

Great Unity, Great Diversity

The twenty-one Arab States, along with the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, share a common language and culture and a sense of belonging to one nation. When it comes to educational provision, however, the similarity ends.

Because of the great disparity in development levels, education in the region resembles a rich mosaic that is impressive but incomplete. The brilliant, shining pieces are countries whose educational development is right on track (such as Kuwait or Lebanon). Other pieces need repair, as in countries where education has suffered from conflicts or economic hardship (such as Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen).

The Arab States have the world's highest percentage of children under 15. One out of four of them are out of school, representing a total of some 10 million children in the region. Educating these children is vitally important if they are to avoid becoming tomorrow's illiterate adults. The overall total of adult illiterates is currently 67 million, ranging from 5.5 per cent illiteracy in Lebanon to as high as 53 per cent in Mauritania.



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As elsewhere, reaching children in remote rural areas is a major concern in the Arab States.

Zoom

- ▶ Between 1990 and 1998, the net primary school enrolment rate in the Arab States went from 74 per cent to 76 per cent.
- ▶ One out of four children are out of school, which represents a total of 10.3 million children in the region.
- ▶ The gender gap has slightly narrowed from 65 per cent of girls in school in 1990 up to 71 per cent in 1998. Half of all women are literate whereas the male literacy rate is over 70 per cent.
- ▶ Less than 10 per cent of 3- to 5-year-olds in 8 out of 15 countries are in early childhood programmes. Only two countries, Lebanon and Kuwait, have 70 per cent enrolment.
- ▶ Lebanon, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates or Kuwait have achieved close to 90 per cent literacy. However, at least 67 million adults are illiterate in the Arab States.

As for the female literacy rate, it lags behind other regions at only 50 per cent, compared with over 70 per cent for males. Women's involvement in civil society is correspondingly low. About 25 per cent of Arab women have jobs, and four per cent are involved in political life. In other parts of the developing world, these figures are 39 and 10 per cent respectively. Nearly half the countries in the region have not yet ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; this denial of women's rights affects girls' education and women's advancement.

Some countries are overcoming cultural taboos to empower their women. Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic have considerably raised their female literacy rates, thanks to strategies developed in the last decade. "It was no overnight success, though," remarks Victor Billeh of UNESCO Beirut. "Improving literacy required a plan of action and regular monitoring. But the results are there." He adds that factors like the democratization of public life, a free press and a variety of media create the conditions for greater equality.

Basic education in the Arab States has come a long way when one considers that, back in 1970, roughly half of the primary age children in the region were enrolled. Today, three out of four children are in school. A handful of countries have almost reached universal primary education. Oman, which had no education system at all prior to 1970, now has some 85 per cent of primary

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school-age children in school. The United Arab Emirates, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Jordan and Iraq have made great progress, while Mauritania's rate of increase is high because, like Oman, it started from a low point. Djibouti, however, occupies the bottom of the list with less than 40 per cent net enrolment.

About 70 per cent of primary-school-age girls are enrolled. The gap between girls' and boys' rates is more than nine percentage points. Yemen has the greatest gender gap, with only 33 per cent of girls in school compared with 73 per cent of boys. Programmes in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen are now leading the way in bringing education to girls in poor areas through community schools located closer to their homes.

Most countries do not consider early childhood education a government responsibility, despite its proven effectiveness. The average figure for the region is below 15 per cent. "Even relatively well-to-do countries do not consider it an issue," explains Billeh. Lebanon again leads the way in this department, along with Kuwait, with 70 per cent of young children in early childhood programmes. The Palestinian Autonomous Territories and Morocco also have good coverage at 50 per cent.

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By locating community schools closer to their homes, Egypt has led the way in reaching girls in poor areas.

The conflicts in Algeria, Somalia and Sudan have disrupted education, and sanctions against Iraq have led to school closings, loss of teachers and more children dropping out. In the early 1990s, Qatar and Yemen spent about twice as much on the military as they did on health and education; the Syrian Arab Republic spent almost four times as much.

"If only we could reduce military budgets to encourage education and investment in humans," says Aicha Barka, founder of the Algerian Literacy Association. Today, civil society is gaining ground in the Arab States, notably in Morocco, where women's groups have mushroomed. "The great task of fighting against illiteracy is a battle that the state cannot win on its own, and neither can we," she insists.

Priority number one in the Arab States is now improving the quality of education. The UNESCO/UNICEF Monitoring Learning Achievement

project found achievement levels unsatisfactory in nine Arab nations. Modernizing curricula is also an area of concern. "We must teach our children how to learn and how to think about what they learn," says Egypt's Minister of Education, Hussein Kamal Bahaa El-Din, "using such modern technology as the computer, which is the blackboard of tomorrow." Performance is lower than expected in most countries considering the spending levels, according to Billeh. "We're not saying more money should be spent but that it should be spent more efficiently," he says. "Good governance and good management are now needed." Priority number two, therefore, is improving the efficiency of educational management.

The shared language, culture and sense of belonging to one nation is the great strength of the Arab States, providing possibilities for co-operation in education between countries. It is a strength to build on. ■

