

A Growing Trend in Philanthropic Education Initiatives in the UAE



Last June's viral photo of the nine-year old boy who was doing his homework on a dimly lit sidewalk still haunts many of us. Daniel Cabrera, a resident of Philippine's island province of Cebu, had no choice but to study under a lamppost as his family had no electricity at home.

Such a sight is far too common in underdeveloped countries around the world. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are more than 59 million children of primary school-age, who are being denied their right to education.

Communities in poverty- and conflict-struck regions are particularly deprived of their right to proper education. As a result, they often remain illiterate, unable to support themselves or their families, which leads to the vicious cycle preventing underdeveloped countries from progressing.

‘Improving the quality of education is key to reducing unemployment – among the Arab world’s most pressing challenges – and to building peace and prosperity in our region,’ said UAE businessman Abdullah Ahmed Al Ghurair, who recently donated a third of his assets, including all revenues and profits, to an educational foundation named after him.

Privately funded

With an initial budget of AED 4.2 billion over the next 10 years, the Abdullah Al Ghurair Education Foundation has become one of the largest privately funded philanthropic education initiatives in the Middle East. Its goal is to benefit at least 15,000 students from less privileged backgrounds in the UAE and Arab world, and equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to become leaders of tomorrow.

Founded in 1960, Dubai based Al Ghurair Group is one of the oldest conglomerates in the country, with interests in banking, food, construction and real estate; hence, the wealth pledged to the foundation comprises income-earning assets that will continue to enhance its resources to support future generations.

Starting its operations in the first quarter of 2016, the philanthropic entity will focus in its first phase on helping underprivileged UAE nationals get access to the education they need. To ensure the funds are being used appropriately, the foundation will award grants based on a highly competitive process, working in partnership with the best educational institutions in the region and the world.

‘Grants for higher education will be made through a clear and transparent process and awarded based on merit to Emirati and Arab youth in need of financial assistance,’ the foundation



Abdullah Ahmad Al Ghurair, Founder and Chairman of Mashreq Bank

stated during its launch, which coincided with the UAE Humanitarian Work Day.

Less than a third of high-school graduates in Arab countries are enrolled in tertiary education, below the world average, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This compares with 70% in Western Europe and North America.

‘It is through education that we will effectively tackle inequality, enabling youth from low-income families to fulfil their individual potential and to help their communities thrive,’ stressed Al Ghurair, adding that the new foundation will forge a path for greater collaboration between philanthropic organisations, the private sector, and education institutions.

Basic human right

Like food and shelter, access to education is every human’s right. In fact, it is one of the 30 basic human rights of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948 and arose

directly from the experience of the Second World War.

In most Arabian Gulf countries, citizens are privileged to have access to government-funded education. In the UAE, for example, the system comprises both public and private sectors, where public education is fully financed by the government and provided for free up to grade 12 or upon reaching the age of 18.

Overall, the UAE places great emphasis on social development, and has made education compulsory for students aged six to 18. As much as 49% of the federal budget for 2015, an estimated AED 24 billion, has been allocated for social development and benefits. The amount will focus on sustainably harnessing financial resources to provide citizens with better health, education and social services.

The same cannot be said about the rest of the Arab world, where poverty continues to dominate many regions and access to education remains a distant dream.



Free Wikipedia access

In a global endeavour to overcome cost barriers to knowledge, Wikimedia Foundation launched Wikipedia Zero in 2012 to provide free access to the encyclopaedia on mobile phones. The service, which does not incur data charges, is particularly targeting developing markets, where smartphones are a luxury and mobile data costs are unaffordable.

By tying up with telecom operators around the world, Wikimedia hopes to enable as many people as possible to access Wikipedia, the world's largest and most popular encyclopaedia, containing more than 35 million -volunteer-authored articles in 291 languages.

'Imagine a world where every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge,' Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales told the Mobile World Congress earlier this year. 'We invite mobile operators all over the world to join our mission'.

And that is exactly what Wikimedia

has been doing. As of July 2015, Wikipedia Zero was available through 68 operators in 59 countries and could be accessed by an estimated 400 million mobile subscribers. The initiative's ultimate goal is to 'work with every mobile operator on the planet'.

So far, in the Middle East, Wikipedia Zero is available in Saudi Arabia through the Saudi Telecom Company, Jordan through Umniah, and Morocco through Inwi and Maroc Telecom. It was only in the summer of 2015 that Wikipedia Zero finally reached the UAE, when Wikimedia teamed up with Etisalat to offer the service across the latter's 19 markets in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

'The traditional barriers to learning are falling away – affluence, birthplace, and gender no longer determine your access to information,' said Khalifa Al Shamsi, chief digital services officer at Etisalat Group. 'Today, if you're motivated and online, you can access incredible stores of knowledge. Wikipedia Zero is a tool that will enrich lives, open opportunities and pave

the way to new futures for countless individuals'.

The UAE: A history of philanthropy

The UAE has been long renowned for helping less fortunate countries and individuals, and over the years, many Emirati philanthropists have generously contributed to the welfare of the local society.

Juma Al Majid, for instance, set up the country's first charitable society back in 1950 with a number of his colleagues and built two secondary schools. He also established the National Charity Schools in 1983 to help needy expatriate students obtain free education. Today, the school has more than 9,000 students attending classes.

Al Majid's philanthropic efforts did not end there. In 1991, realising the requirements of scholars and researchers, especially those unable to obtain the necessary books and manuscripts, he set up a public library that later became known as the Juma Al Majid Centre for Culture and Heritage.

Another prominent Emirati philanthropist is Sultan Al Owais, who has donated huge amounts for the construction of several projects, including schools and hospitals, in the UAE and the Arab world.

As the world's population continues to grow, the need for private sector and individual contributions is more pressing than ever; governments alone cannot solve society's biggest problems. Therefore, if there was one investment we could make today, education – the foundation for individual freedom and sustainable development – would have to be the most worthwhile.

- Heba Hashem