Education for Social Cohesion in Lebanon: The Educational Reform Experiment in the Wake of the Lebanese War

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My contribution here addresses the educational reform experiment following the end of the Lebanese civil wars (1975–90). The reform plan aimed at establishing an educational system that would contribute to restoring and building trust among the Lebanese after a series of wars which took many forms, including wars between Lebanese and non-Lebanese, wars between Lebanese of various denominations and from different regions, and wars between Lebanese of the same denomination, the same party and the same region. The chapter will examine whether this attempt at educational reform has been successful in contributing to the restoration of trust and solidarity among Lebanese people and promoting social cohesion in Lebanon. In order to answer this question, I shall review the post-war education reform plan, its objectives and approach to promoting social cohesion, and its method of implementation. Finally, I will discuss the main challenges that I faced as a policymaker in reforming education and promoting social cohesion.

An overview of the educational reform plan and the implementation methodology

Following the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1989, two massive reconstruction plans were launched simultaneously. The first was concerned with rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure; the other focused on the traumatized population, with education as its main tool. As a result, the Educational Reform Plan (CERD 1994) was prepared by the Educational Centre for Research and Development (ECRD) and approved by the Lebanese cabinet on 17 August 1994. The plan had very ambitious goals:

To build an advanced and cohesive Lebanese society that would allow its children to live their lives in a climate of freedom, justice and democracy, a society capable of assuming a cultural role in the Arab world and globally, through the development of the personality of the learner as...
an individual, a participant in the community and a law-abiding citizen who believes in the country’s fundamental principles and human values. (CERD 2)

However, the methodology adopted in designing the plan aroused many objections, primarily due to lack of consultation and participation prior to its development. When I was appointed the president of the ECRD, we adopted the following eight parameters when implementing the education reform plan, in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes:

1. *Increasing participation* to ensure the participation of all members and organizations working in the field of education, the ECRD was transformed into a venue for national educational dialogue, where representatives of the various sects and political forces emerging from the war, as well as educators, academics, educational inspectors and researchers from the public and private sectors, and representatives of trade unions and the ministries concerned, sat together to discuss the plan and its implementation. In this way, more than 40 people were brought under a dynamic organizational structure, with departments interacting in continuous dialogue. This was coordinated and planned by an academic council which operated under the auspices of a national advisory body and with the authorization of the national educational forum, which included the majority of educational organizations and working groups in Lebanon at the time.

2. *Working in accordance with the National Conciliation Document,* approved earlier by the government, which is to say adhering to the national and ideological principles adopted by this document.

3. *Adopting transparency in decision making* and insisting on discussing all matters openly with courage, responsibility and respect.

4. *Adopting consensus in decision making instead of voting.* Throughout the four years of collective work, we did not resort to voting. Instead, there was continuous discussion and dialogue to achieve common ground, and consequently, we reached resolutions agreed upon by everyone.

5. *Implementing decisions soon after they have been taken.* Due to the fragile political situation of the country, we always strove to translate decisions into actions as soon as possible after they had been approved by the government for fear that any accidental circumstances or sudden political opposition might arise that would interrupt implementation or result in revision or discontinuation of the work.

6. *Consultative workshops with the public.* Several activities were carried out within this framework to inform and engage everyone in the current discussions on the developed curriculum. Such activities included press conferences, media campaigns and numerous workshops organized by the ECRD, which gathered together all sections of the national educational