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Creating Local Context

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Knowledge for Development

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to have this opportunity to be with you this evening.

The leading role of the World Bank in providing global leadership, funding and intellectual capital to bridge the digital gap and achieve the United Nations millennium goals for development needs no mention.

As Chairman of the Human Resource Development and Capacity Building Working Group, an affiliate of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Taskforce (UN ICT TF), as well as Chairman of the UN ICT TF Arab Regional Network, I am privileged to have worked closely with the World Bank and its global partners.

I have just arrived from the meeting organized by the World Economic Forum (WEF) on 'Arab World Competitiveness.' The meeting, as in the case with all WEF events, was well-organized and was attended by a number of figures that are considered to be pilots of Arab intellect.

The meeting began with the controversial subject of the Arab identity by raising the question of: "What is the definition of an Arab individual these days."

This question has emerged in light of the recent political events, in addition to the economic hardships affecting the Arab region.

While it is difficult to avoid the impact of politics in the Arab world these days, the actual drive force for the Conference's assemblance was not politics, but the recently published "Arab Human Development Report," personally written by a number of Arab individuals and which was characterized by frankness and its unusual expression of the frustrating reality surrounding the Arab socio-economic development. The Arab Human Development Report provides a clear overview for the reasons behind the failure of previous Arab methods related to development.

Based on the conclusion of this meeting, it was found that the Arab world does in fact yield the knowledge regarding the solutions for facing the current economic hardship; and to this knowledge, a reasonable opportunity could be made available in order to make a successful

impact represented by its comprehensive implementation. These solutions include:

1. Radical reform of the public education system in most Arab countries.
2. Innovation, which is the foundation of economic development, needs to be encouraged through educational reform, respect for intellectual property rights (IPRs), larger commitment from the Arab business community to human resources development and investment in research and development.
3. There should also be support to research and development and scientific and technical programs through government support for partnerships and public-private collaboration.
4. Extensive liberalization, law enforcement and management of the working environment - where Arab governments have to demonstrate greater emphasis towards achieving the goals of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and take advantage of the WTO mechanism for liberalization. The Arab world has to forcefully free its markets as well as the structure of its capital and use the WTO system to achieve this.
5. Administrative obstacles, which are the result of personal interests in most Arab countries, makes Arab integration virtually impossible, and Arab governments should take action in this regard.
6. The development of transport networks along with the elimination of administrative obstacles are necessary (e.g. the construction of roads and bridges that would link the Maghreb Union countries with the Arabian Peninsula relies more on administrative liberalization rather than financial considerations in order for it to succeed).
7. The Arab welfare state, including large public sectors and state employment such as welfare programs must be replaced with a more continuous economic model.
8. Diversity in the economization of oil is necessary; however, such diversity has to avoid mistakes that have occurred in past attempts, and which resulted in an industrial capacity that lacks the ability to compete globally, and does not facilitate the government's task for economic reform.
9. The miniscule exploitation of the female economic and social capacity is one of the major obstacles to Arab development.

10. The infrastructure for Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) needs extensive investment to meet the informatics needs for development, which is now under developed to a pitiful extent as regards to its needs.

11. The policy of privatization and liberalization, which up until now has been resisted by most Arab countries, is considered crucial for the infrastructure of ICT and must include the removal of basic telecommunications monopolies and the introduction of competition and openness. Moreover, new services such as the private sector's telephone services must not be considered illegal in the aim of protecting government income sources, since this method disregards long-term prospects and can cause damage.

12. Governments must accept the fact that they cannot impose their control on everything, and that they do not have control on everything.

13. There should be a pursuit for achieving local context to make the Internet suitable for the Arab masses.

14. The realization that Arab integration and harmony and the removal of administrative obstacles greatly facilitates e-commerce and Arab development in general.

15. An integrated Arab world based on the European model will yield a larger, more influential competitive economic capacity in the world, and would provide greater opportunities for Arab societies as a whole.

I think it is likely that this does not come as new news for many of you this evening. What is more interesting is that Arabs (leaders) themselves are in fact negotiating these issues.

The meeting which was on Arab world competitiveness was in fact an exceptional one for Arabs. Arabs usually tend to be formal and very pleasant, and therefore are sensitive to minute matters. Those characteristics are accompanied by reservation and a very obvious rejection to change, and let us be very honest; there is often a refusal to mention what is needed for change.

Change implies error, and reference to error is something considered impolite, and thus change comes contrary to Arab culture, which in turn creates a problem when things need to

change. It seems for a shrewd analyst that this "problem" is rapidly moving towards a crisis. Therefore, the report on Arab development was in fact an awakening call to Arab intellectuals. The meeting on (Arab World Competitiveness) has benefited from this intellectual input.

While the WEF included an encouraging group comprising mainly of leaders from the Arab business world, with the presence of some prominent political figures, it would not have been easy to convert the decisions of the Conference and the intellectual analysis for the Arab region to a tangible change. Should that happen, it will be through the efforts of Arab business and political leaders and harmonization with the multilateral support for global businesses and community development.

The Arab world has large human capacities that are unexploited in order for it to add value to the world economy, and through international cooperation, it is possible that a successful situation could result for both the Arab world and our international friends.

During my work with the UN ICT TF under the able leadership of His Excellency Mr. José María Figueres Olsen, this vitality was particularly evident.

The UN ICT TF embodies a new method for global partnerships with a model for multi-stakeholders that include governments, members, the private sector and civil society, all of which are working to exploit the capacity of ICT to facilitate the process of human development.

And it was only a few years later did the efforts of those working in the development and ICT fields in particular have become increasingly sophisticated.

And while the development of ICT and its role in building an information society and knowledge economy has been a major theme in the Arab World Competitiveness meeting, the fundamental nature of ICT must not overshadow our eyes on the network of interconnected themes and ideas that should be addressed with regards to ICT and the power of information to transform societies, or the basic truth that ICT are a means; and not a means to an end.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan, has established the UN ICT TF to guide the overall efforts of the United Nations to disseminate ICT for the purpose of development and the provision of an overall leadership on an international level. One of the basic aspects of this leadership is that for the working group to

be neither an operational nor a funded body, but to have the role of facilitating cooperation between ICTs for developmental efforts in the world. Its task is to utilize its classification as a global body with fixed powers that are characterized with "legitimacy, universality, experience and ground presence," in addition to its role in convening meetings and providing assistance that can contribute in setting international priorities, achieving interest and increasing the value of existing and new initiatives on each of the local, international, regional and global levels.

One of the basic concepts is to provide strategic leadership to issues that has so far not been successfully addressed by current initiatives.

In this regard, the UN ICT TF needs to address world governments, including Arab governments, and urge and encourage them to make changes and take the necessary steps to facilitate work in the field of development.

It is possible to deal with some matters through the private sector, but others fall within the competence of government activity and must be treated as such.

And now I will spend the remaining time to receive your questions and observations.

Regards,

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh

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