

For Immediate Release



MENA still behind rest of the world in education equality

Beirut, Lebanon- 05/03/2012 - Education inequality has not been reduced in the region in spite of greater access to schools and increased enrollment rates, according to research presented at AUB by a leading academic.

Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, professor of economics at Virginia Tech and a research fellow at the Brookings Institute, said that uneven access to learning had not improved in the Middle East and North Africa in over a decade.

“Economic and social mobility can create a perception of a more equal society even if the outcomes are unequal,” Salehi-Isfahani told the audience at an AUB lecture.

The talk, “Equality of Opportunity in Education in the Middle East and North Africa,” was sponsored by the Issam Fares Institute of Public Policy and International Affairs and examined education inequality in 16 countries within the MENA region, using scores from internationally administered tests.

Salehi-Isfahani presented findings also conducted by research partners, Nadia Belhaj Hassine, from the Economic Research Forum (ERF), and Ragui Assaad, from the University of Minnesota and ERF.

Education systems examined by Salehi-Isfahani performed well in terms of equality of access to schools - as evidenced by high average years of schooling and high enrollment rates - but were found wanting in terms of quality.

“The role of the state as [an] equal opportunity provider of education and employer of the educated has been crucial in popular acceptance of big government and strong leaders in the past. But lately the state has been failing in this role,” Salehi-Isfahani said.

The high level of inequality of opportunity in achievement can be attributed to the increasing role of private resources in education, he argued. Some governments had been found to favor students from affluent families over those with modest means, unfairly presenting the richer child with a greater chance of future success.

Salehi-Isfahani referenced Assaad's research, which used the example of Egypt, where “[the] most privileged boy has a 97 percent probability of pursuing higher education compared to only a 9 percent probability for the most deprived boy.”

Through studies such as TIMSS (Trends in International Math and Science Study), which compare international students' aptitude in math and science to that of students in the

United States, Salehi-Isfahani and his researchers found the MENA region to be below the global average in terms of student ability.

Lebanon and Jordan scored equally well in TIMSS, but for different reasons, with varying degrees of family involvement in education. Lebanon saw one of the lowest rates of familial intervention in learning, while Jordan scored among the highest.

Salehi-Isfahani argued that a large amount of the benefits of education remained incalculable. "A lot of it cannot be measured, such as making better citizens, making better parents."

He added that governments needed to start improving education and giving all children - whether wealthy or impoverished - the quality education they deserve as citizens.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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