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**The UNESCO Forum for Higher Education, Research and Knowledge
Workshop on Research in Diverse Social Contexts:
Tensions, Dynamics and Challenges**

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Viewpoint

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**What can be said about Research on Social Science in the
Arab Countries?**

This presentation will focus on the characteristic of Social Science Research and I will particularly talk about the hypothesis of the low connectivity between research and researchers in the Arab region. Actually, connectivity is not only a process of electronic or virtual information but also a human and an institutional networking process. Universities, by themselves do not connect or cooperate, without the initiatives of their scholars and students. However, managers and academics, in particular, compete for research funding, prestige, honors, rank and best positions at leading universities. But much of academic success – either personal or collective- is built on cooperative alliances, and scientific breakthroughs resulting from multidisciplinary teamwork. (Salazar & L. Meek 2007).

The first aspect of this cooperation relates mainly to the different disciplines and synergy between them. I will start by saying that research in the fields of hard science, life sciences or engineering sciences cannot be developed in the long run if the context is not favorable for Social Science research. Basing on this assumption, we can argue that hard sciences are being more and more invested by social and human approach and dimension. There are a number of examples that could make this evidence clear. The first one is the linguistic applied to IT tools. We can safely say the same thing about the applied mathematics, urbanism, and environment where the human and the social factors are more and more undeniable.

Hence, my introductory question is: What can be said about research, on this (field of knowledge) component of knowledge in this region, in terms of connectivity, collaboration and production?

First of all, we should say that most of the countries in the region invest a lot in their human resources, but they do not promote connectivity effectively. Thus, the common idea which presumes that the development of the research is a result of triple dynamics which are natural resources, human resources and invested capital seems in light of the current economic crisis more and more inappropriate.

With regard to research innovation and research development, the recent economic crisis has demonstrated that the real dynamics that determine the future of research and research development in general, are in fact: the human resources, the material resources and the good time management and typically not the capital investment. That's why it is becoming so important, from my point of view, to talk about connectivity or lack of connectivity and networking in the region. In several regards, research management is first of all a question of time and a question of an adequate use of scientific information and timely statistics.

Interdisciplinarity and synergy are the two keys for the future development of research in Social Science. They are also the most important aspects that should allow researchers to deal with the regional context. Today, most of the universities in the region should deal with the following challenges:

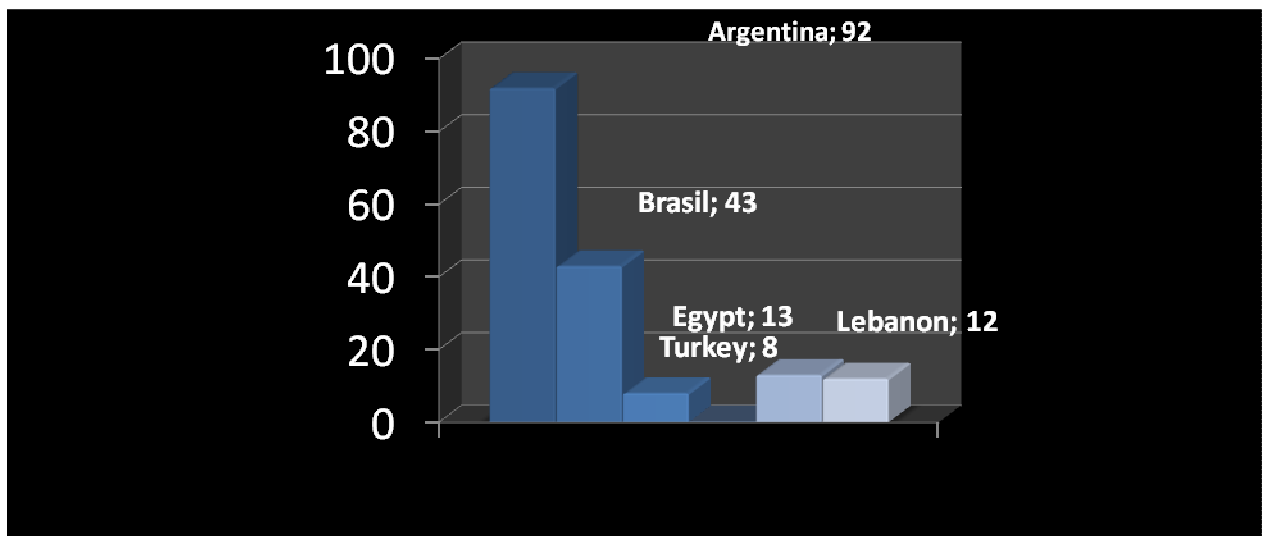
- The economy crisis and the budgetary constraints on public research.
- The priority given to teaching process at the university, and teaching staff heavy workload.
- The large number of professionals going into private practice.
- The lack of financial support.
- The lack of academic freedom.

(I) Challenges of the present and the recent past: This brief analysis can be considered through three lenses: we can talk about challenges of the present, some evidences and Possible Continuing trajectories, and last we will go beyond the talk, as it has been suggested yesterday afternoon by Pr G. Haddad; I mean talking about future needs. Nothing is more significant than indicators and language of trends. That is why we suggest speaking here about the five following indicators:

- Indicator of Performance of Higher Education and its impact on Social Science Research.
- Indicator of Dissemination of Social Science.
- Indicator of Regional Co-operation and Collaborative Research.
- Indicator of Accumulation of knowledge.
- Indicator of accessibility to scientific information.

At the level of higher Educational, the question posed is; what is the impact of Massification of Higher Education on Social Science Research? In the 1950's, there were no more than 10 universities across the region. Today, there are more than 250 higher education providers. This situation has had an immediate impact on the quality of research and the student supervision. As far as the indicators of dissemination are concerned, we can say that in terms of production of social science journals the Arab countries produce fewer regional journals in the local language than other countries like Brazil or Argentina. Funds allocated to those journals are decreasing on a per capita basis, given the restrictive press and the publication laws.

Figure (1) : Production of Social Science Journals in five selected countries



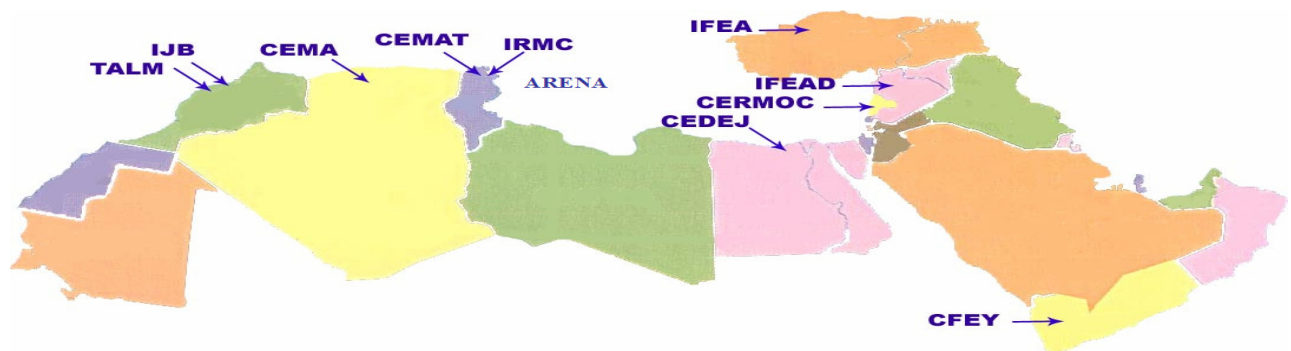
Source: *UNESCO DARE Database, 2006*

We could say the same thing about the **Indicator of Regional Cooperation and Collaborative Research**. Funds allocated to travel and collaborative researches are decreasing given the growing number of professionals in the universities. In 2002, among the total number of issued articles, which was 2700, only 450 ones relate to collaborative research. Most of them were produced by researchers from outside the region. Even though

countries like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar invest a lot in their human resources, they do not promote connectivity or regional collaborative research so that to create a critical mass.

We can also talk here about Collaboration with Cooperative Research Centres, programs and associations, for instance, the European, the American and the Japanese ones, etc. Most of them contribute to the development of networking and international visibility of regional Social Science. Those centres are very much in demand among local research community. Some of them have their own agenda and most of them play the role of host institutions for foreign researchers.

Figure (2): Location of “offshore” International Research Centers in the Arab Countries

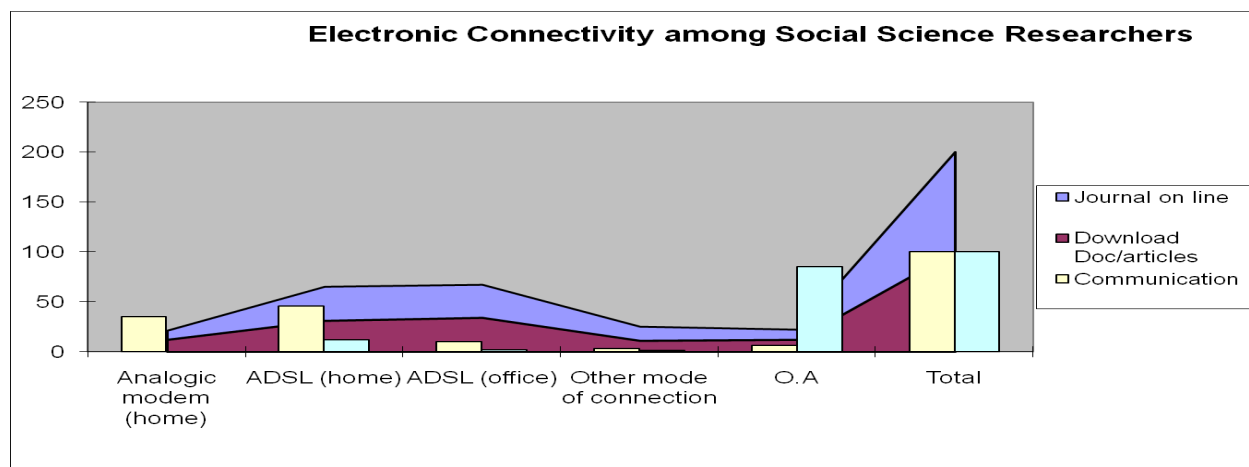


In a context characterized by the absence of independent research and the minor role of independent research centers, international research institutions (Talm, IJb, Cema, Cemat, Irmc, Arena, Cedej, etc) play an important and fundamental role.

Dealing with the **Indicator of accumulation of knowledge**, we should ask the following question: What are Social Scientists Talking about? Thus, basing on the production in nine selected Journals, we observe two contradictory trends: on the one hand we have declining issues like globalization, and development. On the other hand we have many emerging issues like Women studies, Cultural Identity, Family & private life, Regional Conflict, and education.

The other aspect to be covered concerning research connectivity relate to **Scientific Information Accessibility**. Among a sample of 700 researchers in North Africa, only 35% have home ADSL network connection. The others cannot download documents easily from their offices or places of work. Generally speaking; Compared to other regions, the Arab region has a low number of websites and internet users.

Figure (3): *Electronic Connectivity among Social Science Researchers in The Arab Countries*



Source: *El Fida* (2007)

These five indicators put forward three evidences concerning the possible continuing trajectories. The first Evidence: is about *social recognition of social science*. The main question that everyone may have in his or her mind is the following: Studying Social Science....What for? What will be the real impact in terms of status and social function and recognition? Despite the relative increase in the private higher education providers, the research "Market" is still weak. In most of the region, Doctoral studies, for the most part, are still structured, as if all students were destined to become university professors. "Many Social Science PhDs report and suggest that career preparation should begin early in doctoral programs and should include issues such as job search strategies.

The second evidence is about the *critical mass*: At the present time, there are no accurate statistics and only a guesstimate can be made, which indicates that there are 70,000 social science researchers in the MENA countries. This represents more than a ten-fold increase in 30 years. In several countries of the region, governments have undertaken measures encouraging the early retirement of senior researchers and university staff in order to replace them with new PhD holders. Given this fact, Social Science in the region seems to be functioning without 'memory', and unlike the previous generations who had strong links to the West, the New Generations entering the field lack strong attachment to the older

The third Evidence is about scientific information. Research is first of all a communication processes and within this regional context, we can detect a huge deficit of trust between decision makers, information systems and researchers whose accessibility to timely statistics and information is still problematic.

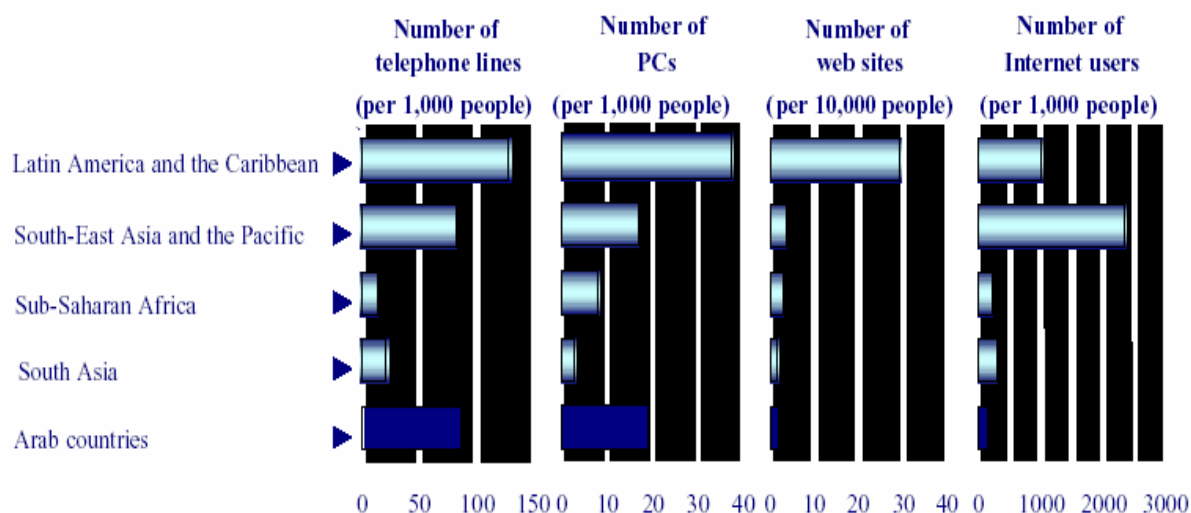
(II) The future Needs and Priorities: the light of these five indicators and three evidences, most of the researchers can today take a long breath in order to think about what has been carried out in terms of development of social science research? What is still unaccomplished? Why? And what are the lessons to learn from the recent past.

Regarding the connectivity need, we re-suggest that no progress can be done in this sense without finding a critical mass. Therefore, we can talk about three kinds of future needs. First, needs for developing Regional Structures of Research to ensure connectivity and collaborative research. Second, needs for Improving research Environment. Finally, needs for Renewing Research Agenda.

Some countries are better prepared to contribute to regional networking than others, especially Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco. But in general, the regional context is still marked by the economy crisis, the public research Crisis, and the hindrance of autonomous initiatives and fundraising (NGOs, associations, foundations).

Two experiments of launching a regional Council of Social Science: the first one was in 1999, in Tunis (Arabssco) and the second one, in 2008, in Cairo (ACSS). Many researchers had expressed the necessity to have a regional council of Social Science equivalent to CODESRIA or OSSERIA in Africa. Such initiatives are often undermined by the unfavourable regional, political and logistic context. Even though, the region has more computer and telephone lines than Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of websites and internet users is still low. Such situation cannot be explained without the context of difficulties, including the lack of academic freedom and the difficulty to undertake research.

Figure (4): Network Connection by region



Source: UNDP 2004

The second need is the creation of a Research Environment for academic freedom .In Most of the Arab Countries, Religion and Governments contribute to the politicization of knowledge. Both, research activity and academic freedom are sides of the same coin. Finally, and as a result of the two previous needs, we can talk about the necessity for renewing the research agenda .Many researchers began to ask about what’s more after globalization and development. Generally speaking, we can say that we have now three emerging trends.

- The return to the local via the rise of community, which can be understood as a part of a post globalisation posture. It’s important to understand the local actors in the local fields in which people struggle for recognition, status, and legitimacy.
- The return to public interest refers to the "common well-being”, to knowledge as a public good." The public interest is central to policy debates and social well-being in the light of the crisis context.
- The third option is about Comparative Research. The latter is a research methodology in the social sciences that aims to make comparisons across different countries or cultures and contexts. Developing Social Science Research in that direction means that the regional research community should use the same categories and define them differently on the base of the regional context.

We can say that there are lots of studies that have covered all aspects of higher education on the various components of the legal and the financial systems, and the rapidly expanding IT sector. There are little ones, however, about how these many different items relate to each other, and how they are connected to human conditions and society. It's difficult to classify all countries in the region at the same level. Some of them are doing well, others are doing their best, and some others are doing what is possible for a minimal survival in a time of trouble.

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