & Gidebo, 2026). A question that precedes any assessment of how well administration converts socio-economic pressure into project outcomes is whether socio-economic conditions themselves shape the strength and functioning of project administration in the first place. If socio-economic pressures are associated with weaker or more strained administrative systems, then administrative capacity itself becomes a channel through which economic and regulatory volatility is transmitted into project outcomes, rather than simply a downstream buffer against it (Altarawneh & Samadi, 2019).

This article therefore addresses two specific, related objectives drawn from a broader study of the UAE construction sector. The first is to determine the direct effect of socio-economic factors, namely economic stability, inflation rate, labour availability and regulatory environment, on construction project performance, assessed separately across the three conventional performance dimensions of time, cost and quality. The second is to determine the direct effect of the same four socio-economic factors on project administration. The corresponding research questions guiding the study were: what is the direct effect of socio-economic factors on construction project performance, and what is the direct effect of socio-economic factors on project administration? The remainder of the article situates these objectives within the relevant literature, describes the survey-based methodology used to test them, presents the empirical results, and discusses their implications for construction stakeholders operating in the UAE and comparable markets.

2 Socio-Economic Factors, Project Administration and Construction Project Performance

The premise underlying this study is that construction projects do not operate in a vacuum: they are embedded within a wider socio-economic environment whose conditions shape, and are shaped by, the way projects are planned, financed and administered. This section reviews each of the four socio-economic factors examined, the project administration construct, and the three performance dimensions used to assess project outcomes, drawing on the relevant construction management literature.

2.1 Economic Stability

Economic stability captures the extent to which broader macroeconomic conditions, such as fluctuations in economic activity, interest rates, and price volatility, affect project scheduling, financing, and cost control. Periods of economic downturn tend to disrupt project financing and resource allocation more severely in construction than in many other sectors, while periods of growth increase demand for commercial and residential development and ease access to financing (Khahro et al., 2023). Broader work on the relationship between the economy and the construction industry has similarly shown that the sector is highly sensitive to macroeconomic and even political conditions, with stable economic and political environments generally associated with stronger investor confidence, steadier project financing and more predictable project delivery (Pheng & Hou, 2019).

2.2 Inflation Rate

Inflation rate captures the rising cost of materials, labour, and procurement and its consequences for budget adherence, cost forecasting accuracy and schedule delays. A recurring finding in the literature is that inflation is frequently neglected in project economics and budgeting, even though building material prices, labour wages and machinery hire rates all vary with it on an ongoing basis, making inflation one of the most persistent contributors to construction cost overrun (Ailabouni et al., 2010; Musarat et al., 2021). Because inflation affects materials, labour and financing costs simultaneously, its effects are rarely confined to a single performance dimension, and its disruptive potential tends to be felt across both budget and schedule outcomes at once.

2.3 Labour Availability

Labour availability reflects the supply, turnover and skill level of the construction workforce, and its bearing on completion speed, cost efficiency and workmanship. Evidence from trade-level analyses shows that skilled-labour shortages are not distributed evenly across the industry, with certain trades facing more severe shortages than others, and that even moderate shortages in trades such as concreting or ironworking can significantly affect both project cost and schedule performance (Elbashbishy & El-adaway, 2026). At the level of individual workers, comparative studies of project managers and contractors perceptions consistently identify manpower-related factors, including workforce experience, supervision quality and labour turnover, among the most critical determinants of construction labour productivity, alongside management, work-condition, project and external factors (Van Tam et al., 2021).

2.4 Regulatory Environment

Regulatory environment reflects the effect of approval processes, permitting requirements and changes in construction regulations on project commencement, timelines and administrative costs. Reviews of the practical barriers to effective cost and time control in construction consistently identify regulatory and approval-related delay among the external inhibiting factors that practitioners struggle to manage, alongside weather, site conditions and client-driven changes (Olawale & Sun, 2010). Because regulatory requirements are typically fixed by external authorities rather than negotiated by project teams, their effects tend to surface as either front-loaded delays in project commencement or ongoing administrative and compliance costs throughout the project lifecycle.

2.5 Project Administration

Project administration, the second focal construct of this study, encompasses the coordination, monitoring, compliance and decision-making systems through which projects are planned and executed, including contract administration, documentation, communication among stakeholders and the day-to-day oversight of site activities. It has been consistently identified in construction management research as a strong direct contributor to project outcomes, with effective contract administration in particular linked to clearer resolution of disputes, better management of contract obligations and improved overall delivery performance, while unclear contract documents, inadequate communication

and limited administrative resources are linked to substandard construction outcomes (Seboka & Gidebo, 2026). Project administration own relationship with the external socio-economic environment, whether stronger economic and regulatory conditions are associated with more robust administrative practice, is less well established empirically and is the focus of the second objective addressed in this article.

2.6 Construction Project Performance

Construction project performance was assessed through three widely used dimensions that together capture the classic iron triangle of project management. Project time reflects adherence to planned schedules and the extent to which external cost and labour pressures translate into delays. Project cost reflects the containment of budgets in the face of inflationary and regulatory pressure. Project quality reflects the extent to which economic and resource pressures compel contractors toward decisions, such as material substitution or reduced supervision, that affect the standard of completed work. These three dimensions, together with safety, are widely treated in the literature as the core criteria against which construction project success is judged, with delays in payment, poor client cash flow and workforce coordination problems repeatedly identified as underlying drivers of poor performance across each dimension (Mustapha et al., 2023).

3 Methodology

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was adopted. A structured questionnaire, using five-point Likert-scale items, was administered to construction project stakeholders in the UAE, covering the four socio-economic factors, project administration and the three project performance dimensions. Of 400 questionnaires distributed, 384 were returned and passed validity checks, giving a response rate of 96.0% and a usable rate of 96.0%. No missing values were recorded across any of the study items.

The questionnaire's items were modified from a variety of established tools and research studies that examined project administration, socioeconomic issues, and project performance in the construction industry. In particular, Memon et al. (2019), who identified the factors that contribute to cost overruns in underdeveloped economies, and Rahman et al. (2019), who looked at the schedule and cost behavior of construction project s in Malaysia, were the main sources of inspiration for the economic factors items (Items 1–10). Flyvbjerg et al. (2003) were cited further for their worldwide assessment on megaprojects, which revealed ongoing cost overruns brought on by poor management and unstable finances.

Furthermore, the social variables elements (elements 11–20) were taken from research by Wang et al. (2016), who examined stakeholder participation and resettlement risks in construction, and Shibani (2014), who investigated the influence of accidents and tourists in UAE project delays. Pheng & Hau (2019) and Nyagwara & Datche (2015) were also cited for recognizing labor-related and community-based social issues in the execution of infrastructure. The Project administration Institute's (PMI) standards best practices for planning, procurement, risk management, and stakeholder communication served as the foundation for most of the project administration items (Items 21–30). Additional modification was derived from the research of Alias et al. (2014) and Iyer & Jha (2005), who highlighted quality control, scheduling, and leadership as crucial administrative factors affecting project performance.

Lastly, the items on the mediating role of administration (Items 31–40) were developed using ideas from studies that investigate mediation effects using structural equation modeling. According to Bui et al. (2010) and Khahro et al. (2023), two important sources, project administration tasks frequently reduce external hazards. The idea that project administration can influence the exchange relationship between socioeconomic pressures and outcome variables was further supported by the adaptation of items to reflect the mediating logic discovered in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). The demographic profile of the achieved sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents (N = 384).

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	311	81.0
	Female	73	19.0
Age (years)	Below 25	82	21.4
	25–34	152	39.6
	35–44	150	39.1
Education	Diploma	15	4.0
	Bachelor's Degree	214	55.9
	Master's Degree	133	34.7
	Doctorate	22	5.7
Work experience	Less than 5 years	71	18.5
	5–10 years	86	22.4
	11–15 years	79	20.6
	16 years and above	148	38.5

Source: Developed by authors

As shown in Table 1, the sample was predominantly male (81.0%), reflecting the technical and site-based composition of the UAE construction workforce, and was concentrated in the 25–44 age bracket (78.7% combined), with the majority holding a Bachelor's degree or higher (96.3% combined) and substantial work experience, with 38.5% reporting 16 years or more in the sector. This profile supports the credibility of respondents' judgements on the socio-economic and administrative issues examined.

Outlier screening confirmed that all item responses fell within the expected 1–5 Likert range, with means between 3.36 and 4.34, indicating no abnormal values. Scatterplot inspection of standardised residuals against predicted values supported the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity for the relationship between socio-economic factors and each performance dimension. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no problematic overlap among predictors, with tolerance values above 0.34 and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) between 1.960 and 2.863 across all three regression models, well within acceptable thresholds. The reliability of each construct was then assessed prior to hypothesis testing, and the results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 Construct reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability).

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_c)
Construction Project Performance	0.901	0.918
Project Administration	0.929	0.940
Economic Stability	0.707	0.810
Inflation Rate	0.732	0.823
Labour Availability	0.774	0.845
Regulatory Environment	0.726	0.820

Source: Developed by authors

As Table 2 indicates, all constructs exceeded the recommended reliability threshold of 0.70, with Project Administration (α = 0.929) and Construction Project Performance (α = 0.901) showing the strongest internal consistency, supporting the use of these measures for further analysis.

The direct effect of the four socio-economic factors on each performance dimension was tested using multiple linear regression, with inflation rate, regulatory environment, labour availability and economic stability entered as predictors and project time, project cost and project quality entered separately as the dependent variables in three corresponding models. The direct association between the same four socio-economic factors and project administration was examined through inter-construct correlations generated as part of the discriminant validity assessment of the measurement model.

4 Results

4.1 Effect of Socio-Economic Factors on Project Time

The regression model predicting project time was statistically significant, $R = 0.646$, $R^2 = 0.417$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.409$, $F(5, 378) = 54.018$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that the model explained 41.7% of the variance in project time. The regression coefficients for the individual predictors are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 Regression coefficients: socio-economic factors and project time

Predictor	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.571	–	2.587	.010
Inflation rate	.245	.208	3.451	.001
Regulatory environment	.056	.046	.695	.488
Labour availability	-.187	-.160	-2.475	.014
Economic stability	-.029	-.023	-.361	.719

Source: Developed by authors

As shown in Table 3, inflation rate significantly and positively predicted project time ($B = .245$, $\beta = .208$, $t = 3.451$, $p = .001$), and labour availability significantly and negatively predicted project time ($B = -.187$, $\beta = -.160$, $t = -2.475$, $p = .014$). Regulatory environment ($p = .488$) and economic stability ($p = .719$) were not significant predictors.

4.2 Effect of Socio-Economic Factors on Project Cost

The regression model predicting project cost was statistically significant, $R = 0.693$, $R^2 = 0.480$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.474$, $F(5, 378) = 69.912$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 48.0% of the variance in project cost. Table 4 presents the corresponding regression coefficients.

Table 4 Regression coefficients: socio-economic factors and project cost

Predictor	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.734	–	3.836	.000
Inflation rate	.239	.221	3.887	.000
Regulatory environment	.263	.235	3.743	.000
Labour availability	-.254	-.237	-3.877	.000
Economic stability	-.019	-.017	-.274	.784

Source: Developed by authors

As reported in Table 4, inflation rate (B = .239, β = .221, p < .001), regulatory environment (B = .263, β = .235, p < .001) and labour availability (B = -.254, β = -.237, p < .001) were all significant predictors of project cost. Economic stability was not significant (p = .784).

4.3 Effect of Socio-Economic Factors on Project Quality

The regression model predicting project quality was statistically significant, R = 0.739, R^2 = 0.546, adjusted R^2 = 0.540, F (5, 378) = 90.839, p < 0.001, explaining 54.6% of the variance in project quality, the strongest fit among the three models. The regression coefficients for this model are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Regression coefficients: socio-economic factors and project quality

Predictor	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.659	–	4.027	.000
Inflation rate	.103	.104	1.953	.052
Regulatory environment	.081	.079	1.348	.178
Labour availability	-.053	-.055	-.955	.340
Economic stability	.121	.115	2.024	.044

Source: Developed by authors

As Table 5 shows, only economic stability significantly and positively predicted project quality (B = .121, β = .115, t = 2.024, p = .044). Inflation rate approached but did not reach conventional significance (p = .052), while regulatory environment (p = .178) and labour availability (p = .340) were not significant.

4.4 Association Between Socio-Economic Factors on Project Administration

The second objective examined whether socio-economic factors were directly associated with project administration. Because a dedicated regression model with project administration as the sole dependent variable was not separately reported, this relationship is evidenced here through the inter-construct correlations generated during the discriminant validity assessment of the measurement model. These correlations, summarised in Table 6, indicate the strength of linear association between each socio-economic factor and project administration.

Table 6 Correlations between socio-economic factors and project administration

Socio-Economic Factor	Correlation with Project Administration (r)
Economic Stability	0.654
Inflation Rate	0.585
Labour Availability	0.605
Regulatory Environment	0.596

Source: Developed by authors

As presented in Table 6, all four socio-economic factors showed positive, moderate-to-strong correlations with project administration, ranging from r = 0.585 (inflation rate) to r = 0.654 (economic stability). Economic stability showed the strongest association with project administration, followed by labour availability (r = 0.605), regulatory environment (r = 0.596) and inflation rate (r = 0.585). The consistency and magnitude of these correlations indicate that, descriptively, more favourable socio-economic conditions in each of the four areas tend to co-occur with stronger reported project administration practice, supporting a positive direct association consistent with the second objective, though the correlational nature of this evidence means causal direction cannot be established from these results alone.

5 Discussion

5.1 Socio-Economic Factors and Construction Project Performance

Taken together, the three regression models confirm that socio-economic factors have a significant direct effect on construction project performance in the UAE, addressing the study first objective and reinforcing similar findings from Pakistan, where social and economic factors were also shown to significantly shape time, cost and quality outcomes (Khahro et al., 2023). However, the pattern of effects was not uniform across performance dimensions. Inflation rate emerged as the most consistently disruptive factor, significantly predicting both project time and project cost, reflecting how rising prices for materials, labour and procurement translate directly into schedule slippage and budget strain, consistent with the wider literature on inflation-driven cost overrun (Musarat et al., 2021). Labour availability showed a parallel pattern, significantly affecting both time and cost, underscoring the practical reality that shortages, turnover or skill gaps in the workforce slow down site activities and raise operational expenses, in line with evidence that trade-level skilled-labour shortages carry measurable cost and schedule criticality (Elbashbishy & El-adaway, 2026).

Regulatory environment, by contrast, significantly predicted project cost but not project time or project quality, suggesting that in this sample the primary burden of regulatory approval and compliance processes is financial, in the form of administrative charges and holding costs, rather than a direct driver of scheduling delay once other factors are accounted for. Economic stability showed the reverse pattern: it was not a significant predictor of time or cost, but it was the only socio-economic factor with a significant, positive effect on project quality. This suggests that stable macroeconomic conditions may operate primarily through supporting steadier procurement, more reliable material supply and reduced pressure on contractors to cut corners, rather than through direct effects on schedule or budget performance.

The variance explained increased across the three models, from 41.7% for project time, to 48.0% for project cost, to 54.6% for project quality, indicating that socio-economic conditions account for a larger share of quality-related outcomes than of time or cost outcomes in this sample, even though the specific factor driving that effect (economic stability) differed from the factors driving time and cost effects (inflation and labour availability).

5.2 Socio-Economic Factors and Project Administration

The correlation evidence addressing the second objective indicates that socio-economic conditions are also meaningfully linked to project administration itself, not only to project outcomes, consistent with prior evidence that effective administrative and contractual practice is closely tied to the surrounding project environment (Seboka & Gidebo, 2026). Economic stability stronger association with project administration ($r = 0.654$), relative to its weak and non-significant direct effect on project time and cost, is notable: it suggests that economic stability may influence project performance less through a direct pathway and more through its association with administrative capacity and practice, an interpretation consistent with project administration own strong direct effect on performance reported elsewhere in the wider study. Inflation rate showed the weakest, though still moderate, association with project administration ($r = 0.585$), consistent with its character as an external cost pressure that administration can only partially buffer rather than fully offset.

Labour availability ($r = 0.605$) and regulatory environment ($r = 0.596$) showed broadly similar associations with project administration, suggesting that workforce planning and regulatory compliance are both areas in which stronger socio-economic conditions coincide with stronger administrative practice, plausibly because both require sustained coordination, monitoring and documentation capacity within the administrative function.

5.3 Integrated Interpretation

Read together, the two objectives suggest a construction environment in which socio-economic conditions matter twice over: directly, in shaping specific performance outcomes in differentiated ways, and indirectly, in their association with the strength of the administrative systems that manage those outcomes. Inflation and labour availability stand out as the most consistent direct threats to time and cost performance, while economic stability stands out both as the strongest quality predictor and as the socio-economic factor most closely tied to project administration. This pattern is consistent with a view of project administration as a partial buffer between volatile socio-economic conditions and project performance, one that itself appears to be stronger when the surrounding socio-economic environment is more favourable.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study addressed two specific objectives: determining the direct effect of socio-economic factors on construction project performance and determining the direct effect of socio-economic factors on project administration, within the UAE construction sector. The evidence for the first objective supports a differentiated but statistically significant effect: inflation and labour availability are the dominant socio-economic threats to project time and cost, regulatory environment adds further pressure specifically on project cost, and economic stability is the key socio-economic support for project quality. The evidence for the second objective shows that all four socio-economic factors are positively and at least moderately associated with project administration, with economic stability showing the strongest association.

None of the four socio-economic factors, taken alone, affected all three performance dimensions simultaneously, indicating that stakeholders should not treat socio-economic risk as a single undifferentiated threat but should tailor mitigation strategies to the specific performance outcome of concern. At the same time, the consistent positive association between socio-economic conditions and project administration suggests that strengthening administrative capacity, and doing so in a manner responsive to the prevailing economic and regulatory climate, may be a productive general-purpose strategy for absorbing socio-economic volatility.

Practically, construction firms and project managers in the UAE are encouraged to build inflation-adjusted contingencies into both schedules and budgets, invest in stable workforce planning and skilled-labour retention to protect time and cost performance, engage early and proactively with regulatory bodies to contain compliance-related cost escalation, pursue broader financial and procurement stability as a mechanism for protecting the quality of construction outcomes, and invest in administrative capacity-building, particularly around economic forecasting and workforce and regulatory coordination, given its consistent association with all four socio-economic factors. Future research could usefully extend this analysis with a dedicated regression model of socio-economic factors on project administration, test whether project administration mediates or moderates the pathways through which socio-economic factors affect performance, and examine whether the patterns identified here hold across project types and emirates within the UAE.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the construction stakeholders who participated in the study.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declare that no financial support was provided for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The quantitative dataset generated and analyzed during the current study via stakeholder questionnaires is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Use of Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI tools solely to improve the grammatical quality and formatting of the manuscript. These tools were not utilized for data collection, statistical analyses, or the interpretation of the results. The authors review and edit the output as needed and maintain full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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