

Trust, Voice and Incentives: Successes in Education in MENA

Hana Brixi

This contribution draws on the forthcoming MENA regional flagship report, which examines the role of incentives, trust and engagement as critical determinants of service delivery performance in MENA countries. The report expands the [WDR 2004](#) approach to ‘making services work’ by exploring how institutions affect trust, participation and provider responsiveness. At the central level, it illustrates how weak external and internal accountability prevalent in MENA institutions undermines policy implementation and service delivery performance in education and other sectors. Evidence shows that this negatively affects citizen trust, which partly explains why citizens infrequently engage through formal channels, relying instead on “wasta” and other survival mechanisms. At the local level, case studies of local success reveal the importance of both formal and informal accountability relationships and the role of local leadership in inspiring and institutionalizing performance incentives. While the Bank Group has recently emphasized incentives and voice for equitable and effective service delivery in education as well as other sectors, this has been operationalized only partly. Enhancing education and other services for MENA citizens requires forging a stronger social contract between public servants, citizens and service providers, and empowering communities and local leaders to find ‘best fit’ solutions. Learning from intra-country variation – especially those instances of outstanding local success – can be a solid basis on which ideas and inspiration for improving service delivery can be elicited.

Citizens in MENA demand better education, yet not accountability. Universal access to education is a constitutional right in most MENA countries, and polls show that citizens across the region value education, along with jobs and economic growth. Citizens are not satisfied, however, with the quality of education services, or government efforts to improve them. On average, about one half of respondents in MENA – compared to about 30 percent in Asia and Latin America – conveyed dissatisfaction with education services in their country, according to the Gallup Poll 2013. Furthermore, trust in state institutions seems to have declined in MENA countries in recent years. Although citizens in MENA tell pollsters that their government should do better in ensuring service delivery, surveys show that they are less likely than citizens in other regions to voice their opinion to public officials directly.

The emphasis on education has a long tradition, but relying on the state to deliver them is only recent. Culturally, the value of education has been recognized in core teachings of the region’s main religions throughout the past two millennia. Prior to independence, however, only the elites enjoyed education. This was the case especially prior to the 19th century Ottoman reforms – such as the 1869 Education Act – seeking economic and military modernization. With the wave of Arab independence, emerging elites introduced universal access to education in most MENA countries as part of the new social contract.

Education outcomes have improved in recent decades, but they have not kept up with demands. In most MENA countries, school enrolment and completion rates have converged to their expected levels

based on economic development. Service delivery has not, however, kept pace with the broader socio-economic transitions. MENA students score low in international competency tests and graduates struggle to find jobs.

Education service delivery performance shows weaknesses in both the effort and capacity of providers. Surveys show that teachers may not possess the required ability – such as qualifications and professional autonomy – to deliver quality services, particularly in rural localities. They also often lack key resources such as teaching materials. Importantly, their effort appears to be lagging: Thirty percent of students in MENA countries attend schools where principals report to TIMSS surveys that teacher absenteeism is a serious problem. Many students rely on tutoring to master basic skills. Although, many MENA countries have developed robust education strategic frameworks and policies, as demonstrated through the [System Approach for Better Education Results \(SABER\)](#) applied to the workforce development systems, student assessment systems and teacher policies in MENA, countries perform less well on system oversight and service delivery. These weaknesses are particularly pertinent as MENA countries seek to match skills supply with demand.

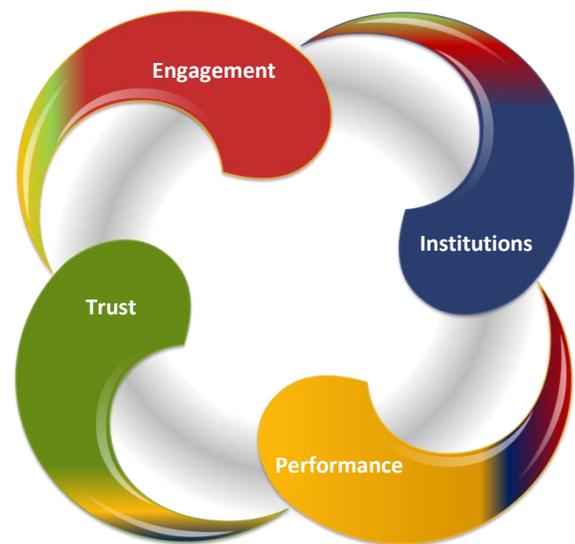
The quality of service provision in education varies significantly within countries, partly due to local governance. Results in education (such as student test scores) exhibit significant subnational variation. So do indicators of service delivery, such as teacher absenteeism and qualifications, and availability of instruction materials and other key inputs. The patterns of performance, however, vary, showing little correlation for instance with teacher effort and the availability of instruction materials. This may reflect the separate vertical management lines in the generally heavily centralized service delivery systems in MENA countries. Furthermore, the subnational data suggest that some poor rural localities are achieving better results than others in spite of their similar adverse conditions. Exploring the root of such ‘positive deviance’, our case studies point to the importance of well-managed local governance systems, and constructive relations between citizens and frontline service providers, including educators.

Examples of local success in education highlight the importance of participation and autonomy at the local level. While central management systems (such as the School and Directorate Development Plan in Jordan) create environments conducive to quality service provision, the impact of such measures is not uniform. Our case studies uncover key drivers of change at the local level: The top performing rural Palestinian school traces its success to parental engagement, coordination with the school district, and the ability of the school principal to build a motivating and encouraging work environment for the teachers. Similarly, in Jordan, the excellent school located in a tribal community benefits from an active Education Council, which is trusted by the community for its transparency and inclusive decision making, and from school grants allowing some room for autonomy. The case studies highlight the importance of both formal and informal accountability relationships (and the role of local leadership in sparking and institutionalizing such relationships), which underpin trust and effective citizen engagement at the local level.

Notwithstanding such examples of local success, MENA citizens seem to suffer from a cycle of poor performance. In this cycle, state and social institutions affect performance, which affects trust and this

in turn influences whether and how citizens engage to further enhance institutions and performance. The cycle may be virtuous at the local level as our case studies demonstrate, but appears stuck in a low equilibrium at the national level in most MENA countries. Without dependable institutions and citizen trust, there is little engagement, institutions remain stagnant, and service delivery poor.

First, institutions in MENA are rarely subject to both internal and external accountability mechanisms. This is partly due to the shortage of performance information guiding centralized decisions and partly due to the lack of incentives toward establishing accountability mechanisms for performance in public sector service delivery. As a result, MENA countries experience a wide gap between policy frameworks and their actual implementation – overall and in the education sector specifically as documented by the SABER benchmarking – which undermines performance.



Second, citizens regularly experience poor quality service delivery. Surveys show that they perceive governments as corrupt and ineffective, and unable or unwilling to provide quality education and other essential services. Not only do public services seem captured by public servants with limited accountability to citizens; a large share of private services seem captured by the same public servants as part of their dual employment (including public school teachers tutoring their students for fee).

Third, weak performance and, indirectly, unresponsive institutions appear to erode citizens' trust. The perception of performance appears to drive trust in government across MENA countries, and across localities within countries for which subnational data is available. In Tunisia, for instance, citizens perceive the central government as responsible for service delivery in education and most other sectors; and their trust in central government is positively correlated with the perceived service delivery performance especially in education. Similarly, citizens' trust tends to be lower in relation to their perceptions of corruption.

Finally, in the current cycle of performance in MENA countries, citizens engage relatively little with the state. Instead, with the exception of occasional civic actions like student demonstrations, they attempt to solve problems by circumventing state institutions. Such survival strategies, most notably the reliance on personal relationships – “wasta” – and side payments, may solve daily problems, but they fail to put pressure on state actors and providers and may further exacerbate the existing problems. The rising popularity of social media and their use by citizens to share their experience and demands, partly facilitated by e-governance initiatives in several MENA countries, is opening potentially effective engagement avenues for the future.

Extraordinary shocks, such as conflict, political transitions and defensive reforms that are sweeping the MENA region, impact the cycle of performance. Conflict, largely a result of weak institutions as the [WDR 2011 World Development Report](#) showed, tends to further marginalize state institutions, undermine service provision, escalate mistrust, and lead citizens to rely on informal, social institutions. Transitions create spaces for institutional innovation and accelerate reform, place additional demands on teachers and other service providers, initially increase trust and foster engagement. Reforms aimed at staving off pressures for change can take many shapes (e.g., decentralization, enhanced political participation and injection of resources). Like transitions, they can alter institutions and potentially increase trust, engagement and performance. The ways in which such shocks reshape the cycle of performance and their ultimate impact often depend on resources and leadership, from domestic and international actors.

Increasingly over the past 10 years, the World Bank Group has been highlighting the role of incentives and engagement for equitable and effective service delivery in education as well as other sectors. In MENA, this emphasis has been prominent in the Bank’s analytical and reimbursable advisory activities but less pronounced in operations. For instance, only about 10 percent of Bank projects in MENA (compared to about 30 percent on average in other regions) promote autonomy and accountability in education. This low rate – along with a relatively modest success rate of Bank operations supporting education in MENA – partly reflects the difficulty of developing interventions to address the cycle of performance beyond infrastructure and state capacity to engage and inspire trust of citizens and to align incentives of educators and public servants with education and employability objectives. In this regard, examples of positive deviance – such as the Yemen “Secondary Education Development and Girls Access” project seeking to engage community leaders, parents, girls and female teachers – offer valuable lessons. Investing in high quality local data collection can pay handsome dividends in terms of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of everyday decisions, and helping to identify where, when and how such positive deviance occurs.

Enhancing education and employability in MENA countries requires forging a stronger social contract between public servants, citizens and educators, and empowering communities and local leaders to find ‘best fit’ solutions. In some MENA countries, this may require reducing political capture of institutions. Others may need to implement institutional and policy reforms to inspire citizen trust and engagement as well as make educators and other providers more responsive. Countries emerging from a shock, such as conflict and transition, have a critical window of opportunity to empower local leaders and educators toward enhancing education performance, as well as build trust and promote voice. In the education sector, as case studies illustrate, valuable initiatives to improve education outcomes can emerge in communities and education institutions. Such initiatives can sometimes involve international collaboration. The [university governance network](#), for instance, includes public and private universities across seven MENA countries to benchmark and enhance transparency, accountability and engagement in higher education. Learning from variation across institutions and localities within MENA countries and within the region – especially those instances of outstanding local success – can inform and inspire the needed governance reforms to enhance education service delivery and education outcomes, including the realization of the employability objective in the education sector in MENA.