

The Relationship Between Illiteracy, Development, Poverty, and Equality

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to clarify the relationship between illiteracy, development, poverty, and equality, considering illiteracy as one of the social and economic issues that directly affect the course of comprehensive development, income levels, and social equality. The study adopted the descriptive-analytical approach. The results confirmed that sustainable development in societies first requires combating illiteracy, as it constitutes the foundation of poverty, unemployment, and inequality of opportunities between genders. This can only be achieved through knowledge and learning, which require enrollment in education at all its stages and levels, with particular emphasis on intensifying literacy and adult education programs. This, in turn, necessitates the adoption of appropriate decisions and methods by governments and societies, as well as the participation of all governmental and civil sectors, to confront this problem and eliminate the sources of illiteracy

Keywords: Illiteracy; Development; Poverty; Equality

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered a fundamental and essential requirement for achieving sustainable development through focusing on human capital by developing individuals' skills and capabilities through learning and training. An educated individual plays an important and effective role by contributing to the development process. Through education and the development of skills and knowledge, illiteracy in its various forms can be eliminated, as eradicating illiteracy is essentially the key to development.

The relationship between illiteracy and development is an inverse one; development cannot be achieved in a country without high-quality education for its human resources, nor can a society attain a decent level of education and a free, dignified standard of living unless illiteracy is eliminated. Illiteracy is one of the major obstacles to development and acts as a barrier that stands between the individual and their intellect and civilization. Moreover, it distances individuals from a sense of responsibility toward their society.

Theoretical Background

The wealth of nations is not truly measured by the amount of oil or industrial and natural resources they possess, but rather by the intellectual capacity of the minds of their people. During the second half of the twentieth century, the perspective of economic thinkers on development changed with the emergence of the technological revolution, which differs from industrial wealth. This shift gave rise to what is known as the "knowledge society," which has the ability to manage a "knowledge economy." As a result, societies began to receive an abundance of information that supports and develops various economic, social, and commercial sectors, leading to progress and advancement in the development process (Khyari, 2013).

Human beings are considered the most valuable form of capital, as they are the only ones capable of accessing knowledge and information and possessing the ability to utilize and invest them in order to improve quality of life and to free themselves from poverty, ignorance, and disease.

Development is defined as “the organized and integrated effort to develop a society’s resources economically, socially, and intellectually, in order to first confront underdevelopment, then strive to catch up with civilizational progress, and to provide a decent and comfortable life for every individual in society.” Numerous studies have emphasized that education is a promising area for investment, with its social and individual returns exceeding its economic returns (Al-Saqqa, 2015, p. 298).

The elements of a developmental will include awareness of the problems of underdevelopment and illiteracy and their dimensions, which help overcome these problems and find ways to harness and overcome them. Awareness of the necessity to eliminate underdevelopment is a first step; understanding the phenomenon is key to solving the problem of illiteracy. Awareness of the methods and tools to combat underdevelopment is the second step, using approaches suited to the society in question and tools that serve the community in overcoming the issue (Al-Wahbi, 2017, p. 248).

Madi (2006) identifies three dimensions for measuring human development levels in different countries: education, health, and living standards. Education is measured by enrollment rates in primary, secondary, and higher education, as well as literacy rates. Health is measured by access to quality healthcare and life expectancy. Living standards are measured by individual income and the ability to meet basic needs. These dimensions, while limited, cover the essential societal needs that indicate progress or underdevelopment, unemployment, and social well-being, with education as the central factor. An educated individual can raise income and living standards and maintain health, whereas an illiterate person cannot meet basic needs due to ignorance. Economists note that a person’s productivity increases from 30% after primary education to 320% after secondary education and 600% after higher education, showing the strong returns of education (Al-Rawaf, 2002).

Consequently, development has become a central concern for governments and organizations, particularly in light of poverty, ignorance, underdevelopment, urban migration, and brain drain. Developing countries have therefore implemented plans and policies to improve education, reduce illiteracy, and build human capital to support economic growth, social stability, and democracy, while mitigating corruption and violence (Al-Azzawi, 2013).

In contrast, most Arab countries still face high illiteracy, low material resources, and weak human capacities necessary for development, due largely to underinvestment in education, both formal and non-formal. In Iraq, for instance, illiteracy remains a major barrier to human and national development, reflecting failures in the educational system. Illiteracy limits employment, economic productivity, and social advancement. High illiteracy, low school enrollment (especially among girls), street children, and poverty all hinder development, resulting in uneducated generations, increased unemployment, and widening poverty—conditions incompatible with modern technological and developmental requirements (Sardar, 2015).

Many Arab countries have attempted to combat illiteracy, but efforts have often failed. The persistence of illiteracy is attributed to a lack of adult literacy centers, low prioritization of education, absence of human development policies, limited financial and organizational support, insufficient monitoring, irregular attendance, lack of compulsory education laws, and inadequate literacy programs based on structured philosophy rather than ad hoc approaches (Al-Humaidi, 1992; Al-Azzawi, 2013).

Conversely, some countries have successfully reduced illiteracy and achieved human development. For example, Japan rebuilt after World War II by integrating education into national development plans, revising curricula, promoting teacher involvement, and aligning outputs with labor market needs (Al-Saqqa, 2015). Malaysia, since its independence in 1957, reduced illiteracy from 74% in 1970 to 6% in 2000, with near-universal enrollment (99%), through sustained educational investment, contributing to citizen empowerment and economic growth (Al-Azzawi, 2013).

From the above, it is clear that illiteracy and development have an inverse relationship: illiteracy hinders education and human development, leading to unemployment and societal underdevelopment. Education, in contrast, positively contributes to personal and societal growth, as it builds the capacities necessary for utilizing resources and improving productivity.

Illiteracy is also directly linked to poverty: where illiteracy exists, poverty emerges. Poverty, in turn, varies across societies and cultures. The World Bank defines a poor person as someone unable to meet minimum food and non-food needs (Coordinating Authority for Social Solidarity, 2010). Human development perspectives define poverty as lacking freedom, respect, and the capabilities needed to contribute to development (Krishan, 2012). In Islamic teachings, the poor are those entitled to zakat, whose needs and those of their dependents are unmet.

Poor countries typically face low education, inadequate healthcare, lack of clean water and sanitation, malnutrition, high disease prevalence, mortality, unemployment, crime, and substance abuse. The World Bank sets poverty lines at \$370/year per person, with extreme poverty at \$275/year (Khyari, 2013). Education and poverty

are interrelated: higher poverty reduces educational access, while education prevents intergenerational transmission of poverty and raises income; each additional year of schooling increases income by 10% (UNESCO, 2014).

Factors contributing to poverty and illiteracy include lack of education prioritization, large family sizes, early labor of children, natural disasters, population growth, low school enrollment, and conflict (Ahando, 2017; Al-Shurti, n.d.). Poverty limits political participation, reduces educational resources, and disproportionately affects girls' education (Ismail, 2014). Addressing poverty requires comprehensive literacy and education programs, supported by political will, financial and human resources, and appropriate curricula.

Equality between genders is crucial to ensure every individual's rights, including security, health, and education. UNESCO emphasizes education for all through its Education 2030 framework, aiming to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities. SDG 5 highlights gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (Al-Alma'i, 2018). The UN advocates equitable educational opportunities and free access to ensure social justice (United Nations, 2013).

Despite these efforts, female illiteracy remains higher than male in developing countries, particularly in rural areas. Around 16 million girls have not enrolled in school, and women comprise two-thirds of adults lacking basic literacy skills (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). Barriers include poverty, early marriage, family responsibilities, work, geographic inaccessibility, and cultural norms (Krishan, 2012). Educating women improves knowledge, independence, and contributes to economic growth, poverty reduction, and societal development. Children benefit directly from educated mothers, highlighting intergenerational impact.

Thus, illiteracy and equality have an inverse relationship: higher illiteracy weakens gender equality. Without gender equality and women's empowerment, human development faces significant obstacles. The UNDP Human Development Report (1995) notes that human development is at risk if not gendered (Faour, 2013). Sustainable development challenges are addressed through inclusive education, equitable opportunity, tolerance, justice, and empowering women to participate fully, consistent with Islamic principles (Al-Sinbul, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes that illiteracy constitutes a major obstacle to sustainable development and is closely associated with poverty and inequality among individuals within societies. This necessitates, first and foremost, combating illiteracy, as it represents the foundation of poverty, unemployment, and unequal opportunities between genders. Addressing illiteracy can only be achieved through knowledge and learning, which require enrollment in education at all stages and levels, along with intensifying literacy and adult education programs in particular. This, in turn, requires the adoption of appropriate policies and approaches by governments and communities, as well as the participation of all governmental and civil sectors, to confront this problem and eliminate the sources of illiteracy. Furthermore, addressing illiteracy is not merely an educational duty; rather, it is a genuine investment in individuals and society, given its direct positive impact on economic growth, social justice, and the reduction of disparities within society.

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