

Human Development Crisis in the Arab World

Arab governments must rethink their priorities and course of action.

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Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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When the first [Arab Human Development Report](#) (AHDR) was published in 2002, a star glistened in a vast, gloomy sky. The fact that a UN-sponsored report, authored by independent Arab scholars would receive so much attention in Arab media, was in itself a promising start. The fact that such terminology as human security, personal security, economic security, etc - as highlighted in the report - would even compete with the largely ceremonial news bulletins' headlines in many Arab countries was in itself an achievement. But then, the star quickly faded, the terms became clichés, and the report, published seven times since then, became a haunting reminder of how bad things really are in the Arab World.

Those who wish to discredit Arab countries, individually or as a collective, now find in these reports plenty of reasons to fuel their constant diatribes; those who genuinely care and wish for things to improve are either silent or muted.

The last report, sponsored, like the rest, by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was [published in July 2009](#). It was the grimmest. Its statistics are intriguing, although depressing. 2.9 million square kilometers of land in the Arab World are threatened by desertification. Natural resources are depleting at an alarming level. Birth rates are the highest in the world. Unemployment is skyrocketing. 50 million new jobs must be created by 2020. Arab oil-based economies leave some Arab countries entirely vulnerable to market price fluctuations or the depletion of oil altogether. While many economies, especially in Asia are shifting or have already achieved great strides into becoming knowledge-based economies, Arab economies are still hostage to the same cycle of oil and cheap labor. In fact, 70 percent of the Arab region's total exports, according to the report, is oil.

The problem is not just economic, or environmental, it's societal as well. Inequality is entrenched in many Arab societies. Women's rights are not the only individual rights violated. Men's right are violated too, that is if they are not members of the dominant group, which are either divided by blind political allegiance, tribal or sectarian membership, or economic leverage.

Admittedly, Arab societies are, of course, not the only societies that suffer from these ills, but sadly, the problems of Arab countries are most convoluted, accentuated by the fact that there is little action to rectify the problem, neither at individual country's level or using joint platforms, for instance, the Arab League. Why didn't the Arab League hold an emergency summit following the release of the first or even the last AHDR report? One would think that problems of such magnitude, ones that affect the lives of 330 million people, are pressing enough for such gatherings.

Arab media has been highlighting the issue and the shortcomings, some media outlets more than others. But the discussion is largely political, at times a mere attempt at discrediting this government or that leader, and are still conducted in general terms. The latest report for example was supplemented by opinion polls conducted in four Arab countries – Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco and occupied Palestine. One need not emphasize the different human development challenges in these countries, situated in diverse geopolitical settings. One cannot possibly devise the same solution to a country occupied by a foreign army, to an independent country with untold oil wealth, to a third with immense human potential but dire poverty.

Generalized problems can only obtain generalized, thus superficial solutions. Therefore, it has been summarily decided that the problem lies in lack of education, not the inequitable and unrepresentative political systems. Education became the buzz word, as if education is a detached value; therefore, education cities are erected in Arab countries that can easily afford importing the best teachers and curricula money can buy. More, research institutions are also making appearances in various Arab capitals. Those existing in rich Arab countries are operated largely by foreigners, whose sense of priority lies, naturally, elsewhere. One fails to grasp the wisdom.

But of course, education is a mindset, a culture even. What is the point of pursuing a PhD in a society where nepotism determines who does what? It's most rational, from a self-seeker's point of view, to spend time knowing and passing one's business cards to the 'right people' than spending years of one's life pursuing a university degree.

UNDP had recently launched "[The Arab Knowledge Report 2009](#)", jointly with the United Arab Emirates-based Mohammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum Foundation. Another depressing read, nonetheless. Governments were criticized for paying lip service to 'reform', yet "widening the gap between word and deed." It concluded that Arab countries are far from being knowledge based societies. Numbers and more numbers told the story: Finland spends \$1000 per person on scientific research, while less than \$10 are spent annually in the Arab world. More, the number of published books averages one for every 491 British citizens, while in the Arab world it's one for every 19,150. But that should not be much of a surprise considering that one-third of older Arab citizens are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women. Meanwhile, more than seven million children, who should be in school, are not. Illiteracy stands at 30 percent in the Arab world.

Dr. Ghassan Khateeb, of Birzeit University in the occupied West Bank believes that there "is a direct relation between the lack of investment and the problematic situation we find ourselves in relation to knowledge." "This is all related to politics; the lack of democracy and the lack of knowledge enforce each other," he was quoted as saying.

Paul Salem, writing in the British Guardian, while recognizing the failure of Arab governments, found that others are also, if not equally, responsible. "The cost of a single month of Western military spending in Iraq or Afghanistan would be enough to triple total aid for education in the Middle East. The cost of two cruise missiles would build a school, the cost of a Eurofighter a small university."

Alas, some Arab governments, spend twice, if not three times more on their military budget than invest in education. And keeping in mind that nearly one out of every five Arab citizens lives below the poverty threshold of two-dollars a day, the tragedy is suddenly augmented.

Arab governments must rethink and reconsider their current priorities and course of action. They must think and act individually, but collectively as well, before the crisis turns into a catastrophe, as will surely be the case if nothing is done.

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