

Illiteracy in the Arab World

By

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Introduction

Literacy is a word that is usually associated with the positive aspects of human civilization, and of social and economic development. However, the word illiteracy has been, and is still used nowadays to characterize poverty and lack of education in various parts of the world. **Literacy as we refer to it in this report is a second chance in basic education and a chance not only to improve youth and adult standard of life and upgrade their basic life skills, but also to contribute to the sustainable development of their societies and to become life-long learners.**

Although adult education in the region has begun to take on other characteristics more prevalent in other parts of the world, which include providing people with the skills and knowledge needed to respond effectively to the growing challenges of new technologies and the information age, it is important to point that the “focus of adult education in the Arab region as a whole has been primarily on literacy, and most of the region still deals with adult education as a literacy issue”¹.

In order to identify the trends and characteristics of literacy and illiteracy in the Arab countries, data was retrieved and compiled from recent UNESCO literacy estimates and projections. These estimates provide basic information on the number and percentage of adults (age 15 years and older) and youth (age 15 to 24 years old) who are literate and illiterate. They indicate the dimensions and patterns of illiteracy within each country according to gender and age groups. The 2000-2004 data on literacy in tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix) is derived from the March 2004 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) Literacy Assessment which uses directly reported national figures taken between 1995 and 2004, or when not available are based on UIS estimates for 2002. All these figures were rebased to the 2002 UN Population revision (EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, p.249). As to the illiteracy figures in tables 4 and 5 (see Appendix), they were compiled from UIS estimates and projections for the period 1980-2015.

However, no academic publications were found on literacy and illiteracy in the Arab World. To compensate for such a deficit, many UNESCO publications and UNDP reports were examined and used in the preparation of this report.

Literacy in the Arab World: The teaching of reading and writing faces the challenge of the dichotomy in Arabic language between the spoken (colloquial) and the classical language. The latter seems today no longer the “language of

¹ Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003. p. 9

conversation”, it is rather the language of reading and writing, while the former is the language of cordial, spontaneous expression, emotions, feelings and everyday communication. Therefore, teaching illiterates reading and writing in classical Arabic faces the crisis of the growing neglect of the functional aspects of (Arabic) language use. On the other hand, another aspect of the crisis is the relation between the Arabic language and the transfer and absorption of technologies which necessitate the renewal of Arabic language by expanding its functional use in everyday life and the strengthening of its relationship with other languages to avoid the risk of being marginalized from new informational and technological developments (Arab Human Development Report, 2003, p.125 - 126).

Literacy

Literacy is a pressing issue on the Adult Education agenda for the Arab Region, the key to development beyond the notion of reading and writing; it also encompasses language and computer skills and other relevant skills needed to cope in modern society and fully participate in all aspects of life.

Literacy Improvement. In 1980 the Arab States were able to attain 51.3% literacy rate, an increase of 11% from the previous decade (40.8%). A decade later that rate rose to 61.5%, an increase of only 10%. This was not a considerable increase if these countries were keen to eradicate illiteracy or cut it in half by the year 2000 in accordance with the 1990 Jomtein Declaration. In other words, at an annual rate of 1% increase, the Arab countries will need an additional 39 years to eradicate illiteracy².

Literacy Rates. Great variations exist among the Arab states in their literacy rates for the age group 15 and over. The most recent data (Table 1) reveals that such literacy rates range from 80% and above in nine countries (Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and Libya), which are relatively small states with the exception of Saudi Arabia, to less than 75% in nine other countries with large populations, with Iraq, Mauritania and Yemen standing as low as 40% and 41.2% and 49% respectively.

As John Daniel, former UNESCO Assistant Director General for Education alarmingly warns “the Arab region has some of the world’s lowest adult literacy rates, with only [62.2%] of the region’s population of 15 and over able

² The Regional Report on Education for All in the Arab Countries, The Regional Arab Conference, Assessment 2000, UNESCO, Cairo, Egypt, 2000, p.65

to read and write in [2000-2004] well below the world average of [84%] and the developing countries average of [76.4%]”³.

As for the age group 15-24 (Table 1), the achievements were greater, whereby eleven countries attained a literacy rate of 90% and over well above the world average of 87.6% (Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Syria, Qatar, Kuwait, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Tunisia), with Jordan scoring the highest (99.4%). Such “literacy abundant” countries are contrasted to another “literacy deprived” group of five states with the largest Arab population all scoring below the developing countries average of 85.2% (Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, and Yemen).

Improvement of Female Literacy. Female literacy rates 15 and over (*Table 1*) in the Arab world today range from 24 (Iraq) to 85.9 percent (Jordan). Between 1990 and 2000- 2004, six Arab countries ranked above the world average of 76.5%. Bahrain raised its female literacy rate from 74.6% to 84.2%, Jordan from 72.1% to 85.9%, Kuwait from 72.6% to 81%, Lebanon from 73.1% to 82%, Qatar from 76% to 82.3%, and the United Arab Emirates from 70% to 80.7%.

However, despite such great strides in female literacy in these countries, high rates of illiteracy among women persist in the majority of the Arab countries, indeed women today account for two thirds of the region’s illiterates and according to the Arab Human Development Report 2002, p.52, this rate is not expected to disappear “not until 2040”. Several factors seem to account for such a deficit, chief among them are the low base in primary enrollment from which such countries started, the slow down in the rate of increase in enrollment during the 1990s compared with the 1980s, with an apparent bias against female (AHDR 2002, p.52), the decline in public expenditure on education since 1995 (AHDR 2003, p.52), in addition to “a decline in political commitment or inappropriate approaches to rectifying the situation”⁴.

Gender Parity. It was estimated that gender parity in the Arab world stood at .69 in 2004, one of the lowest rates in the world except for South and West Asia⁵. Although progress has been made during the last two decades towards bringing all girls into schools, in the Arab World girls still attend school less commonly than boys.

³ Daniel, John. “Education for All in the Arab World”. UNESCO 25 January 2005. (<http://www.portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev>, p. 6

⁴ Swift, Digby, Tackling Female Illiteracy in Arab Countries, published in “Critical Issues in Education For All: Gender Parity, emergencies”, TUVSULA. Hilsenki, Finland, UNESCO, Paris, June 2003.

⁵ Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005, p.384

That is not to say that the education of boys is not important. All children, boys and girls, deserve quality education. As the information age advances, illiterates and uneducated children, and the adults they will become, are more likely to fall behind.

The data shows (**Table 2**) that only five countries (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain) had a gender parity index of .90 and above for the age group 15 and over, well above the world average of .88 with UAE scoring as high as 1.07. While eleven countries (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Oman, Mauritania, Egypt, Yemen and Morocco) have an index lower than the developing countries average parity index of .83, they do correspond to the countries previously labeled as literacy deprived with the exception of Syria and Saudi Arabia. Such a gender disparity between the Arab countries is due to various obstacles; in Sudan poverty and early marriage are the main reason for families to neglect female education. Yemen's low enrollment of girls in the primary level and the distant location of schools away from home hamper female enrollment. It is worth noting the presence of other problems such as the shortage of resources and funding of schools for girls within the local communities to segregate girls and boys, and the lack of commitment on the part of the educational authorities to promote and raise awareness about the education of girls.

As for the age group 15-24 (Table 2) the disparity is less pronounced. Nine countries have an index of .94 and above (Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar, and Kuwait) with five of them (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates) reaching parity, while five countries (Mauritania, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Yemen) show an index of less than .91 which is the developing countries' parity index.

Illiteracy

There is a great awareness in the Arab countries at the governmental and organizational levels of the seriousness of the situation. Several measures were taken, including the establishment of national councils and commissions, setting up policies and strategies, holding national and regional conferences to coordinate the efforts to combat illiteracy with direct technical support from the UNESCO regional office in Beirut, Lebanon. A major technical assistance to combat illiteracy in the area was the launching of the REGIONAL PROGRAM FOR UNIVERSALIZATION AND RENEWAL OF PRIMARY EDUCATION AND ERRADICATION OF ILLITERACY, IN THE ARAB STATES

(ARABUPEAL, 1989), which was later integrated with EFA goals and action plan after 2000. The objectives of this program concentrated on the development of Arab educational systems at the level of literacy and primary education through curriculum development, teaching methods, teachers' education and training, and setting up proper administration and planning structures.⁶

Moreover, the establishment of the Arab Network for Literacy and Adult Education was one of the major achievements of CONFINTEA V (Hamburg, 1997) for Arab Countries in 1999. Its aim was to support NGOs and civil organizations to play a vital role in the eradication of illiteracy in the region⁷.

Illiteracy Improvement (age 15+). As a result of such efforts, the Arab countries combined were able to reduce the illiteracy rates from 48.7% in 1990 to 38.5% in 2000. The average percentage of female illiteracy (in 18 Arab countries data, Table 3) for the age group 15+ decreased from 64.9% in 1980 to 51.9% in 1990 to 40.2% in the year 2000. As for the age group 15-24 (in 17 Arab countries data) it decreased from 44.9% to 29.9% to 19.4% for the same years respectively. It is worth noting that for this same age group the percentage of illiterate women in 9 Arab countries reached below 10%, and was almost nil in Jordan (0.2%) and Bahrain (1.4%)⁸.

Table 3 Improvement of women illiteracy in the Arab Countries

<i>YEAR</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>
<i>Illiteracy for women 15-24</i>	<i>44.9%</i>	<i>29.9%</i>	<i>19.4%</i>
<i>Illiteracy for women over 15</i>	<i>64.9%</i>	<i>51.9%</i>	<i>40.2%</i>

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

The data reveals (Table 3) that illiteracy rates had dropped sharply in the Arab countries in the last two decades for the age group 15 years and over. Various states had different rates of improvement varying from less than 10 percentage points to over 30 percentage points.

More recent data (Table 4) reveals that a decline in illiteracy in one country had been almost negligible over the last quarter of a century 1980-2005 (Iraq 10

⁶ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p.12

⁷ Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003. p.8

⁸ Hammoud, Rafika. Non-formal Education for Girls, , UNESCO, Beirut 2001, p.20

percentage points), while its illiterate population had doubled in absolute terms. Seven other countries have improved their **illiteracy rates** by 10 and 20 percentage points. Of this group, two countries (**Bahrain, and Lebanon**), had tremendously reduced the overall illiteracy rates to below 12 percent, in three other countries the changing rate grew between 21-25 percentage points (**Jordan, Morocco, and Syria**), and to an even higher rate of 26-41 in (Djibouti, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria). While it is obvious that all countries have achieved considerable improvement in their illiteracy rates, Iraq's rate had almost stagnated due to the deteriorating security situation, economic sanctions, prolonged curfews, the inability of students to reach their schools and the destruction of educational facilities.

Illiteracy Rates (age 15+)

In 1980 (Table 4) the illiteracy rate in fourteen Arab countries ranged from 45% to 80%, and from 28% to 35% in six others. In the year 2005, the overall illiteracy rates dropped drastically to a range of 8% to 22% in ten countries (Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Syria, and Libya), and they varied between 23% and 34% in three others (Algeria, Djibouti, and Tunisia). Six countries (Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and Yemen) are still burdened by over 35% illiteracy rates, with Iraq and Mauritania being overburdened with around 60% of their population being illiterate.

Improvement of Female Illiteracy (age 15+)

In 1980 (Table 4) female illiteracy rates in almost half of the Arab countries were above 75%. That is 3 out of 4 women are illiterate. In the year 2005, tremendous improvements in female illiteracy were witnessed in six countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, UAE, and Qatar) with rates ranging between 10 to 20 percent. Another group (Libya and Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Djibouti, Oman, Syria, and Tunisia) had brought down their female illiteracy rates to a range of 25 to 40 percent. However, Sudan still maintains a female illiteracy rate of 46%. Females in five other countries (Iraq, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, and Yemen) did not fair any better, their illiteracy rates are still as high as 50 to 67 percent.

As per the above statistics, the Arab countries can be grouped into three categories:

- 1- Seven countries successfully reduced both illiteracy rates and population of illiterates (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Libya, Oman, Tunisia).

- 2- Ten countries decreased their illiteracy rates, while their illiterate population increased (Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen, Syria, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Sudan).
- 3- Algeria and Djibouti reduced their illiteracy rates; however, their illiterate populations remain unchanged.

Illiteracy Improvement (age 15-24)

The data (Table 5) reveals various degrees of changes in the illiteracy rates for the age group 15-24 over the last quarter of a century, ranging from 8 to 41 percentage points. However, and despite the improvement, five countries still maintain high illiteracy rates ranging from 20% to 55%. This is mostly due to the high base line of the eighties and to the scarcity of resources available (Mauritania, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, and Morocco).

Illiteracy Rates (age 15-24)

In 1980 (Table 5) ten Arab countries had illiteracy rates for the age group 15-24 ranging between 40% and 70%, the rate in seven other countries fell in the range of 18% to 30%, while only three states had rates of less than 13% (Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain). In the year 2005 (Table 5) however, the status of illiteracy of the same age group dropped drastically to less than 5% in seven countries (Tunisia, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, and Qatar) with Bahrain, Oman and Jordan reducing their illiteracy rates to 1% and below. Four others (Algeria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE) dropped their illiteracy rates to a range of 5% to 8% in . The illiteracy rate of three countries stood at 10% to 18% (Syria, Djibouti and Sudan,), while the last five countries had illiteracy rates of 24% to 55% (Morocco, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, and Mauritania).

Female Illiteracy

In 1980 (Table 5) female illiteracy rates for the age group 15-24 ranged between 50% and 89% in ten countries, with Iraq, and Yemen scoring 79% and 89% respectively, while only six states had a range of 13% to 23% , the remaining four countries had their illiteracy rates falling to between 38% to 48%. The last two and a half decades witnessed dramatic improvement in female illiteracy rates in eight countries (5 % and below in Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, and Oman), the last three countries with female illiteracy rates falling to 1% and below. Five others made good progress with a range of 6% to 20% (Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Djibouti, and Tunisia), while two countries (Syria and Algeria) fell in the range

of 16% to 22%. The last six countries (Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, Mauritania and Yemen) had illiteracy rates ranging from 21% to 70%, with Yemen, Iraq, and Mauritania at the peak.

Analysis

The above figures on literacy and illiteracy reveal great variations between the Arab countries. Three groups of countries could be identified according to their achievements in this regard, the first group identified as the “literacy abundant countries”, comprises Libya and the gulf states with the exception of Saudi Arabia, these countries are characterized by being limited in size, with small populations and abundant financial resources; two other countries Jordan and Lebanon also belong to this group. The second group is the promising one whose countries seem to be on track towards attaining acceptable levels of literacy, it includes Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Algeria. The third group known as “literacy deprived countries” includes Egypt, Mauritania, Iraq, Yemen, Djibouti, Morocco, and Sudan.

Several literacy and illiteracy policies, strategies and programs lie behind the success of the first group. The Gulf States provide free and compulsory education and a system of incentives and rewards, in Bahrain no government job can be obtained without a certificate proving the completion of a literacy course. Bahrain and Jordan facilitate the enrollment in flexible programs by offering evening and afternoon classes. In Oman and Lebanon and Libya the collaboration between the government and civil society has been considered one of the contributing factors to success. Moreover, the political commitment at the highest levels in Jordan to eradicate illiteracy was very fruitful, since it provided the sustained support and necessary funding to develop a ten year policy framework, with medium and long term goals to achieve significant educational reform

The second group of countries is characterized by being spread out over large geographical areas, with limited resources spearing out Saudi Arabia. Despite the impressive records in combating illiteracy, these countries require the provision of trained teachers and professionals to carry on the literacy programs, in addition to the improvement of books and teachers guides. Saudi Arabia began to encourage the civil and the private sector to play an active role to meet the needs of qualified technical and vocational labor force. In the year 1999, an evaluation of the adult education and literacy plan in Tunisia revealed the unsuccessful 1997 strategy due to several factors, chief among them are the lack of partnership, insufficient training and extreme poverty of some illiterate

population. Despite the improvement in literacy rates, the Syrian government has declared in 2000 these results far from satisfactory.

As to the third group, all these countries suffer from a shortage of financial resources and large population spread over vast geographical areas. However, initiatives were taken for designing new programs and curricula (Morocco, Yemen, Sudan, Egypt), ensuring the accessibility of adult education to women and girls, particularly in rural areas and remote communities (Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania), raising awareness of the importance of education (Mauritania). However, these countries suffer from a wide discrepancy between urban and rural literacy for both genders because of the limited available resources and the inability of the education facilities to reach out all the illiterates⁹.

In conclusion and despite the great strides achieved in adult education in the last two and a half decades, it was found that “The awareness in the region of the importance of education and its central role in achieving sustainable human and social development and a competitive edge on the global market has not been matched by the provision of the tools necessary to set effective policies and put in place implementable goals and strategies to achieve it”¹⁰.

Literacy Acquisition

The Arab countries were very keen to implement the recommendations and principles called upon by the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtein, 1990) to provide their children with quality education. However, little has been done to systematically assess literacy acquisition or basic education in the region; as John Daniel pointed out “To date there has been little participation of Arab countries... [in the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA)]”¹¹

In order to monitor the quality of education programs in general and those of learning achievement in particular, a joint project between the UNESCO and UNICEF was initiated and implemented in nine Arab countries to address learning achievement in basic learning competencies in Arabic Language, Math and life skills¹². The results revealed that only two states (Tunisia and Morocco) succeeded in enabling the identified percentage of students to master the basic learning competencies in Arabic. However, none of the participating

⁹ Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003. p.16, 20,21,32, 38,

¹⁰ Billeh, Victor. Educational Reform in the Arab Region. Newsletter of the Economic Research Forum, for the Arab Countries, Iran & Turkey, Volume nine-Number two-summer 2002, p. 31.

¹¹ Daniel, John. “Education for All in the Arab World”. UNESCO 25 January 2005. (<http://www.portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev>), p. 4

¹² Learning Achievement of Grade Four Elementary Students in Some Arab Countries, The Arab Regional Conference on Education for All, The Year 2000 Assessment, Cairo, 2000, p.1-3

Arab states has been able to achieve the targeted percentage (80% of students) in mastering basic competencies in math; the highest was Tunisia at 77%.

The general performance of students in the Arab Countries under study was at its best in the Arabic language and the lowest in math; however, the general trend was not clear on the life skills performance. Another conclusion was that, urban and private schools students performed at higher levels than those in rural areas and public schools. Females exceeded males in Arabic, basic skills and math competencies.

Two sets of factors were found to be accountable for the students' performance and achievement, the family and personal factors which had more relative contribution to the students' achievement than the school factors. Among the family and personal factors that had the most influence on achievement were the socio-economic level, the family follow-up of students work, the pre-school education, high expectations of students' potentials and student absence. Among the school factors affecting students' achievement were those related to school facilities, realistic teachers' expectations of students' abilities, variation of teaching methods and evaluation, teachers and principal age, and school cooperation with the local community.

Supporting the above findings, several other studies have been conducted on students' achievement in some Arab Countries including Oman, Egypt and Bahrain. These studies are of limited value as they have been neither designed nor conducted on a comparable basis and do not support comparative conclusions. Their findings, however, provide significant insights into the quality of elementary education. In Oman, four studies to evaluate educational achievement in Arabic, mathematics, science and life skills in the fourth, sixth and ninth grades revealed two findings, 1) grade averages in all subjects are below excellence, 2) girls outperformed boys in all subjects. In Egypt a field survey showed a low level of student achievement reflected in the lack of mastery of essential skills in reading and writing and mathematics. In Bahrain, the low level of student was reflected in a lack of mastery of essential skills. When it comes to comparative studies with other countries of the world, only one Arab country, Kuwait participated in the "Third International Mathematic and Science Study". Despite sufficient financial resources and a small population, Kuwaiti students came at the bottom of the list of 41 countries and ranked 39th in terms of achievement in mathematics and science. These examples point to an important conclusion; ultimately the quality of education does not depend on the availability of resources or on quantitative factors, but rather on other characteristics related to the organization of the education process and the mean of delivery and evaluation. (Arab Human Development Report 2003, p.54-55)

However, in general, the essential aspects of learning in the Arab countries do not receive sufficient attention, and the information about the acquisition of basic skills related to the of education quality is still very scarce.

The Illiterates: Characteristics and Problems

Out of school children

Much progress has been made in school enrollment in the Arab World, particularly for girls, who presently stand better chances in education and even better opportunities than those in West Africa or Southern Asia. However, despite this improvement during the last two decades, it was estimated that girls' enrollment ratio is still below that of boys; it only reached 69.4% in 1990, and with the trend of progress that the Arab countries were witnessing during the last decade, over one fifth of girls aged 6-11 were expected to be out of school in 2000¹³.

In spite of the expansion in the number of first level pupils, from 29 million in 1988 to about 42 million in the year 2000, and estimated to reach 57 million in 2025, enrollment of children aged 6-11 reached only 68% in 1980 and 75% in 1988. In the mid nineties a conference of Arab Ministers of Education predicted that if the Arab countries' policies remain unchanged, the enrollment ratio of this age group of children in schools will not go beyond 80% in the year 1995, and 83% in 2000¹⁴.

While most governments have made tremendous strides toward extending access to basic education to all children, the region is characterized by great underlying variations at the country level based on many factors such as the size of the population, where a small country like Qatar has about 6,000 out-of-school children, and Egypt, being a large country, has a total of 1,610,679 youngsters out of school¹⁵. According to the EFA most recent report, it is

¹³ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p. 5

¹⁴ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and Those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994, MINEDARAB3, p. 5

¹⁵ Education for All National Plans in the Arab States. Main Working Document, Arab Regional Conference on EFA National Plans: What's Next? , Beirut, 20-23 January 2004, p.22,24.

estimated that Sudan has approximately 2,700,000 young persons out of school, the majority of whom are female. Only 0.11 percent from the total target category were attracted to centers created to educate them. Among the major problem that hampers this kind of youth education and training is probably the low enrollment rate compared to the volume of this category, to say nothing of the weakness in organization, coordination, follow up, whether at the federal level or at the level of governorate, in addition to the poverty characterizing the learning environment. In Egypt, despite the tremendous efforts, only 4 percent of the volume of this targeted group is enrolled in schools created in deprived regions. The problems hampering enrollment are the non-compliance with child labor laws; the high indirect education cost compared with low family income in rural areas, and the cultural heritage regarding the education of girls¹⁶.

Although the available data on this age group (6-11) in the population is very scarce, it was estimated that in the year 2000, the Arab States had a total of 39% of its population under the age of 14. Today some eight million primary school-age children remain out-of-school in the Arab World and five million of them are girls. Nearly one child in five of primary age (one girl in four) is still out-of-school¹⁷ and will be living in states where universal basic education has not been attained. The states lagging behind are the least developed in terms of quantitative as well as qualitative aspects of basic education; even those countries that provide education for all children of school age will have to face the problem of quality and relevance on one hand and the problem of illiteracy and continuing adult education on the other¹⁸.

Indeed when these children turn 15 years old; they will no doubt join the ranks of adult illiterates.

Girls and Women. Female education in the Arab World is facing numerous obstacles and challenges. Out of school girls and illiterate women constitute a majority; due to unfavorable attitudes towards the education of women, seen as less important particularly in rural areas and the shortage of resources, preference is given to men. Poverty and the tradition of early marriages, particularly in rural areas, and parents' unawareness of the importance of girls' education, in addition to the shortage of "girls friendly" schools, are the common causes of women illiteracy. That is not to forget the absence of a strong political commitment to eradicate women illiteracy.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.24, 25

¹⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Education in the Arab States, 2003.

¹⁸ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994., MINEDARAB/3, p. 14-15

Rural Populations. In 1989, 49% of the region's total population lived in rural areas; this proportion was expected to drop to 43% by the end of the century. These rural communities do not receive adequate education services comprising schools, teachers and material. Low attendance rates are attributed to economic reasons for males and to shortage of resources as well as poverty and early marriage for females. Moreover, the curriculum in rural areas has little relevance to daily life.

Surprisingly, in Morocco, the gender gap in literacy among the present younger generation is larger than that of their parents and even grandparents. This is the result of selective out-migration of literates from the countryside to the towns or of insufficient educational access and facilities in rural areas. Part of this high result of illiteracy in rural areas is the relative frequency of households in which both parents are illiterate and who are by far more likely to raise illiterate children.¹⁹

Nomads. Nomadic areas receive little attention from the authorities compared to urban centers; schooling for nomadic children is inefficient to acquire the literacy skills and education relevant to their needs and life style. Enrollment rates are very low and less enforced in these areas, there is inequality between the sexes, and girls have low enrollment ratios. Repetition and drop-outs are very common.

Nomadic areas suffer from the absence of schools and other educational facilities for men, women, trained teachers and others. There are no available data on this group of the population, and therefore their numbers and characteristics cannot be accurately determined²⁰.

The Disabled. Considering their number, these children and adults in the Arab World constitute, after women, the largest group of the disadvantaged population. There is little provision for this group of people in the region, with no adequate or sufficient schools and training facilities. There are no precise data on the size of this segment of the population and the types of their disabilities; a great number of them go unidentified. Some of the major obstacles facing their education lie in the absence of policies and planning and inappropriate programs for special education at national levels, the wrong

¹⁹ Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003, p.25

²⁰ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p:MINEDARAB/3, p.17-18

perception surrounding such an education in some countries, and the professional dichotomy between regular and special education²¹.

In a recent conference on disability held in Beirut in October 2002, major trends causing increased instances of disability in the region were identified. Chief among them was the violent conflict shattering people's lives across the region.

“We have an increase in the number of disabled people as a result of violence in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Palestine. Disability is also growing as a result of poverty and malnutrition. This can be found in Egypt, Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen. A third source of disability is blood marriage, a very common tradition in most Arab countries, which is leading to an increase in mental disability across the Arab World”.

Out of 17 national reports, only four countries, Egypt, Oman, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates, mentioned the education of adults with special needs as a priority. All four countries indicated special programmes for people with physical disabilities, including an accessible learning environment, especially trained teachers, adult literacy books printed in Brail, and integration in schools and higher institutions²².

Leading innovations in the Arab countries

The sustainability of literacy greatly depends on evaluating adult education programs in order to assess their impact on learning acquisition. This process is equally important for future modifications and improvements of such experiences. Moreover, the documentation of success stories in adult education provides solid grounds for lessons to be drawn and their implications implemented in other contexts. The Arab countries provide various modalities in adult education to address program quality, adequate teaching material, lack of incentive among learners, special population needs, community participation, and use of technology. Such concerns have been addressed in a multiplicity of innovations launched by various Arab countries.

²¹ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p:MINEDARAB/3, p. 21

²² Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003. p. 41

A 2001 UNESCO report on the non-formal education for Girls in the Arab Region²³ pinpointed four pilot projects carried out in Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Libya to eradicate illiteracy:

1. One-room and community schools in Egypt were inaugurated in 1993 to improve female education in rural Egypt to help acquire basic life skills from within the community and to bridge the gap between male and female education. These schools have not only allowed women and girls in traditional communities direct access to education but also to overcome the barriers that impeded girls education in poor and traditional societies. The closeness of these schools to home and the flexible timetables and scheduling enabled the girls to pursue their education and to continue their role in helping their families in the field and daily chores. However, only 4% of the targeted group benefited from such facilities. Several factors lie behind their limited scope such as the shortage of public funding, the lack of enforcement of child labor law, poverty and migration of large number of rural families to remote areas inaccessible to educational facilities, and the low priority given to girls education by families (Egypt national Plan for Education for All 2002).
2. Female Education in Al Saragena district in Morocco. A project launched in 1994 in collaboration with the UNDP to encourage female school enrollment in an impoverished rural area by offering the female students incentives, and introducing to the school curriculum new activities needed by the participants, mainly women, on agriculture, carpentry, sewing, electricity and other basic life skills required in their community.
3. Educating the nomadic Bedouins in Sudan who in 2001 constituted 65.5% of the country's population (Sudan National plan for education for all 2002). This project took place in 1994 in the Darfour district to implement the roving schools experiment. A special Department was established by the Ministry of Education to be in charge of nomadic schools. The community was involved and provided the location and the incentives for the teachers, and agreed to move the schools along as they roam in the desert.

²³ Hammoud, Rafika. Non-formal Education for Girls, UNESCO, Beirut 2001, p.24-25,27-28

4. The Open University in Libya was established in the late 1980s and expanded to include 17 new branches by 1990. It was supported by a satellite channel to spread the distance learning process to various areas and provinces of the country. It offers 11 areas of specialization in basic education, basic and lifelong learning skills, illiteracy and sustainable education.

Other innovations worth noting:

- Saudi Arabia's training program of post literacy for girls which aims to provide them with skills such as home economics, and sewing among others. Another non-formal training program addressing women is to teach them additional competencies including computer skills and languages besides the traditional crafts. Small handicrafts workshops known as "**the income generating families**" were established to assist women who completed their training in sewing and embroidery to generate an income (Saudi Arabia National Plan 2000).
- The UNILIT pilot project in Lebanon launched by UNESCO in 1998 is an attempt to combine literacy programs and higher education institutions in an effort to combat illiteracy on the basis of "**teaching others**" and to bridge the education gap between the "**haves and have-nots**". As part of this program, in some countries the students get one academic credit or 40 hours of UNILIT work, while in others community work is a prerequisite for graduation. However, this program faces a major problem in that it has not yet become an institutionalized part of the universities. (UNESCO:UNILIT).

In addition, Egypt, Oman, and Lebanon chose to face the deficiency in teachers for their illiteracy programs by training thousands of high school graduates, which enabled them to expand the service to larger groups of people and to broaden the coverage to rural and neglected areas of their countries (Egypt, Oman and Lebanon National Plans 2002).

- Sudan has adopted the open learning method to educate the displaced, living in camps due to political conflict, by providing formal and non-formal education from illiteracy to the high school level. In addition a follow up to the "**after illiteracy program**" is carried out to insure its success. The project enables the newly literate to write their own stories

which are published to generate income (Sudan National Plan on Education for All 2002)

In addition, Sudan addresses rural women's education and illiteracy through the Sudan Open Learning Organization (SOLO), by adopting Paolo Freire's approach on adult education aiming at empowering women in rural areas of the country (Sudan National Plan 2002). The project focuses on involving the participants in determining the communities' needs within their environment, and introduces subjects that trigger the learners interest.

- Two pilot projects launched by the Arab Women's Institute in Lebanon, to help poor and illiterate women to make a living through the "**income generating project**". A survey was conducted to determine the most needed crafts to assist women in starting small business projects by providing the raw material and marketing for their products. It even assisted women in finding jobs. This project was even implemented in one of the country's prisons.
 - The "**Basic Living Skills project**", which was launched in 1985, aims at enabling the illiterates and the handicapped to make a living, integrate into their societies and become effective citizens. This project was also carried out in seven Arab countries over 18 years²⁴.
 - A successful literacy program in Algeria run by "**Iqraa**" aims to achieve an appreciable increase in the literacy rates of families in rural areas, and of women and girls in particular. Women were motivated to join the literacy and adult education classes, by adding courses such as embroidery, sewing and hairdressing. These motivations were effective in drawing women from remote and rural areas. In addition the certificates given to women at the end of each course gave them a sense of accomplishment²⁵.

Unfortunately, no solid knowledge base for such field innovations is provided, since little is done to document their effectiveness, inadequate resources are being invested in their assessment, evaluation and monitoring. Thus, not only does their contribution to curb illiteracy go unnoticed, but their impact on learning acquisition and its sustainability are severely hampered as well.

²⁴ Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University (2003). Basic Living Skills Program. Beirut, Lebanon: LAU, IWSAW

²⁵ Literacy and Adult Education, Arab Regional Report, CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003, p.14

Indeed, as it was revealed in a recent Arab Regional Report on Literacy and Adult Education (CONFENTIA V, 2003):

“there is a shortage in the availability of statistical and narrative information on adult education and literacy in the region, and some of the information is unreliable. This has been attributed to the lack of dependable centralized documentation and information collection. While there are many successful programmes in many countries, and valuable studies that are worth duplicating and adapting, they have not been sufficiently documented, published or distributed. Therefore, it was concluded that there is a body of knowledge in the region that is not being shared and not being made use of”
p.5.

Challenges and Limitations

The majority of Arab countries face common and important challenges in universalizing quality basic education and literacy. A survey conducted by UNEDBAS in 1989 in all Arab States on basic education and literacy found that the following nine obstacles impede the spread of education for all²⁶

- Inadequate financial resources and properly trained human resources.
- Unfavorable social attitudes of some communities towards girls' education
- Predominant beliefs among the poor and the uneducated of the economic value of child labor over education.
- Lack of infrastructure to reach nomadic and rural communities.
- Natural and man-made disasters resulting in the destruction of property and dislocation of people.
- Lack of well defined policy regarding the use of existing traditional education institutions.
- Lack of appropriate use of mass media to promote education.
- The ineffectiveness of some Arab States in managing the education systems along with weak administrative and planning bodies.
- Discrepancy between values taught in school and the dominant values in societies.

As to literacy, several leading factors seem to have plagued most of its programs in the region' such factors are attributed to the lack of mobilizing

²⁶ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p:MINEDARAB/3, p. 9-10

financial and human resources the adoption of appropriate techniques to strike the interests of the targeted groups who may not consider literacy as a necessity. The literacy task is solely handled by one ministry or department. In addition, a common characteristic among most countries is the poor quality of teaching due to lack of appropriate training, and the low motivation of both the staff and learners. More importantly, the basic literacy phase is rarely followed up, thus resulting in considerable relapse. The limited use of the traditional learning institutions to eradicate illiteracy in a functional manner, and the bureaucratic system of managing the illiteracy program is often modeled on the formal primary education system without consultation with the adult learners, and in most cases is handled by non-professionals. Finally, universities and research institutions take little interest in adult education problems²⁷.

In assessing the level of conformity of Arab countries with the criteria of credible plans for education for all, a recent UNESCO regional report²⁸ found that most plans did not mention any clear governmental commitment, including the appropriation of necessary financial resources for the implementation of these plans. In addition, there is no indication that such plans were designed with the participation of various sectors and civil society organizations. Despite their commitment to the EFA goals, Arab States did not integrate their education within the scope of social and economic plans and did not link them to their poverty reduction strategies. The plans include a clear statement of goals and objectives without being defined by measurable indicators. The goals and action programs were not translated into executive plans with specific activities.

In general all national plans lack a clear monitoring and performance assessment mechanisms to be able to assess and monitor the progress towards the achievement of the goals.

CONCLUSION

Despite the significant progress that was made in adult education, the Arab region is still below the required level in terms of implementation of the EFA goals. As we look into the available 2004 figures, we realize the intensity of the problem and the numerous challenges the Arab countries are facing. A recent report of the Arab League Education, Culture and Science Organization

²⁷ Universalization Of Education and Improvement of its Quality and Relevance to Prepare for the Twenty – First Century. Fifth Conference of Ministers of Education and those Responsible for Economic Planning in the Arab States, Cairo, Egypt, 1994. MINEDARAB3, p:MINEDARAB/3, p. 11

²⁸ Education for All National Plans in the Arab States, Main Working Document, Arab Regional Conference on EFA National Plans: What's Next?, Beirut 20-23 January 2004, p.56

(ALECSO)²⁹ reveals that some 70 million people aged 15 and over stepped into the twenty-first century without being able to read or write, one of the largest populations of illiterates in the world. It is with regret, the report asserts that a goal to halve the numbers of illiterate people between 1990 and 2000 had not been achieved, and that based on current trends it would take three decades to completely eliminate the problem in the Arab countries.

Although the Arab States regional reports on Education for All and available research materials reveal that the region has made great strides and much progress to curb illiteracy, yet the rapid increase in population has raised the number of people who cannot read or write in the last three and a half decades. Though the percentage of illiterate people out of the total population has steadily decreased from 73% in 1970 to 48.7% in 1990 to 35.6% in the year 2004, the number of illiterates rose from 50 million in 1975 to 61 in 1990 to 70 million in 2004. The ALECSO report on illiteracy also reveals that almost half of the women (46.5%) in the Arab Region are not able to read or write while 25.1% of the men are illiterate. The absolute number of women illiterate in the age group 15-24 is increasing in most Arab Countries; it rose from 40 million in 1990 to 42.2 million in 1997, and is expected to reach 43.9 million in 2005³⁰.

According to the Millennium Development Goals estimates, the Arab world will not be able to achieve gender equity before 2020 or achieve basic education for all before 2050 if things remain unchanged. That is, if the rate of progress does not improve³¹.

The Jomtein Conference's target to eliminate illiteracy by 50% in the year 2000 has not been realized in any Arab country, and yet there is a widening recognition that the low literacy and poor basic learning competencies are even more prevalent today than they had been a decade ago.

Using the **EFA DEVELOPMENT INDEX** to determine how close to or far each state is from the targeted level of assessment year (end of 2015) for education for all, the Arab Regional Conference on EFA (2004) has recently found that of the 14 countries for which data is provided, seven were found to be on track for achieving the EFA goal by the expected deadline (Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, Palestine, Bahrain, Lebanon, UAE). However, five others

²⁹ Ben Salah, Hamida. 70 million Arabs still unable to read or write. www.middle-east-online.com

³⁰ Non-formal Education for Girls, Rafika Hammoud, UNESCO, Beirut 2001, p:39

³¹ Education for All National Plans in the Arab States. Main Working Document, Arab Regional Conference on EFA National Plans: What's Next ? , Beirut, 20-23 January 2004, p.3

(Oman, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria) are only halfway through, while two countries (Sudan, Yemen) are off-track.³²

With the recent United Nations' proclamation of a literacy decade (2003-2012) as part of the global effort towards Education For All, it is of utmost importance that the Arab countries, equipped with a more enlightened vision and a more dedicated commitment, should join hands and mobilize their societies' overall resources in order to overcome this new challenge to fully enable their children and adults to achieve their potential in the new millennium.

Several suggestions are deemed important on the literacy front to address other human development problems³³. Arab countries with education problems often face challenges related to health, poverty and job creation which need to be attended to simultaneously, therefore, for literacy programs to succeed, they must be tied to improve job opportunities that are appropriate to the economies of individual countries and their programs must employ curricula that meet the practical needs of pupils. In addition, necessary steps should be taken "to embed the importance of literacy so deeply into a given country's economy and culture that the costs of being illiterate and raising illiterate children become prohibitive".

³² Education for All National Plans in the Arab States. Main Working Document, Arab Regional Conference on EFA National Plans: What's Next ? , Beirut, 20-23 January 2004, p.58

³³ Orbach Benjamin and Delaney Bjorn. Daily Star (Beirut), June 2004

A P E N D I X