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Education Policies in Morocco: Can the Government Fix What It Broke?

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Moroccan student teachers protest against police violence and government-proposed cuts to education jobs, Rabat, January 2016. © EPA.
A certain degree of pessimism hangs over the Moroccan education system. In the eyes of average citizens, as well as members of the elite, Moroccan schools are viewed as underperforming and indeed incapable of reform. This pessimism can be explained by decades of failed attempts to reform the Moroccan education sector. Following independence in 1956, schools in Morocco experienced a sharp increase in the number of enrolled students; however, despite this growth, the quality of education never improved. While this can be attributed to a wide range of factors, the greatest problems that have plagued the education system stem from structural failures. Shortly after independence, the newly formed Moroccan government began implementing educational reforms by establishing the National Ministry of Education in 1956 and the first Royal Commission focusing on education reform in 1957. This Royal Commission issued the first education charter which was succeeded by the 1964 education reform conference in Maamora and the 1980 conference on national education in Ifrane. By the late 1980s, Morocco had undertaken the first large scale vocational training project as well as efforts to decentralize universities. In 2000 an improved National Charter for Education and Training, set up by 34 prominent Moroccan scholars, was adopted. However, only nine years later this charter was already starting to show sign of failure, urging the government to adopt an emergency education reform plan. In 2015 the National Charter for Education and Training was abolished and replaced with the 2015-2030 Strategic Vision of Reform. Despite these decades-long efforts to initiate substantial reforms and other smaller administrative and financial changes, the government has not been successful in reforming the education system or improving the quality of education.

Despite these failures, Morocco has achieved some positive improvements in the education system, most notably, the implementation of universal elementary education across the country, which meant all elementary school aged children are enrolled. This is an impressive statistic for Morocco, a country still struggling with high illiteracy rates. However universal enrolment has faced numerous obstacles. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the percentage of elementary school enrolment experienced a sharp decrease due to a period of social and political upheaval, characterized by a series of violent uprisings. It took Morocco 20 years to return to complete school enrolment at the elementary level. These two decades represent a lost opportunity for the education system to evolve and
improve.

Table 1: Percentage of students enrolled in elementary school between 1970 and 2015


Nonetheless, Morocco’s minor success in universal elementary education does not compensate for the significant deficiencies uncovered by various national assessments. This poor performance has caused many to lose faith in the school system and in its ability to overcome current and future challenges, which was one of the motivations behind the 2015-2030 Strategic Vision of Reform. This loss of faith in the education sector exposes the problems within the Moroccan institutional framework. Moroccan citizens are struggling to trust a system that has proven to be unstable, oppressive, and undemocratic.

**Manifestations of a Failed School System**

Thirteen years after the establishment of the National Charter for Training and Development, the Supreme Council for Education and Training released a study
Implementing the National Charter for Education and Training, 2000-2013: Achievements, Obstacles, and Challenges. The report divided the shortcomings of the education system into two internal and external weaknesses. Internally, the study found that Moroccan schools are lagging behind in terms of languages, knowledge, skills, and values, that resources are wasted in schools, universities, and vocational training centres across the country, and that scientific research in educational institutions is limited. Externally, the study concluded that graduates of Moroccan universities struggle to integrate economically, socially, and culturally into society as Moroccan schools tend to be isolated from the larger national and global contexts and have not evolved or adopted new technologies. This report used data from the International Comparative Assessments of Student Achievement in Mathematics and Science (TIMSS) and in reading (PIRLS), which assesses math and reading levels in more than 60 countries. Morocco performs poorly in these assessments year after year, which further revealed that the quality of education severely deteriorated, especially between 2001 and 2011. The breakdown of the school system has led to severe education gaps in Morocco. The average number of years students aged 15 and above attend school reached 4.72 years in 2010, a 1% increase from the average scored in 1982. This average is still lower than that in most developing countries, where students study for an average of 7.1 years. However, in developed countries, the average is 11 years.

One reason for this deterioration could be security issues. According to various national assessments and reports issued by the Higher Council, 60% of students in fourth grade and 49% of students in middle school attend schools with significant security challenges, characterized by a real threat of bodily harm and high rates of absenteeism and tardiness. Only 14% of students, according to reports by the Higher Council, are enrolled in schools that are considered safe and high-performing. Moroccan universities, as well as student campuses, face similar security concerns. Universities have transformed into a microcosm of the political struggles dividing the country. As such, universities are no longer institutions of research, knowledge, and learning, but instead are places of violence, protests, and social and political tension. In the last few years, many students have fallen victim to this violence and some have even died on campuses.
Focusing exclusively on security issues, however, perhaps misses the more structural causes behind the failing school system. Modern economic theory proposes several models to explain the relationship between a country’s national institutions and the quality of its education system. A well-developed education sector is the product of economic growth, which requires strong institutions. This means the quality of education is affected by the quality and stability of national institutions, most importantly political and economic institutions. For most citizens, trust in the government stems from faith in national institutions; this trust motivates society to invest in its human capital. Applying such an analysis to the Moroccan case demonstrates how the greater failings of Moroccan institutions, and the ensuing lack of faith of average Moroccans in their system, creates a context in which public education cannot thrive.

National Institutions and the Quality of Education

The relationship between the broader institutional framework and the quality of education was first discussed by Douglas North and Robert Thomas in 1973, who summarized the causal chain between institutions, the growth of capital, and economic development:

North and Thomas suggest that economic development theories must take into account how institutions influence and affect economic development. The diagram above relates how the quality of institutions is directly correlated with the quality of human capital in any given country. This idea was not a novelty. David Hume, John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stewart Mill all believed that freedom, justice, and property rights were necessary for economic growth. Following in this tradition, modern economists such as Ronald Coase along with Arthur Louis, along with
North and Thomas, all employ the theory of “New Institutional Economics” in their work. This newer trend uses institutions as a tool to explain certain economic and social phenomena, including the deterioration of the education system (human capital) within a certain country. Likewise, some institutionalists like Benhabib and Spiegel, Easterly, Pritchett, Rodrik, as well as Acemoglu and Robinson, posit that the quality of education is directly correlated with the quality of institutions. In their book *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, Acemoglu and Robinson consider that undemocratic institutions hinder economic growth as well as the growth of human capital.\(^{11}\) As a result, citizens in countries with undemocratic institutions do not invest in education, having lost faith in their governments. Instead, they wait for any opportunity to immigrate elsewhere.

Democratic and free institutions, on the other hand, promote the growth of human capital and, in so doing, create space for high-level education and productivity to flourish. Human capital also encourages the adoption of modern technologies, which ultimately leads to increased economic productivity. In such an environment, individuals are motivated to invest in education and to invest in human capital to improve the quality of education. According to North,\(^ {12}\) an individual’s motivation to invest their human capital or financial capital is closely linked to the institutional framework in which they live. Institutions, thus establish “the rules of the game in a society,” including both “formal” rules such as constitutions, laws, parliament, property rights, human rights, democracy, etc. and “informal” rules such as religion, culture, norms of behaviour, and conventions.\(^ {13}\) Through applying the effects of formal rules or institutions to the education sector in Morocco, the evolution of institutions from independence to the present day can be effectively evaluated.

As is the case in most developing countries, political institutions can often be subservient to the will of the political and financial elite, which is an indication of a weak institutional framework. The shortcomings of Morocco’s political and economic institutions are corroborated by rankings and studies of institutions carried out by international organizations. For example, according to the Polity IV Project, which ranks political regimes, Morocco is autocratic with a fragile democracy. Human Rights Watch and Human Rights Protection Scores\(^ {14}\) found that the Moroccan government does not have the capacity to protect human
rights. In other studies, Morocco scored poorly on the state’s capacity to protect civil liberties as well as political freedoms. Freedom House, for example, reported that Morocco’s government strongly discourages freedom of the press. And according to studies of both national and international organizations, Morocco has high levels of political corruption.

State Institutions and the Failure of the Education System

These various institutional weaknesses have an important impact on the failure of the country’s education system. Acemoglu, Gallego, and Robinson reaffirm that “greater education can be a path to more discontent, depending on the institutional and social context.”\textsuperscript{15} Easterly\textsuperscript{16} further corroborates this notion by explaining that the extent to which citizens are willing to invest in human capital is directly correlated to the role of institutions in a given country. If a state’s institutions are unable to create opportunities for their citizens, then any investment in education will only lead to social unrest, violent protests, and even revolutions. In turn, this level of social and political unrest negatively affects economic development.

Surveys conducted by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning\textsuperscript{17} in 2012 paint a negative image of the current climate in Morocco, which can be traced back to slow growth and economic development. These surveys showed that 64% of Moroccans are unsatisfied with their personal income levels, more than 50% are not content with their jobs, 72% consider the health services inadequate, and more than 55% are extremely disappointed with the quality of education in the country. This slow growth negatively affects the degree of trust that citizens have in the capacity of institutions to protect them as well as their personal property and causes Moroccans to view investments in education as investments with no returns.

This mistrust has caused negative effects on human capital as Moroccans have preferred to emigrate abroad. For several generations, Moroccans have had few incentives to invest in their country. As a result of this general discontent, there have been regular social and political demonstrations since 2001 which apply
pressure on social and political institutions. The education sector has experienced similar waves of protests and dissatisfaction. Most Moroccans have a negative perception of their country’s education system which is most evident through their widely used phrase “what has education ever done for anyone?”

Moroccan schools are suffering under the weight of failed political and economic institutions. The government has been, and continues to be, unable to motivate citizens to invest in a country in which they cannot imagine a future. Today it seems impossible to successfully reform the education system without completely transforming Morocco’s broken political and economic systems.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In order to implement a true reform of Morocco’s education system, there needs to be a comprehensive reshaping of Morocco’s institutions. These institutions need to be strengthened to provide protection to all citizens. Additionally, Morocco needs to carry out true political and economic reforms. Reform of political institutions will need to allow for political pluralism as well as a system of checks and balances. Political reforms should also facilitate Morocco’s transition to a true parliamentary democracy and must protect and uphold human rights. Lastly, the judicial system must ensure transparency, speedy trials, and needs to be independent as well as protected from corruption.

Likewise, reforms of the economic institutions must safeguard personal property, one of the most important economic rights, and inflation rates must be controlled. Morocco needs to implement new laws to protect free trade and abolish existing laws that hinder economic growth. If properly reformed, economic institutions could allow for economic growth, more competition, and access to increased foreign capital.

However, reforms of political and economic institutions are not enough to repair the education system. Moroccans do not believe in their individual and collective futures and no longer invest in human capital. This belief in the future is essential for Morocco’s school system. Without first reforming political, social and economic institutions, which will lead to continued economic and social development, Morocco will not be able to reform the education system.
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Endnotes

1. The violent protests of 23 March 1965 began as a response to the Ministry of Education’s policies. The general strike of June 1981 held by unions in Morocco led to increased tensions with the government. The teacher’s union had the highest number of participants in the strike, which turned violent.


5. CSEFRS, 2015, p. 7.


8. Abdul Rahman Al Hasnawi, a student in a campus affiliate of the Islamic Justice and Development Party, was killed on 25 April 25 2014 at Fez University. Abdelilah Benkirane, then Prime Minister, attend the funeral.


17. Samples from these studies can be found at https://goo.gl/icQvQ
About the author

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