REGионаl Collaboration on Education: An ARAIEQ InnovATion

Simon Thacker and Juan Manuel Moreno

Introduction: Regional collaboration on Education is arguably more challenging, comparatively speaking, in the Arab World than in other regions of the world. There are many reasons for this.

While there is a strong sense of regional identification – indeed, the concepts of the ‘Arab world’ and even the ‘Middle East and North Africa’ are well-circumscribed and well-understood – that awareness is undercut by a lack of regional cohesion. This is in part political. The Region as a whole has faced escalating concerns over the absence of order. Ongoing conflicts, sectarianism and the politicization of Islam have all contributed to minimizing the level of Arab unity and coordination found within the Region. As a result, there has been a widening of differences both within the Region and, moreover, between the Arab region and the rest of the world on cultural and ideological levels as well as in the areas of economic and social development.

In education, it is true the MENA region had initially made great strides after Independence in improving access, equity, and completion outcomes. However, as far as regional collaboration on education is concerned, national policymakers largely worked to address domestic concerns alone with only little external assistance, mostly because the Education sector was considered to be entwined in national interest and identity, and so not open to much international scrutiny, let alone cooperation. That, by the way, was also the baseline situation in other world regions which later on managed to build very ambitious education agendas (LAC and the European Union are good examples).

Though there was foreign donor support with the capacity to influence public policy, there remained nevertheless a low level of cooperation among the regional education actors themselves, whether the entities were global yet regionally based (like UNESCO-Beirut for instance), regional (ALECSO/ISESCO), or national (such as Ministries of Educations). Commonly, each of these actors had its own vision for the future and each its own individual means to lead the way towards that vision.

International student assessments, such as TIMSS and PISA, undertaken in countries of the Region starting in the late 1990s were pivotal in this respect, as they led to a change in this prevailing attitude. Not only did they demonstrate that education quality was weak across MENA countries but also, by providing in-depth analysis of assessment
results, led to the realization that many countries of the Region shared comparable challenges in regard to that quality. As a result, in 2010 a call for action was made by all MENA Ministers of Education in the Doha Declaration for Education Quality. If the Region did indeed face similar challenges, it stood to reason that it should face these together collectively. Much could be gained through collaboration.

The collegium of MENA Ministers of Education demonstrated regional leadership by mandating the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), to be the entity to address this issue. But against the backdrop of the concerns outlined above, it was understood that there would generally need to be a push for technical cooperation from the start. And yet the reliance on a few ‘experts’ – who may have no audience -- would not be a solution either.

This was the beginning of the Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ), a network developed by the World Bank in close association with ALECSO, with the aim, as its name implies, of addressing key dimensions of education quality across the Region. What was new was the important innovative working principle of this initiative, simple yet sometimes overlooked, of being developed ‘by the Region for the Region.’

Five pillars concerned with Assessment, Early Childhood Development, with Curriculum, Innovation and ICT, with Teachers, and with Entrepreneurship - all factors recognized to determine quality and to contribute to its improvement - were developed to function in three ways: (i) to bring together regional specialists in a network or community of practice, (ii) to develop and think-tank function, i.e., producing reports, benchmarking policies, disseminating knowledge and policy tools, and (iii) hold regional workshops and conferences, also engaging in training activities. Over the last three years, this has translated into a profusion of regional activity arising from these programs.

**Strengths of this approach.** The work of each of the ARAIEQ pillar programs has been, following this mandate, to find regional answers to regional questions. Keeping regional policy-makers, analysts, and practitioners in mind, it was designed to address the need for improvements in particular aspects of education quality in a regionally-specific manner, taking into account the Regional and sub-Regional contexts.

As an example, consider the issue of learning to read and write Arabic in primary school, a question recognized to be problematic in all MENA countries. While many children learn to speak Arabic at home (in a local dialect), the Arabic they must learn to read and write at school (Modern Standard Arabic called *fusa* or *fus’ha*) differs substantially from each of these spoken versions. This is a prime example of what sociolinguists refers to as *diglossia* – the use of two distinct varieties of the same language, usually in different social contexts. The difference is so great that it constitutes an impediment to their first years of learning. In response, research has been undertaken under the auspices of ARAIEQ to study the question with the objective of proposing recommendations to help attenuate the challenges that young students face when learning to write standard, classical Arabic. The study is forthcoming.

**Innovative aspects.** What has been innovative in this approach is that policymakers are now working together on regional issues, and, because of this, by seeing what is happening elsewhere in the Region, are in a position to ‘think outside the box’ -- something which may seem evident enough but is in fact ground-breaking.
regional policymakers is bringing about regionally appropriate, applicable, and so useful policy solutions. An example of this is the recent Regional Report on Education Assessment, which draws together MENA country reports on assessment of student performance systems. Its recommendations on assessment policy and practice are specific to and valuable across the Region.

What remains challenging, nevertheless, is the dissemination of this knowledge throughout the Region in ways that touch all concerned stakeholders. ARAIEQ has succeeded in diffusing new knowledge, allowing regional ideas to be shared, appreciated, and applied regionally. However, if this spread of knowledge has occurred ‘horizontally’ between members of the ARAIEQ networks (for the most part at the level of policymakers and technical analysts) there still remains the need to create greater movement of this knowledge both ‘horizontally’ from the ARAIEQ network to MoEs and ‘vertically’, so this knowledge can flow more decisively to all subsidiary levels -- to school districts, schools, teachers -- where it can be put into practice and begin to have a positive impact.

This challenge can be expressed in another way – in terms of communities of practice (CoPs) – and this time it is not regionally specific. What the ARAIEQ pillar programs have created in essence is communities of practice, communities of individuals coming together to share and support each other in their work, often enthusiastically. The challenge for the ARAIEQ CoPs, like all CoPs, is to know how to transfer the lessons learned to MENA states and to see them ultimately institutionalized.

**The post-DGF future.** ARAIEQ was developed and launched with seed money from the World Bank in the form of a Development Grant Facility, a three year grant. By design, the World Bank must disengage from the initiative at the end of the grant period. In many ways, this makes sense as it reinforces the point that this was to be ‘for the Region by the Region.’

ARAIEQ has not only launched a discussion about the importance of education quality in the Region, perhaps more significantly it has created higher expectations about quality among regional actors. ARAIEQ is therefore beginning to be recognized for what it is, a ‘regional public good’ which should be sustained and developed in the Region (and of course by the Region).

Needless to say, though, mobilizing funds to sustain a regional public good of this sort is and will be challenging. ALECSO needs a very solid partnership strategy and a growing leadership role in the education sector in the Region in order to address and succeed at that challenge.