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MOST Policy Brief

Production of Social Sciences Research in the Mashrek Sub-Region

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The growth in the number of research centers in the Mashrek Sub-region is related to the subsequent proliferation of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). There are almost 122 centers involved in research activities within this area, which emerged in the context of the political transition in both the Palestinian territory and Lebanon as well as the economic transitions in Egypt and Jordan. The trend relates more specifically to the increasing amount of international aid, conceived as a way to promote the growth of civil society in a developing country. Understanding the research production of social sciences in this

region cannot be fully comprehended without understanding the political economy of the aid system as well as the problematic legitimacy of the social sciences ever since the colonial era.

Context and problematic issues

Since the -Washington Consensus in 1995 recommended not only directing aid to government but also to civil society, the international community has increasingly supported research activities in research centers outside of national universities. In this context, unlike in the Maghreb sub-region, the trend of establishing research centers in the Mashrek sub-region, taking the form of NGOs is widespread. They launch several surveys and studies in applied social research for two specific aims:

1. The implementation of a peace process for both Lebanon and the Palestinian territory and
2. Economic liberalization in Jordan and Egypt.

For these goals, the reinforcement of civil society is regarded as crucial.

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* Sari Hanafi prepared a discussion paper entitled as "Consultancies and NGO-based research in the Arab East: challenges arising from the new donor agendas" for World Social Science Report (2010), jointly published by UNESCO and International Social Science Council (ISSC).

Research results

The production of knowledge in social sciences within the Mashrek sub-region has at least two main actors:

1. Specialized research organizations such as research centers that have emerged either within or outside the university settings;
2. NGOs specialized in development, advocacy and cooperative efforts.

The recent growth of research groups outside universities has led to three contradictory consequences:

1. University faculty were discouraged to conduct scientific research;
2. NGO research centers and groups, usually scattered, have not effectively engaged graduate and undergraduate students' participation in research;
3. The majority of policy oriented research undertaken by these NGO research centers remain unpublished. Otherwise, these policy papers do not undergo a proper peer review process for rigorous quality assurance.

The majority of research is carried out within NGO structures and not in specialized university centers. This trend not only negatively impacts the quality of the research and the type of approach and methodology used, but also fosters the formation and emergence of a new 'globalized' elite in local societies (Hanafi and Tabar 2005). In addition to that, the emergence of NGO research centers has contributed in decreasing in state's influence on the sector of research. Concretely, many State universities have become a locus for producing graduate students who are often ultimately disconnected from the actual research field. Few NGO research groups seek partnership or affiliation with states universities in fear of losing part of research funds. NGO research tends to be more flexible and efficient compared to the ones at universities, because they are able to avoid their rigid, bureaucratic structure.

Indeed, the local researchers in NGO research centers are more "globalized" in their accessing global networks, but their actions and research, consequentially, are often disconnected from the social demand of the local community. Many of the practitioners and researchers at NGO Research centers are highly skilled and highly paid in comparison to the public sector. The relationships of these NGOs to their society need to be understood in the context of an internal transformation of the NGO sector. The reports often lack any critical assessment.

New research topics and methods, are often used to legitimize donors' interventions. . Donors promote more quantitative, thus "standardized", methodology; namely opinion polls. Instead of assessing opinions, they generate and manufacture opinion, in order to legitimize political discourses and actions of certain political actors, who remain the globalized elite. Social scientists thereby become a part of the political game (Champagne 1990).

Conclusions and recommendations

- Funding disparate projects, instead of coherent research programs raises a major problem concerning the accumulation of knowledge, methodology, topics, and specialization necessary to ensure quality research. The scarcity of public funding for research, the lack of fundraising from the wealthy local community, and the exclusive appeal to and for foreign funding all hinder the abilities of the research centers to produce long-term plans and hire suitable personnel.
- Endowments that generate minimal revenue for research centers, often found in North America and some European countries, may contribute positively to social sciences' research in the region.

- Research outside and within universities need to be strengthened to adapt research methodology and agenda in linkage to the society.
- Production of knowledge in both Arabic and other languages will allow Arab researchers to update and build on their research trends and approaches.

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