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Working Together for a Better ICSW



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Dear ICSW members, friends, and interested readers,

Welcome to the July 2024 issue of our newsletter. In the field of social welfare and social protection, ICSW's proposals for the past 100 years have always been focused on the defense of human rights, the promotion of social welfare, and the dissemination of good practices in the field of social inclusion. Following the World Congress in Panama (April 2024), both ICSW and our sister organizations, IFSW and IASSW, have committed to give a boost to the Global Social Work Agenda, sharing a common approach based on the protection of people and the defense of human rights.

In September 2025, the Global Summit will be held in Switzerland, 30 years after the Global Summit in Copenhagen (1995), an event that

impacted on the redefinition of social policies at global and local level. Throughout 2024 and 2025 ICSW, in a participatory dynamic, will hold different events to bring in 2025 our perspective on social welfare. In super-diverse, digitized societies, and immersed in a strong process of social polarization, enhancing participation, co-design and co-creation are key issues to develop inclusive welfare systems.

Literacy, social protection, and specifically child protection, are key issues in improving social welfare. In this issue of the Newsletter, we are fortunate to have the contributions of our colleagues from the Mena Region, who deal with this subject with rigor and precision in their region. I thank them very much for their contribution, and for their help in getting this Newsletter published in French and Arabic. This is yet another example of the cooperative work and support that our colleagues in the Mena Region offer us at the global level. Thank you very much!

In this month of July, the volume with the best papers presented at the Seoul World Congress organized by ICSW, KNCSW and IASSW in 2022 is finally available, after a severe peer review process. Cfr. López Peláez, A., Keet, A., Sung, C.M. (eds.). *Social Welfare Programs and Social Work Education at a Crossroads: New Approaches for a Post-Pandemic Society*. London: Routledge (<https://www.routledge.com/Social-Welfare-Programs-and-Social-Work-Education-at-a-Crossroads-New-Approaches-for-a-Post-Pandemic-Society/LopezPelaez-Keet-MoonSung/p/book/9781032623030>).

It is one more contribution of our collective work in the global ICSW, in collaboration with other organizations, to provide data and good practices to help us in our decision making in the field of social welfare. It is a good summer read, so I highly recommend it.

Take care and stay healthy!

ILLITERACY IN THE ARAB WORLD



***Bachir Tamer,
ICSW President of
MENA Region***

Introduction

Literacy is a word generally associated with positive aspects of human civilization and social and economic development. Illiteracy, on the other hand, has always been used in relation to poverty and lack of education in different parts of the world. The literacy that we are talking about in this report is not only a second chance at basic education but also an opportunity, for young people and adults, to improve their standard of living and skills necessary for everyday life in order to be able to contribute to the sustainable development of their societies and lead a life of lifelong learners.

Although the Arab world is beginning to give "adult education" the same meaning as other countries in the world, namely giving individuals the skills and knowledge necessary to respond effectively to the growing challenges of new technologies and information, it is important to remember that" in the Arab world, adult education has primarily focused on literacy, and the majority of countries in the region continue to consider it as such."

Recent UNESCO assessments and projections on literacy have made it possible to gather sufficient data to analyze the trends and particularities of literacy and illiteracy in Arab countries.

However, having found no academic publications on literacy and illiteracy in the Arab world, we wrote this report on the basis of numerous UNESCO publications and UNDP reports.

Literacy in the Arab world

The teaching of reading and writing comes up against the dichotomy between spoken Arabic and classical Arabic. It seems today that classical Arabic is no longer the "spoken language" but rather the language of reading and writing, spoken Arabic being that of cordial and spontaneous expression, of emotions, of feelings and daily communication. Teaching reading and writing classical Arabic to illiterate people therefore risks neglecting the functional aspects of the language. Another aspect of the problem is the relationship between the Arabic language on the one hand, and the transfer and absorption of technologies on the other; if we want the Arabic language to keep pace with informational and technological development, it is essential to renew it by extending its functional use to everyday life, and by encouraging its contacts with other languages (Report on the human development in the Arab world, 2003, p. 125-126).

Literacy. Literacy is a priority issue on the adult education agenda in the Arab world; it is the key to development insofar as it is no longer limited today to the teaching of reading and writing, but includes language skills, computer knowledge and skills in all the necessary areas to modern life and the multiple facets of life.

Increase the literacy rate. In 1980, the Arab States were able to achieve a literacy rate of 51.3%, or 11% more higher than in the previous decade (40.8%). Ten years later, the rate rose to 61.5%, representing an increase of only 10%. This pace is insufficient if we consider that these countries have decided to eradicate illiteracy or reduce it by half by the year 2000, in accordance with the Jomtien Declaration in 1990. In other words, at the rate of 1 % per year, Arab countries will need another 39 years to eradicate illiteracy.

Literacy rate. Literacy rates for people over 15 vary greatly from one country to another. The most recent data shows that they reach 80% and above in nine relatively small countries, with the exception of Saudi Arabia (Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and Libya); by contrast, it is less than 75% in nine other highly populated countries, with Iraq, Mauritania and Yemen recording respective rates of 40%, 41.2% and 49%.

John Daniel, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, sounds the alarm: "Arab countries have the lowest adult literacy rates in the world; between 2000 and 2004, only 62.2% of those over 15 were able to read and write; this rate is significantly lower than the world average [84%] and that of developing countries (76.4%)."

As for the age group of 15 to 24, the results are more satisfactory since the literacy rate reaches 90% and more in eleven countries, significantly

higher than the international average, i.e. 87.6% (Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Syria, Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Tunisia), with Jordan scoring the highest rate (99.4%). These "highly literate" countries contrast with the five Arab ones that are both "lowly literate" and the most populous, in which the average is lower than that of developing countries, i.e. 85.2% (Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Yemen).

Improved female literacy. Literacy rates for women aged 15 and over vary between 24% (Iraq) and 85.9% (Jordan). Between 1990 and 2000-2004, rates were higher than the international average (76.5%) in six countries. In Bahrain, the female literacy rate increased from 74.6% to 84.2%, in Jordan from 72.1% to 85.9%, in Kuwait from 72.6% to 81%, in Lebanon from 73.1% to 82%, in Qatar from 76% to 82.3%, and in the United Arab Emirates from 70% to 80.7%.

Despite this considerable progress, high illiteracy rates persist in the majority of Arab countries among women, who represent two-thirds of illiterates in the region; according to the World Human Development Report 2002, p. 52, the situation may not improve "before 2040". This imbalance is due to several reasons, but more particularly the very low rate of primary schooling, the slowdown in the rate of growth of this rate in the 90s compared to the 80s with an apparent bias against females (RDHA 2002, p. 52), the decline in public expenditure on education since 1995 (RDHA 2003, p. 52), and finally a "decline in political commitment or the inadequacy of the methods used to rectify the situation".

Gender parity. The gender parity index was estimated at 0.69 in 2004, one of the lowest in the world except for South Asia and West Asia.6 Despite efforts made over the past two decades, girls are generally less educated than boys.

That is not to say that boys' education is not important. All children, boys and girls, deserve a good quality education. Because as the information age advances, illiterate or uneducated children, and later the adults they become, risk being among those left behind.

Only five countries (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain) have an index of 0.90 and above for those over 15 years, a rate significantly higher than the global average of 0.88, with the UAE even reaching 1.07. We note that eleven countries with an index below the average of that of developing countries (0.83) (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Oman, Mauritania, Egypt, Yemen and Morocco) are those who have always been the least literate, with the exception of Syria and Saudi Arabia. These disparities between countries are due to various factors: in Sudan, poverty and early marriage cause families to neglect female education. In Yemen, the level of primary schooling for girls is low and schools are too far from homes. Finally, some countries are reducing resources and funding allocated to girls' schools in local communities that are gender-segregated, the education authorities are not engaged enough and do not raise awareness about the education of girls.

The disparities are less pronounced in the 15 to 24 age group. The index is 0.94 and above in nine countries (Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar and Kuwait), with five of them reaching parity (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates), while five others (Mauritania, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Yemen) record an index less than 0.91 (parity index in developing countries).

Illiteracy

Arab countries are well aware of the seriousness

of the situation, both at the governmental and organizational level. Several measures have been taken and have been implemented through the establishment of national commissions and councils, the setting up of policies and strategies and, with direct technical support from the UNESCO regional office in Beirut, Lebanon, by organizing national and regional conferences to coordinate actions against illiteracy. One of the main technical assistance measures was the launch of the Regional Program For The Generalization and Renovation of Primary Education and Elimination of Adult Literacy in the Arab States (ARABUPEAL, 1989), which was later integrated with the EFA goals and action plan after 2000. The objective was the development of Arab educational systems in the field of literacy and primary education through the development of curriculum and teaching methods, the implementation of teacher training measures, and the creation of adequate administrative and planning structures.

Furthermore, one of the main successes of CONFINTEA V (Hamburg, 1997) was the creation, in 1999, of the Arab Network for Literacy and Adult Education; its aim is to strengthen the role of NGOs and civil society organizations to eradicate illiteracy in the region.

Decline in illiteracy rates (over 15 years). These measures have enabled Arab countries to reduce their illiteracy rates (48.7% in 1990, 38.5% in 2000). The average percentage of illiterate women aged 15 and over has decreased (see table below for data from 18 countries), going from 64.9% in 1980 to 51.9% in 1990 and to 40.2% in 2000. In the age group of 15-24 years (data for 17 countries), the illiteracy rate rose from 44.9% to 29.9% and 19.4% for the same period. It is worth noting that for this same age group, the percentage of illiterate women was less than 10% in nine countries and

practically zero in Jordan (0.2%) and Bahrain (1.4%).

Decline in illiteracy rates among Arab women

Year 1980 1990 and 2000

Illiteracy for women aged 15-24 44.9% 29.9% 19.4%

illiteracy for women aged 15 and over 64.9% 51.9%

40.2%

Source: extract from Non-formal education for girls, UNESCO, 2000, Rafika Hammoud, p. 20

Illiteracy rate (over 15 years). In 1980, illiteracy rates were 45% to 80% in 14 countries, and 28% to 35% in six others. In 2005, these rates recorded a spectacular decline: they represent 8% to 22% in ten countries (Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Syria and Libya) and 23% to 34 % in three others (Algeria, Djibouti and Tunisia). Six countries (Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and Yemen) still have an illiteracy rate of 35%, with Iraq and Mauritania leading the way with 60%.

Decline in illiteracy among women aged 15 and over. In 1980, female illiteracy rates were above 75% in almost half of Arab countries, which represents three out of four women. In 2005, we noted considerable progress in six countries which reached rates of 10% to 20% (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates and Qatar), and a less significant decline in Libya and Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Djibouti, Oman, Syria and Tunisia (25% to 40%). Nevertheless, Sudan maintains a rate of 46% and five other countries (Iraq, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Yemen) from 50% to 67%.

Analysis

Variations are significant from one country to another. Three groups could be identified based on the progress made: the first includes "highly literate" countries (Libya and Gulf States except

Saudi Arabia); these are small, and low-density countries with significant financial resources; two others, Jordan and Lebanon, are also part of it. The second consists of promising countries that seem to be able to reach acceptable levels of literacy (Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Algeria). The third includes "low-literacy countries" (Egypt, Mauritania, Iraq, Yemen, Djibouti, Morocco and Sudan).

The first group owes its success to a variety of literacy policies, strategies and programs. Gulf states provide free and compulsory education, and have systems of incentives and rewards in place. In Bahrain, holding a literacy certificate is the sine qua no condition for access to employment in the public sector. Bahrain and Jordan encourage access to flexible programs by offering evening and afternoon classes. In Oman, Lebanon and Libya, collaboration between government and civil society has contributed significantly to success. In Jordan, the political will to eradicate illiteracy observed at the highest levels has largely borne fruit: sustainable support and necessary funding have helped to define a ten-year policy framework with medium and long-term objectives focused on the implementation of important educational reforms.

The second group is unique in that it is both very large geographically and includes countries with low resources, with the exception of Saudi Arabia. Despite the impressive results achieved in the fight against illiteracy, these countries require trained teachers and professionals to carry on their literacy programs, and at the same time must improve their textbooks and teaching guides. Saudi Arabia has begun to encourage the public and private sectors to actively participate in the technical and vocational training of the skilled workforce. In 1999, Tunisia carried out an evaluation of its adult education and literacy plan,

which identified the factors for the failure of its strategy adopted in 1997: lack of partnership, insufficient training and extreme poverty of some illiterates. Despite the improvement in the literacy rate, the Syrian government declared in 2000 that its results were far from satisfactory.

The third group consists of highly populated countries, geographically large and deprived of financial resources. However, initiatives have been taken to set up new programs and curricula (Morocco, Yemen, Sudan and Egypt), guarantee access for women and girls to adult education, particularly in rural areas and remote communities (Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania), and raise awareness among populations of the value of education (Mauritania). These countries are, however, marked by wide discrepancy between urban and rural areas for both sexes, the reasons being the lack of resources and the inability of educational structures to reach the illiterate.

In conclusion, despite the great progress made in the field of adult education over the last twenty-five years, it can be seen that:

"In the Arab region, awareness of education, but also its key role in promoting sustainable human and social development and competitiveness on the global market, has not benefited from the instruments that would have made it possible to put in place effective policies and to define the objectives and strategies necessary for the implementation of these policies."

Literacy achievements

While it is true that Arab countries have been eager to implement the recommendations and principles of the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien 1990) to provide their children with a better quality education, they have on the other hand little effort to systematically assess

literacy achievement and basic education in the region; John Daniel pointed out, "To date, Arab countries have only weakly participated...[in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)]."¹²

As part of monitoring the quality of educational programmes in general, and learning outcomes in particular, UNESCO and UNICEF initiated and implemented a joint project in nine Arab countries, which aims to analyze basic learning outcomes in Arabic, mathematics and life skills. The results show that in only two states (Tunisia and Morocco) students have reached the expected basic level in Arabic, but none of the participating countries has reached the level in mathematics (80%), the highest score being that of Tunisia (77%).

It is in the Arabic language that the results are the best, in mathematics they are the worst; it was not possible to make an accurate assessment of the results in life skills. We also see a higher level in urban and private schools than in rural and public schools. Females performed better than males in Arabic, basic skills and mathematics.

These results are due to two types of factors: family and personal on the one hand, and school on the other, the former having a greater impact on student performance than the latter. Among the main family and personal factors : socio-economic status, homework monitoring, pre-school education, parents' expectations of children's potential, and absenteeism. Among the school factors: school structures, teachers' concrete expectations of students' abilities, differences in teaching methods and assessment, the age of teachers and principals, and school cooperation with the local community.

To corroborate the above results, several other studies have been conducted on the same theme

in certain Arab countries, notably in Oman, Egypt and Bahrain. These studies are of limited value as they were neither designed nor carried out on a comparable basis and do not provide comparative conclusions. Nevertheless, the results clearly highlight the quality of elementary education. In Oman, four performance assessment studies in Arabic, mathematics, science and life skills carried out in grades 4, 6 and 9 reveal that 1) the class average in all subjects is below the excellent level, 2) girls are better than boys in all subjects. In Egypt, a field study finds that the level of academic performance is poor, especially in the main subjects (reading, writing and mathematics). In Bahrain, the situation is similar in essential skills. As part of comparative studies with other countries, only one Arab country, Kuwait, participated in the Third International Study in Mathematics and Sciences. Although this country has sufficient financial resources and low demographics, Kuwaiti students came 39th out of 41. This leads to the following conclusion: ultimately, the quality of education does not depend on the level of resources or quantitative factors, but other elements relating to the organization of educational processes and modes of delivery and evaluation. (Arab Human Development Report 2003, pp. 54-55).

Generally speaking, it can be said Arab countries do not pay enough attention to the essential aspects of learning, and that we still have too little information on the acquisition of basic skills compared to those available on the quality of education.

Challenges and constraints.

The majority of Arab countries face considerable challenges in universalizing the quality of basic education and literacy. A study on basic education and literacy carried out in 1989 by

UNEDBAS in all Arab States identified nine obstacles to education for all:²²

- inadequacy of funds and lack of well-trained human resources;
- unfavorable attitudes of certain communities towards girls' education;
- priority given by the poor and uneducated to the economic value of child labor over education;
- Lack of infrastructure to reach nomadic and rural communities;
- Disasters of natural and human origin, resulting in the destruction of property and the dislocation of populations;
- Lack of well-defined policies regarding the use of traditional educational institutions;
- Lack of adequate use of media to promote education;
- Inability of certain Arab States to manage education systems, weakness of administrative and planning bodies;
- Discrepancy between the values taught at school and dominant social values.

Regarding literacy, several factors seem to have a negative influence on the programs, including the lack of mobilization of financial and human resources, and the lack of appropriate techniques to attract target groups who do not consider literacy as a necessity. Literacy is the exclusive responsibility of a ministry or department. In addition, these countries have in common a poor quality of education, the reason being the lack of appropriate training and motivation of teachers and learners. But more importantly, is the fact that the basic literacy phase is rarely followed up, leading to a significant relapse rate. Traditional educational institutions are rarely used to eliminate illiteracy in a functional way; similarly, the bureaucratic system of curriculum management is often copied from the formal primary education system without consulting

adult learners, and is generally managed by non-professionals. Finally, universities and research institutes show little interest in adult training.²³

As part of the assessment of the level of compliance of Arab countries with the criteria of education for all plans, a recent UNESCO²⁴ regional report noted that the majority of plans do not clearly evoke government commitment, nor the allocation of funds necessary for their implementation. Furthermore, there is no indication that these plans were designed with the participation of different sectors and organizations of civil society. Despite their commitment to the EFA goals, Arab states have not integrated education into their social and economic plans or into their poverty reduction strategies. Plans include clear statements of goals and objectives without being defined by measurable indicators. The objectives and action programs have not been translated into operational action plans.

In general, National plans lack monitoring and performance evaluation systems that would allow them to take stock of progress.

Conclusion

Despite the significant progress made in the field of adult education, the Arab region is not reaching the level required to implement the EFA goals. The figures we have for 2004 demonstrate the seriousness of the problem and the countless challenges facing countries in the region. A recent report from the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO)²⁵ states that some 70 million people aged 15 and over have entered the 21st century without knowing how to read or write, which represents one of the highest percentages of illiterates in the world. The report strongly deplores the fact that the objective of halving the number of

illiterates between 1990 and 2000 was not achieved; Current trends show that it will take more than three decades before this problem can be definitively resolved in the region.

Although Arab regional reports on education for all and available research materials reaffirm the great progress made in this region in eradicating illiteracy, the rapid increase in population has raised the number of people who cannot read and write in the last 35 years. Although the percentage of illiterates out of the entire population decreased constantly from 1970 to 1990, going from 73% to 48.7%, reaching 35.6% in 2004, the number of illiterates rose from 50 million in 1975 to 61 million in 1990 and 70 million in 2004. The ALESCO report also reveals that almost half of Arab women (46.5) are unable to read and write, while 25.1 % of the men are illiterate. The absolute number of illiterate women aged 15 to 24 is increasing in most Arab countries; it increased from 40 million in 1990 to 42.2 million in 1997, and is expected to represent 43.9 million people in 2005.²⁶

According to the Millennium Development Goals estimates, the Arab world will not be able to achieve gender equality before 2020, nor basic education for all before 2050, if the situation remains unchanged, i.e. -say if the rate of progression is not improving.²⁷

The Jomtien goal of reducing illiteracy by 2000 has not been achieved in any Arab country; it is also recognized that low levels of literacy and basic skills are even more prevalent today than a decade ago.

Drawing on the EFA DEVELOPMENT INDEX to determine the degree of progress made by each country in favor of education compared to the target year (end of 2015), the Arab Regional Conference on EFA (2004) recently claimed that of

the 14 countries that provided figures, only seven are likely to achieve the EFA goals by the expected deadline (Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, Palestine, Bahrain, Lebanon, UAE) . Five others (Oman, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria) are halfway there and two (Sudan, Yemen) are completely incapable.²⁸

In the context of the recent proclamation of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) as part of global efforts towards education for all, it is extremely urgent that Arab countries adopt a more informed and become more involved, but also that they join hands and mobilize the resources of their societies to overcome this new challenge and allow their children and adults to exploit their potential in the new millennium.

Proponents of literacy make various suggestions for solving other human development problems:²⁹ Generally, Arab countries that have educational problems also have problems in health, poverty, and job creation, whether they must solve simultaneously. If literacy programmes are to succeed, it is therefore important to create jobs adapted to the respective economies and to design teaching programmes that meet the concrete needs of students. It is also necessary "embed the value of literacy so deeply in a country's economy and culture that the costs of illiteracy and raising illiterate children become exorbitant."

***This article is a Summary of the report written by Dr Hassan Hammoud, Education for all and literacy, Published by DVV international, 2006**

Digital rights, A new challenge for social development



Driss GUERRAOUI, President of Open University of Dakhla, Kingdom of Morocco & Member of Global Management Committee-International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW)

The acute global health crisis, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, has indistinctly affected every continent since January 2020, and cast a universal glance at the state of the world, imbued with a generalised conviction that human societies have entered a new era marked by uncertainties, hazards and major risks of all strips. These risks have affected all aspects of daily social life of the entire population living in the North and the South, thus threatening global human safety as a whole.

The same crisis revealed that the global system is undergoing the emergence of a new generation of insecurities and wars, manifested noticeably in wars of food, water, energy, drugs, and plant and animal genetic engineering. They also take the most devastating and pernicious forms that are associated with biological warfare on the one hand, and with wars related to knowledge, learning, artificial intelligence, information, image, space and digital technology, on the other.

Furthermore, the lack of coordinated, shared, responsive and united global governance, to manage the above-mentioned pandemic, illustrates the exorbitant costs of this crisis, which caused socio-economic, human, and psychological repercussions on the world's poor class, vulnerable wage-earners and workers, and "business project leaders" working in the so-called informal sector. The activities, carried out in this sector, constitutes the main source of income for these leaders, especially for women, young people and abandoned children in rural and suburban areas, in particular.

In fact, it is not only concerned with a crisis in the system as a whole, but rather with a real disaster that affected the economic, social and political system. In addition, the emergence of new generations of poverty, unemployment, precariousness, social violence, diseases and migration are just noticeable forms caused by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Addressing such crises, therefore, does not require classical reforms, but rather substantial changes and essential innovations to guarantee the efficient running of the system as a whole.

Socially speaking, implementing these changes and innovations requires adopting a new social development model, which focuses on two core values and a new generation of human rights, referred to as "digital rights".

I- The core values of the new social development model

The fact that the 2020 global pandemic is leaving behind human distress, despair and misery, in a way that calls to mind or even exceeds the 1929 Great Depression, is the reason why the development of the Post-covid19 new social

development model must centre around two core values: dignity and the value of human beings. Hence, future public policy makers and UN international and regional agencies must take into account these two values when designing social action and solidarity programmes.

Dignity refers to a state of the human being measured by the satisfaction of all the population's basic needs in a given society, based on effective access to fundamental human rights and without discrimination because of sex, age, social status, place of residence, and physical and social-health conditions.

Effective access to fundamental rights includes:

- The right to education and training,
- The right to health, a minimum basic income, and decent employment,
- The right to food and decent housing,
- The right to retirement, basic health care, family and old age benefits,
- The right to disability support and economic equal opportunities and treatment,
- The right to fair justice and freedom of expression and worship,
- The right to geographic mobility and participation to city management,
- The right to safety, culture, entertainment and living in a healthy and eco-friendly environment.

Dignity also means the respect of rights to social basic services whether concerned with drinkable water, electricity, sanitation or means of transport.

Put it differently, dignity is a global and general state of human conditions in a given society at a given moment in its history. It denotes, in fine, the highest and fullest form of citizenship.

As far as the **value of human beings** within society is concerned, it depends on the implementation

of three simultaneous actions, including recognition, consideration and involvement in decision-making and city management. In this context, participative democracy, merit, skills, accountability, equity, justice, and equality as well social, cultural and professional inclusion constitute the basic parameters of this value.

Translating these two core values into social development plans requires the adoption of a new model whose founding principles encompass extending universal social protection basics, establishing a basic income for all, adopting new methods to tackle poverty and unemployment, restructuring social solidarity funding and governance system, and changing radically the current mainstream that governs social dialogue.

These principles cannot, however, be carried out unless the States, civil society organisations, businesses, territorial authorities, and international organisations take into account the new realities driven by the digital revolution and their impacts on sustainable and inclusive human development.

II- The digital right: a new generation of human rights

The digital revolution is generating new forms of gap and injustice, caused by the emergence and development of a growing phenomenon within society, and which can be described as “**digital illiteracy**”. The latter is best demonstrated in the wide-reaching inequalities in terms of using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in various regions of the world.

The state of inequalities in using ICT by every region worldwide in 2018

Region	Proportion of population using the internet	Landline phone subscription for every 100 inhabitants	Mobile phone subscription for every 100 inhabitants
Sub-Saharan Africa	25	1	76
South Asia	30	2	87
East Asia and the Pacific	57	15	120
North Africa and the Middle-East	60	15	107
Latin America and the Caribbean	64	16	104
Europe and Central Asia	78	30	124
Member States of the OECD	83	35	120
Eurozone	84	44	123
North America	88	36	120
The rest of the World	51	13	104

Source: the World Bank

The most direct consequences of digital inequalities include increased difficulties experienced by the world's poor populations in accessing basic social services. The fact that everything evolves within the economies and societies of the 21st century is the reason why dignity and the value of human beings, as defined before, currently depends on every citizen's ability to absorb the tools of digital revolution at all aspects of economic, social and cultural life.

In fact, the tools and mechanisms for access to education, employment, health, housing, family benefits, severance pay, different social benefits or microfinance credits have currently been transformed into distance learning, teleworking, e-filing and e-payment.

All these digital devices require a digitised e-registration in digitized local, regional and national registers, from which the poor could be excluded, who not only belong to the new generations of illiterate people, but also lack the conditions for a fair and controlled use of these devices.

Therefore, extending digital technology has become a real and necessary step and a sine qua non for any policy that seeks to enable the poor to benefit from better access to the basic needs and services.

Moreover, the Nation-States, regional and international organisations, specialised in social action and solidarity must endeavour to elevate the digital right and transform it into a basic human right. Helping the poor and vulnerable population's master digital technology should also be a major focus area of their new social development strategies.

III- Suggestions for a better future

Given the afore-mentioned challenges, the International Community must develop and adopt a Global Plan to build the digital capacities of poor populations. This Plan, which focuses on the following major areas, must be carried out in tune with the United Nations 2030 Agenda:

- Undertaking a global international programme for education and training in terms of new good digital practices, which aims at strengthening the poor's capacities in priority areas and enlarging their access to basic social services to facilitate their socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-institutional integration;
- Promoting the development of digital infrastructures by supporting the formulation and implementation of national programmes that seek to reduce the digital divide worldwide and target vulnerable, disadvantaged and outlying zones in rural areas, mountainous and desert regions;
- Facilitating the poor's access to internet via innovative financial support mechanisms for the purchase of digital tools,
- Increasing connectivity in a way that reduces the digital divide worldwide in vulnerable, disadvantaged and outlying zones in rural areas, mountainous and desert regions,
- Enhancing public-private-civil society partnerships that aim to update and familiarise the poor and vulnerable populations with innovative projects pertaining to digital economy jobs, especially in sectors specialised in social and solidarity-based economy,
- Organising, under the auspices of the UNDP, the UNESCO and the ICSW a information and awareness-raising campaigns on digital technology good practices in the 9 regions of

ICSW in order to enhance social development for the benefit of the poor and the vulnerable populations living in these 9 regions;

Finally, for my country, The Kingdom of Morocco, I recommend that this perspective of social development will be integrated in the new future programs of The National Initiative for Human Development (NIHD), headed by His Royal Majesty King Mohammed VI since 2005.

Social protection in the MENA region: Challenges in universalization



Fahd ASSILA,
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In 2020, the world faced an unprecedented health crisis with the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, causing a large-scale crisis whose effects continue to weigh on populations and governments globally. Public health quickly became the primary concern for societies and policymakers worldwide. Despite the measures implemented to curb the virus's spread, leading to the collapse of healthcare systems in several countries.

This crisis had devastating effects on health and social protection systems in general. These systems were mobilized not only to protect the health of populations but also to preserve

individuals' jobs and incomes. Despite these efforts, many countries faced considerable challenges regarding social protection during the health crisis. Five major observations:

1. The pandemic highlighted persistent inequalities and significant gaps in the completeness and adequacy of social protection coverage to meet populations' needs. The most vulnerable individuals, particularly informal workers and marginalized populations, were often the least protected, revealing systemic flaws in existing mechanisms.
2. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, countries placed unprecedented emphasis on social protection policies. This shift resulted in increased resource allocations and the expansion of support programs aimed at mitigating the socio-economic effects of the pandemic.
3. Socio-economic recovery remained uncertain, making investment in social protection more essential than ever. The resilience of economies and societies will largely depend on the ability of social protection systems to adapt and respond effectively to future crises.
4. Countries face a choice regarding the trajectory of their social protection systems: adopting ambitious strategies and investing in strengthening their social protection systems or succumbing to budgetary or political pressures and opting for a minimalist approach that dries up resources allocated to social protection. The decisions made today will determine not only the ability to overcome the current crisis but also prepare societies for future challenges.
5. The establishment of universal social protection systems and the realization of the human right to social security for all is the cornerstone of a human-centered approach to achieving social justice. A renewed commitment to universal social protection is essential to ensure that no one is left behind in efforts towards sustainable development and equity.

The COVID-19 crisis underscored the imperative need to strengthen and expand social protection systems worldwide. The commitment to universal social protection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is crucial to ensuring the resilience of societies in the region against future crises and promoting true social justice.

Data from the World Social Protection Data Dashboards indicate that 39.5% of the MENA region's population receives at least one social protection benefit compared to 46.9% globally. This means that social protection coverage in this region is 7.4 percentage points below the global average.

In terms of health, 64.2% of the MENA region's population is affiliated with a social protection scheme compared to 66% globally. Here, the gap is narrower, with only a 1.8 percentage point difference. Although the MENA region lags slightly behind the global average, the proximity of the figures indicates that the region has made considerable progress in affiliating with health social protection schemes.

These statistics reveal three key findings:

- A significant proportion of the MENA region's population does not benefit from social protection benefits, which can exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities, especially during a crisis.
- The MENA region shows notable progress in health social protection coverage, nearly aligning with the global average, although there is still some way to go to achieve universal coverage.
- Differences between overall social protection coverage rates and those specific to health may indicate varied political priorities and investment levels in different aspects of social protection within the MENA region.

These findings emphasize the importance of further strengthening social protection systems in the MENA region to achieve coverage levels comparable to the global average, particularly by including diverse benefits and implementing effective and accessible social protection schemes for all population segments.

Regarding public social protection expenditure by function as a percentage of GDP, the MENA region shows a rate of 9.3%, divided between 6.2% for social protection excluding health and 3.1% for health. Globally, these expenditures amount to 18.8% of global GDP, divided between 12.9% for social protection excluding health and 5.8% for health.

These data show significant disparities between the MENA region and the global average. The MENA region dedicates about half the proportion of its GDP to social protection compared to the global average, indicating much lower investment in social protection mechanisms.

This situation reflects insufficient public investment in essential social protection programs, impacting the systems' ability to effectively meet populations' needs. Social protection expenditures excluding health in the MENA region represent less than half of those at the global level. This under-expenditure can lead to inadequate coverage of benefits such as pensions, family allowances, unemployment benefits, and other forms of economic support.

These disparities in social protection excluding health highlight a potential deficit in economic support benefits such as unemployment allowances, pensions, and other forms of economic security. This under-expenditure can exacerbate regional inequalities and poverty.

Health social protection expenditures in the MENA region are also below the global average, which may explain gaps in healthcare access and lower quality of health services. The MENA region may be less equipped to provide quality and accessible healthcare for all. This situation could lead to inequalities in healthcare access and negatively affect population health outcomes, countering the objective of universalization.

The challenge of universalization

The challenge of universalizing social protection in the MENA region is complex and multidimensional. It requires concerted and coordinated efforts from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. By increasing investments, expanding coverage, strengthening institutional capacities, ensuring sustainable financing, adapting systems to crises, and raising public awareness, the MENA region can progress towards universal social protection, thus guaranteeing an essential safety net for all its citizens.

The MENA region dedicates a significantly lower share of its GDP to social protection compared to the global average. This under-expenditure is reflected in both major domains: social protection excluding health and public health. To reach levels comparable to the global average, governments need to increase budgetary allocations dedicated to social protection. This requires strong political will and fiscal reforms to mobilize additional resources.

A significant proportion of the MENA region's population lacks adequate social protection. Inequalities and gaps in social protection benefit coverage are particularly pronounced. Hence, it is necessary to implement inclusive policies

aimed at extending social protection coverage to all segments of society, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups such as informal workers, women, people with disabilities, youth, and rural populations.

Infrastructures and institutional capacities to administer social protection programs are often insufficient. This can lead to poor management, inefficiencies, and unequal distribution of benefits. Thus, strengthening these institutional capacities and infrastructures contributing to strengthening social protection systems through effective and transparent program management. This also requires the establishment of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Ensuring sustainable financing for social protection systems is a major challenge. Over-reliance on volatile revenues, such as those from natural resources, can compromise funding stability. Therefore, alternatives lie in diversifying funding sources by adopting progressive fiscal measures and reducing dependence on volatile revenues. Private sector participation is strongly encouraged, as well as exploring public-private partnerships to support social protection initiatives.

The final challenge for MENA countries lies in the capacity of social protection systems to respond effectively to economic, health, and social shocks, as they are often ill-prepared for such situations. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the vulnerability of these systems. To address this, it is necessary to develop rapid response mechanisms and adaptive safety nets to cope with crises. This can include setting up reserve funds and flexible social protection programs capable of adjusting to emerging needs.

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