A Catalyst for Socio-Economic Transformation: Bridging the Gap between Research and Policy

Dr. Aida Essaid
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A Summary by Bayan Jaber and Jana Chammaa

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) hosted a Director’s Policy Series lecture entitled: "A Catalyst for Socio-Economic Transformation: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Policy" at the American University of Beirut (AUB) with Dr. Aida Essaid, the Director of the Information and Research Center at the King Hussein Foundation (IRCKHF) in Jordan. Essaid shared the center’s success stories, obstacles and challenges, lessons learned and ongoing work in the IRCKHF’s pillars and programs as it continues to advocate for evidence-based policies.

The IRCKHF, which was initially launched in 1996 as part of the National Task Force for Children, promotes the welfare of children, youth, women, families, communities, and vulnerable groups through effective socio-economic planning and decision-making. IRCKHF has sister organizations which operate under the umbrella of the King Hussein Foundation, some of which are the National Music Conservatory, the Jubilee Institute, and the National Center for Culture and Arts. IRCKHF’s core mission is to provide objective, multidisciplinary research and analysis to practitioners and policy-makers in Jordan and the Middle East. The IRCKHF achieves its mission to be a catalyst for socio-economic transformation through research, information and dissemination of knowledge. The Center’s research focuses on critical issues falling under the pillars of social cohesion, equality and justice, and civil society empowerment. In order to achieve positive change, the IRCKHF advocates for policies that are based on evidence and on universal human rights.

Essaid provided an overview of IRCKHF’s programs through which the center attempts to bridge the gap between research and policy-making. Essaid described the Center’s Research Program as a central program whose results feed into all other programs. One of IRCKHF’s strategic objectives is to conduct and disseminate high quality multidisciplinary research, in which qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as needs and impact assessments, and monitoring and evaluation tools are used. Essaid pointed out that it is imperative to adopt holistic and inclusive methodologies when conducting research and in order to better advocate for the issues at hand. This includes peer/participatory research, a bottom-up approach, gender
sensitivity and ethical considerations, in addition to the cooperation with stakeholders. For example, with regards to honor crimes, one research endeavor in collaboration with the EU, included investigating the economic underpinnings of honor crimes. This meant looking at the socioeconomic status of victims and perpetrators, and making recommendations based on the findings which, in this case, revealed that most perpetrators of honor crimes haven’t finished school.

At the IRCKHF, advocacy is used for the creation or amendment of public policies and ensuring their effective implementation. Some of IRCKHF’s advocacy tools are new media and partnerships with members of civil society. Essaid noted that information is only accessible as long as it is being shared. To this end, dissemination is carried through policy papers and briefs, workshops/roundtables/press conferences, videos and info-graphs, and public debates.
The fourth program is Access to Information, which all the other programs are dependent on. Assaid stated that research can produce change if the information produced from that research is accessible to those concerned. The IRCKHF launched HAQQI Human Rights Information Zone for that reason in April 2014, to provide an open space for all to access information in the shape of legislation, research, and media, about human rights issues in Jordan.

One of the main achievements of the center is the founding of a coalition called: “My Nationality is the Right of my Family”. The coalition aimed to reverse the gender bias against Jordanian women married to foreigners. Researchers conducted a cost-benefit analysis study showing that the government would actually benefit from giving women nationality rights. The coalition also worked on presenting the social exclusion of women as a human rights issue instead of a political one. The IRCKHF built the first civil society coalition consisting of both organizations and individuals. The objective of the project advocated for the amendment of the Constitution to affirm gender equality in Jordan, through creating a platform for the building of a coalition. The IRCKHF succeeded in creating a media campaign and meeting with Members of Parliament and providing them with research findings from its past project, as well as producing its first policy brief, therefore directly disseminating information to policy-makers.

Essaid stated that researchers often face obstacles in the field, such as conserved social environments where families of target groups have reservations when it comes to conducting focus groups. Furthermore, there is a lack of a research culture and sharing information in the Arab world, especially in the field of social sciences. Essaid recommended that think-tanks build on each other’s research rather than start from scratch. Another challenge is the gap between civil society organizations (CSOs) and the government, where clear channels of communication between them are needed. This calls for a change in perception about the role of CSOs and think-tanks as not an enemy to the government but as a support for making evidence-based policies to better propose solutions to societal problems.

Dr. Aida Essaid concluded with a quote by Gibran Khalil Gibran: “A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle.” In order to bridge the gap between research and policy, “information has to move”, stated Essaid. IRCKHF’s experience shows that research findings cannot be left idle and expected to make an impact at the policy level. Research has to be followed with education and advocacy efforts and then made accessible for those concerned. The value of any research project is dependent on others being able to access its results in order to benefit from it, whether for the objective of policy-making or for future research.