

Knowledge — key to empowerment of Arab world

Education, media and translation represent key channels for information distribution ■ Arab countries have lower information media-to-population ratios than world average

DUBAI: Dubbed by Time magazine as the most important study in 2002, this year's UN Arab Human Development Report expands on the need for governments to reform economically, politically and socially as well as engage globally or else trail behind the rest of the world.

Unlike last year's version, which concluded the region faced freedom, gender inequality and knowledge deficits, the 210-page report published this week and compiled by Arab intellectuals and analysts covering the 22 Arab countries, stresses the unappreciated potential of knowledge.

The deterioration in civil and political freedoms in the Arab world is attributed to newly enacted legislation like the "Arab Charter against Terrorism," created in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

The charter, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report says, "allows censorship, restricts access to the Internet, and restricts printing and publication... the

charter neither explicitly prohibits detention or torture nor provides for questioning the legality of detentions."

Education, the media and translation, considered by the authors as key channels in distributing information, present a picture of an important Arab region.

"The most important challenge facing Arab education is its declining quality. The mass media are the most important agents for the public diffusion of knowledge yet Arab countries have lower information media-to-population ratios compared to the world average," says the report.

The region has fewer than 53 newspapers per 1,000 citizens, compared to 285 papers per 1,000 in developed countries, it says, adding that translation, a salient medium of propagating information, is stagnant in the Arab world.

Arab journalists continue to suffer, with a number of cases in the past and current year of imprisonment, detention or bans.

"Journalists face illegal harassment,

intimidation and even physical threats, censorship is rife and newspapers and television channels are sometimes arbitrarily closed down," the report says.

"Our assessment is that freedom in Arab countries has been assailed on more than one front", Nader Fergani, the report's main author, told AFP in a telephone interview.

"In the US and Europe there has been an erosion of civil and political liberties especially for Arabs and Muslims. Arab countries have taken advantage of this war on terrorism as a context to further restrict freedoms in Arab countries."

The authors acknowledge that some ground was covered by Arab governments, such as the holding of elections "for the first time in decades", and some improvement in the information environment with the sprouting of independent papers outside the region, and an improvement in empowerment of women. But they point to inadequacies in manufacturing and technological innovation.

The technology bubble in the West

and the ever-expanding information highway have had little effect, in terms of a trickle down in know-how.

"Imported technology has not led to its adoption and internalisation in the host country, let alone to its diffusion and production," says the report.

The shortcomings are largely explained as a result of a "lack of innovation and knowledge production systems and the lack of rational policies that ingrain those essential values and institutional frameworks that support a knowledge society."

Perhaps the most striking assessment is that "importing technology has not led to its adoption ... and that Arab countries with their aging technologies, are stuck at the wrong end of the technology ladder."

"In Arab countries there has been an illusion that importing commodities, factories and equipment ... would automatically transfer knowledge or the technology embedded in the commodities to Arab societies, which has not happened," said Fergani.

He added that in order to achieve effective transfer technologies you have to have active research and development activities.

One of the most important aspects of technology transfer is absorption, said Ramzi Abdel Jabber, chief executive of MENAFN.com, an online financial portal.

"You can transfer as much as you want, but it doesn't mean diddly if no one is absorbing. In the Arab world there aren't mechanisms and systems and the training to ensure proper absorption," he said.

It is a fact that the knowledge gap between the Arab world and more developed countries is widening.

"On the one hand the pace of innovation in more developed countries has increased tremendously and on the other hand the knowledge absorption in the Arab world has been lagging," said Abdel Jabber.

The gap could be bridged, he said, by working on absorption and investing in human capital and education.

On the economic front, Arab countries continue to suffer from declining productivity, anemic economic growth and growing poverty.

At the end of the 20th century the region's gross domestic product (GDP) stood at 604 billion dollars, slightly above Spain's \$59 billion dollars.

However, Fergani said, "there is hope but not in the short range. Any meaningful development in Arab countries will have to be long range and a rather serious social project."

"You need a concerted attack on all problems facing Arab societies. Although we are concerned with the knowledge society, the package of recommendations... extends to all walks of life in Arab countries."

Fergani believes the report has acquired credibility and its recommendations will not be ignored.

"The three deficits some people were not happy with that were identified in the first report are on everybody's agenda in the Arab world, whether they admit it or not." —AFP