

The Annual Conference for Social Science and Humanities

March 24-26, 2012

Topic One: From Hampered Growth to Sustainable Development:

Which Economic and Social Policies for the Arab Countries?

Preface

After decades of political and social stasis, today the Arab World is witnessing an immense process of change motivated by popular protests and uprisings. This is taking place within a complex, multi-dimensional context, the effects and products of which will be revealed gradually in ways and forms that remain uncertain at this point and open to different possibilities. Thus far, the flow of events in the Arab World has reflected the extent of Arab commonalities and the interweaving of Arab political paths, apparent through the mutual influences among Arab countries, the similar conditions from which these events emerged, and the prospective aspirations for potential change. The likelihood of success in any of the potential eventualities is a function of the success of the peoples and their leaderships in organizing their capabilities towards alternative projects for political, economic, and social change.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies believes that it has a role, even if a modest one, in the intellectual contribution that helps tilt the probability of success towards a project based on the formation of a new social contract that replaces despotic rule. Such a project would establish a sustainable, civic state that guarantees equal rights and democratic freedoms, and is inhabited by citizens, not subjects. In this envisioned system, society – through its elected leaders – would control material and human resources and their development policies in a manner that ensures the sustainability of these resources from one generation to another.

As part of this intellectual effort, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies will address this project as one of two topics to be examined at the first Annual Conference for Social Sciences and Humanities. Titled, “From Hampered Growth to Sustainable Development”, this topic is conceived as a comprehensive one, reflecting the organic links among democratic change in the Arab context, the economic and social conditions for its success, and its sustainability. .

Under this topic, the Center is inviting academics, researchers and other intellectuals to participate in an intellectual exchange to be organized along the following themes:

Theme One: Concepts and policies of development: Transition from a rentier economy to a productive economy, and the role of the state.

The first theme focuses on obstacles to moving beyond the rentier economy and strategies best-suited to building a productive and diversified one, based on analysis and discussion of related questions, including:

- How developmental policies are affected by the doctrinal failure of economic schools of thought (such as neoliberalism, the Washington Consensus, the absence of an effective industrialization policy)
- The dominance of the consumption culture over that of production and productivity; the predominance of the service sector at the expense of diversification, strengthening the bases of agricultural and industrial production, and reorienting the economy towards activities with significant value-added components The reinstatement of job creation as the top priority in economic policy without undermining the promotion of productivity and diversification
- Suggested policies for the dismantling of institutional structures based on rent-seeking alongside the creation of incentives for producers in the private sector to commit to the principles of improved productivity and recognizing the value of work, which are among the prerequisites for competitiveness in Arab and international markets.

This theme also includes the role of the state in the new international environment, and reducing dependence on foreign aid and other external resources. This leads to questions on the requirements for institutional change and the policies leading to sound management of economic resources. These include upgrading the efficiency of public institutions, reassessment of economic regulations, increasing transparency in order to fight corruption, and the reshaping of economic structures especially in terms of public finances and the manner in which these are managed.

Theme Two: Equal opportunities for all in developmental action and the reaping of the benefits of development: the distribution of income and wealth, fighting poverty, and social protection.

This theme includes the following:

- Analyzing structural and institutional gaps that contribute to poverty by perpetuating the unequal distribution of incomes and wealth in Arab societies; the role of the rentier character of the economy in the creation and/or sustenance of massive inequalities in incomes and wealth. How do the realities of poverty, as well as the policies to combat it,

compare across Arab states? What are the roles of general economic policy, public finance policy, and tax policy in this regard?

- Rural development and social empowerment in the production processes, the institutionalization of agricultural projects (large and small) and the appropriate infrastructure and technology
- The development of provinces and local communities as well as fighting urban concentration, desertification, and the degradation of the environment
- Increasing popular partnership in development, and seeking ways to empower the poorer sectors of society to effect decision-making on the local level in popular and professional organizations, stressing institutionalization as a tool to assimilate social and political elements in response to the challenges of development; promoting mechanisms of accountability in order to limit the hegemony of the executive authority, and the importance of these mechanisms on the local level.
- Developmental policies that lead to job creation. The reasons for the failures of past economic policies to generate employment opportunities sufficient in quantity and quality to satisfy the numbers and ambitions of Arab youth; the problems borne out of this deficiency (This subject overlaps with the theme of the Arab Prize for Social Sciences and Humanities for the encouragement of scholarly research; researchers should therefore be aware that papers receiving the prize will have priority for presentation at the conference.)
- Policies of social protection and the necessary reforms for the increase of the role of health and educational services in reducing both unemployment and poverty; labor policies, including social security, and the privatization of social services and its effect on social safety nets.

Theme Three: human development, the knowledge society, and the quality of life

This theme includes:

-Educational doctrine: The conditions for transforming the educational system from a sentinel of obedient behavior in society to an educator of liberated and critical citizens capable of self-learning and of building the knowledge society.

-Ensuring access to a high-quality primary education for all citizens, establishing a balance between general primary education and vocational training in a manner that ensures adequate qualitative and quantitative supplies of labor to the employment market, and examining the financial, institutional, and human resources needed in order to provide opportunities for higher education.

-Research and technological development needs and the link between educational and research institutes on the one hand, and the industrial, agricultural, and service sectors on the other.

-The development of general culture, and collaboration among educational and cultural institutions, both public and private, to establish a culture of continuing education at work and production sites, and of appreciation for culture, the arts and all that refines the quality of life outside the workplace.

Theme Four: The role of Arab integration in developmental performance

This theme addresses factors that motivate people in the region to value the benefits of cooperation and integration at the Arab level, and discusses the limits and challenges to such initiatives, along with the possibility of overcoming such challenges by:

-Evaluating the current external economic relations of Arab countries or those Arab countries with similar circumstances, and the varying patterns of these relations in terms of dependence and linkage with industrialized countries and neighboring regional countries. The evaluation will also address the nature of trade and the ability of labor to cross borders, the movement of capital, the receipt of aid, and regional and international trade agreements.

-Analyzing the social, cultural, and political conditions for the successful development of Arab cooperation including raising awareness among economic and political elites so that their work more accurately reflects the needs and the will of the general population – and takes advantage of synergies to establish complementary links between, e.g., countries with plentiful resources and those with abundant labor. The rational pursuit of such relationships can help reduce a number of symptoms stemming from poor integration with the global economy.

-Developing institutions that contribute more to general economic, social, and cultural integration among the Arabs, even if such development is initially incremental. This should include a methodological identification of priorities within a timeframe that progresses from cooperation in particular issues. in the eventual goal is the construction of a secure and highly effective political and economic bloc which can maintain the gains of a democratic transformation in all participating countries.

Theme Five: Questions in the production of data for the measurement of development

This theme deals with technical issues requiring specialization in economic statistics, accounting, and social balance sheets in order to address the following issues:

-The design of new concepts that improve the tools for generating social accounts (on the national level)

-The use of the concept of social balance sheets in order to calculate a new notion of the “Net National Product”, to replace traditional ways of calculating Gross Domestic Product, and to highlight the rentier characteristics of the economy

-Calculating the levels of depletion of natural resources in a manner that considers the needs of both current and future generations

-Establishing effective accounting mechanisms for the investment and administration of public funds, in a manner with an eye towards social justice for the current generation, guaranteeing parity in returns between current and future generations, and achieving and maintaining sustainable development