

Education in the Middle East and North Africa: The Current Situation and Future Challenges

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This paper investigates the educational development in the Middle East and North Africa, drawing on data from different international and national institutions. The paper begins with a review of similarities between countries within the region, and continues by investigating the situation of basic education, literacy rates and quality of education. In the third section, issues of inequality between public and private education are discussed. The paper concludes by outlining future educational challenges in the region.

Comparative education, Middle East, North Africa, development, literacy, basic education

INTRODUCTION

Human capital formation is receiving increased attention from policy makers and scholars interested in promoting economic development in Third World countries. Models of endogenous economic growth stress the importance of investment in knowledge, including basic education, as a critical factor in economic expansion. Specialists have long argued that education should form a principal component in any development strategy.

The Middle East and North Africa form a vast region stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arab- Persian Gulf. The historical and cultural experiences of the region's countries share many common themes. First, Islam as the main religion and Arabic as the language are key factors in the identity formation of the region. In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, most of the region was under European colonization. When colonization ended, a strong economic, cultural and political dependence on developed countries remained.

Each country's educational past and current experiences are different, but several important similarities exist. These similarities provide a starting point for a country-to-country comparison, and for a better understanding of some of the problems that must be solved if the educational systems are to be structurally improved.

In the Arabic region, colonial authorities initiated compulsory modern education. However, native access to formal education was limited for two main reasons: for one thing, the colonial powers did not want to equip indigenous people with the skills and knowledge to challenge their power. Restricting modern schooling and especially European-language education to a minimum of students would simultaneously strengthen the colonial administration and weaken nationalist tendencies.

Secondly, the existence of a local formal education system was represented by Koranic schools. This alternative system was in competition with the colonial one not only because of its religious reference but also because of its opposition to western cultural hegemony. In the late nineteenth century, colonial European powers were promoting compulsory education and at the same time

seeking territorial and colonial conquests. In France, Jules Ferry was both the founder of the French public education system and the supporter of more colonialism.

For Muslim societies, there is a clear division between the role of school for religious education and the role of school for modern development. The Koranic school, with lessons in Arabic by a teacher of religion [maallam, Fkih], is an essential part of the upbringing of a Muslim child. All children are exposed to Koranic recitation, and many progress to higher religious studies. However, the debate on Koranic education and modern formal education existed even before European colonization in some Arab countries.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Egyptian and the Tunisian governments sent missions to Europe to try to emulate European ways; to modernize according to what was perceived as European technological and military advancement. The primary purpose of these early missions to the West was to learn the ways of the advanced white man, to translate his works, and to pick up his habits (Saïd, 1993). Modern schooling was one of the ways to develop this European modernism. In Tunisia, the polytechnic school of Bardo was created in 1830 as a local version of *l'école polytechnique* in France to give the country the possibility of absorbing new technologies.

During the second half of the twentieth century, education has been taken very much as an investment in human capital, with long-term benefits both to the individual who is educated and to the public at large. The story of education has been also the story of post-colonial government control of education for purposes of nation building and economic development (Akkari, 1999).

EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Access to basic education

Free, publicly provided education has been a central tenant of the social contract in every country in the Middle East and North Africa since independence. Post-independence governments significantly expanded their education systems, driven by rapidly expanding youth populations, the need to build nationhood and to establish political legitimacy and popular support for new regimes through making education a fundamental right of citizenship.

It is well known that population growth in the Arab countries is among the highest in the world, which makes providing basic education a major challenge. However, education systems in the region, with few exceptions, now provide basic education to most children. Opportunities for secondary education, vocational training and tertiary education are also provided to many students, particularly in urban areas. Education is compulsory through the primary grades everywhere, and through lower secondary grades in some countries. Most countries have achieved universal primary enrolment and significant secondary enrolment increases. Growth in tertiary enrolment rates has been less dramatic and a few countries even saw slight declines in the 1990s. However, given expanding tertiary populations, even a constant rate implies a large increase in students.

Educational outcomes have improved. Primary enrolment shot up from 61 per cent in 1965 to 98 per cent in 1990, with particular progress in oil-exporting countries. The economic growth as well as oil incomes facilitated the task of the Arab States in expanding basic education. The World Bank pointed out that during the period 1960 to 80 the Middle East and North Africa outperformed all other regions except East Asia in income growth and the equality of income distribution:

By 1990 only 5.6% of the population in Arab countries lived on less than \$1 a day-the global benchmark of absolute poverty- compared with 14.7% in East Asia and 28.8% in Latin America. And whatever the wealth, poverty was lower in Arab States countries than elsewhere. (World Bank, nd p. 3)

Consequently, the social outcomes have been enormous. Infant mortality more than halved, and life expectancy rose by more than ten years. In Tunisia, for example, life expectancy rose from 51 years in 1961 to 72 years in 1998 (Institut national d'études statistiques, 1999).

Yemen, Egypt and Morocco struggled to achieve universal public education mainly because a demographic explosion and a large rural population characterized these three countries. According to the 1986 census, 41 per cent of the Egyptian population was below 15 years of age, and nearly 11.33 million were between the age of 6 to 14 years, the age range of compulsory basic education. With a relatively young and growing population, pressures on the education system in recent years have been enormous (Zibani, 1994).

A significant number of people live in the mountain regions in Yemen and Morocco, where access to schools and their limited number are problematic. In Morocco, the construction of 511 classrooms every month in the 1980's would have made it possible to meet the needs, but for the years 1980 to 85, despite rising expenditure, only 271 classrooms were completed (De Lavergnée, 1991).

In Yemen during 1998 and 1999, as many as 2000 women teachers were trained for work in rural areas. The Community Schools Project, which began in 1994 with approximately 1,000 girls in 120 villages, have now reached more than 11,000 girls who would not otherwise have received primary education. While communities have provided classroom space in most of the villages, in some cases the classes meet under trees. More than 50 new classrooms have been constructed and another 25 classrooms repaired for the girls' schooling (UNICEF, 2000).

Access to basic education is widening in the Middle East and North Africa. Still, demographic pressure imposes intensive use of school facilities. Double and sometimes triple shifts are used. A lack of qualified teachers also contributes to the limited quality of basic education. Rural schoolchildren must sometimes walk for hours to reach schools. The scarcity of schools, poverty and the use of children as workers are some of the key factors of low schooling achievement in the Middle East and North Africa.

Literacy rates

Literacy improved dramatically from 1960 to 1995, more than doubling in every country, each starting from a very low base-rate. Improvement in literacy was larger than in any other region in the Third World. However, because literacy increases more rapidly in urban areas, countries with very significant rural populations (Morocco, Yemen and Egypt) also have lower adult literacy rates: around and above 50 per cent. Moreover, because literacy in the region (everywhere except Lebanon) is at least 20 per cent lower among women, females in predominantly rural countries such as Morocco and Yemen are at a distinct disadvantage: only one in ten rural women can read and write in Morocco, and only one in nine can read in Yemen (World Bank, 1999).

Illiteracy is still widespread all over Egypt, but especially in rural Upper Egypt. Fergany (1995b) argued that the concept of illiteracy must be redefined in order to encompass those who attend school but are not adequately educated and not fully literate. Fergany (1995b) has also established that illiteracy is significantly higher in rural areas (61%) than in urban areas (35%). Similarly, women and the poor suffer the most from high illiteracy rates, particularly in rural areas. The

illiteracy rate among women in rural areas reaches 76 per cent as compared to 45 per cent in urban areas.

If we also take into account regressive illiterates, who have lost their ability to read and write through disuse, and functional illiterates, who are incapable of grasping a minimum amount of information for daily use, the figures of illiteracy in all Arab States will be different than the statistical picture. Furthermore, access to newspapers, books and libraries is still limited in the region not only for lack of resources or readers, but also because of a strong political control on printed materials. Access to newspapers varies widely in the region from 15 copies per 1000 inhabitants in Yemen to 110 copies per 1000 inhabitants in Lebanon (UNESCO, 1998a).

Quality and international comparisons

Special consideration is given in this section to the relative position of Arab countries vis-à-vis the rest of the developing world. Some international comparative studies on the quality of education in terms of the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills are available, yet only Jordan has participated in recent international assessment studies. Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia have decided to participate in the repeat of The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) for 1999. Jordan was near the bottom in mathematics and science in the international assessments and a national Jordanian assessment found that students were not meeting learning objectives in Arabic, mathematics and science (World Bank, 1999). However, we observe that most of the countries participating in international comparative studies are industrialized countries. Thus it may be misleading to compare educational performance of countries with different levels of economic development.

International comparisons of quality, of both inputs and outputs, are extremely difficult. This is because education systems differ substantially not only in the structure and content of their learning, but also in their objectives. The cultural component of education, its social objectives, is least susceptible to comparison, indeed to any form of quantitative measure.

If we consider completion, the Middle East and North Africa have one of the best rates among the developing countries. Almost 93 per cent of all youngsters who enter primary school are able to complete the cycle and move to the secondary level compared to a percentage below 70 in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (UNESCO, 1998b).

A mean year of schooling is an indicator used to reflect the level of educational development of a country. It reflects the cumulative impact of previous and current investments in education. It is important to point out here that this gross indicator does not directly show quality of education. However, high mean years of schooling usually correlate with good quality and it is a basic condition to build an efficient education system.

Mean years of schooling is lower in the Arab countries than the rest of the developing world. Even for Gulf countries, mean years of schooling is lower than the rest of the Third World in spite of the per capita GDP being much higher.

The standard indicator of expenditure on education as a percentage of GNP shows that Arab countries spend over 5 per cent on education, the highest percentage of GNP among all countries. Education costs, largely supported by the public sector, have been rising because of population growth and the expansion of schooling.

OXFAM 's Education Performance Index (EPI) was created by to measure some aspects of educational inequality between developing countries. It concentrates on three dimensions of basic education, which have a critical bearing on the performance of education systems:

- the net enrolment rate, which shows the proportion of children aged between 6-11 years who enrol in school;
- gender equity in net enrolment expressed in terms of the enrolment gap between girls and boys;
- the school completion rate, which represents the proportion of students who progress beyond Grade 4 (Watkins, 1999).

Comparing the EPI ranking for the Arab countries, analysed with their income ranking, confirms that in education as in other areas of human development, some countries have been better than others in converting economic potential into benefits for people. Several countries have achieved a high level of success in overcoming income constraints. Among the success stories is Tunisia, which ranked 20 places above its income ranking. Syria and Iraq, whose EPI ranks at least 10 places above their average income rank, are also considered by OXFAM as good performers. In Tunisia, more than 6 per cent of the country's GNP is dedicated to public education, which is free at all levels. School attendance has also been compulsory since 1991 for the 1.4 million basic education students (Institut national d'études statistiques, 1999).

Despite their financial resources, several countries in the Middle East have been unable - or, more accurately, unwilling - to convert national wealth into extended opportunities for basic education. In some cases, the gap between EPI ranking and income ranking is of extraordinary dimension. Among the bad performers are Kuwait (54 places lower), Saudi Arabia (48 places lower), Qatar (38 places lower), and Oman (36 places lower). Kuwait and Saudi Arabia respectively account for the largest and second largest differential between EPI rank and income rank.

The underlying reasons for the discrepancies vary. In the cases of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, the central problem is a relatively low net enrolment rate. Completion rates for both countries are high and the gender gap in enrolment small. In Qatar, the gender gap in enrolment (20%) is the primary problem (Watkins, 1999).

Education and labour

Despite a significant improving of formal education in the Arab countries during the last decades, the connection between education and employment is still lacking. In Egypt, Fergany (1995a) argued that the rewards of education in terms of access to more productive and remunerative employment is becoming increasingly precarious. He argues that open-unemployment has been steadily rising in the last two decades to reach 14 per cent of the labour force in late 1992 and that unemployment has been concentrated among young, new entrants to the labour market with secondary vocational degrees. The next highest rate of unemployment is among university graduates. In general, women are those who suffer the most from unemployment.

In this context, the education system does not contribute to improving the average Egyptian's earnings prospects in the labour market. Only university education results in a sizable return over the previous stage of education. Schools, specifically primary and preparatory levels, do not produce marketable skills, hence the high rate of unemployment among this category. According to Fergany (1995a), the conditions of schooling, in conjunction with the socio-economic situation of the pupils in these levels, do not allow them to pursue further their education and to acquire a higher level of training in formal education. Therefore, education appears to have low private returns.

Clearly, we may extend Fregany's analysis to most countries in the region. Investing in education must be accompanied by massive investment in economic sectors where the skills mastered can be used to provoke more economic growth.

Inequalities within each country

The least privileged and the poor are those most strongly affected by the precarious situation of the education system in the Middle East and North Africa. In Egypt, The number of working children between 6-14 years of age is estimated to be 1.5 million children, representing an average of 12.5 per cent of the population in question. Furthermore, the rate of working boys is 13 per cent while that of girls is 12 per cent (Zibani, 1994). The alarming dropout rates from basic education are a symptom of the declining quality of education. A large number of pupils attend double and triple shift schools, in over-crowded classrooms, with no sanitary facilities, with poor educational materials, low quality of teaching, and poor future returns. All these factors cannot render education attractive even to the most ambitious pupils (Fergany, 1995a).

In the whole Middle East and North Africa, nearly 5 million children aged 6 to 10 years and another 4 million children aged 11 to 15 years were out of school in 1995; by 2015, these numbers are expected to grow by over 40 per cent, to 7.5 million and 5.6 million respectively. Over 70 per cent of these out of school children were in Egypt, Morocco and Yemen. Many children drop out before completing compulsory education. In Tunisia, about a third of those who entered first grade dropped out before completing the seven-year basic cycle in the early 1990s (World Bank, 1999).

In Yemen, higher dropout rates among girls reduce their share of total enrolment from 31 per cent in first grade to only 25 per cent in sixth grade. A disproportionate share of schoolchildren are poor rural children and girls.

In Egypt, poverty affects access dramatically. Net enrolment rates for children in the top quintile of household wealth remains above 80 per cent until they reach age 15 years, and even those of the third and fourth quintiles remain at 75 per cent until age 16 years. In sharp contrast, enrolment s of children in the poorest one fifth of the households drops to 70 per cent at age 11 years and below 50 per cent at age 14 years. In 1994, Moroccan net primary enrolment s were 58 per cent in rural areas and 85 per cent in urban areas, and Tunisian secondary enrolment s in rural districts were as low as 19 per cent while in Tunis they were 78 per cent (World Bank, 1999).

Several factors contribute to the dropout phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa:

- a) the inadequate quantity and quality of elementary and secondary schools;
- b) the excessively long distance from home to school, which is a particularly important obstacle for girls in rural areas;
- c) the lack of parent responsiveness to the laws mandating compulsory schooling, in light of the low private economic returns of schooling;
- d) the inability of schools to offer an attractive environment to children;
- e) the economic difficulties of some families who are forced to put their children to work early.

Gender inequalities

Dispelling the myth that there is an automatically negative correlation between Islam and gender representation in schools, Islamic states increased the share of girls in school by about 2 per cent in the first half of the 1990s, four times the overall rate for developing countries (Watkins, 1999).

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, a high-level political commitment, backed with adequate resources, improved gender parity in primary schools: since 1986, the primary school enrolment rate of girls has climbed from 80 to 96 per cent nationally. Even in rural areas – where enrolment rates are lowest for all children – girls' enrolment rate has gone from 60 to 80 per cent in the past five years (UNICEF, 2000).

The female literacy rate in Arab countries is only 44 per cent, compared to 68 per cent for males. Still, most Arab countries have succeeded in reducing gender gaps in enrolment and completion rates far more successfully than South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, and are projected to achieve gender equity in literacy, with a literacy rate of 70 per cent, in about 2010 (Watkins, 1999).

One example is Tunisia, where the government supported a liberal version of Islam, making it the Tunisians' Faith without ever proclaiming it the state religion. Tunisia adopted, at an early stage (1956), the most progressive policies in the Arab world toward women, achieving great advances regarding gender inequalities (Zaimeche, 1994).

In Syria, girls were only 44 per cent of primary enrolments in 1960, well below the developing countries average, but this was 94 per cent by 1987/88. Equivalent figures are 26 to 90 per cent for Libya and 38 to 88 per cent for Iraq (Gould, 1993).

Gender gaps are significant in three countries. In Yemen they are wide, with just over four girls for every ten boys in primary education and fewer than three girls for every ten boys at the secondary stage. In Morocco, there are about seven and a half girls for every ten boys at both stages, while in Egypt a little over eight girls are enrolled per ten boys at both stages (World Bank, 1999). In Egypt, the consequence of poor national educational services at the basic level, combined with poor socioeconomic conditions, are increasingly excluding girls from basic education. It is estimated that about 600,000 girls in the 6 to 10 year age group do not attend school. Nearly 81 per cent of the excluded girls are in rural areas with the majority from Upper Egypt (Fergany, 1995b). Gender and social class inequality in access to education is not a recent phenomenon in Egypt. However, recent conditions and recent figures confirm the steady intensification of inequality over the years. Gender discrepancy in education widens the socio-cultural gap between the two sexes. Under such economic conditions, with the increasing rate of dropouts, and the lack of credibility of the educational system, a further gap between formal and informal education is created. Pupils who are not attending schools, mostly the poor, are educated outside the formal establishment where they acquire the values and norms or their immediate social environment. The cultural and social gap that is thus created between those with formal schooling and those without it further contributes to the exclusion that is experienced by the poor (Rouchdy, 1996a, 1996b)

PRIVATE AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Private participation includes both provision and finance. Private provision of education varies widely within the region. Private schools outnumber public ones in Lebanon but are very limited in others countries, particularly in North Africa. On average, private primary and secondary enrolment s are lower than the world average for lower-middle income countries. As in most developing countries, pre-university private education caters mainly to a high and middle-income urban clientele. In Jordan, Lebanon, and West Bank–Gaza, the private sector plays a substantial role in higher education (World Bank, 1999).

In Tunisia, despite a very liberal economic policy supported by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, private provision and financing of formal education is very limited. The private sector represents only 0.6 per cent of enrolment in primary education and 10 per cent

for secondary education where it is considered as a stopgap system for dropout students. The private sector share is about 3 per cent of enrolment in higher education (Gharbi, 1998).

It is necessary to note the presence of different missions and foreign embassies, which run their own schools, principally serving the children of the specific community. Many are open, however, to certain social, local categories. French schools in North Africa, for example, welcome a number of local children and provide them with an education quite close to what is provided in France. The religious system has mostly been developed by minority communities: Jews in North Africa and Christians in the Middle East. This system is particularly efficient, mostly thanks to external financial contributions.

The system of Koranic schools is well developed in many countries, notably Morocco, either to begin literacy instruction for preschool children, or to make up for the absence of the public sector in the rural regions. The village community directly recruits the schoolteacher, who they often can only pay in room and board, to teach their children the Koran and the basics of reading and writing.

Compared to other Third World regions like Latin America or East Asia, it is still premature to speak, in the case of the Middle East and North Africa, of a two-tiered educational system with private education opened to higher income children and lower income children gathered in public education. However, structural changes toward more inequalities in schooling are in work, particularly in the Middle East.

Regarding this issue, the position of the World Bank is ambiguous. On the one hand, this institution recognizes that public education has contributed to raise literacy rates and mean years of schooling in the Arab countries. On the other hand, the World Bank is pushing toward a massive privatisation and deregulation.

All private educational institutions will likewise need a clearly defined sphere of authority over curriculum and materials choice. Regulation which so closely controls curricular choice as to mandate subjects, sequencing and hours by subject would eliminate a significant potential for the differentiation which can drive demand for and growth of non-public provision...(World Bank, 1999, p. 28)

In Morocco, when private schools using the French curriculum were obliged to teach the national curriculum, they chose instead to use both curricula to maintain the differentiation which supports the demand for their services. At the same time, the absence of regulation can create a bifurcated market in which well-to-do students enjoy very high quality and everybody else suffers from a "race to the bottom" among providers (World Bank, 1999, p. 28).

Privatization and market-oriented reforms, particularly in primary and secondary education will not contribute to improve the performances of the educational system in North Africa and the Middle East. However, many of the countries of the region have experienced decades of educational centralism combined with little concerns with socio-cultural productivity of schooling. Many educational systems in the region suffer from bureaucratic structures that emphasize a top down approach to learning. Through the production and diffusion of textbooks, Ministries of education implement rigid curriculum centered on memorization and dictation as everyday activities.

It is important to stress that the need for further and broader educational reform in the Middle East and North Africa is inextricably linked to continued economic and political reforms. Today's students must be taught the technical skills that are needed to function effectively in tomorrow's world. Moreover, they must be taught the problem solving, cooperation and critical thinking skills that are needed to build democracy and citizenship. Several countries in the Middle East and

North Africa are failing in granting educational access to all their social groups. They include the poorest countries in the region, as well as some of the richest. By present trends, approximately 2.6 million Yemeni children will not be in school in 2015. Enrolment levels have also fallen in Saudi Arabia and Iraq (Watkins, 1999).

In his report on population growth and the “Youth Explosion” in North Africa, Cordesman (1997) pointed out the following picture:

- projected future declines in the rate of growth will not affect the region for a decade or more;
- nearly 40 per cent of the population is under 14;
- education is breaking down and often irrelevant;
- 15-20 per cent of the population must leave home in the next five years; and
- direct and disguised unemployment of youth averages 25 to 40 per cent, with little improvement in sight.

The Middle East and North Africa region is at a crossroads in its educational development. The region is characterized by inadequate research and development for knowledge creation and limited communications infrastructure. It accounts for only about one tenth of one per cent of the world’s research and development spending, less than any other region save sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 1999).

Educational research is particularly limited in the region and not integrated within the international research networks. Recent reports from the SERI (Southern Educational Research Initiative) have reviewed educational research activities in all Third World regions except the Middle East and North Africa (SERI, 1996).

Regional organizations, such as ALESCO (the Arab League Education, Culture and Science Organization) or ISESCO (the Islamic Education, Science and Culture Organization) must work to establish strong research programs as well as to build partnerships with international organizations.

Since each country's experiences, culture, and history are different, each country of the Middle East and North Africa will have to devise its own plan for educational reform. No one model is likely to work everywhere. Nevertheless, there are some issues which all countries must deal with: Gender, regional and social inequalities in schooling, illiteracy, weak relationships between education and economic, community involvement and the role of the private sector.

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