

Enhancing International Partnership in the Egyptian Pre-university Education: Perspectives of International Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present the perspectives of international officials regarding partnerships between the Egyptian Ministry of Education and international organizations. Data of this article were gathered mainly from semi-structured interviews with twelve officials working for international organizations in Egypt. The article suggests that international organizations working on the pre-university education face serious challenges that undermine their efforts and affects the efficiency of their contributions and initiatives in a very negative way. It concludes with a set of recommendations that may be considered by the Egyptian policy- and decision-makers for enhancing international partnerships in education.

Keywords: international aid, international donors, international officials, international organizations, partnership, pre-university education sector.

INTRODUCTION

A partnership in education is an agreement that involves two or more parties who come together for the common good to enhance teaching and learning. True partnerships are characterized by ongoing trust, communication, and respect among the different parties involved (Cox-Peterson, 2011). Partnerships can contribute to innovation, broadening participation in decision-making and complementing public sector resources. However, cultural differences among partners may represent potential barriers to realizing successful partnerships as the wider social, political, and economic setting may influence them (Marriott & Goyder, 2009).

The Egyptian Ministry of Education (MOE) collaborates for decades with international organizations, the United Nations (UN) and international donors, in different areas including pilots, technical assistance, governance and management, decentralization, capacity building and professional development programs, and teachers' training. Those organizations possess and share and implement their successful international experiences, best practices and lessons learnt from different contexts.

The Egyptian pre-university education sector is the largest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and among the largest in the world. It is supervised and managed by the central Ministry of Education, while universities and higher education are supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education (World Bank, 2002). In 2018/2019 school year, the sector reported an enrolment of more than 22 million students attending more than 55 thousand schools. It employs more than one million teachers and eight hundred thousand administrators (Ministry of Education, 2019).

The pre-university education sector consists of four hierarchical management levels: The Central Ministry of Education, governorate (Mudiriah), local district (Idara), and school. The Egyptian pre-university education system consists of three levels: Primary, preparatory and secondary. The educational ladder is composed of a six-year primary, a three-year preparatory and a three-year secondary.

This article reviews the perspectives of international organizations' officials regarding partnerships between the MOE and international organizations. Perspectives of those officials represent external voices and inputs on the pre-university education sector. The article addresses the MOE's leaders, policymakers, educational experts and researchers as well as international organizations' officials in Egypt and overseas who are interested in getting a better understanding of the sector in light of the actual expertise and practices of the participants on the ground.

It is composed of the following sections: International Organizations, Method, Findings, Discussion, and Recommendations.

International Organizations

A lot can be understood and learnt about any national education sector by exploring and understanding the perspectives and perceptions of different stakeholders including international organizations and their employees. Those organizations possess power that is based and supported by their funding capacity, political influence, strong capacity and highly qualified staff, information and knowledge, technical expertise, and skills. More details are presented in the following sections.

Revealing the Unrevealed

It is a normal practice that international organizations share their draft reports with senior governmental officials from the host country for two main reasons. The first is to avoid any mistakes that may occur in these reports, especially those related to the names of national organizations, departments, their staff or dates of certain decrees and so on. The second reason is to reach agreeable final versions: national officials may request lightening the criticism, editing, deleting or/and placing more focus on positive aspects than negative ones. That is why these reports tend to present more strengths and fewer weaknesses of national education sectors. Some facts, criticism, interpretation and attitudes cannot be introduced directly; international organizations' reports tend to be very diplomatic and avoid harsh criticism of the host country. Indeed, deeply critical reports may hinder or even prevent current and future cooperation between the host country and international organization.

Powerful Organizations and Robust Influencers

Scholars and studies described international organizations' increasing power and how they significantly, influence and interfere in national policymaking. Increasingly the UN and international donor agencies influence and formulate national policies in different sectors in many ways. For example, Dale and Robertson (2009) argued that "international organizations do not replace national states but create an additional and informal structure of authority and sovereignty besides and beyond the state (through providing) means of communication, socialization, institutionalization and integration" (p. 5).

Since the 1990s, international organizations have widened their scope of action considerably and have undertaken new activities. They may shape,

guide and influence national debates on education and related policy, influence states' aims and goals, and change the structures of education systems. They may introduce performance standards and evaluation mechanisms. They exercise governance as they often employ highly skilled professionals who can provide effective solutions to national problems (Martens, Rusconi and Leuze, 2007).

International organizations influence states in different ways. The transnational exchange of ideas and information can take many forms such as publications, conferences, meetings, and seminars. International organizations influence states to value, adopt and implement certain policies, practices, and structures. They conduct studies for a country's internal use; for international comparison; and for general monitoring. They provide ideas and models for following prescribed practices and influence national policies in many ways (McNeely, 1995).

One important source of influence for international organizations is their use of expertise that resides in their professionals to influence other actors (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Mundy (2007) suggested that "efforts to understand multilateralism usually assume that [international organizations] take on institutional and normative characteristics that in turn play an important steering role across the systems of national states" (pp.19-20).

National education sectors are complemented by an emerging, expanding and increasingly significant system of transnational influence where international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the professions and scientific communities have all formed a system of global influence and engagement (Jones, 2007).

Policymakers and Prescribers

International organizations prescribe national education policies (McNeely, 1995; Resnik, 2006). The World Bank, United Nations Children's Funds (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) particularly played vital roles in designing the world agenda, supported by Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD (King, 2007).

Mountsios (2009) suggested that international organizations have become major contributors that determine a country's educational aims, and education policy-making is no longer an exclusive matter to the nation-state. Similarly, Resnik (2006) argued that international organizations are:

The tools of capitalists or vehicles of a consensual world education culture...[who] played a key role, and not merely as transmitters but as actors, in the creation of a world education culture that encouraged educational expansion...[and] whose significance is likely to continue to grow in our global world (pp. 194-195).

International organizations continuously and increasingly guide and influence educational policies in the global North and the South in different ways. Sahlberg (2009) stated that “International organizations have been instrumental in profiling national education policies and financing the implementation of education reforms, not only in the developing world but also in the industrial nations” (p. 8).

Strong Capacity and Presence in Egypt

The United Nations system in Egypt is represented by 24 UN and UN-affiliated agencies (United Nations, 2005):

The UN is expected to work less on direct program implementation and increase its work in the areas of upstream policy advice, advocacy and capacity development, drawing on its strong and varied country presence, healthy mix of international managers and highly-capable national professionals with local knowledge that is backed by regional and international expertise (United Nations, 2013, 15).

As for international donors, the Development Partnership Group (DPG) brings together 20 bilateral and 19 multilateral organizations. When a country participates with more than one member in the DPG, it is only counted as a single country; for example, the Japanese embassy and JICA (United Nations, 2013).

Since the 1970's, Egypt has received international aid totalling tens of billions of dollars from the UN and international donor organizations, bilateral and multilateral, including United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Union (EU) and from countries such as Canada, Japan and Germany as well as the Gulf states (Amin, 2014).

For two decades after signing the Camp David Accords in 1978, Egypt has topped the lists of development assistance recipients and was only second to Israel in receiving aid from USAID. Egypt, however, is described as “the black hole of development assistance” (Sayed, 2006, 1).

The American government promised Egyptians and Israelis significant financial support as a contribution to assist in developing their countries (Rugh, 2012). Egypt attracted large amounts of foreign development

assistance because of its strategic importance, its key role in the peace process in the Middle East, and its cultural influence on neighbouring countries (Sayed, 2005).

The most obvious factor in Egypt's experience with aid is politics, not economics (Handoussa, 1991). The country's strategic location, large population, and military strength have made it the leading power in the Arab World and positioned it at a critical point in the larger superpower competition. Cairo hosts representatives of almost all bilateral and multilateral development organizations. More than forty bilateral and multilateral donor organizations provide assistance to Egypt (World Bank, 2001).

According to Sayed (2006), "The Government of Egypt and foreign development assistance agencies identify education as a crucial agent of internal and political stability. Therefore, both the state and international organizations together with liberal donors have mobilized significant resources and activities" (p. 144).

METHOD

This article builds on qualitative data gathered mainly for my PhD thesis on enhancing governance and management of the pre-university education in Egypt. Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2016 with twelve officials working for international organizations, three from UN organizations and nine from international donor agencies; ten with an Egyptian background, one European and one Asian; seven women and five men whose focus is the pre-university education sector in Egypt. They had received educational credentials of high quality. All of them had at least a master's degree; 50% had completed their doctoral degrees at western universities; and four of them held the rank of a university professor.

Several approaches were used to recruit interviewees to participate in this study. One approach was the exploration of international organizations' websites, where applicable, to obtain candidates' contacts. The invitational emails asked potential interviewees to nominate other candidates to participate. Additionally, I sought the support of my professional and academic networks for nominating potential candidates and asked interviewees at the end of every interview session to nominate other candidates. At the time of data collection, international organizations avoided to get involved in large-scale programs and their preference to work on specific small projects or even totally withdraw. That led to a decline in the

numbers of officials working for those organizations who constitute the population of this study.

Ten interviews were conducted in participants' offices at their convenient times. One participant requested that the interview to be held outside his office and confirmed that his inputs cannot be perceived as the official ones of his organization. Another interview was conducted over the phone based on a participant's request due to an emergent medical condition. All interviews took place in Cairo except for one that was conducted in Upper Egypt.

The sequence of interview questions was not always the same in each interview (Appendix A). In many cases participants jumped to cover certain areas even before they were asked, probably for moving to other themes they felt more comfortable talking about or for avoiding discussing certain issues in more details. This meant I skipped over later questions that were related to areas already covered by interviewees. Each interview took around one hour.

For confidentiality, names of the participants were changed in a systematic way without any reference to their real names, identifying information or their organizations of affiliation (See Appendix B). After transcribing the interviews, transcripts were then sent back to participants to check for validity and verification. A final version of the transcripts was reached in the light of the received feedback.

FINDINGS

Data collected on the theme of partnership were categorized into the following themes: Uncertainty; A Real Partnership? Partnership Launch and Mutual Interests; Organizations' Interests and Ready-made Solutions; The Driver's Seat; and International Partnership Challenges.

Participants tended to be more knowledgeable and focused on certain areas or aspects of the pre-university education sector than others. Those areas are probably their organizations' focus, their own areas of education or professional specialization. This was predicted while sharing their own views and thoughts on very broad topic such as governance which is the product and reflection of complicated factors, aspects and processes within the dynamic political, social, economic, managerial and administrative context of the country.

Uncertainty

It was confirmed repeatedly that international organizations in Egypt were then hesitant and they avoided getting involved in major programs. Adam, for example, said: "International organizations in Egypt, during this

period of time, are hesitant to take initiatives. They prefer to work on very limited, very specific problems and activities rather than expanding and working on long-term plans. That is what happening currently”.

Adam referred particularly to the USAID, the major donor to the Egyptian pre-university education sector for many years indicating that the USAID reduced significantly its contributions to the education sector after the 2011 revolution. Adam stated that: “There was the revolution and the role of the USAID in the MOE was very limited; focusing only on one of the projects serving girls’ education”.

Jack suggested that international organizations are willing, eager and feel responsible for supporting reforms in the pre-university education sector. However, they are interested to see more positive tangible results for their efforts. Jack explained:

The minute you provide an opportunity for doing something that is successful, you will find that donors will lavish these experiences and want to replicate them. So, donors are willing to invest more if they can see the benefits of their investments. I think donors are willing to invest because they feel there is a responsibility to invest in the education system of the country, but they need to see the results. They need to see there are good examples where they can be invited to invest.

A Real Partnership?

According to most participants, cooperation between the MOE and international organizations cannot even be described as a partnership. They described it as being unsuccessful, ineffective and inefficient. However, as suggested by Adam, the MOE has to continue working with its international partners for realizing a better education sector.

According to Mary, for example: “The picture I am giving is not a bright one, but we still have hope and we are still working with the Ministry of Education because there must be a reform. There is no other way”.

Adam suggested that pre-university education represents the preferable sector for a lot of international organizations, and it has a history of partnerships with UN and international donor organizations since the seventies. That long and rich history of partnership enabled the staff at the MOE to develop the required culture and necessary skills to deal with international partners.

Adam explained:

The Ministry of Education used to have the lion’s share of international economic assistance to Egypt. The USAID, the World Bank, UNICEF,

UNESCO, European Commission used to work with the Ministry. I think the staff of the Ministry of Education has the culture of dealing with international donors because this experience started in 1970s in Egypt.

Suzanne indicated that there is a paradigm shift of attitudes within the education sector towards cooperation and partnership with international organizations compared to the past when the MOE and its staff used to deny that the sector suffered from any challenges. For Suzanne:

Recently, they have good relations and projects. Because they changed attitudes that “we do not have any problems”. Before 2000s, we used to talk to the Ministry of Education, and they said we do not have any problems. Our curriculums are up-graded; our teachers are Ok.; our students are excellent. After that they said: “We know we have problems and the whole attitude changed”.

However, to what extent can cooperation between the MOE and international organizations be considered as a real partnership? Mary, for example, indicated that cooperation cannot be described as a real partnership, but it is rather a donor-recipient relationship. She stated:

They do not partner with international organizations. All the organizations working around the Ministry of Education. This is not a partnership. This is a donor-recipient relationship. On the documents of donors, we will have the word “partnership” and all the documents of the Ministry of Education have a lot of the word “partnership”. But what happens is not a real partnership.

Partnership Launch and Mutual Interests

According to all participants, partnership between the MOE and international organizations can be started in two ways. First, it is probably launched as an initiative taken by international organizations when they offer to support the MOE or the pre-university education sector in a certain area(s) that have to be approved initially by the Egyptian Government. Second, sometimes it can be initiated by the MOE through requesting the support of international partners in area(s) such as pilots, capacity building, and/or technical assistance.

Peter confirmed there are two pathways to the launch of partnership between the MOE and its international partners. He suggested that:

There are two ways in which these projects or programs come up. Sometimes international organizations or the Ministry have an idea

they really care about ... Our side suggests the idea to the Ministry of International Cooperation, and also shares this idea with the line Ministry; which in this case is the Ministry of Education. They always can say “we want it” or “we do not want it”. The other path that can be taken is that the Ministry itself requests something through government consultations and government negotiations through bilateral meetings that take place between the representatives of the embassy and the Ministry of International Cooperation. Maybe also other Ministries are involved.

Peter stated that partnership between the MOE and international organizations can start as an offer from the organizations or as a request of the MOE itself. However, he suggested that it is always up to the MOE to accept or refuse a certain program or project. For Peter:

It is a mixture of both, but it has to be a mutual agreement because we rely on the cooperation with our partner in order to implement. If the partner, the state, is not interested in a particular program, they block it. They really do block it. So, it is not conducive for us to try to implement something that has not been agreed with the partners.

Jack suggested that partnerships are not imposed but coordinated when he explained:

International donors avail opportunities for the Ministry of Education to gain from funding. There is a gear towards certain elements donors see in need of support and this is not happening except when the Ministry agrees to such support. So, if there is a mutual interest between donors and the Ministry of Education to provide support in a certain area, I think it is a mutual benefit for the Ministry to accept this support as long it is something that the Ministry is interested in and as long there is an agreement from donors and the Ministry that this area is something that would help both. I think, at least from my own experience, this has been successful so far. Because donors come in and point out a certain issue or a certain problem that they would like to finance and support in. At the same time, the Ministry agrees and that gets to be an opportunity for both to cooperate on a mutually beneficial opportunity.

Organizations’ Interests and Ready-made Solutions

Sarah argued that it is true that international organizations do have their own interests and they probably come with their own initiatives.

However, the MOE can still benefit from those organizations and their experiences in areas where the MOE needs their support. Those areas can be the base of tailoring and starting programs and projects that match the mutual interests of both parties as Sarah explained:

One donor may say: “I am interested in increasing the access of out of school children; those who are excluded. We would like to get them back into the system”. Another may say: “We would like to work on early childhood education, children age 4 and 5. That is my target”. I have not seen any of the projects that I came across during my experience that does not match by one way or another one of the educational priorities. When you start doing the planning of it, how you do it and how you can make the best use of the available resources. You would have two things: Sometimes you would have a priority you want to go for and sometimes you would have an opportunity you need to take.

Sarah, however, suggested that it is still the responsibility of the Egyptian Government and the MOE to identify their educational priorities. This is important so that international organizations can work on areas that fit with their interests and at the same time fulfill the country’ educational priorities and needs. Sarah stated:

Putting forward priorities is the responsibility of the Government and the Ministry of Education ... and that is the importance of the strategic plan with its proper budget. When you have that in place and you do the proper awareness around that and you market it, then you are putting your priorities forward. So, when any international organization comes, they will match their interests with the priorities that will guide them.

Adam stated that international organizations normally introduce ready-made solutions based on their experiences gained through conducting research, implementing programs, projects and reforms in different contexts. They possess knowledge, technical assistance and well-qualified and highly trained human resources that enable them to develop and share success stories, identify best practices, realize different sorts of challenges, design and tailor solutions to those specific challenges. Adam explained:

The fact that international organizations have ready-made solutions for main issues, the answer is: “Yes”. Why yes? Because international organizations work in different countries. They are implementing different initiatives in different countries. They have many successful

stories. Some actions or procedures succeeded in a number of countries, so they prefer to scale up these initiatives specially if they are proven to be successful.

Adam suggested that with strong leadership and capacity at the MOE, ready-made solutions can be put into a context and be well utilized in the Egyptian settings. However, he agreed that ready-made solutions have their own negative impacts that affect partnership negatively when the recipient country lacks strengths to play the role of a true partner.

For Adam:

If the government or the Ministry of Education is strong, it will be able to contextualize these ready-made solutions and tailor them to work within the Egyptian environment and based on priorities of the government itself. Contextualization should not destroy these initiatives. We talk a lot about Egyptian environment, and Egyptian privacy. We need to be sure that these solutions are sufficient and are adequate to deal with our issues, but at the same time we should not actually distort these interventions under the claim that we have our own culture and we have our own privacy. Because at the end of the day, and currently, we are talking about globally approved or globally agreed upon solutions for specific problems. So, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. Some solutions are already experienced in a number of countries and give good results, so we have to adopt them. Some solutions we need to contextualize. Again, if the counterpart is not strong, the negative impacts of that kind of ready-made solutions, I think, are bad.

Taking the Egyptian political, social and economic context into consideration is not only crucial but an essential requirement for enabling educational reforms in collaboration with international organizations. However, there should be no extra exaggeration or emphasis on the uniqueness of the national context that may undermine international partners' contributions and efforts.

Mary agreed that international organizations normally approach national governments with ready-made solutions in the light of their intensive research, studies and their strong expertise in different contexts. However, the MOE still has the right to accept or decline those solutions as

Mary explained:

Yes, [International Organizations] do come with ideas. They do situation analysis. They come with comprehensive studies and research; the USAID, the World Bank and UNICEF, name it. When they come, they negotiate with the Ministry. The first strategic plan has made it a little easier, but the second strategic plan is really very bad. The Ministry has priorities, then, there is negotiation. So, it is a combination. I come with good ideas because I have done a lot of research, then I negotiate it with you. Usually they come with orientation. For instance, an organization will come and say: "I want to work on early childhood". So, they come to the Ministry with this suggestion because they have the capacity to help; they have money for this, and they have the experience. When they negotiate with the Ministry, the Ministry probably says: "It is a good idea. Let's work together on early childhood".

The Driver's Seat

The driver's seat is used frequently in the literature on international partnership and international aid. For example, Riddell (2008) suggested that "the donors continue to do their own thing, and the government does not care to be in the driver's seat" (p. 15). It is a metaphor used to refer to the party that takes and possesses leadership in a partnership. Leadership is taken, not granted. So, if the MOE wants to sit in the driver's seat, there is a set of prerequisites that should be realized including the availability of effective leadership, a sound and reliable strategic plan that reflects the real priorities and needs of the education sector, and strong highly-qualified and well-trained capacity at all management levels.

Mary argued that leadership of the MOE is very limited to accepting or declining programs and projects proposed by international organizations. However, unfortunately, it does not actually possess real leadership to lead initiatives and activities implemented by international organizations. She continued:

That is what we hoped for. This is exactly what we have been telling them when we started the idea of the strategic plan. Do the strategic plan and be in the Driver's Seat. The Ministry of Education is in the Driver's Seat in the sense that it can approve or disapprove, what donors are doing. It can approve or disapprove a program. But in the Driver's Seat in the sense that it is leading the reform or leading the program, No".

Mary justified the inability of the MOE to sit in the driver's seat because it lacks effective capacity to take leadership. She clarified that international organizations' capacity is significantly stronger than that of the MOE, consequently, those organizations take the lead:

To be in the Driver's Seat, you have to be in control, right? How can you be in control if you do not have a monitoring and evaluation system? How can you be in control if you do not have the capacity to analyse data? The Ministry does not have these. How can you be in control? Donors have all these capacities, so they are in control of programs from A to Z. They need the help of the Ministry. They need the approval of the Ministry. The Ministry is in the Driver's Seat when the Minister says: "I approve this program" or "I do not approve". But through implementing, it becomes very difficult for the Ministry. The Ministry is like shadowing the implementation. So, the program is implemented, and the Ministry is shadowing and mostly, unfortunately, donors like this shadowing because the Ministry can then facilitate the implementation. But this does not mean sitting in the Driver's Seat. It is facilitation. The capacity of donors is way way higher than the capacity of the Ministry.

International Partnership Challenges

There are many challenges that hinder the effective partnership between the MOE and international organizations in the pre-university education sector. Some of the challenges raised by the participants are presented as follows:

Lack of a Clear Vision and Effective Strategy. Lack of a clear vision and effective strategy is among the most serious challenges facing the education sector in general and its partnership with international organizations in particular. Adam argues that having a clear vision can enable the MOE to cooperate with international organizations in a more effective and efficient way. If the MOE does not possess a well-defined agenda, then it has to implement the agendas offered by its international partners. In other words, if the MOE does not have clear priorities, goals, and objectives, international organizations do.

Adam explained:

Having a clear vision regarding the future, regarding their plans, I think that is the milestone and the bone. It is a key issue. A cornerstone is to have a kind of vision, clear vision and clear policies, and

implementation plan. Based on that, you will be able to deal with international donors. Rather than that you are working on the agenda of international donors. You accept the projects they provide. There is no doubt that some of them are very useful, but it is very important and efficient to make all the work of these international organizations supporting the Government.

Mary stated that a sound strategic education plan is a crucial but missing pillar of effective partnership with international organizations. She confirmed there are opportunities and possibilities for realizing more effective partnerships between the MOE and international organizations as there are joint work-teams composed by both parties. She suggested that international organizations, on the contrary to the education sector, work and report in a very systematic way:

Partnership means the Ministry of Education should develop a sound strategic plan and should call the donors to come in and to take their partnership roles. So, all donors work together as a team in a partnership with the Ministry in order to execute a strategic plan. This never happened. It never happened. Donors come with their money and they have their own system for reporting, their own system for disbursing funds. They have a results framework. They work very systematically. So, at the macro level, there is no partnership.

Ramzy in this regard stated:

You do not have a strategy, you do not have a plan. It is not sustained. What is happening is the EU comes and says we want to be your partner in girls' education in Egypt. You say: "Okay". They have a project and work, then they go... At the Ministry of Education, it is supposed that the minister changes, but the strategy is there, but unfortunately the minister changes and the strategy as well. That is happening within the sector. The other thing is planning. It is a sort of a personal interest that every minister wants to produce his own plan and says: "that is my document, or this is my plan" and so on. The result is that is the worst case of efficiency and that is why we are all the time starting from the very beginning.

Mistrust. There is low trust between international organizations and recipient governments. International organizations often fear that aid will not be managed appropriately by national governments because of the lack of adequate policy or effective management. Recipient governments often distrust international organizations because of unpredictable aid flows

including short-term, variability, changes in conditionalities, unreliable disbursement or even suspensions (Amis & Green, 2002).

Peter confirmed the state of lack of trust between the MOE and international organizations, which can be observed particularly during certain activities such as conducting studies or entering schools indicating that international organizations cannot even do what they should because of certain security measures.

Peter shared:

I feel a lack of trust which is very unpleasant for us because that is the basis for work. We need a lot of security clearances specially to do studies, we try to do evidence-based decision-making. It is very difficult to enter schools these days. You need to go through the whole security apparatus. Sometimes, we need security clearance for us. Sometimes, we do not go to places because we do not get the clearance even if we ask for it quite some time in advance. The other aspect is that sometimes some members of the Ministry are reluctant to share information with us that we need in order to carry out things they ask us to do. Sometimes there is a request from the Ministry with very superficial information, which is not enough for us to carry out the task properly. So, we find ourselves in a locked-up situation. We say: "Okay. But we need this information to carry out the process". They say: "No. That information is not of your business". We say: "Okay. But we cannot do things" and they say: "Why not?"

Peter suggested that the lack of trust between the MOE and its international partners negatively affects the quality of cooperation in different ways. That is not only because of the lack of information and reluctance of MOE leaders and staff to share information and data they need for their work, but also because of the impact of frustration they feel for not being trusted by their partner.

Peter explained:

These situations are a bit frustrating. Another big issue is the lack of moderation between the Ministry and different international organizations. It is extremely important that the line-ministry that is hosting all these international development organizations, takes ownership and leadership for the work that is being carried out.

Lack of Efficiency. According to all participants, partnerships between the MOE and international organizations are inefficient. Funds are not always

spent in a wise way, which leads to a waste of resources in a country that already suffers from a tight education budget. Aid delivered to the education sector through partnerships with international organizations can absolutely be utilized and maximized in a much more efficient way.

Though Adam agreed that the education sector receives a significant share of international assistance to Egypt, he raised a lot of doubts regarding the efficient utilization of resources allocated by international organizations. Adam suggested this is due to the inability of the Government of Egypt and national authorities, to maximize the impact of international aid to realize real significant changes within the education sector.

In Adam's words:

To which extent that was efficient? And to which extent the Government of Egypt or the Ministry of Education uses that assistance to realize breakthroughs in the pre-university education sector? This is I think quite low. Based on my experience, I think the most efficient initiative that included most of these donors was the preparation of the pre-university strategy in year 2007 because at this time there was good leadership at the Ministry of Education and most of these international organizations contributed in a way or another to the development of this strategy.

Relatedly, Mark stated that:

Honestly the outputs of the programs, I can say are less than the cost of the programs. I believe that a large percentage of finance is misused in terms of spending, holding all these luxuries, and using SUV cars. I believe it needs to be managed a little bit.

One example of the lack of efficiency of using international aid to Egypt is the concentration of different international organizations on providing trainings. Pratt (2002) suggested that donors in Egypt focus on training, as it is the easiest thing they can do in the absence of a unified clear plan.

Mark critically presented a similar argument stating that:

[Training] is also the quickest thing to do. It does not need so much effort and honestly you cannot measure accurately the impact of such trainings. We did that and that and that. Our impact is that and that and that. But you cannot know what is going into the education sector after all these training programs.

Frequently, bilateral donor agencies organize a wide range of trainings in five-star hotels for teachers and administrators from different levels. The teachers and administrators are then invited from all over the country to one of the tourist or resort cities to attend their trainings – an extremely costly process. The same quality training can be organized with much less cost if organized in one of the MOE’s training facilities such as the Education City or through the Video-Conference Network. However, it is important to ask if those training programs really contribute to enhancing the education sector and improving its performance.

Lack of Capacity. Suzanne clarified that lack of strong capacity is a serious challenge that affects negatively partnership between the MOE and its international partners. It is a phenomenon that is observed within the education sector as well as other public sectors in Egypt:

For example, how many projects does the Ministry of International Cooperation have on education? Do they have somebody in the Ministry of International Cooperation that can assess a project on education? They do not have. But they approve the projects. The problem is that people responsible for the projects are with no specific expertise except for monitoring the funding money. The issue is not money. The issue is the goals, implementation mechanisms, indicators. They do not have indicators. Who is approving these projects and who is monitoring? Who is locally or nationally monitoring these projects?

Jack stated that building capacity of the education sector will impact its performance in a very quick and positive way when he said:

Again, I will repeat this. Building the capacity at different levels. I think the minute you do this, there will be better service delivery. There will be better management. It is not the same capacity at all levels. You build different capacities at different levels and for different individuals.

Mary suggested that international organizations should continue their efforts in building the education sector’ capacity stating that without building the national capacity, no reform can be sustained. She explained: “What donors should do and have been doing is building the capacity of the Ministry of Education. This is what donors can do. Building capacity to scale up successful pilots”.

Lack of Sustainability. Sustainability has seldom been realized after project implementation. International assistance was often based on scattered projects

entirely led by donors with the lack of strong support at the national level. That is why projects often failed to be sustained once donor support was withdrawn (West, 2004). Initiatives supported by international organizations worldwide cannot be sustained once those organizations decide to terminate their projects or programs because of the lack of leadership, required resources and capacity at the national level.

Mark suggested that the MOE and the whole sector should take more responsibilities and make more contributions to projects supported by international organizations to ensure sustainability. Those responsibilities and contributions should not be limited to negotiations or discussions, but they should be expanded to include projects' implementation.

Mark said:

I believe all donors' projects should not only be discussed but also implemented by the education people themselves ... If you have a project and comes down with specific targets, and the money is gone, the project is gone. It is going to collapse after that: No sustainability or continuity.

Mary presented a very similar argument that projects conducted with international organizations are limited to where they are implemented and cannot be expanded or mainstreamed. Normally, that is because of the lack of ownership from national authorities towards those projects. For Mary:

At the micro level, when I talk about projects at the district or school levels, partnerships are possible. Because you have teams working together. You have Egyptian and foreign experts working together in a close relationship with the Ministry people, with school leaders, with teachers. It works. But if it is a partnership, there must be a mutual trust, respect, contribution, sharing, and empowerment. However, when you work at that level and you can achieve wonderful results, it stays at that level. And if it stays in that level, it is not institutionalized. Your achievement does not become part of the system.

The Lack of sustainability and the inability of mainstreaming international projects represent common pitfalls of international projects. That is why Ratcliffe and Macrae (1999) referred to international projects as *islands of excellence*.

Duplication and Conflicts. Peter suggested that the MOE is partially responsible for the duplication of international efforts as it opens the door fully for those organizations when they are interested in funding a certain

project or program regardless of what the sector's actual priorities and needs are. International organizations also take partial responsibilities for duplication due to the lack of coordination among them that sometimes reaches the level of a conflict or even a collision. Peter described the situation as follow:

We see the Ministry here says: "Okay. whatever. You know everyone comes, everyone brings money. So, do whatever you want". And that will lead to duplication of work and collisions with other agencies. Unfortunately, this is also related to the setup of international organizations. Sometimes, they have the interest to carry out a particular program and do not coordinate with other agencies. Even if there is another organization that is doing almost the same, they say: "Hey, I have my orders, so I will implement". The only entity that can really stop that type of very inefficient work is the host government that says: "Nobody is going to do that because we already have people here and we like their approach. There is no need for another agency with a different approach. Sorry, this topic is covered. However, we still have these areas, join in if you like".

Nancy confirmed the lack of coordination among international organizations working within the sector. She stated:

There is a lack of partnership ... Development partner should share best practices with the Ministry of Education and join efforts to better coordinate their initiatives in an effort to avoid duplications.

Peter suggested that effective leadership at the MOE level is essentially required to reduce duplication of international organizations' efforts that probably will continue to exist because of the complicated environment where they work, which is not limited only to Egypt.

Peter said:

A strong assertive leadership is needed. Even currently the situation improved a lot but still there are some situations in which one agency is working in a school and then has to leave the school because a new agency comes and sets up something completely different that relates to the same topic. I guess there is always going to be some sort of friction in this environment which is very complex.

Mariam stressed the fact that in Egypt there is an obvious competition rather than coordination, cooperation and partnership among international organizations working in the pre-university education sector which negatively

affects those organizations' contributions. Enhancing coordination among international partners can maximize their efforts and impacts on the education sector. Sandy suggested that the lack of leadership at the MOE is a crucial factor that negatively affects the coordination and partnership among different international organizations as well as their efforts and contributions to the sector.

Bureaucracy. UNESCO (2008) called for a change in the organizational and management culture in the MOE, stressing the importance of moving away from traditional management practices towards new ways of doing things. Mary suggested that the bureaucratic environment within the education sector represents a real challenge to international organizations. Within the education sector, there is heavy bureaucracy and there is a tendency of educational leaders not to take any decision before getting the approval of their seniors in the hierarchy. Mary said:

The Ministry of Education is a very difficult place to work with. If you get caught in bureaucracy or in the system, you cannot do anything. So, donors' strategy is to stay out as much as they can, help the Ministry, and focus on one aspect or another.

Mary described the environment within the MOE as being highly bureaucratic and very contradictory to that of its international counterparts. Indeed, international organizations adopt more advanced management systems and apply systematic monitoring and evaluation approaches so that they can report to their headquarters. Mary explained:

It is very complex and complicated in the Ministry of Education; very complicated. It is very difficult to work in a close partnership. Plus, donors work in a very systematic fashion, results framework, monitoring and evaluation which the Ministry does not have. They disburse money, a lot of money that has to be reported and be accounted for.

Most policymaking and/or decision-making committees are characterized by a bureaucratic style and their members are usually appointed, not elected (El-Baradei and El-Baradei, 2004). Members of those committees are appointed by the Minister himself or his advisors, and consequently their loyalties are normally to those who have appointed them, and their continuity can be guaranteed by working towards the agendas and objectives settled and supported by those in authority. Sometimes, they find themselves in a situation where they either cope or leave (United Nations, 2001).

Project Implementation Contracts. Peter stated that there is normally a Project Implementation Contract signed by Egyptian authorities and international organizations after reaching a concrete agreement regarding the implementation of a certain program or project. That contract identifies responsibilities of the different parties and serves as the legal framework for their partnership. Peter suggested that the contract acts as the base of international organizations' work and presents regulations of partnership. He said:

In Egypt, it requires a so-called Project Implementation Contract, which is a binding contract signed by both parties. It mentions the activities, the people, the indicators and the contributions of both sides. This contract is the legal base that allows us to work here, to operate here. Usually, it also includes things and regulations like where we will be working. Usually, it is the hosting Ministry that provides the premises of the project.

Peter, however, indicated there are some occasions when Egyptian authorities agree to certain projects, but do so without signing the contract. He explained it is a difficult situation that organizations always try to avoid:

There are some projects that do not get these Project Implementation Contracts signed. Maybe there is a broad consensus of the two parties that maybe a program in this area should be implemented, but when it comes to the actual signature of the Project Implementation Contract, sometimes the Egyptian side decides not to sign which puts us in a very difficult position. Because then, at any point, there is no legal basis for us to work. Sometimes, we arrive to the country before these things are signed because we have to plan in advance. People have to be hired. They have to have a place to live, but if you have no legal base to work, the partner, the Ministry, the government could say at any point: "What are you doing here? You are not allowed to be here under this program design, please leave". So, this is of course to us very dangerous. This is a situation that we really try to avoid.

DISCUSSION

Cooperation between the MOE and international organizations should imply a win-win situation for all parties. International organizations are not charities that donate their funds without considering their own interests and returns. Thus, partnership is sparked when mutual interests meet.

This argument can be supported by the fact that there are many examples when more developed countries get more assistance than other countries who suffer from worse economic conditions and demonstrate more need for international aid. The situation in Egypt provides evidence for this point. Egypt is categorized by the World Bank as a medium income country, yet as it has remained among top recipient countries of international aid since the seventies for strategic reasons.

Egypt's January 2011 and June 2013 uprisings contributed to creating a new political and socio-economic context that provided an environment of uncertainty for international organizations and institutions that have supported Egypt over the past four decades (Amin, 2014). Most of the study participants are not satisfied with the current level of cooperation between the MOE and its international partners. Though the image of this partnership seems to be gloomy, it still represents an open window for enhancing the education sector and improving its performance.

Following the revolution of 2011 this is still a time of instability and uncertainty. The state of political, economic and social instability has affected international organizations' contributions to the education sector. International organizations normally contribute to programs and projects that probably lead to positive, concrete and significant impacts. However, in times of uncertainty those impacts cannot always be realized.

Developing a clear vision and a sound strategic plan can help the MOE realize a more effective and efficient partnership with international partners and maximize the impact of international aid. I argue that because the MOE does not have a realistic and effective strategy to determine clear priorities, it does not have the capacity to invite different stakeholders, including international organizations, to contribute to the implementation of certain programs and projects of that strategy and fill in its gaps. Thus, partnership is often initiated by international organizations who offer to support the education sector in areas of their own interest. Unfortunately, in such situations with international partners, the MOE continues to adopt its passive attitude.

The lack of an effective strategic plan for the pre-university education sector simply means that it cannot accurately identify its top priorities, estimate the required resources to realize certain goals, or determine challenging areas that need urgent interventions. At the same time, it opens the door for international organizations to be in the driver's seat, bring their own agendas and introduce ready-made solutions based on their own

priorities and interests instead of responding and supporting the actual priorities, goals, objectives and needs of the sector.

Because of its low salaries, the education sector witnesses a continuous leakage of its strong capacity; especially those who hold graduate degrees or/and advanced professional development programs as they are typically absorbed by international organizations, NGOs or other recruiters that can better reward their experiences. Well-qualified and highly trained staff may leave the education sector for better opportunities within Egypt or overseas. It is a vicious cycle of brain-drain, continuous wastage and significant inefficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations may be considered by the Egyptian Government and the MOE to enhance partnerships with international organizations and maximize their impacts on the pre-university education sector. Realizing better partnerships with international organizations within the pre-university education sector is not and cannot be the responsibility of the MOE alone. It is the responsibility and duty of all national stakeholders and authorities. Cooperating effectively and efficiently with international organizations need a lot of coordination and efforts from ministries and organizations such as the Ministry of Investment and International Cooperation, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Interior.

1. **Supporting international partners to contribute to the education sector in a more** effective way through developing a framework of partnership, enhancing mutual trust and understanding, and reducing their challenges to enhance the impact of their contributions.
2. **Reducing and accelerating security procedures imposed on employees of** international organizations whenever possible. Such procedures constitute a serious challenge facing national and international organizations, their projects and efficiency as they consume a lot of their time and efforts and cause their frustration.
3. **Improving availability, flow, access and sharing of statistics, data, and information for enhancing partnership.** This should be undertaken with different stakeholders, to build trust, enhance their contributions to the sector, and improve the quality of their decisions.
4. **Inviting and encouraging international partners to contribute to the education sector** in areas where their assistance is really required

according to a sound strategic plan that can determine accurately and effectively the gaps where assistance is needed.

5. **Realizing real partnership rather than a donor-recipient relationship.** If the MOE wants to move forward in this direction, it should develop its clear vision, applicable strategic plan and strong capacity.
6. **Enhancing coordination with and among international organizations.** Better communications would create pathways towards realizing more coordination and collaboration among international partners, avoid duplication of their efforts and reduce their potential conflict.
7. **Enhancing trust and collaboration with international partners** through creating and enabling a supportive environment and appointing a highly effective and responsive team at the MOE.
8. **Adopting a more participatory approach** by conducting consultations with different stakeholders, including international organizations to reach an effective strategic plan, and taking their perspectives into consideration as partners and supporters to different education initiatives.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

I – Demographic Questions

Name:

Organization:

Position:

Highest level of education completed:

Years of professional experiences

Years working in international organizations:

Years in your current organization

Work years in education sector:

Work-years in Egypt:

II- Organization and Governance

- 1- How do you describe your own role in your organization?
- 2- How does your organization cooperate with the Egyptian MOE and in what areas?
- 3- How do you define education governance in your own words?
- 4- What are the contributions of your organization to governance and management of the pre-university education sector; if there are any?

III– Perspectives on Egyptian Education Governance and Management

- 5- How do you assess the pre-university education sector regarding:

- a- Leadership: Political leadership and educational leadership?
 - b- Partnership: International organizations and private sector?
 - c- And Participation: Community participation, BOTs, and NGOs?
- 6- What are the strengths of governance and management of the Egyptian pre-university education sector?
 - 7- From your point of view, what are the weaknesses of governance and management of the pre-university education sector?
 - 8- What should be the top priorities of the MOE to enhance governance and management of the pre-university education sector?
 - 9- Are there any particular strategies to be adopted by the Egyptian Government to enhance education governance and management?
 - 10- Are there any other recommendations to improve education governance and management?

IV– Final Questions

- 11- Would you like to share any final thoughts or comments?
- 12- Would you like to recommend any candidates to be interviewed?

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

	Participant's Given Name	Post	Date
1	Ramzy	Consultant	August 7 th 2016
2	Nadia	Senior Officer	August 11 th 2016
3	Jack	Project Manager	August 14 th 2016
4	Mark	Project Manager	August 15 th 2016
5	Peter	Advisor	August 21 st 2016
6	Nancy	Project Officer	September 4 th 2016
7	Sandy	Program Manager	September 5 th 2016
8	Adam	Senior Advisor	September 7 th 2016
9	Suzanne	Advisor	September 8 th 2016
10	Mariam	Advisor	September 11 th 2016
11	Sarah	Education Officer	September 13 th 2016
12	Mary	Education Officer	September 17 th 2016