FAILING VOCATIONAL AND SKILLING PROGRAMS

MARWAN TARAZI, CCE DIRECTOR

The problems with Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the occupied Palestinian Territory (Opt) are very well defined. They have been researched, published and documented over and over during the past two decades (facts and figures can be obtained from studies conducted by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor, and many international organizations that have been engaged in this sector). The issues remain mostly the same and the impact of the numerous interventions or attempts by the various stakeholders have been limited. Our analysis of the situation is as follows:

1. The Opt suffers extremely high unemployment rates – especially amongst youth. At the same time, employers (from all sectors: industry, commerce, agriculture, NGOs, government, etc.) express high frustration at the severe shortages in professionals and young people entering the job market with relevant vocational knowledge, skills and attitudes. This simple fact highlights that there is a severe problem in the quality and relevance of the educational system in Palestine. This is especially applicable to TVET1.

2. This fact is known and has been known by practically every stakeholder or decision maker for the past two decades, yet very little progress has been made in the development and improvement of TVET in Opt. According to our analysis, this is attributed to the following factors:
   a) Most attempts at improving TVET programs have been isolated focusing mostly on one aspect of the whole education/employability lifecycle: Either working on limited infrastructure and equipment or some curriculum, or some teacher training, or some interface and placement, or some career counseling, etc. But hardly has any one invested in an integrated approach.
   b) The OPT is suffering from a dreadful shortage of experts and expertise2 needed to reform and uplift the TVET sector. There is a shortage in practitioners, teachers, planners, leaders, institutional capacities, etc. As such, there are no simple or easy solutions to TVET reform. Yet most interventions have been looking at “quick wins” or attempting to adopt isolated simple solutions usually based on entirely different environments or contexts. Practically none was able to achieve or sustain any measurable impact. The biggest indicator to this statement is that the status of TVET in Palestine in terms of quality and quantity has not improved in any measurable manner in the past two decades.
   c) There is little cooperation amongst the various stakeholder engaged in the development or support of TVET in Palestine. If cooperation exists, it is at the superficial level.

3. TVET in the minds of policy and decision makers and development agencies still sits in the classic mold of heavy works (carpentry, metal works, mechanics, etc.) Unfortunately OPT has very limited demand for this type of work. Because of the closed and extremely volatile and restricted markets (due to occupation), OPT can hardly sustain existing micro industries and economic activities in these areas (let alone growth). As such these types of skills have very limited employability prospects for TVET graduates. Another issue to consider is the fact that teaching such vocations demands heavy and very expensive machinery and equipment which is difficult and

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1Existing TVET programs face a myriad of challenges: under-qualified teachers; outdated curriculum which is irrelevant to labor market needs, does not incorporate years of technological advances and includes little or no interaction between employers and those designing the programs; does not address the specific social and learning needs of the learners and an ongoing focus on traditional skills which fail to move trainees beyond the edge of poverty.

2Due to weak industry and other economic sectors, severe brain drain and restricted access to external expertise (by the Israeli occupation), weak educational systems, etc.
costly to acquire, to maintain, or to train beyond a handful of students at a time (10s every year). Compared to the almost exponentially growing needs of youth looking for education and training opportunities that would qualify them to join the labor market (close to 100,000 new entrants every year) – such programs have negligible impact for such needs.

4. What TVET stakeholders seem to have been missing to focus on is “Knowledge-based” and service industries (KBIs). In the absence of a Palestinian industry base and with very limited local economic activities (as a result of the occupation – Ref: World Bank report 2006), combined with the inability of Palestinians to compete on the manual labor globally (because of the very high cost of living), one of the few viable options for Palestinians today to develop and grow their economy is to focus on KBIs. KBIs are industries that do not depend on movement of goods and people and can be traded easily across the globe. These include industries such as graphic design, animations, translation, ICT products and services, engineering support (e.g. CAD, project management), web design, content development, marketing, tourism services, etc. KBIs have unlimited markets and typically bring in high value (compared to traditional industries). They also require minimal infrastructure (as simple as a computer and internet access) and can be done from anywhere, any time and in any place.

For this reason we believe that a significant emphasis should be placed on developing a TVET sector with strong emphasis on KBIs.

5. While KBIs appear to make perfect sense for the OPT, building the workforce for such industries is not a trivial task. As explained in the adjacent box, today’s knowledge economy and KBIs require a workforce with contemporary knowledge, skills and attitudes. Our existing educational systems (at all levels) are not at all designed to “produce” such a workforce. It is a rote learning based system and even failing at this (very low standing at international benchmark exams, at least 50% failure rate amongst students in their final matriculation examinations (12th grade) every year, etc.). Therefore entrants into the TVET system come from an educational system not designed for a knowledge economy. This means that new TVET programs need not only focus on developing disciplines suited for the knowledge economy, but have a much more daunting challenge of developing the attitudes necessary to survive professionally in the 21st Century.

6. To further complicate matters TVET candidates today are typically the underachievers from the basic educational systems. While we do NOT consider this to reflect true students’ abilities and skills in any means, we acknowledge that such students end up with low self-esteem and very often have behavioral or other social problems. Developing effective TVET programs must take this factor into consideration if they are to be effective.

7. TVET has an enormous “growth” potential, and there are numerous stakeholders engaged in TVET (4-5 line ministries, Vocational Centers, schools, youth organizations, etc.) and there are 100s of thousands of students that desperately need skilling programs to gain decent employment, and the Palestinian economy desperately needs a skilled workforce to build up a shattered economy. This means that there is unlimited demand for effective TVET programs and practically unlimited stakeholders to work with to build effective TVET programs. Innovation in building effective TVET programs should not only be limited to the selection of discipline and methodology, but equally important in the selection of the right stakeholders that are able to move and produce effective results with “STEAM” attributes: Scalable, Timely, Effective, Affordable and Manageable.