

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN THE ARAB REGION

DIAGNOSIS, OPTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Monroe Hotel Beirut, Lebanon

11-12 April 2006

A Regional Workshop Co-funded by UNDP Regional Bureau of the Arab States and
the International Development Research Centre (Canada)

and

Co-sponsored by the Social Science Research Council (New York) and Population
Council (Cairo)

SUMMARY REPORT

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I. Introduction

It is widely recognized that regional social science programs in the Middle East are few in number and quite inadequate to address the range of challenges facing the region in the early years of the 21st century. As a result, several institutions have recently launched initiatives to examine the need to create or strengthen social science research in the region. These include UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab State's KAGUAR project on "*Knowledge Acquisition, Generation and Utilization in the Arab Region*" and IDRC's Research Support Activity entitled "*The Middle East Under Pressure: What Role for the Social Sciences?*" as well as ongoing discussions between the Middle East Program of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York and the Regional Office of the Population Council in Cairo.

Each of these initiatives has a somewhat different entry point and geographic focus. Nonetheless, at the core, they all address the same issue: the need to generate more effective social science research with a regional scope in order to enhance understanding of the cross-cutting problems in the region and to influence public debate and public policies through research and policy analysis.

Building on their common interest in strengthening regional social science research in the Middle East, the above institutions held a workshop in Beirut on 11-12 April 2006. The workshop had several interlocking goals: a) to review past experiences, best practices and

lessons learnt from social science policy research efforts to date in the region; b) to examine the various proposals for creating and/or strengthening regional social science research institutes in the Arab world; c) to review sustainable experiences and success stories from other regions; d) to adopt a strategy for complementary and collaborative action; e) to confirm the core partnership and identify sources of financial support for follow up.

The meeting was attended by representatives from the four collaborating institutions and selected participants from regional institutions with a special interest in the state of social science research in the Arab region and the challenges of institutional development. The workshop agenda, list of participants and a detailed narrative record of the meeting are available separately. This summary report is designed to highlight the key findings and recommendations emerging from the workshop.

II. Key themes

Workshop participants acknowledged that the topic of the workshop is timely and important but also extremely broad. They were cautious not to over-generalize about the state of the field or to put forth firm proposals. Instead, they saw the workshop as an opportunity to learn more about the thinking of the co-sponsoring organizations and to examine a menu of ideas and options for moving the agenda forward.

In that light, the ensuing discussions were extremely rich—fully conveying the multi-faceted nature of the challenges confronting social science research in the region. On virtually every issue, there was a wide spectrum of opinion which reflected the diverse professional experiences, disciplinary expertise and geographic foci of the participants. The following sections are designed to highlight the richness of the group’s deliberations rather than to offer a watered-down synthesis.

Although there was an underlying consensus about the need to strengthen social science research in the region, the diagnosis of the problem as well options and strategies for addressing them covered the entire knowledge production chain. Thus, the differences of opinion among participants and the dilemmas, challenges and trade-offs inherent in divergent perspectives merit as much attention as the eventual agreement that emerged by the end of the workshop. In a nutshell, it is recognized that strengthening the social sciences in the Arab region require multi-layered strategies at the political, economic, social and institutional levels.

a) *The type of social science research that is needed:* While there was a strong call for “basic” social science research that is empirically-grounded and theoretically informed, the group acknowledged the need for other types of research including policy oriented research by a range of research centers and think tanks; advocacy research by NGOs and other interest groups; academic research in universities; policy or operations research by government organizations or the private sector. It was agreed, however, that the functions, quality and imperatives for different types of research are inevitably different.

b) *Diagnosis of the state of the art in social science research:* It was recognized that different types of research confronted different problems. The discussion focused mainly on academic or basic research although the distinction between university-based research and other social science research was not always clear. The problems that were identified covered the full spectrum of the knowledge production chain: quality and quantity of research; scope and range of the research agenda (moving away from fragmented to sustained research); teaching and training in the social sciences; curricula development; institutional and infra-structure development; funding; dissemination and distribution; regional and international linkages; and finally, the political and cultural climate. In retrospect, these can perhaps be reduced to the following statement: there are serious economic, socio-cultural and political constraints that militate against the advancement of the social sciences in the Arab region. While it is possible to address particular problems (such as training, curriculum development and dissemination) through technical solutions, the weaknesses of the social sciences in the region are deeply rooted. In the absence of political demand for social science research, social value attached to such research and material/economic incentives to encourage researchers, the classical problems of the social sciences (that are not unique to the Middle East region) are unlikely to be redressed in the short term. Despite this grim overall picture, it was noted that there are several important new initiatives in the region that merit closer attention: UNDP's Arab Human Development Report; the Arab Reform Initiative; the Issam Fares Center for Public Policy in AUB; the various new research centers in the Gulf region.

c) *Strategies for strengthening social science research:* Given their fairly negative diagnosis of the state of social sciences in the region, participants did not offer any magic bullets or any technical or institutional solutions. Instead, they strongly called for multi-dimensional strategies to strengthen existing institutions, to create selected new institutions to address unmet needs, to promote networking, to enhance individual and institutional capacities, and to capitalize on new information and communication technologies to overcome perennial problems of isolation, atrophy and lack of resources. Beyond specific interventions, there was full awareness of the importance of economic, social and political incentives in order to bring about significant changes in the quality and quantity of social science research in the region. In this context, the differences between the state of Turkish and Arab social sciences were raised by various speakers.

d) *Alternative institutional models:* Since the workshop was explicitly designed around the idea of strengthening the infra-structure of research through institutional building or institutional support, participants examined different institutional responses including: a) a new center to undertake in-house research from a regional perspective ("research generation"); b) a new mechanism to support existing institutions ("servicing"); c) a new institute to respond to unmet needs ("additionality"). There was no consensus about which of these models was the most suitable since each had advantages and disadvantages. However, there was a strong sense that given the limited pool of intellectual, human and financial resources in the social sciences in the Arab region, creating new research centers to compete with existing institutions was the least attractive option along a spectrum of options such as:

- a regional social science research council (along the lines of CODESRIA or FLACSO in West Africa and Latin America respectively)
- various types of consortia and networks (along the lines of ARI or ERF)
- "communities of practice" (along the lines supported by UNDP)
- temporary and time-bound institutional research collaboratives (along the lines of the Research Policy Center model supported by DFID/UK)
- new research centers (along the lines of UNDP's proposed new center, CESPAC)

e) *Key tasks that require attention:* Participants identified a range of tasks that a new institution (specifically dedicated to strengthening the social sciences in the region) could undertake. These included promoting or providing the following services: training and methodology development; research agenda setting; advocacy; documentation/resource center; fellowships; linking, networking, and coordination; fundraising, resource mobilization; dissemination and distribution. It was noted that currently there are no institutions with a mandate to undertake these tasks at a regional level.

f) *Challenges of Institutional Development in the region:* As many of the participants have actively been involved in previous efforts to strengthen regional social science research (through programs such as MEAWARDS, MERC, ERF, CAWTAR, SRC, etc.) the discussion of the challenges of institutional development was particularly compelling. These included, but were not confined to, lack of sustainable funding, the close identification of many research institutions with a single individual and the resultant disincentives against institutionalization, the role of donors in commissioning short-term research projects in lieu of supporting longer-term research programs, the adverse political climate that discourages the establishment of independent and non-partisan institutions, etc. It was noted that these problems have repeatedly been identified in successive evaluation reports, expert group meetings and conference proceedings with virtually no follow up or remedial action. The lack of governments, donors or international organizations with a mandate to support regional institution-building was seen as a serious drawback. Thus, UNDP-RBAC's KAGUAR project was recognized as a major contribution even though the proposed Center for Economic and Social Policies in the Arab Countries (CESPAC) did not find support from the workshop participants since it was seen as competing with existing institutions.

g) *Emerging consensus:* In light of the discussions summarized above, participants agreed that in order to move the agenda forward, they needed additional information on three specific areas: a) a mapping of existing institutions in the Middle East with the mandate and capacity to undertake regional social science research; b) a comparative and cumulative analysis of evaluations of the successes and failures of previous or current regional social science research initiatives in the region; c) a comparative review of institutional mechanisms to strengthen social science research in other regions. They felt that this information was essential to start thinking more systematically about possible options and strategies. Accordingly, they strongly recommended that the IDRC feasibility study incorporate these in its terms of reference. Although the group refrained from endorsing any single proposal for consideration by the co-sponsoring organizations, there was a decided preference in favor of establishing a possible regional social science

research council that would complement or serve, rather than compete with, existing institutions and initiatives in the region.

III. Next steps

Participants expressed strong interest in remaining involved in the next phases of the collaborative project on strengthening social science research in the Middle East. They requested that the sponsoring organizations share a list of the names and contacts of all participants to the whole group. They urged IDRC to share the results of its feasibility study with the Beirut group as well as other interested researchers and institutions in the region. They also endorsed the idea of a follow-up meeting to be based upon the findings of the IDRC feasibility study. The four sponsoring partners agreed to continue their collaboration and to give full consideration to the recommendations emerging the workshop in light of their individual institutional mandates and work programs.