An Overview of Fellowships and Research Grants Programs in the Middle East and North Africa

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FORDFOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

Over its 60-year history in the Middle East and North Africa, from its base in Cairo, the Ford Foundation has been associated with four flagship fellowship and research grants programs: the Middle East Awards Program in Social Sciences (MEAwards) (1978-2005), the Middle East Research Competition (MERC) (1986-2011), the International Fellowships Program (IFP) (2005-12), and programs developed by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS) (2012-present).

The term "associated" is intentionally chosen to reflect those programs' direct and indirect links to the Ford Foundation. In the first case, the Population Council, a grantee of the foundation, conceptualized and administered the MEAwards fellowship program with financial support from Ford. On the other hand, MERC was born and nurtured within the foundation and later was housed within local host institutions in the region. The IFP was a global fellowship program supported by the foundation and implemented by various agencies in different countries around the world, including Egypt and Palestine. Finally, the ACSS runs several fellowship and research grants programs, one of which is specifically supported by the Ford Foundation.

Whether this was in the '70s and '80s of the last century (MEAwards and MERC) or the new millennium (IFP and ACSS), the four fellowship programs under review started from the premise that there was a pressing need for fellowships. For the Ford Foundation, this was articulated as a need to invest in individuals and ideas by increasing the pool of talented people and amplifying their exposure to rigorous academic and professional opportunities for advancement. But more importantly, Ford has been mindful of the need to level the playing field so that the marginalized would have equal access to higher education opportunities. The foundation's emphasis early in the millennium on higher education for social justice resulted in the IFP program, which focused on access of marginalized groups to higher education and their success in completing their studies. It will be reviewed below.

Earlier, in the '70s and '80s of the last century, and again more recently, the foundation has been concerned with field building exemplified here by the MEAwards, MERC, and the ACSS. In this report, I will briefly introduce readers to the four programs, highlighting the context within which they were born, the type of fellowships they offered, and their geographical and disciplinary scopes, as well as their target populations. On the basis of this review, I will distill at the end some issues of relevance for future reflection and harvesting of lessons.

FELLOWSHIPS AS EQUALIZERS: FIGHTING INEQUALITY AND INVESTING IN INDIVIDUALS

Philanthropy and social giving around the world, including in the Arab world and Egypt, has historically been used to address social problems and promote social services such as health care and education. For example, as is well known, Cairo University would not have existed if it were not for Princess Fatma, member of the Egyptian royalty, dedicating her palace in Giza for the establishment of what is now Egypt's premier higher education institution. Whether it is done as a religious duty or with the intention of effecting social change, acts of philanthropy have contributed to changing the lives of thousands around the world.

From the perspective of higher education, foundations and international organizations have historically supported promising and talented individuals who could promote scientific innovation and lead discoveries to improve lives. More recently, however, there has been a growing realization that instead of acting as an equalizer of opportunities and an agent of social mobility, higher education—worldwide—has been used to deepen inequality by rewarding socioeconomic privilege at the expense of untapped talent, regardless of social background. Because higher education has been operating in favor of the wealthy and supporting social class distinctions, scholarships and fellowships were offered to remedy this situation and provide pathways for thousands of young people around the world who, for reasons related to financial resources or gender, ethnic, or racial background, have not had access to such opportunities.

In Egypt, as in several other post-independence countries, large enrollments and inadequate funding compounded by weak mentoring networks, a lack of forums for experience sharing, and diminishing funds for training and research have compromised educational outcomes. While most Egyptian universities offer advanced degrees, they have not been able to adequately meet international standards of excellence. Not only that, but in recent years, the situation in Egypt became more critical with the rising trend toward privatization of higher education and the establishment of fee-paying departments within public universities. A body of research supported by the Ford Foundation pointed out that this dual system of education in public higher education has disadvantaged those studying in Arabic, particularly in social science departments. Despite manifestations of educational inequality, a mapping of the landscape of scholarships and fellowships in Egypt (commissioned by the Ford Foundation) has demonstrated that a few donor organizations and foundations are using their generous study opportunities to redress class bias, for example, by focusing on aspects of disadvantage and the financial needs of applicants.

It was within this overall picture marked by poor-quality education and class bias that the Ford Foundation launched the IFP.

THE INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS PROGRAM (IFP)

Between 2001 and 2013, the Ford Foundation provided $420 million in funding resources for the IFP, the single-largest program commitment in its history. During this period, the IFP supported midcareer and graduate-level education for 4,305 emerging social justice leaders from 22 countries, including Egypt and Palestine. The fellowship recipients represented a wide range of groups that have been marginalized due to socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, and physical disability, among other reasons. The IFP's underlying assumption was that given the right tools, emerging leaders from disadvantaged communities could succeed in postgraduate studies and would work to improve conditions in their communities upon returning home.

Justification

The IFP strongly believed that social and economic disadvantage should not weaken the potential for leadership that emerges from a propitious mix of individual ability, opportunity, and guidance at critical life junctures. In communities where poverty or other forms of

disadvantage prevail, the natural pool of talent in every new generation often goes unrecognized or unnurtured. Bright individuals with leadership potential who manage against the odds to succeed in the education system receive little support for advanced training. They may face pressures to earn and support other family members at the expense of developing their exceptional talents. The end result is a loss both for the person and the community.

For the equity-based fellowship program, it was a challenge—but also an essential starting point—to define with clarity those underrepresented groups and draw distinctions between them. First, the composition of disadvantaged groups and their relative size and characteristics has been shifting due to factors such as emigration to oil-producing countries. Moreover, elements of deprivation or skill deficiency that may define a person as disadvantaged have not always been coherent or consistent. For example, individuals differed in their degree of exposure to other communities and information technology, as well as their adaptability and language abilities. Finally, disadvantage is exacerbated when gender, ethnicity, religion, and place of residence intersect with income levels to generate more complex degrees of marginalization. Having thoroughly studied what disadvantage in the Egyptian context meant and whom it applied to, the IFP was particularly concerned with women, the disabled, and individuals residing in peripheral or rural communities, particularly in Upper Egypt. Having selected those broad groups, the IFP designed an inclusive program that successfully identified candidates who had no access to educational and professional opportunities but were rooted in their communities and showed high potential for leadership.

Structure

In terms of structure, the IFP addressed the needs of both academics and members of civil society organizations who had leadership potential. Particularly in the case of the latter, the IFP understood that the improvement of lives in poor communities did not necessarily require an advanced academic degree but rather could be achieved through the forging of stronger links to grassroots communities by acquiring practical and hands-on skills. Thus, the IFP provided opportunities for professional degrees and diplomas to respond to the needs of civil society organizations.

Secondly, the IFP had a pioneering design that integrated placement services with orientation training and support for graduate-level scholarships. It was conceived that way to offer optimum opportunity to those who may have been underserved by their educational background and needed the capacity enhancement to ensure their success. In this regard, the language bar was a serious obstacle to some. The IFP made English proficiency an exit benefit not an entrance barrier.

Thirdly, a pioneering feature of IFP design was its flexibility in selecting place of study. One had the choice to study in the USA, Europe, or their home country. This flexibility was designed to benefit women and the disabled, in particular. Around the world, the distribution has been that one-third of all global scholars went to the US, one-third to European universities, and one-third pursued further education in their home country or region.

FIELD BUILDING AND INVESTING IN IDEAS: SOCIAL SCIENCE PROGRAMS

The MEAwards, MERC, and the ACSS are programs and institutions that have addressed social science needs in the Arab region. Both the MEAwards and MERC were regional programs. MERC awarded grants in the Arab world and Turkey, while the MEAwards served the Arab world, Turkey, and Iran. Both were about field building, as they were concerned with the advancement of specific social science disciplines (international relations and population studies, respectively, at their intersections with social sciences). On the other hand, the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, which is a newcomer to the Arab regional scene, focuses on social sciences in their entirety and seeks to advance their status and role in improving lives and contributing to effective public policies. The underlying assumption of the three programs is that within the overall poor development of education, and especially higher education in the Arab world, social sciences have been particularly undervalued despite their centrality to understanding Arab societies and resolving their problems.

The Middle East Awards Program (MEAwards)

The MEAwards Program was established in 1978 as a Population Council initiative to promote innovative research in the field of population and the social sciences in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and serve as a vehicle for capacity building in the region. It operated in the Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran. Initially funded by the Ford Foundation and the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC), it later gained support from the Mellon Foundation and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.

Justification

Population studies were taught in Arab universities but their importance was not sufficiently recognized. Struggling with the development of their societies, countries of the region were at different stages of demographic transition, and governments of countries facing overpopulation, like Egypt, focused narrowly on family planning as a solution. However, thanks to programs like the MEAwards, a new approach was put forward emphasizing the need to adopt a broader understanding of population by focusing on issues such as fertility, poverty, income distribution, migration and displacement, and urban growth and development, as well as the status of women. The MEAwards was a pioneer in these new directions and encouraged research in the intersection between population and the social sciences. It made population studies in the MENA region more meaningful and respected.

Structure

The MEAwards started with the fellowship (graduate studies) program, which ended in 1995 when the Ford funding was terminated. Most fellowships were for one year, either the first or last year of study, and recipients were encouraged to seek matching funds or receive financial assistance for the remainder of their study. Fellowship holders were eligible to apply for research grants from the MEAwards research competition (see below). So, not only did the MEAwards identify talents but it also nurtured intellectual links with the region through the research awards.

Within its period of operation, the MEAwards granted 85 individual fellowships divided between graduate studies and midcareer training. Of the total fellows, 80 percent returned to the region after completion of their studies. Some returned to the region but not to their own countries. Others were based outside the region but maintained active and close ties with the region.

Fellowships nurtured a new generation of researchers, including women, and created conditions for their upward mobility and therefore retention in the region. Most fellows saw advancement in terms of position and employment. When they came back from their studies abroad, several were promoted to senior positions within their institutions. The program also helped retrain a number of individuals at the midcareer level.

The MEAwards added a research awards competition to the fellowship program, which later became the backbone of the program. Gradually, the two were buttressed by other capacity-building components: methodology workshops (training), thematic but short-term study groups, and thematic long-term working groups. At a later stage, it also added a regional exchange program and a regional papers publication series. The regional exchange encouraged scholars to affiliate for a short term with a university or research center in another country. The idea was to further strengthen regional research and networks.

These components were organically linked to one another. They were carefully calibrated to fit the objectives of the program, identifying and addressing any remaining capacity-building needs—which varied by individual and academic trajectory. For example, fellowships abroad ensured quality training for young people; methodology workshops served to raise the level of research skills and train underprivileged and new researchers. The awards competition came later in the career to address the need to engage in research. They helped researchers identify themes of priority and rising importance. Research awards were then elaborated upon by study and working groups. In their turn, the latter sought to form teams of researchers from different countries and disciplines, thus promoting networks and additional research ideas, which would in turn be funneled back into the research competition.

The Middle East Research Competition (MERC)

MERC was set up in 1986 at the Ford Foundation as a research grants program upon the initiative of the program officer in international affairs and was modeled after the MEAwards. During the first 10 years of its life, MERC was situated in Cairo and administered directly by the Ford Foundation's Cairo office. Over this period, it helped shape the career trajectories of more than 153 researchers by providing them with resources and opportunities to undertake research in different areas of social science and explore new and critical grounds of relevance and significance to the region.

Justification

For the Arab region, the focus on international relations (and, later, on comparative politics and social sciences) promoted an understanding of the volatile nature of politics in the

region by strengthening regional research that was nontheoretical and of a more applied nature. The region had capable scholars who emerged in the ’70s, but they were hampered by the poor development of political science as a field and limited funding for research, as well as by the lack of independent research institutions.

Structure

MERC was conceived as a research competition program that awarded small research grants in response to a perceived need for strengthening research in international relations and comparative politics in the Arab world and Turkey. As mentioned earlier, the focus in the early period was on international relations and comparative politics. At later stages, MERC evolved into more of a general social science competition weighted toward political sciences. The grants went to individual scholars and the level of funding was generally below $35,000 per project. While MERC addressed the social sciences, borderline topics such as law and history were reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

MERC grew over the years, accumulating experience and enhancing the status of the social sciences in the region. Gradually, the program showed interest in network building and developing a critical mass around particular research topics. It also organized methodology training workshops and a seminar series and launched a newsletter. The expansion in activities coincided with MERC’s move toward autonomy from the Ford Foundation and attempts to house it within local institutions in the region. A request for proposals to administer MERC was circulated and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) in Beirut, Lebanon, was selected to take over MERC, heralding a new phase in the life of the program. MERC remained in Beirut for four years, from 1997 to 2001, and then, following a new request for proposals, moved back to Cairo to be administered by the Center for the Study of Developing Countries (CSDC), Faculty of Economics and Political Science, at Cairo University, from 2002 to 2004. Between 2006 and 2011, MERC was based at the Centre d’Études et de Recherches Économiques et Sociales (CERES) in Tunis. At the end of 2011 in Tunis, MERC closed down.

The experience of having localized MERC within regional institutions, over the course of 13 years, had its pros and cons. On one hand, giving local institutions a chance to administer a program like MERC strengthened their institutional capacities and introduced staff to new traditions and modalities of fundraising, partnerships, and capacity building. It also invigorated a scholarly community around MERC activities, albeit one that was mostly confined to the country or region in which the program was located. For example, while MERC flourished under the LCPS in Beirut, its outreach was mostly to Lebanese students and researchers. On the other hand, the main drawback related to the frequent relocation of MERC was the disruption in programmatic activities and inability to sustain them in the long run. For example, the methodology workshops associated with the program during its Cairo years under the CSDC were stopped with the move to Tunis. The end result has been that none of the programs that were added on to the research competition developed into strong or sustainable components of MERC.

MEAWARDS AND MERC COMMONALITIES

Governance

Both the MEAwards and MERC were administered by a small secretariat and guided by an advisory committee. The MEAwards was housed at the Population Council and the team was made up of a director, program manager, secretary, and financial administrator. It kept links with the New York headquarters of the Population Council, which supported the program financially, in terms of the provision of space and some staff salaries and programmatic costs. Throughout its history, MERC also maintained a small-scale operation similar in many ways to the MEAwards. Staff of the two programs - director of MEAwards and Program officer of MERC - were ex officio members of the advisory committees whose opinions were also solicited for policy and programmatic orientation.

Both programs were guided by an advisory committee of five multidisciplinary regional scholars who served for two years and met two times a year, usually in Cairo. Their identities were not made public while they were serving on the committee. Directors and program managers examined proposals for eligibility and sent feedback for improvement. Proposals were submitted in Arabic, English, French, or Turkish.

Target

Both programs targeted midcareer scholars, new PhD graduates, and graduate students, and over time shifted more toward supporting PhD candidates and their dissertation research. They were both open to MA degree holders but only a few went to those applicants. Often, they served as assistants to principal investigators.

THE ARAB COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES (ACSS)

Justification

The ACSS was established in Beirut in 2012 as a regional social science network following a long and intensive process of deliberations that had started in 2008. The ACSS preparatory committee, comprising scholars from the Arab region, was concerned about the historical neglect of social sciences in the Arab world. Post-colonial states had adopted a notion of development that valorized natural and traditional sciences, such as medicine and engineering, and, more recently, disciplines that are closely associated with modernity, such as computer and business sciences, all at the expense of social sciences. The resulting marginalization of social sciences has meant that much of the dominant discourse on development, broadly speaking, has gone unchallenged and public policies have not been informed by scientific knowledge, evidence, and debate.

Structure

In order to address the above challenges, the ACSS articulated an ambitious mission and designed programs to enhance the capacities of social science researchers and research/academic institutions, encourage the production of independent research, provide forums for exchange among social scientists, promote the role of social sciences in enhancing public interest, and encourage dialogue between researchers and policy makers.

Operationally, those programs included a biennial conference, biennial research forums, the Arab Social Science Monitor, a research grants programs, postdoctoral fellowships, the New Paradigm Factory, a small grants program, working groups, workshops for grantees, training workshops, online courses, policy dialogues, a website, and social media.

Below are examples of fellowships and research grants offered by the ACSS:

The postdoctoral fellowships program is a nine-month fellowship program aimed at enabling young researchers, up to three years after earning a PhD, to pursue their research and publishing plans, become part of Arab research networks, and plan a research career in the Arab region. This program complements the efforts of the ACSS in supporting and promoting the social sciences in the Arab region, particularly in terms of investing in a new generation of social science researchers and attracting foreign-trained Arab scholars back to the region.

The small grants program supports individual Arab researchers and practitioners residing in the Arab region whose work focuses on Arab societies in undertaking five kinds of activities: conference presentations, internships, pilot studies, dissemination events, and organizing workshops. The program provides small amounts of funding ($4,000 on average) in a flexible and timely manner, encouraging junior researchers and practitioners to apply.

The research grants program provides funding for up to 18 months for research projects. It targets researchers in the Arab region and diaspora at any stage of their career.

ISSUES FOR REFLECTION

Impact: Shahnaz Rouse's evaluation of the MEAwards referred to visible and invisible (tangible and intangible) impact. Publications, reports, and other material products are of the first type. The latter comprises hidden or less-visible inputs, such as contribution to intellectual excellence, support for talents, and improvement of the research skills of individual scholars, opening up new career paths and thus enhancing mobility, creating trust with policy makers, and assisting in better policy formulation and community work as well as institutional development. As we assess the impact of programs, we need to find ways to gauge visible and invisible effects on individuals.

Excellence vs. capacity building: One of the persistent questions that fellowship programs in general (MERC, MEAwards, and ACSS, here) had to grapple with, was the need to define their scope of work and target groups. The argument is often summarized in whether the mission of a program should be to create and nurture centers of excellence or to raise the capacity of disadvantaged and unaccomplished scholars. The concern over who should get support—local vs. foreign-trained scholars and MA vs. PhD-level applicants—has been recurring and reflects the tension between wanting to leave no one behind and raising the bar to make research outputs highly competitive, globally. In the Egyptian context, this question is not easily resolved, given the large demand on training and research opportunities and the limited capacity of any one program to address all capacity-building issues. And yet, both capacity building and research excellence are priorities of Egypt's sustainable development goals and Egypt's 2030 vision. This issue merits attention because it involves financial and human resource allocation decisions. Groups have different needs

and responding to those needs will determine the choice of work modality and capacity-building mechanisms. It is also important to remember that capacity-building programs require a long time to yield results and their impact is best observed on the *longue durée*. This often conflicts with donors' fatigue and desire to demonstrate success by pointing to concrete outcomes defined within a particular time frame.

Defining the field and setting new agendas: The ACSS recognizes its role in defining research agendas in regional social sciences and, for that purpose, it has designed programs to both identify and pursue key and priority topics of relevance to the development of Arab societies (e.g., the Arab Social Science Monitor, an observatory to monitor and assess Arab social sciences, and the New Paradigms Factory and the research grants program to respond to priority areas identified by local researchers).

Also, as mentioned earlier, the MEAwards had from its inception adopted a broad definition of the field of population studies. It emphasized reproductive health rather than family planning as a primary field among researchers and public health practitioners long before it became popular among donors. As it set the agenda, the MEAwards led rather than conformed to the international community. It created a critical mass of researchers throughout the countries who were themselves based in universities in social sciences, demography, and health departments.

Comprehensive programs' responsiveness to identified needs: The lesson we have learned is that programs succeed when they listen to voices that matter to them. Those constituencies were saying that inequality is not only manifested in the maldistribution of financial resources and study and research funds. Inequality in education grows with the lack of mentorship and preparation and the absence of an environment conducive to debating ideas, exchanging views, and learning from other disciplines.

From its conceptualization phase, the IFP tailored its interventions to be in tandem with its declared goals of targeting marginalized and underserved individuals. It was designed as a comprehensive program that not only identified talent and offered educational opportunities but also prepared successful applicants for those opportunities by providing language training, counseling, and cultural adaptation classes to ensure success in completing their studies.

Both the MEAwards and the ACSS have been responsive to the needs of their constituencies. The former started as a research competition but developed gradually and added on new components to finally become a full-fledged training and research program. The ACSS has articulated a broad and ambitious mission encompassing capacity-building and training programs, research and knowledge production activities, and networking platforms, as well as dissemination and advocacy forums. All of these different components have been carefully designed to become a package that heads off the potential isolation of young people who complete their studies and return home to inhospitable institutions and stale ideas. Such programs draw them into new research and networking, which keeps them engaged in the pursuit of scholarly activities.

Dependence vs. autonomy: In general, programs are often torn between unwillingness to lose the gains acquired by links to mother organizations and main donors on one hand, and the need for an institutional base for long-term presence and continuity on the other. Both the MEAwards and MERC faced the question of autonomy vs. dependence on the organizations in which they were (originally) located or which were their main financial supporters. In both cases, the main donors were keen to see them develop funding strategies to eventually become independent of external funding. From its base at the Population Council, the MEAwards managed to approach a number of funding agencies simultaneously to support specific activities, depending on the donors' areas of interest. The fact that it had a variety of small programs (training, research, publications, etc.) helped diversify sources of funding for a short period of time, but it was not sustainable over the long haul. MERC, as mentioned earlier, experimented with regional institutionalization and indigenization but like the MEAwards did not raise enough funds to ensure long-term sustainability. That weakness was noted in evaluation reports, which made several suggestions to help the two programs address funding gaps.

Individuals vs. institutions: In general, the three fellowships focused on individuals rather than institutions. The assumption undergirding this emphasis is that institutions in the Arab world—particularly universities—are often politicized or bureaucratized, which makes it difficult to penetrate them and effect change. Thus, it became more sensible to support individuals who, after benefitting personally from the programs, would carry the gains with them into their institutions. In academic institutions, those benefits could be conveyed through fresh teaching approaches and the introduction of new methodologies and important research topics. However, it remains an individual endeavor unless a critical mass of fellowship beneficiaries has the opportunity and power to effect change in their departments. In the coming years, the ACSS plans to go beyond support to individual researchers by working more on the institutional level, for instance, with universities, research NGOs, and think tanks, to promote institutional collaboration and partnerships, building on each organization's institutional strength.

A final reflection on investing in institutions: Within the Ford Foundation we have identified the three Is - representing individuals, ideas and institutions – as the areas that trigger social change, and where social change simultaneously happens. In general, we still have a lot to learn about how institutions are strengthened and how change happens within them. For a better understanding, Ford has embarked on an ambitious program to invest in promising institutions to strengthen their infrastructure and help them grow stronger and more capable of leading social change in their respective societies.

To write this piece, I have reviewed evaluations of the MEAwards program written by Shahnaz Rouse and Ann Lesch; three internal assessments of the MERC program by Seteney Shami, Hazem El Beblawi, and Moushira Elgeziri; and the evaluation of the IFP conducted by Karima Khalil. I also read the piece written by Noha El-Mikawy on the occasion of the AMIDEAST celebration of the IFP and the article she co-authored in Alliance magazine on Arab philanthropy. I listened to Hilary Pennington's "Funding Futures: Welcoming Remarks" on the Ford Foundation's IFP website and reviewed the five-year strategy of the ACSS.