

Monday, February 27, 2012

Gaping Holes in Education and the Labor Market in Lebanon

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The educated elite is looking abroad in search of work opportunities. (Photo: REUTERS - Jamal Saidi)

Despite Lebanon's reputation for having a strong education system, a recent report by the International Labor Organization on youth employment shows that the country's labor market suffers from multiple structural problems.

Regional Advisor of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Zafiris Tzannatos and ILO researcher Mary Kavar are in the process of producing an in depth report that examines the issue of youth unemployment in Lebanon.

“Is the problem a lack of skills or unemployment of skilled workers?” This is the fundamental question that the study is attempting to answer.

On Sunday, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) organized a workshop on the preliminary results of the project, which concluded that the educational system in Lebanon “is good on average.”

Even though Lebanon prides itself in its educational system, there is a class-based problem that plagues the system's performance.

The research shows that at the national level, only 5 percent of low-income families send their children to private schools. However, 70 percent of students in the Beirut area, which Tzannatos describes as “Monaco surrounded by belts of poverty,” attend private schools.

The results of this situation show up in the final education output, where it is clear that the “outcome of education is bad for the poor.”

The knowledge gap between students that come from rich families and their colleagues from poorer families is about 45 percent in science and 38 percent in mathematics. This makes Lebanon’s class-based knowledge gap at the school level the largest in the Arab world (except for Qatar where the gap in science is 48 percent).

At the university level, research indicates that “there is one public university that enrolls half of Lebanon’s college students” and that is the Lebanese University.

There is also a clear geographical disparity in the rate of student enrollment in higher education whereby learning is concentrated in Beirut.

The knowledge gap between students that come from rich families and their colleagues from poorer families is about 45 percent. An even more significant indication of this class-based inequality is that 10 percent of students obtain college degrees but the percentage rises to 25 percent among the wealthiest students. Another problem is the degradation in the field of vocational education, according to Kawar.

But if we put all the problems aside for a minute, it appears that the educational sector in Lebanon, compared to the rest of the region, is “the best and sometimes it even compares to countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which is the club of rich countries,” Tzannatos says.

But if the situation on the educational level is somewhat acceptable, it is very bad when it comes to the labor market.

The study’s abstract summarizes the situation as follows:

“The good news” is that “Lebanon does not have to worry about its skilled human resources because they are abundant.”

“The bad news,” however, is really bad. There are too many skilled workers compared to the jobs available. For every 20,000 new entrants to the labor force, the net increase in the volume of employment is 4,000 jobs only.

In addition, “the top 50 percent of people in terms of average income, receive high-level and expensive education but end up emigrating.” According to the data supplied by the research, Lebanon suffers from the “highest rate of brain drain in the Arab region.”

The worst part, according to research assumptions, is that “little can be done in terms of geopolitical problems.”

Given that Lebanon is closely connected to the region as a whole, the area's problems have a far-reaching impact on its economy and employment rates. (According to the research project, unemployment in Lebanon stands currently at 11 percent).

Furthermore, "addressing each one of the issues that must be reformed in order to improve the conditions of the labor market, is way more difficult than dealing with the shortage of a skilled work force," a problem that exists in other countries though not in Lebanon.

If the situation on the educational level is somewhat acceptable, it is very bad when it comes to the labor market. Reform, for example, must first address issues such as improving governance, transparency, and accountability. Second, there is the problem of debt and macro-economic and industrial policies. Third, and most importantly, the state must improve social services (Lebanon, for example, does not have a retirement system for the private sector). And fourth, poor children must be provided the opportunity to receive high-quality education.

There is also a deep problem at the level of academic skills. A while back, a representative of Internet giant Google came to Lebanon hoping to find the elite among Arab computer engineers.

The representative however returned home empty-handed as he discovered that the academic elite at the country's best universities are "three years behind on the latest technology in computer-related fields," according to a source familiar with the representative's exploratory trip.

This is shocking given all the talk about Lebanon's prospects in terms of its knowledge- and information-based economy.

In addition, it appears that the country's sectarian system plays a negative role in the labor market, according to the study's early findings.

"It is a vicious cycle of sectarian segregation that plagues the country, starting from the first years of schooling. Everyone knows how the story ends in the labor market and foreign countries...where 80 percent cannot find work without having connections," says AUB economics professor, Jad Chaaban.