

POLICY PROCESS AND EDUCATION REFORM IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Abstract – *This paper explores and summarises the status, policies, challenges and reforms of the education systems in the Arab World. There is much that the systems have in common, especially in relation to cultural background, language and general strategies – this despite the striking differences that exist in the region in terms of the stage of development as reflected in such indicators as literacy rates, participation rates, gender issues, funding, and so on. The steady shift of the status of, and approach to education from being predominantly a social service reflecting mainly individual needs and human rights, and thus is mostly supply driven, to a balanced socioeconomic activity that incorporates the necessary aspects of a social service and economic investment has been a common phenomenon in Arab countries. One of the major developments in this respect is the growing privatisation and globalisation of educational services, especially in higher education. Modern technologies helped to support such developments and enhance a commodity approach with all its pros and cons which are clear mainly in distance and open education that utilises e-learning methodologies and which is spreading quickly, whether in open universities or as blended education in ordinary ones. The governance and structural aspects of the education systems in the Arab World have been characterised by some apparent weaknesses that are reflected in the ongoing efforts to improve their relevance to developmental needs and labour market requirements, enhance the decentralisation aspects and school empowerment, and develop the technical and vocational education systems. The relatively high population growth rate, coupled with the phenomenon of mass education and the lack of resources in the majority of Arab countries, have reflected negatively on the qualitative aspects of educational efforts and services, and have resulted, in many cases, in poor efficiency. This is clear for example in the modest achievements in the field of scientific research. In the educational field, the Arab World does not lack regional and sub-regional organisations and set-ups, although the effectiveness of such organisations has so far been subject to criticism despite many distinct efforts and achievements.*

Introduction

For the Arab region, many social, cultural and economic characteristics render a regional approach to many educational issues a feasible effort, despite the great differences among the individual countries in the degree of progress and stage of development, as well as the priorities and challenges. The feasibility of a regional

approach is further justified by a common language as well as similar educational frameworks and strategies that developed with time through different bilateral, sub-regional and regional interactions. Regional organisations, in particular, played an important role in this respect. Such organisations include the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO), the Arab Labour Organisation (ALO), the Union of Arab Universities (UAU), the Arab Union for Technician Education (AUTE), the Arab Education Office for the Gulf countries, and others.

The characteristics of the labour force and the labour market in the Arab World have much in common; and since such characteristics are expected to be taken into consideration and addressed by the national education systems, a regional approach to the relevant issues and frameworks is justified and needed. To start with, a relatively high labour mobility exists within the Arab region, reflecting the fact that some countries have surpluses while others have deficits in their human resources. The organisation and rationalisation of such mobility would justify common efforts in such human resources development issues as occupational classification systems, occupational standards, certification and national qualification frameworks. On the other hand, the mobility of Arab labour outside the Arab region requires that the above mentioned regional approach to educational issues should take into consideration the need for compatibility with the relevant international standards and criteria, such as the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) and the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). Furthermore, the trend of globalisation with the accompanying Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) imposes additional pressures and incentives for a regional and international approach to many human resources development, including educational, issues.

The education system

In what follows, a brief description and general assessment of the various stages and components of the education system in the Arab World will be undertaken, taking into consideration the great variations among countries.

Literacy

Literacy rates for the adult population, 15 years-of-age and above, vary considerably among Arab countries. For the period 1995-2004, such rates varied between 51% and 93% (UNESCO, 2007, p. 252). It is worthwhile noting that, as will be shown later, the gender gap in the field of literacy exceeds considerably

that in the field of participation in primary education. This is an indicator that the efforts exerted are directed mainly toward the preventive measures to dry up the sources of illiteracy through the universalisation of compulsory basic education, more than toward the remedial or curative measures through the introduction of programmes for the eradication of illiteracy. On the other hand, the data on literacy rates conceal, as expected, the variations that might be considerable among geographical areas such as the urban and rural areas, or among the various population groups, such as the poor and the rich. In general, such and similar data conceal the poor distribution of the knowledge wealth which is as bad as the poor distribution of 'material wealth' in society. Thus, to help deal with the literacy issue in the Arab countries, the efforts that are exerted for the universalisation of compulsory education need to be strengthened, taking care of its quality and efficiency dimensions, and should be accompanied by the availability of effective eradication of illiteracy services, including easily accessible locations, qualified teachers, appropriate learning material, supporting legislative tools, and the necessary funding resources. The need exists also for enhancing the social demand for literacy services in general, and of females in particular, through the relevant social work and information and media efforts, to raise the awareness and convictions of the target population.

Pre-school education

The importance of pre-school education is attributed not only to its mission that aims at the development of the child's personality as is the case with other educational stages, but also to the nature of the concerned age group (i.e., 3-6 years), since most aspects of the individual's personality develop and their features define before joining school, which usually takes place at the age of six. This is reflected in the growing popular support for the concept of Early Childhood Development (ECD), as emphasised by educationists, psychologists and sociologists. In the Arab countries, pre-school education varies between two and three years before the age of six. Gross enrolment rates are very low in most Arab countries, indicating that such education has not been a priority in the relevant national educational plans. Such rates varied in 2005 between 1% and 74%, and were nearly the same for males and females (UNESCO, 2007, pp. 268-269). The gender gap in pre-school education is less than in basic education and in literacy. In many Arab countries, this gap is almost disappearing. This can be explained by the fact that the population groups that benefit from pre-school education tend to be of relatively high income, and thus can afford the cost involved, especially that such education is non-compulsory and is provided to a great extent by private for-profit institutions.

Basic compulsory education

Admission age to basic compulsory education in all Arab countries is six years. Nevertheless, the duration of such education varies considerably from one country to another: between five and ten years. Legislation regarding free basic compulsory education exists in all countries. Net enrolment rates in primary education vary in Arab countries between 33% and 97%, with small differences between males and females (UNESCO, 2007, pp. 276-277, 284-285, 292-293, 300-301). The transfer from basic to secondary education is open and accessible to all students without any educational filters in some countries, but with such filters in the form of national examinations in others.

It is worthwhile noting that the concept of compulsory education is in practice applied to mean 'compulsory to the government' to provide the relevant services, and not 'compulsory to the learner and parents' to benefit from such services. This is clear from the fact that education laws do not usually refer to any legal action against parents whose children drop out from school before completing basic education.

Academic secondary education

As in the case of primary and basic education, great differences exist among Arab countries regarding the rate of transfer from primary to secondary education which in 2004 varied between 45.9% and 99.9%, and regarding the net enrolment rates in secondary education which in 2005 varied between as low as 15% and as high as 95%, with small differences between females and males to the benefit of males (UNESCO, 2007, pp. 308-309).

To join higher education institutions, including universities and intermediate university institutions, graduates of academic secondary education, which is offered free in public schools, are required to pass national examinations. Such examinations are usually planned and implemented by the concerned national Ministry of Education (MOE), thus casting some doubts about their credibility and objectivity. There is need therefore to disengage such national examinations from the MOEs and to entrust them to autonomous agencies that are looked after by councils with representatives from universities, intermediate university institutions, MOEs, teachers and the private sector. Such examinations should basically have the objective of admission to higher education, and should thus assess the different components of the learners' abilities, rather than just the cognitive component.

Vocational education

In most Arab countries, vocational education is considered part of upper secondary education, lasting between two and three years, and offered within a

formal school system. The economics and funding of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems is a major issue that reflects on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of such systems. In most Arab countries, TVET institutions are state owned and funded, with little participation of private sector enterprises which are usually the main beneficiaries of the outputs of TVET programmes. Thus, there is urgent need for the diversification of funding sources, and securing a participatory approach to the financing of TVET whereby employers, civil society, the government, and sometimes learners are the concerned contributors. This should be supported by efforts to deal with the existing weaknesses in the efficiency and effectiveness of TVET programmes through such measures as the choice of cost-effective systems of TVET, raising the utilisation factor of facilities, reducing the drop-out rates, and enhancing relevance to developmental needs and labour market requirements. Other weaknesses that require special attention include the need for effective systems of monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance. Needless to say, the standards and criteria for such a system would benefit from a regional approach, taking into consideration the need for compatibility with international standards. It has to be admitted that public-private partnership in TVET is weak across the region, despite genuine efforts and some breakthroughs in a few Arab countries. Such partnership can be promoted through several measures, including the development of cooperative or formal apprenticeship systems, the enhancement of the role of the private sector and social partners in policy making, planning as well as testing and certification. Furthermore, skill standards, specialised curricula and performance tests need to be derived from actual job requirements and work competences.

Higher education

As is the case in the other stages of education, considerable variations exist among Arab countries regarding the rates of enrolment in higher education. This is clear from the gross enrolment rates that varied in 2005 between 2% and 56%, with females achieving slightly better rates than males. The proportion of females varied between 25% and 68%.

The weakness of scientific research in Arab countries, as judged by the relevant criteria and indicators, is admitted by the concerned stakeholders. One of the relevant limitations in this respect is the relatively low 'freedom ceiling' that is available for researchers when dealing with some social and cultural issues, such as gender issues. Such limitations are sometimes influenced, directly or indirectly, by the official authorities, or they could be the result of potential social pressures that generate a state of 'self censorship' or self imposed limitations by

the researchers themselves. On the other hand, many scientific theories, initiatives and breakthroughs in Arab research efforts have external, usually Western, sources. This is not restricted to the fields of natural and applied sciences, but is to be found in the humanities and social sciences as well. The relevance to Arab societies, socially and culturally, would thus be incomplete.

Assessment of educational progress

The performance of the education system in the Arab World can be assessed through the adoption of three kinds of criteria. These are:

- (i) *Quantitative criteria* that are concerned mostly with the quantitative indicators in education, such as the extent of universalisation of services and facilities for the various educational cycles at the regional and national levels. In other words, the quantitative criteria are those criteria that measure the extent of attaining equal opportunities for all to access the available educational services and facilities, and to progress in the educational ladder so that the social and economic status and background of the learner does not stand in the way of such accessibility or progress. It is worthwhile noting that the progress achieved in the Arab countries according to this type of criteria has been substantial, taking into consideration the great variations that exist among the individual countries. One of the indicators about such progress is the average number of years spent at school in formal education including primary, secondary and higher education. According to this indicator, the average years of schooling in 2005 exceeded 12 years in half of the Arab countries, and exceeded 10 years in the majority of countries (UNESCO, 2007, p. 277).
- (ii) *Qualitative criteria* that deal with such issues as the quality of teachers, curricula, teaching methodologies, facilities, evaluation tools, guidance and counselling services, special services for individuals of special needs, and the nature of out-of-class activities. They also include the extent to which life-long educational services and facilities are available, especially within non-formal education. The progress achieved in the Arab countries according to the qualitative criteria has been modest. Weaknesses can be identified in most of the above mentioned issues, such as in-service training of teachers, proactive learning, school environment, etc.
- (iii) *Governance criteria* that concern the different organisational frameworks and administrative structures. They include legislative provisions, financial and funding set-ups, stakeholders' roles, etc. As in the case of the qualitative

criteria, the progress achieved regarding the governance criteria has also been modest. The major weaknesses in most countries include a high degree of centralisation, lack of school empowerment, weak interaction with local communities, and the absence of teachers' professional associations and unions.

Education legislation and social practices

In general, equity and equal opportunities characterise Arab constitutions, laws and by-laws in the field of education. This applies in general to all fields and stages of education, including its formal and non-formal systems. Nevertheless, the availability of the appropriate educational legislation constitutes in practice one side of the coin. The other side is the extent to which such legislation is applied and translated into action and practices. Many challenges and obstacles are encountered in this respect. To start with, the lack of resources or will on the part of governments stand in the way of availing the facilities and services as well as human resources that are necessary to activate the relevant legislations, such as the full provision of basic compulsory education. Social practices and convictions, especially in some remote or rural areas, sometimes reflect negatively on the extent to which educational services are utilised, such as in the case of women's education. On the other hand, the commitment to the implementation of some aspects of legislative provisions is restricted in practice to the public and governmental sector, while such commitment is not fully practised by the private and non-governmental sector, especially if such legislative provisions are vague. Thus, in general, it can be stated that a clear schism exists in Arab societies between the cultural roots and the prevailing societal culture. The cultural roots, a great part of which emanates from Islamic teachings, encourage life-long education for all, 'from the cradle to the grave'. National legislative tools, whether old or new, reflect this concept to a great extent. This is also reflected by the positive response to the international treaties, conventions and declarations which rarely face any reservations from Arab countries, due to their concurrence with the relevant cultural roots. This is not usually the case with other international treaties and conventions that deal with fields other than education where, not infrequently, reservations are made concerning the provisions of some articles.

When exploring social and cultural characteristics in Arab societies and their influence on educational issues, one can easily conclude that it is societal culture, rather than the cultural roots, that influence the type of outputs and impact. Societal culture is a mixture of original cultural roots on the one hand, and those inherited cultural features that accumulated through centuries of backwardness on the other. In this sense, societal culture is of special relevance when exploring those limitations

in Arab societies that stand in the way of the full utilisation of educational progress in national socioeconomic developments. One of those limitations is the limited utilisation of women's education in their participation in such developments.

Education and society

Education systems affect and are affected by many social, cultural, political and economic considerations and factors. The nature of interaction between education and these factors is what actually differentiates one educational system from the other. The following is a brief description of the general issues that are of relevance, and the relevant status of such issues in the Arab World.

Democracy and education

Democracy of education is to some extent a reflection of democracy in society at large. The education system can be assessed as democratic if:

- (i) It provides equal opportunities to all social groups in society: males, females, the underprivileged, the talented, the slow learners, the handicapped, the refugees, etc.
- (ii) It is organised, governed and administered by the utilisation of democratic principles and processes that highlight the participatory approach to learning and that empowers the school as the basic unit and active cell in the system.
- (iii) It makes available the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to the learner related to democratic systems, models, principles and practices through the relevant educational material as well as in-class and out-of class activities.

The substantial progress in the Arab World vis-à-vis the first criterion (i) above is not matched by the status of the two other criteria, (ii) and (iii). This is clear from the fact that the organisation, governance, administration and content of the system lack the democratic approaches, principles and processes.

Unemployment and education

With rates exceeding 14%, unemployment has been for sometime a chronic problem in the Arab World. Although it is basically an economic issue resulting from the fact that the new job opportunities created by the economic growth are

less than the number of new entrants to the labour market, the education system can contribute to improve or worsen the situation. The fact that more than 20% of the labour force in the Arab countries consists of expatriate labour from outside the Arab Region who are employed mostly at the basic occupational levels as skilled and limited-skills (semi-skilled) workers, coupled with high unemployment among university graduates leads to the conclusion that the education system should emphasise more the preparation of human resources at the post-basic education level in vocational areas. Furthermore, the relatively high population growth that amounts to 2.4% on one hand, and the slow economic growth that has been accompanied by the availability of limited job opportunities on the other, led to high unemployment rates in most Arab countries that affected women more than men, due to various practical and social factors.

Poverty and education

It is estimated that about 15% of the Arab population live under the poverty line. Some studies show that poverty in the Arab countries is due to low income as well as to unemployment. Most of the efforts undertaken to alleviate poverty are of the curative type through such measures as direct financial help, provision of loans to establish productive projects, and the provision of training services in employable skills. Preventive type efforts for the alleviation of poverty such as tax structures, redistribution of wealth systems, legislative tools, and fighting corruption are not as effective as needed. The education system can play a role in the efforts to alleviate poverty by promoting its relevance to developmental needs and labour market requirements, and by expanding its non-formal and adult education services that enhance the employability of the poor and empower them locally and regionally.

Gender and education

The progress achieved by many Arab countries in the field of women's education has been accompanied by only a modest progress in their political, economic and social status. It seems that a time lag exists between the outputs of educational efforts and the expected impact on other socioeconomic fields, including gender issues. As one relevant example, the great progress achieved in the enrolment ratios in the various stages of education has so far not been matched by a similar progress in their participation in the labour market. Females constitute only 20% of the labour force in the Arab World, and unemployment among females is more than 50% higher than among males. This is despite the fact that,

as in the case of educational legislation, labour laws provide for equal job opportunities for males and females, the basic right to work for all, equal wages for similar jobs, etc. Nevertheless the situation in the case of employment is different from that of education, as the legal provisions for equality are applied to a lesser extent in the labour field, especially in the private sector. The issue should thus be explored regarding how the education system can contribute to the promotion of female employment by enhancing its relevance to developmental needs and labour market requirements, and emphasising the relevant attitudinal aspects.

Any future look on women's education and its impact on their role in public life and contribution in the labour market would lead to potentially positive indicators within two dimensions. The first concerns the dwindling effect of the 'time lag' referred to above and hence the gradual growth of the influence of developments in women's education on their role in public life and their contribution to the national economies, especially with the support of other forces of change that yield pressures in the same direction. The second dimension concerns the influence of new technologies and the accompanying ICTs that are gradually leading to new modes of work that are expected to open new horizons for employment in general, and for the employment of women in particular, especially if the education system supports such developments. The new modes of work include 'distance or virtual work' where the individual can work without physically joining a work site.

On the other hand, it can be stated that what has been achieved regarding the realisation of equal opportunities and similar rates of participation for males and females in education guaranteed the quantitative dimension only of gender equity in education. The need would still exist to realise the qualitative dimension that concerns curriculum content, the image of women in school textbooks, and in general the approach to gender issues in the education system. This qualitative dimension includes also the role played by women in the teaching profession, especially in the planning, policy making, governance and organisation of the education system at the central, local and institutional levels. Such role is known to be far from adequate in most Arab countries. This is not the case regarding female participation in the teaching staff where, with the exception of higher education, the proportion of females in the teaching staff exceeds that of males. The limitations that stand in the way of women's participation in education in general in Arab countries increase by one extra limitation when considering vocational education that aims at the preparation of skilled workers at the basic occupational levels. Such limitations, as already referred to, have quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and are of both social and economic nature. In this respect, the available information (UNESCO,

2007) shows that even in countries that have realised full gender equality regarding the enrolment rates in the various educational stages, such quantitative equality conceals noticeable differences in enrolment rates in vocational education to the benefit of males, due to various practical considerations and social prejudices. Such limitations can be explained by the fact that admission to vocational education takes place usually after completing basic compulsory education, in most cases at the age of 15 or before, and lasts for two or three years. Females at this age are usually considered by their families as too young to join the formal labour market.

On the other hand, most vocational education programmes in the Arab countries prepare learners for jobs and professions that fit the traditional labour market, and rarely deal with the needs of home industries or self employment or micro and small business that can be attractive to females. Furthermore, vocational education necessitates in many cases direct contact with enterprises for on-the-job training, especially in apprenticeship schemes. Typical Arab families in many parts of the Arab World are too conservative to have their daughters involved in such schemes at an early age. The status of females as compared to males in higher education is better than in secondary and primary education, despite the great variations among Arab countries. The enrolment ratio of females in such education exceeds the ratio for males in more than two-thirds of the Arab countries. On the other hand, female enrolment is particularly high in such fields as the humanities, arts, medical sciences, and health care, and is equivalent to that of males in the natural sciences, but considerably less in engineering, industry, construction and agriculture (UNESCO, 2007, pp. 324-325). To summarise, the following are some indicators about women's education in the Arab World (UNESCO, 2007):

- Average years of schooling for females are equal to or more than those for males in most Arab countries.
- Literacy rates vary between 35% and 91% for males, compared to 60% and 95% for females.
- Enrolment rates of females in pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education are comparable to such rates for males.
- Females in the majority of Arab countries constitute more than 90% of the teaching staff in pre-school education and more than 50% of the teaching staff in primary education, where co-education is common.
- The proportion of females in the teaching staff is nearly equal to that of males in secondary education where co-education is not common.
- The proportion of females in the teaching staff of higher education is less than 35% in most Arab countries.

Role of the non-government sector

When considering the involvement of the non-government sector in education, two groups of stakeholders can be identified. These are the private sector which is usually a for-profit sector, and the NGO sector including philanthropic and voluntary organisations and civil society at large. Both these groups are active partners in Arab education systems, and their role in such systems is characterised by a number of strengths and weaknesses. To start with, the relatively high level of participation of the non-government sector in education on the implementation level is not matched by a similar level of participation on the policy making and planning levels, despite the representation of this sector in the membership of the relevant boards and councils. Furthermore, the non-government sector has a weak role in the evaluation and assessment of the outputs of the Arab education systems. The need to strengthen such a role is particularly obvious in the case of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems, some of which are implemented jointly by both government and non-government partners. It is worthwhile noting here that the role of the non-government sector on the implementation side of TVET is almost exclusively limited to the cooperative (dual or apprenticeship) system which can be found on a limited scale in some Arab countries, and is minimal in the school system which prevails in most countries. On the other hand, voluntary NGOs are usually active in the provision of subsidised or free educational services for special groups such as the handicapped and the underprivileged, especially at the pre-school and pre-university levels, although a modest proportion of such groups are provided with the necessary educational and training services.

The size of private education in particular, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, varies considerably in Arab countries, although a great expansion in such education took place during the past two decades. On the other hand, private education addresses all educational stages, but it tends to expand more in the non-compulsory stages of education, such as pre-school and higher education. Learners and their families usually bear the full cost of services in educational institutions that are run by the private sector. This applies to private universities, intermediate university institutions and schools. The relatively high cost involved and the lack of effective systems of student funds render such institutions accessible mainly to the economically able to the detriment of those who cannot afford to pay for the services, thus reflecting negatively on the democracy of education. Student funding schemes that are available for this purpose are provided by some NGOs and through some trust funds that are established by individuals, but the size and impact of such efforts are limited.

In general, therefore, it can be stated that private education, especially where public education is not comprehensive enough in its coverage or where its quality is relatively low, enhances elitism in the education system and accentuates social strata. This is because the high costs involved stand in the way of low income groups benefitting from the relevant services. In this context, the summary of the *Arab Human Development Report* states that 'in the existing institutional context, it would be difficult for the profit driven incentives to provide a basis for fulfilling the educational needs of vulnerable groups ... Such vulnerability worsens if the government does not assume its role in securing education for these groups' (Gharaibah, 2002, p. 29).

Due to the high cost of the services of private education institutions, especially the for-profit ones, their social mission stops usually short of providing services in activities or programmes that are not economically feasible, such as serving remote areas or groups of special needs. Needless to say, all these restrictions apply in particular in the case of traditional educational institutions that require face-to-face presence of teacher and learner inside the education institution. It does not necessarily apply in the case of open learning institutions, especially those that utilise modern information and communication technologies or e-learning. Fortunately, such open modes of education are gaining momentum and are helping to reduce, at least partially, the elitist dimension of traditional systems.

The economics of education

It is well acknowledged now by education systems, including Arab ones, that education is as much an investment in human capital as it is a social service and a human right. Nevertheless, and despite this recognition, the economics of education as a concept that comprises such components and criteria as internal efficiency, rate of return, sources of funding, etc. is not fully recognised or comprehensively taken into consideration in the Arab World. On average, Arab countries spend about 6% of their Gross National Product (GNP) on education. Percentage wise this is a favourable figure according to world standards, but as an absolute figure it falls short in most countries of the funding requirements that would respond to the quantitative and qualitative needs of the education systems. Part of the gap is frequently bridged in some countries by external funding through loans and grants. A substantial increase in national spending on education can be a justified and feasible suggestion in some countries, but not so in others due to other pressing national needs. In both cases, any major moves in this respect should concentrate on promoting the economics of education by rationalising expenditures and enhancing the rates of return on educational services. Some of

the weaknesses that need to be tackled in many Arab countries in this respect include:

- Little efforts are undertaken to evaluate the socioeconomic rate of return and feasibility of many educational programmes at the secondary and post-secondary levels.
- Low utilisation factor of educational facilities in some locations due to population characteristics and the scattered nature of schools and lack of consolidation of facilities.
- Lack of funds to develop the qualitative aspects of the educational processes, resulting in a higher than usual proportion of the available financial resources spent on salaries and wages.
- Under-employment in some educational levels and sectors due to lack of adequate human resources, and over-employment in other levels and sectors due to social pressures that reflect conditions of unemployment.
- The limited diversification of funding sources, and thus the need to increase the role of the private sector (e.g., in scientific research), NGOs (e.g., in services for learners of special needs) and learners (e.g., in higher and non-formal education).
- The need to rationalise the system of government subsidies in general, and to higher education institutions in particular, so as to link such subsidies to the promotion of national policies and priorities, or to criteria that are related to quality and relevance of outputs.

Education, globalisation and modern technologies

Globalisation is a phenomenon whose effects and extensions show in one way or another in almost all societies. Disregarding globalisation might lead to marginalisation and isolation. There is no alternative therefore but to deal with the challenges it presents in a practical and rational manner to maximise its benefits and minimise its shortcomings. Needless to say, although this applies to all societies, the efforts needed in developing ones are deeper and of a more serious nature. It can be taken for granted that good quality education at all levels and in all fields, through formal and non-formal systems, is a major tool in dealing with the challenges of globalisation, utilising its potentials and avoiding its pitfalls. Technological developments and ICTs are known to be important features that accompany globalisation, and both act as driving forces as well as outputs at the same time. In this respect, the challenges that face the education systems in developing countries, including Arab countries, assume a further dimension due

to the continuously widening scientific and technological gap between such countries and the developed ones. One of the dimensions of such a gap, which is known as the 'digital divide', exists in the field of ICT. In addition, this gap can be found among the Arab countries themselves, and even among the different social groups within the same country.

The continuous expansion that is taking place in the utilisation of ICT in education systems and work places should be a helping factor in this respect. Open and distance education that utilises modern technologies, and which is called e-learning for this reason, is one of the fruits of the ICT developments that is establishing itself in Arab education systems, especially in higher education. Although it is facing some difficulties regarding its accreditation and full assimilation within the education mainstream, such difficulties seem to be part of a transition period. As one mode of distance learning, e-learning is characterised by the potential to avail educational services to a wider spectrum of societal groups than can be realised by traditional learning systems. These groups include housewives, residents of remote areas, the employed and many groups of special needs. The fact that these groups in particular are not well served by existing services renders the growth of e-learning facilities and services a welcome sign. On the other hand, e-learning upgrades the capacity of learners for self-learning and entrepreneurship. It also enhances their contacts with a wide spectrum of sources of knowledge. This is expected to contribute to the improvement of the quality of education which would be a welcome and needed development in Arab education systems. Furthermore, e-learning supports both formal and non-formal education, thus helping to open new horizons, which are not restricted by time or place, for continuous education and lifelong learning. The proviso being that such learning is well utilised and made accessible for the various societal groups, especially if it is blended as much as possible with the traditional face-to-face learning systems.

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