

UNEVOC Forum

Learning, Training & The World of Work

Challenges facing a rapidly changing Arab World

This paper is an adaptation of a presentation Dr. Yousif gave on 21 August 2003 under the UNESCO-UNEVOC Outreach Programme in Germany. He examines some of the educational challenges that the Arab States are facing.

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Background

» We live in an uncertain world whose rapid rhythm of change is further complicated by globalisation and the widening digital gap between "developed" and "developing" countries. Nevertheless all countries of the world share some common concerns about issues such as unemployment (especially among youth), poverty, pandemic diseases, dialogue between cultures and the need for peace in the world.

The 21 Arab countries are no exception. Human development and peace have topped the agenda of every country in the region for the last four decades. But this has not been an easy task in a region that has witnessed no stability during these four decades, mainly because of the conflict with Israel, but also because of internal political uncertainties in most, if not all, countries of the



The 21 Arab countries

region. Consequently, the various efforts to bring about authentic development in the region have paid little dividends. The situation, of course, varies from country to country as can be seen in the variations in GDP level, the rate of adult literacy, the level of achievement in the fight against poverty, unemployment, and the status of women.

However, the region as a whole has made considerable progress in terms of economic and social development. There is certainly a

great potential for the region to advance quickly into prosperity provided that peace prevails and that the Arab countries find a formula that can help them pool their resources together. It is the most homogenous region in the world, in which 21 countries share the same language, history and, to a very large extent, the same religion. There are abundant human and material resources, enough to "make the miracle" happen, but they need the right political and social context to make a meaningful contribution.

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Learning, Training and the World of Work

» As far as education is concerned, there are serious problems of both quantity and quality. While about 10 countries have achieved 100% enrolment in Primary Education, the enrolment level in six countries is below 50% of children of school age. The most alarming aspect is the high illiteracy rate among youth and adults, which is higher than 50% in about seven countries, and over 70% for women and rural people. It is estimated that there are about 60 million illiterate adults (15 years of age and

above) of whom two thirds are women. While all countries have made progress in education, particularly for girls, the overall situation indicates that the kind of education provided by government institutions is generally of poor quality compared to private education. For the majority of people private education is too expensive, a fact that has added to the social gap between groups in society and consequently hampers social mobility.

Secondary Education suffers from inadaptability to the needs of individuals and society. Graduates who do not get admitted to university have little chance of finding a job in the labour market, thus adding to the unemployment problem. There have been many attempts in the region to reform secondary education, but no country has yet managed to come up with the magic formula.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET)

» Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has been a priority area in many countries in the region. However, that too suffers a problem of orientation and a lack of real appreciation of the role it can play in transforming the landscape of industry in a country, and in meeting, at least partially, the labour market demands

and the needs of unemployed citizens. There are still those who associate TVET with lower categories of labour. This view is encouraged by a prevailing situation in the whole region which lowers the entry requirements for technical and vocational education, compared to those required for academic secondary education. The region needs to take a new

look at this matter. There should be clear policies on vocational qualification systems, and on the issue of partnership between TVET systems and industry with the goal of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of TVET by sharing the resources available in schools and industry, thereby integrating education and training.

Higher Education (HE)

» One is struck by the rapid rate of expansion of Higher Education (HE) institutions in the region. In 1950 there were only 10 universities in the region: in 2003 there are more than 200 and the numbers are increasing at the rate of about ten universities a year. Although the majority of the universities are government sponsored, there are a good number of private universities, most of them new.

their societies. However, there are some good examples of distinction in some countries. It is also important to mention that the universities of the region are struggling to cope with the increasing demand with limited resources. As the Beirut Declaration on Higher Education in the Arab States for the XXIst Century (1998) states, HE has been "under considerable strain" and therefore, has fallen short of meeting its goals.

- High population growth;
- Inadequate financial resources;
- Inflexible and centralised management;
- Lack of diversification of institutions and programmes;
- Inability to meet students' needs;
- Weakness of the link between HE institutions, general and secondary education institutions, local communities and societal and human development needs.

The call for reforming HE has come from both government and the private sector and from circles of intellectuals. They all share a belief that the universities in the region have not been able to meet the demands of

A recent publication by UNESCO on Higher Education lists a number of issues that were identified as straining HE in the region. They include:

The Beirut Declaration on Higher Education in the Arab States for the XXIst Century identified the need for:

- New teaching and learning skills, methods and processes;
- Inclusion of new technologies;
- Promotion of scientific and analytical thinking skills.

Unemployment remains a formidable challenge for the region. According to the ILO Report for 2000, unemployment for the region is estimated at 15%. However, there are variations among countries.

est unemployment rate (2.6%) followed by the State of Bahrain (3.1%).

Another serious issue is the brain drain. It is estimated that there are around one million Arab experts working abroad at a high skill level.

The United Arab Emirates reports the low-

Obstacles and barriers

» Although there are common cultural and human ties among the people of the region there are still some hurdles to overcome. Many governments create obstacles and barriers, which make integration or even regular exchange of goods and individuals, a cumbersome, if not an impossible task. The most glaring examples are the low level of trade and investment between countries in the region, which fluctuate between 4% and 8%, and the serious restrictions imposed on the movement of labour. With the exception of Syria, citizens of Arab coun-

tries are required to obtain entry visas to all other countries, irrespective of the visiting purpose to that particular country.

It is striking to note that most of the Arab countries that need foreign labour prefer to hire Asians, for three main reasons: They are less expensive than Arab employees; They can be terminated at short notice and without many obligations; and according to employers, their presence in an Arab country does not pose any political danger (unlike the Arab citizens whose political

learnings may not be desired).

The UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2002 described these three issues as 'The Three Deficits'.

- The Freedom Deficit;
- The Women's Empowerment Deficit; and
- The Human Capabilities/Knowledge Deficit Relative to Income.

Women

» The report concluded that the Arab countries score the lowest on the Freedom Deficit index. The criteria used in the report measures various aspects of the political process, civil liberties, political rights and independence of the media. Data also shows that the Arab region "has the lowest value of all regions in the world for voice and accountability".

the population, their membership in Arab Parliaments is only 3.5%. Another dimension of the Women's Empowerment Deficit is the low level of educational attainment as measured by the high rate of illiteracy, which places the Arab countries at the bottom of the scale. An estimated 65 million Arabs, out of a total population of about 280 million, are illiterate; two thirds of them are women.



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While women have made progress in terms of Primary Education, they scored poorly on the Women's Empowerment Deficit largely because of their limited involvement in the political process. Arab women rank a notch higher than the status of women in sub-Saharan Africa who remain at the bottom of the scale. While women represent 50% of

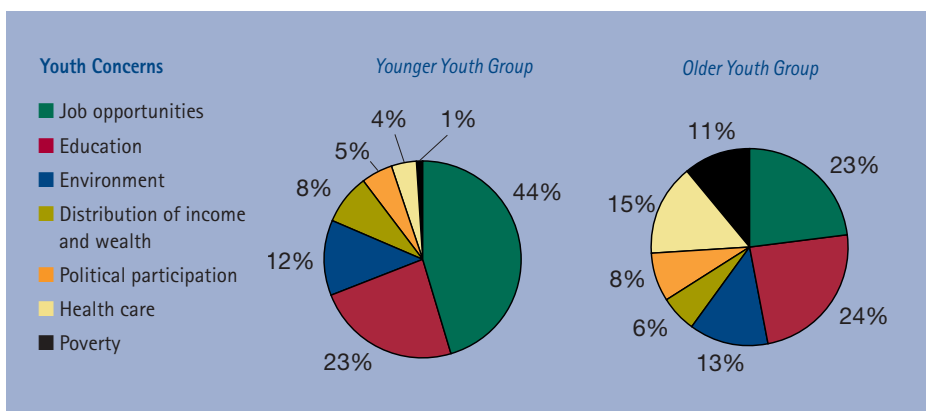
The report underscores the relatively weak and poorly utilised human capabilities in the region, due to poor educational systems and the high illiteracy rate. Poor education means poor access to knowledge acquisition. The Arab countries have the lowest access level to information and communication

technology (ICT), even lower than sub-Saharan Africa. It attributes the poor access to ICT to the absence of national information policies that delineate targets and priorities, coordinate the various sectors and formulate strategic alternatives with regard to the creation of infrastructure and the development of human and information resources.

Youth

» The youth groups considered the following issues as the most important ones addressed in the report (see chart).

Young women expressed relatively more concern than young men did about education, work, political participation and health care.



Job availability is the most common concern of youth, followed by education. Based on surveys conducted in a number of countries, 51% of the older youths expressed a desire to immigrate to other countries, clearly indicating their dissatisfaction with current conditions and future prospects in their home

countries. The authors of the report were cautious to mention that: *"the responses obtained and analysed here do not constitute a probability sample of Arab youth large enough to permit valid generalisation about the entire universe of young Arabs"*.

Which way forward for the Arab Region?


Although the Arab countries have made some progress in Human Development, there are still some significant deficits in key areas of human well-being: civil and political freedoms, the status of women in society, and access to knowledge. As we have pointed out at the beginning of this paper, there are huge inter-country disparities. While some countries have done well in some aspects of material wealth, human development remains low in many instances. A number of countries are far from being able to universalise basic education for children or to eradicate basic adult illiteracy; and all countries of the region need to improve the quality of their education to make it relevant to the needs of individuals and communities in a rapidly changing world.

The educational systems are very traditional. There is hardly any serious plan for introducing the concept of lifelong learning as a governing concept in the educational system. A few countries are now experimenting with the idea of introducing ICTs in education, but what they lack is a holistic approach to the problem in- and outside the school. A new concept of learning has to be developed inside the school to make the learner the key actor in the process.

There will be a need for a new curriculum and a new type of teacher whose primary role is not to transmit knowledge but to help their students learn how to learn. Outside the school the society should be prepared for creating and managing knowledge.

Related to the issue of reform in the education system is the issue of unemployment, to which there are two sides: supply and demand. On the supply side, education and training institutions need to be radically reformed in order to be capable of responding effectively to the demands of individuals and those of society. There is no room for half measures. Education and training systems must be overhauled in accordance with the emerging requirements for human development in the region.

On the demand side, there is a need for governments to adopt new visions for the future. Such visions should be translated into real plans and programmes that address issues that are of prime concern to the people of the region. The three deficits identified by the UNDP report are important but they only represent the tip of the iceberg. Other major issues include: governance and the rule of law, including freedom of



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opinion, speech and assembly: the development of science and technology and their role in transforming the Arab Society; the questions of inter-country cooperation, Arab unity and Arab links with the rest of the world; and finally, questions of poverty and exclusion. These are issues that have to be addressed by all governments in the region, in partnership with the private sector and civil society. Unfortunately, the latter is rarely seen as a partner by the governments in the region.

Final remarks

The choice, in my view, is very obvious: Each Arab country must now take every measure necessary to establish an effective, dynamic knowledge acquisition system through education/learning and research and development. They can only be effective if they are enacted within a context that is free of deficits, be they in the domain of freedom, status of women and ethnic minorities or in national and Pan-Arab unity. The Knowledge Deficit is the most serious of all deficits.

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