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Islamic Perspectives on Education

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Introduction

According to the 2008 UNESCO *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, at the end of 1999 less than one-third of the 800 million children under the age of six benefited from early childhood education. Of the 113 million children without access to primary education schooling, 60 percent of these were girls. Furthermore, some 880 million adults, the majority being women, were illiterate. Additionally, excluding the United States and Europe, approximately one in three countries in 2005 did not “constitutionally guarantee” a right for “free and compulsory primary education”. Countries have achieved progress since 2000, but much work remains to meet the goals of “education for all” and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals¹ (MDGs) as demonstrated by the following 2005 statistics: The number of children not enrolled in school is 72 million; global gross enrolment in secondary education is at 66%; approximately 774 million adults, the majority women (64%) lack basic literacy and numeracy skills; while gender disparities in education at the primary level were eliminated among 63% percent of the reporting countries from 2000-2005, only 37% had eliminated gender disparity at the secondary level (UNESCO 2008: 13).

There are, therefore, still significant gaps in educational systems and opportunities around the world. The question, then, arises –Why do non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international declarations and conventions, and governments tout the importance of increasing global education levels in the fight against poverty? What is the role of faith in diminishing the gap in education? *The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of education in processes of development from Islamic perspectives.*

The Universal Significance of Education

There is widespread international recognition of the importance of education as a key tool for development. The international community has emphasised the importance of education for humanity through many declarations and conventions. Thus, it is obligatory for governments, international institutions and civil society organisations to work on, and advocate for the availability of quality educational opportunities that are accessible to all. The right to education is paramount and part of the inherent dignity of all humans; it is a tool to facilitate communication and bring cooperation among societies and, by extension, a means of bringing peace, stability and more mutual understanding between communities and nations (UNHCR 1966).

The right to education has been spelled out clearly in a number of international declarations and conventions.

Article 26 in the United Nation Universal Declaration on Human Rights outlines the right of everyone to free, compulsory, elementary education with higher levels of education to be made available to all without discrimination, although higher education may be merit-based. While recognizing an individual’s right to choose their form of education, the Declaration emphasizes that, “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the

¹ The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs were adopted by 189 nations during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. The goals are: first, eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; second, achieve universal primary education; third, promote gender equality and empower women; fourth, reduce child mortality; fifth, improve maternal health; sixth, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; seventh, ensure environmental sustainability; eighth, develop a Global Partnership for Development. <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>

strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups; In addition, it should help the UN in strengthening its efforts to maintain peace in the world” (UN 1948). This is echoed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in which Article 13 emphasises that the ratifying states of the Covenant recognise the right of everyone to education, and call for all parties to abide by the obligations and aims echoed in the UN Declaration on Human Rights, Article 26 (UN 1948 and UNHCR 1966).

Article 9-a in the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam asserts that the seeking of knowledge is obligatory in Islam, and that the provision of education is the duty of the society and the state. However, the declaration emphasises that it is the state’s responsibility to ensure the availability of services for individuals to acquire education (knowledge). Furthermore, the state shall guarantee the diversity of education in the interest of the society (Organisation of Islamic Conference 1990).

The international community emphasises education as a human right and recognises it as a necessity for comprehensive, sustainable development. Education is instrumental for economic and social development. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aim to promote development by improving social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries, this includes promoting universal primary education and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education. In addition to education’s role in the MDGs, other forums such as the Jomtien 1990 and the Dakar 2000 conferences² have all articulated the same theme: education is vital, especially primary education.

Education and Development

Development is more than economic growth; it encompasses economic, social, cultural and political dimensions. The UN's Declaration on the Right to Development Article 1 emphasises that “every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development” (UNHCR 1986). Development focuses on improving the well-being of individuals on the basis of their participation and the fair distribution of benefits resulting from their active participation. Hence, along with being a basic human right, education is recognised as being at the core of development.

Education has a multidimensional impact on communities, and it is widely recognized as one of the building blocks for sustainable development. As World Bank research notes, “Investment in education benefits the individual, society, and the world as a whole” and “broad-based education of good quality is among the most powerful instruments known to reduce poverty and inequality” (World Bank 2009). Therefore, in addition to other interrelated tools of development, promoting education is integral to socio-economic development and poverty reduction.

Indeed, the economic and social implications of education are significant. Investment in education serves to promote economic growth through enhancing the skills and productivity of the poor (Oxal 1997: 1). This will eventually contribute to developing the human capital of the

² The Jomtien conference in Thailand, 1990 world declaration on “*Education for All*” promotes quality education and adult literacy for all. Dakar or World Education Forum conference in Senegal, 2000: reaffirmed the *Education for All* goal and set targets to increase the global literacy rate by 50% by the year 2015.

population. Human capital theories stipulate that investing in education will develop individuals' skills, which enhance their productivity and contribute to economic growth (Oxal 1997: 3) emphasising the correlation between levels of schooling and the level of economic development.

In addition, according to the World Bank(1997), “comparative advantages among nations come less from natural resources or cheap labour and more from technical innovations and the competitive use of knowledge”. Thus, education has cascading effects: countries with greater human capital development are more likely to have higher rates of economic growth and income. Therefore, proper investment in education will help to combat global poverty as well as reduce the economic gap between rich and poor nations.

Apart from the general benefits of education for development, girls' education in particular has been shown to have substantial economic and social benefits. Research suggests that “gender inequality in education directly affects economic growth by lowering the average level of human capital” (Klasen 2002: 1). This indicates that investment in girls' education will increase the average level of human capital in the population, which will eventually contribute to the process of economic growth.

On a societal level, studies have shown that communities with a high proportion of educated mothers have less health problems. In addition, the number of schooling years contributes positively to empowering women and raising their awareness regarding childbearing, personal and community health (Oxal 1997: 4). Thus, education may contribute to lower infant and maternal mortality rates. Furthermore, education promotes greater women's participation in the labour market and increases the likelihood that their children will participate in formal education. And considering the devastation caused by HIV/AIDS, women's education is a key to reducing the spread of the disease by educating women in family planning and reproductive rights (World Bank 2009). In conclusion, women's education can contribute to social and cultural changes that have a positive impact on the health and livelihood of the community.

Despite these facts, women continue to have lower education rates than men. While the ratios of literacy rates vary among women and men, women face significantly reduced educational opportunities in the poorest countries (Oxal 1997: 10). The reasons may vary, such as social or cultural views, the cost of education, or the economic constraints of families that require their daughters to stay home and assist in household chores. Nonetheless, if negative attitudes towards women's education and the constraints that work against their incorporation into the education system can be overcome, the benefits can be significant for families as well as for society as a whole (Oxal 1997: 1).

Furthermore, education is instrumental in promoting equal opportunities and higher income levels amongst the entire population. Economic growth, *per se*, does not necessarily imply the reduction in economic inequality. Combating poverty necessitates having equal opportunities in economic activities and more equitable income distribution. While the past 20 years have witnessed a marked decrease in global poverty rates, inequality in many regions has increased. Among developing regions, inequality is highest in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, and it is increasing in Asia as well (UNESCO 2008: 14). While education on its own cannot solve the problem of economic inequality, it is one important tool in promoting equal opportunities for all, including children from marginalized social or economic backgrounds and women.

“Unless compensating policies are introduced, especially targeting children from the least advantaged backgrounds,” contends UNESCO, “existing socio-economic inequalities could even be reinforced because of poor education quality, low achievement, high dropout rates, differentiated school systems and limited access to higher education levels” (UNESCO 2008: 19). Where education is considered as part of a broader tool to promote equal opportunities, the effects are likely to be more profound. Corresponding policies, such as promoting equal employment opportunities are necessary if the “potential equalizing benefits of education expansion are to materialize” (UNESCO 2008: 23). Thus, education is one tool that can help the poor and marginalized to contribute to and benefit from economic growth.

The Significance of Education in Islam

Education has been greatly emphasized in Islam. The first verse of the Qur’an to be revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) indicates the importance of education in Islam; the verse started with the word “*Iqr’a*”, it is a command that means ‘read’ in Arabic, and that implies the concepts of ‘learning’, ‘exploring’ and ‘seeking enlightenment’. This demonstrates that reading (knowledge) is the way to approach the Creator of all that exists. Verse 96/1-5 states:

"Read! In the Name of your Lord who has created (all that exists). He has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not. "

Hence, Muslims believe that Allah created humanity and commanded that they seek knowledge in order to become stronger in their faith.

The importance of education has been emphasized repeatedly in the Qur’an, which is the ultimate source of guidance for Muslims. Verse 20/114 says, "*My Lord! Increase me in knowledge.*" This verse indicates that whatever we know is limited as we need to keep asking Allah to increase our knowledge. Therefore, a Muslim should constantly be seeking more knowledge (*ilm*). The Qur’an treats knowledge as a means to reaching *iman* (faith) for all Muslims, males and females, to becoming true believers. This is demonstrated in the following verses:

"Allah grants wisdom to whom He pleases and to whom wisdom is granted indeed he receives an overflowing benefit." Surah 2/269 "*Those truly fear God, among His Servants, who have knowledge: for God is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving.*" Surah 35/28

"Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition." Surah 39/9

The *hadith*³ of the Prophet (pbuh) also emphasise the value of knowledge. As the following *hadith* narrated by *Abu Hurairah* notes:

³ Hadith is a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad; it includes his sayings and deeds, and his tacit approval of what was said or done in his presence.

"When a man dies, his acts come to an end, but three, recurring charity, or knowledge (by which people) benefit, or a pious son, who prays for him (the deceased)." (Sahih Muslim: Book 12, Hadith 4005).

Therefore, in the Qur'an and *hadith*, the importance of education is explicit; in Islam seeking education is obligatory, and that knowledge is considered to be the path towards greater closeness to Allah.

Perspectives on the Implications of Education in Islam

Islam considers that humans have the responsibility (stewardship) to serve the earth and humankind and are accountable for this role. This includes serving humanity and applying the principles of justice for all. Justice is crucial for peace and social harmony. In Islam, justice is a sacred principle in all matters from personal relations to matters of governance. Justice is instrumental in fighting poverty and inequality and is vital in the achievement of sustainable development. In Islam, justice entails protecting individuals' rights, as well as the fair distribution of wealth and resources. Justice is a human value in Islam; ignorance and illiteracy would prevent the performance of justice as it is taught in the Qur'an and the *hadiths* of the Prophet (pbuh). Therefore, knowledge and wisdom are paramount for the achievement of justice and social harmony in Islam; The Qur'an states that individuals bear a responsibility towards the community; Verse 5/2 states:

"and help one another in goodness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and aggression; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah"

Therefore, there is no doubt that learning the Qur'an and understanding its social and economic implications would contribute to the achievement of justice and social equity. This is also apparent from Surah 2/269 mentioned above, which promotes the importance of wisdom/knowledge for Muslims.

The importance of education for the betterment of society was also emphasised by the Prophet (pbuh) who asserted that for a Muslim to fulfil their role to serve humanity, they must acquire knowledge for the common good:

...If anyone acquires knowledge of things by which Allah's good pleasure is sought, but acquires it only to get some worldly advantage, he will not experience the arf, i.e. the odour, of Paradise. (Narrated by Abu-Hurayrah, Translation of Sunan Abu-Dawud, Knowledge (Kitab Al-Ilm), Book 25, Number 3656)"

The previous *verses* and *ahadith* indicate the importance of knowledge and equity in Islam. Indeed, the acquisition of knowledge and the use of this knowledge for the betterment of humanity are seen as sacred duties for Muslims.

Education for All in Islam

In Islam, the duty of seeking knowledge and learning is obligatory for every Muslim. Islam affirms the right to education for all without gender discrimination. For example, in Verse 39/9

(mentioned above), the Qur'an addresses all people and indicates that people will be judged by their knowledge and understanding.

In addition to the emphasis on knowledge for all Muslims in the Qur'an, women's education is emphasised in many of the *hadiths* of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). He encouraged the education of members of the most marginalised communities including slave girls. The Prophet said:

.. "He who has a slave-girl and teaches her good manners and improves her education and then manumits and marries her, will get a double reward; (narrated by Abu Musa Al-Ashari)

This approach was followed to eradicate slavery in the early days of Islam, but at the same time indicates the importance of girl's education in the Prophet's (pbuh) thinking.

In Islam, the welfare of orphans is also emphasised. Muslims are encouraged to provide for the physical, social and psychological needs of orphans, including their education as part of equipping them with the means to achieving a decent livelihood. The Qur'an states:

"They ask you, (O Muhammad), what they shall spend. Say: that which you spend for good (must go) to parents and near kindred and orphans and the needy and the wayfarer. And whatsoever good you do, lo! Allah is Aware of it." Surah 2/215

Furthermore, the principles of charity in Islam offer a way through which Muslims can support education programmes that will empower the disadvantaged sections of society. *Waqf*, apart from *zakat*⁴ and *sadaqah*⁵, is one way that Muslims engage in ongoing charity (*Sadaqa Jareyah*). *Waqf* can be in the form of paying for or declaring a building or land as a communal space, with schools and training centres falling within this category. Thus, Islam offers many forms of charity that Muslims can observe in order to promote education projects for the disadvantaged in developing countries.

In line with the relatively recent calls of international institutions for universal education, Islam has been advocating education as a social necessity for over 1400 years. In addition, Islam encourages individuals to focus their efforts on the disadvantaged especially and provide them with greater access to educational opportunities.

Conclusion

Islam has a holistic view of human development, which views education and knowledge as central. Islam encourages the acquisition of knowledge and its use for the benefit of humanity. Furthermore, the principles of justice, equality and equity are important in Islam; by extension, this entails acquiring knowledge, wisdom and skills to carry out one's duties. While knowledge is needed to fulfil religious and spiritual responsibilities, it is also highly important for achieving

⁴ *Zakah* is the third pillar in Islam; it is an obligatory form of *charity* to the poor. *Zakah* should be used for specific categories of people and for Muslims only. The purpose of *zakah* is to promote equality by redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor and needy as well as discouraging greed and selfishness.

⁵ *Sadaqa* is a voluntary form of *charity* as opposed to *zakah*, and it can be used to help Muslims and non-Muslims. *Sadaqa* may include financial assistance, public service, or even a smile to someone who needs it. *Sadaqa* is what is given voluntarily for the sake of Allah to obtain the recompense from Allah.

social and economic development, for the wellbeing of the community, and for ensuring social harmony, freedom and human rights.

The Qur'an and *ahadith* indicate that knowledge and education is important for all Muslims in order for them to fulfil their duties and obligations to Allah and humanity. As such, it is clear that obtaining knowledge and providing equal access to education for all sections of society is of central importance in Islam. While focusing on economic and social development is fundamental for international development organisations, Muslim Faith Based Organisations focus mostly on relief work rather than on long-term development projects, which would include education. As illustrated above, both the acquisition and the provision of knowledge are obligatory in Islam. Therefore, Muslim FBOs should consider focusing on education as obligatory while setting their priorities. Furthermore, education for marginalised groups such as girls and members of disadvantaged sections of the society should have a priority in project planning. The calls from international institutions as well as the teachings of Islam make it imperative that Muslim FBOs focus on providing access to quality education for all as part of their agendas, especially in those areas that are relatively deprived such as many developing countries.

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