Overcoming Inequality: why governance matters

Educational Reform can empower youth in Arab countries and help build human development

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Dysfunctional educational systems weaken the human capabilities of Arab youth leading to
the marginalisation of youth in Arab countries, and hence undermine human development in
Arab countries. Therefore educational reform could contribute to human development on both
the individual and societal levels.

Challenges of education in Arab countries, Need for Reform

1. **Quantitative Deficits**

In spite of noteworthy achievement in the *quantitative* expansion of education in Arab
countries during the 20th century, educational attainment in Arab countries is still deficient on
the quantitative dimension due to the following five factors.

1. A huge backlog of illiteracy, especially among women (at the beginning of the 21st
century at least 70 million Arabs were estimated to be illiterate, the vast majority of
which were women (AHDR1, 2002).

2. Low emphasis on early childhood education

3. Non-universal basic education and slowing growth rates in educational enrolment.

4. Selective exclusion (of girls, the poor and marginalised) from elite-branches and
higher stages of education

5. Lack of recurrent life-long education opportunities

As a result, youth literacy in the Arab region still lags behind all developing countries, not to
mention, more advanced regions of the world.
Table (2)
Youth literacy 15-24 years (%) Arab region and other regions of the world
2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab states</td>
<td>81.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing countries</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>98.0</td>
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</tbody>
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UNDP & AFESD, AHDR 2005, p. 296

Another cogent comparison is given in Figure (1), where the mean years of schooling indicator in Arab countries has been lagging behind east Asia since the 1960s.
Figure (1)
Mean years of schooling (population 25 years of age or older),
Arab countries and three Asian tigers, 1960-2000
The Quality deficit

Poor quality in Arab educational systems articulates around three main axes:

♦ Restriction of freedom, in education as well as in society at large, coupled with bad content, pedagogy (routine learning) and evaluation methods (grades in information-retrieval examinations) retards analytical and critical skills, and impedes creative faculties

♦ Low priority given to technical education, sciences and engineering. Figure (2) documents the sciences and engineering deficit in the Arab region.

♦ Neglect of the mother language, the natural vehicle for innovation and creativity.

At the level of higher education, educational reform, advised by Western powers, in addition to the globalisation of educational services, in the mode of franchises of western educational institutions in Arab countries has dealt higher education instruction in the mother tongue a severe blow, especially in the Gulf countries.
The Private/public provision dialectic

Government provision of educational service has been the vehicle for a tremendous quantitative achievement in the expansion of education in Arab countries.

However, with the advent of ill-advised structural adjustment policies, governments were advised to withdraw from direct provision of public services for the benefit of unregulated markets and private capital. At the same time, civil and political liberties remained restricted. Thus, rather than enabling a non-profit seeking civil society based mode of service provision, for-profit education enterprises mushroomed and private provision of education became one of the most lucrative among legal economic activities.
This commercialisation of educational provision threatens to exacerbate one of the major deficiencies in Arab education, i.e. selective exclusion for the rich and powerful in good quality education, especially in the stages and branches leading to high societal status. Furthermore, though low and perhaps deteriorating quality being the major failing of Arab education systems, private for-profit education has not helped improve quality of education significantly.

The Heavy Price of Being a Woman

In spite of commendable progress in girls' education, women still suffer a relatively higher level of deprivation from access to knowledge in Arab countries, Figures 3 & 4.

Figure (3)

Female literacy rate as a percentage of male literacy rate (age 15+),

World regions, 2003

Source: (UNDP, 2005)
This injustice takes place in the face of accumulating evidence that girls are the better educational achievers in Arab countries. In Egypt in mid-2005, for example, the annual scene of girls harvesting the highest places in the national secondary school final examination - the great hurdle on the educational ladder for the wider public in Arab countries - was repeated. Girls captured the number one spot in both Humanities and Sciences. Among the top ten spots, girls took eleven out of twelve¹ in Humanities and seven out of fifteen in Sciences. The outstanding performance of girls in the secondary school examination was not limited to Egypt (Figure 5). They also swept the board in Kuwait, Palestine, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates.

¹ More than one person may be listed in each spot in the case of a tie.
Girls’ share, among top scorers in all Arab countries where data is available, is over 50 percent. The fact that, on average, girls make up less than half the total enrolment in education serves to confirm their academic suremacy. Notice also the ascendancy of girls in a wide variety of circumstances, in rich and poor Arab countries alike and under the most obstructive of military occupations, underscoring the intrinsic, non-circumstantial nature of the phenomenon.
The bias against women extends to the spheres of utilisation of human capabilities. Women suffer higher unemployment rates endured in Arab countries.

Given women’s superior achievements in education, this trend goes against the grain of pure economic efficiency in that the sex with the greater potential for learning, and thus the one more likely to boost production, is less likely to be employed.
Elements of a Strategic vision for Educational Reform in Arab countries: Two Major Axes

1) Governance and private provision

The responsibility of the state (not just government) to guarantee high quality basic education for all and excellence in education, especially in the higher stages, should be stressed.

The issues of equity and equal opportunity are no longer limited to guaranteeing initial enrolment in basic education. As a result of widening poverty and persistent rise in the cost of education to households, continuations in education and access to higher stages have become critically dependent on financial means. Hence, the state should ensure the availability of necessary financial means for the poor - in the form of scholarship grants for the needy and study loans to be repaid after graduation and employment) especially for females, the poor and marginalised.

All this does not, however, mean that the state necessarily engages in direct provision of all educational services. Nor does it mean that the government should command education.

Indeed, there is need to support non-governmental, not-for-profit, education as a competitor to governmental education.

Private, for-profit, education already exists in most Arab countries. With the exception of Lebanon, a very special and problematic case, private provision is limited in scope and will probably remain so in the future. Moreover private provision tends to be characterised by low quality\(^2\) and social polarisation.

Expanding private, for-profit, educational provision can inflict, under the conditions prevalent in Arab countries, considerable damage - especially in view of the fragility of market

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\(^2\) To take basic education in Egypt as an important case, some of the very best schools in the country are private, but the majority of private schools are poorer in quality than government schools. Indeed, many private schools cater to dropouts from government schools.
regulatory mechanisms and the predominance of the quick-profit mode of private sector operation. The likely damage extends to breach of equity, erosion of social cohesion, worsening the distribution of income and wealth, and weakening the national identity.

It is important, however, to encourage the business sector to support education through donations motivated by generous tax exemptions. This support is in the best interest of the business sector since the education system needs to be improved in order to produce the currently lacking human skills needed to raise productivity and maximise profits. On the other hand, effective participation of the business sector and civil society in improving education should be guaranteed, especially in technical and vocational education. There is pressing need for the state, in effective collaboration with all other stakeholders, to establish, and continuously reinforce, accreditation systems to ensure quality in all types of education.

The need also arises to ensure the independence of higher education institutions through entrusting them to governing boards composed of representatives of the state, the business sector, civil society and academics.

It is also essential to work towards good local governance, and not just spurious decentralisation of educational administration, and forging strong linkages between the various levels of administration- down to the school- on one hand and local governance and the communities on the other hand. This requires devolution of authority, representative and accountable educational governance institutions on the local level, provision of resources, and capacity building for the non-central tiers of administration.
Effective *coordination* is also needed *on the central level*, among all agencies responsible for education, and between these and others responsible for different aspects of human development in general.

All of these calls for serious *civil service reform* (higher wages; linking appointment, employment rewards and promotion to quality performance; ...). Civil service reform also contributes to raising the effectiveness of government education at large.

In the final analysis, however, effectiveness of educational administration, at all levels, is conditional on the development of *transparency* and strict *accountability* of educational institutions to *societal stakeholders*.

**A multidimensional package of educational reform that ensures quality**

Educational reform is a multidimensional task whose dimensions interact strongly. Hence it is essential that a strategy for reform be built on synergy among the many dimensions of the educational system, and its linkages to the socio-economic system. The most important dimensions include the following.

- Adoption of *rigorous, and regular, assessment as a means for achieving higher quality* in education, especially in the event of introducing changes in programs and methods.

  Assessment should go beyond cognitive achievement to *portfolio evaluation* in the realms of values, attitudes and skills.

  The first requirement is to establish the institutional structure necessary for assessment, and improve on it systematically.

  Assessment needs to be carried out on many levels:

  - on the school and district levels;
  - on the national level allowing for comparisons on the sub-national level;
• on the Pan Arab level using standard tests that enable the assessment in language skills and comparative evaluation across the Arab educational system;
• on the international level, providing for international comparisons essential for ensuring competitiveness.

Success of the assessment effort requires transparency through wide dissemination of information and encouraging consultation among all stakeholders.

♦ Transforming educators into professionals through building the institutional structure of the education profession is critically needed.

This starts with quality initial preparation- in institutions of higher education, upgrading faculties of education, effective in-service training and improving supervision and guidance.

In addition, professional associations of educators need to be built and reinforced in order to take charge of setting professional standards, enforcing codes of conduct, improving the conditions of educators and advancement of the profession. Introducing the practice of issuing teaching permits, and periodic renewal, based on strict criteria, and retraining if needed, would go a long way in this direction.

♦ Efficient utilisation of modern technologies, particularly in information & communication, in order to improve education, foster self-learning and facilitate acquisition of the information-age skills.

♦ Reinforcing technical vocational education that is closely linked to the needs of development and the business sector; that imparts skills enabling further training and acquisition of higher-order capacities including the ability to manage new and complex situations.
Emphasising *pre-school education*; and upgrading the education of *children with special needs*, particularly the *gifted*.

Building an efficient system for *life-long adult education*.

The region is relatively behind in combating illiteracy. Low educational attainment hampers productivity gains. Illiteracy of the parents retards the education of children, in both quantity and quality.

Eradication of illiteracy, it should be realised, requires effective mobilisation of societal capacities (for example, youth in higher education). But literacy eradication should go beyond mere acquisition of rudiments of the three *r’s* that is easily lost.

Indeed, life-long education has become a necessity not only to prevent regression to illiteracy, or to provide graduates of the educational system with labour market relevant skills but to also accommodate the, fast changing, education and retraining needs of modern society.