

Preface

As we write, a strong media spotlight is shining on the wider region we associate with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It is as if the region stands as a focal point for public debate around the world. In a sense, its journey seems to embody the turbulence, conflict and insecurity that afflict the modern world. Its peoples experienced relatively little change to their daily lives over extended periods of time. But this is a region where massive change can unfold and spread with remarkable velocity, as the world has seen following the Arab uprisings that began in early 2011.

For all the attention levelled at the critical challenges facing the region today, there has been limited coverage of what matters more than anything else—the need for change in the way knowledge is developed and used. Investments must be made in people, social and environmental challenges have to be addressed and new economic activities must be enabled to flourish. These requirements are not unique to this region, but they manifest themselves differently in this part of the world. They also have an urgency about them here that is unparalleled elsewhere. Without progress on the long-term agenda centring on knowledge development and use, there can be no answer to the vocal demands we associate with the *Arab Spring*.

Whereas all the Arab countries face more or less the same challenges in this respect, the socio-economic context varies tremendously. The MENA region contains some of the richest countries in the world, but the majority have moderate incomes and large numbers of their citizens live in harsh conditions. Like elsewhere in the world, there is a common interest among policymakers in the role of knowledge and the ascent of a knowledge-based economy (KBE). Yet it is far from well understood how any particular society can go about fulfilling its potential benefits. Capacity building requires serious attention in the areas of education, research, innovation, enterprise development or entrepreneurship, which are interrelated. There is a fundamental need for each society both to be open and learn from the experiences of others and—at the same time—to work out its own solutions. Often, there is more to learn from societies that share similar issues and objectives. Despite the fact that the Arab countries have much to gain from closer collaboration in this field, there are relatively few collaborative

projects across the MENA region addressing the critical issues we associate with the knowledge society. Likewise, few books have been published that venture into that space for broader parts of the region.

This book is in the position to draw on a unique joint research project aimed at promoting research and innovation capacity in this part of the world, which is the European Science & Technology International Cooperation Network set up in collaboration with the GCC countries (known as the INCONET-GCC project, funded by the European Commission). Obviously, on the MENA side, the focus here is thus not on the wider region, but the subset represented by the six relatively wealthy GCC countries. At the same time, Yemen (a candidate for GCC-accession), Egypt and Morocco also engaged in this programme. The initial work on this book built directly on the material prepared for the Best Practice in Science and Technology Policies conference hosted by The Research Council (TRC) of Oman at the Intercontinental Hotel in Muscat on December 6–7, 2010. Dr. Talal Al-Balushi and Ms. Umaima Al Mahdori at TRC coordinated the event.

Along with other collaborative events held in association with this project, the Muscat conference presented an opportunity for actors across the GCC countries and the European Union to engage in constructive dialogue on research and innovation, while also bringing on board experts and representatives from other Arab countries. An interim project report, based on the conference and published early 2011, ventured partly into methodological and measurement issues and laid the basis for further work to identify research areas and issues of mutual interest.

Following the report's completion, some of the contributors saw the potential benefits of developing a separate product destined for a wider audience. The initial vision was that of a book examining and communicating the range of issues confronting the GCC countries and the Middle East more broadly in regard to their effort to regain an edge in science, technology and innovation.

In the meantime, the Arab Spring broke out. As we know, the spark was that act of protest and despair by the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi when, following the confiscation of his wares, he set himself ablaze on December 17, less than ten days after our conference had ended. In the same vein, the uprisings reflect political conditions across the wider Arab world, pressing social, economic and environmental issues, and the distinct demand for a greater say by ordinary citizens. A strong feature from the outset has been the exasperation of young people living in societies where investments remain tilted towards traditional tangible assets in land and real estate, where natural resource extraction and the public sector dominate the economy, and which are marked by a deficiency of avenues for quality education, entrepreneurship and civil society engagement.

While the material from the INCONET-GCC conference provided a useful start for the book, we set about adding new material and dimensions, inviting a number of new contributors to cover additional critical angles that require attention in order to get a handle of the present situation, without losing sight of the core task of underpinning a more prosperous long-term development. On this basis, while the examination of conditions in the relatively wealthy GCC countries has remained at the core of the book, an effort was made to cover trends and patterns in

the MENA region more broadly. We further ventured into additional aspects that need to be considered in order to get to the roots of the issues at stake in the region's transition, away from its current dependency on natural resources and ever-present public sector. The demographic situation, the state of the educational system, the conditions for entrepreneurship, the management of the natural environment, health and wellness, and the changing role of women all form part of the picture. The way institutions, cultural factors and governance structures play out matters crucially for what steps can be taken and how. Although the scope of these subjects prevents us from exhausting any single one of them, they must all be taken into account.

In parallel, the ongoing INCONET-GCC initiative has continued to deliver relevant output, including bibliometric analysis on cross-border collaboration in science and technology, which we have been able to partly include here. Again, however, the book reaches beyond that project and is one of the first to explore the wider societal and regional context of what has occurred on the ground—in Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, Damascus and other hotbeds of unrest. While paying heed to the political factors that generally take centre stage in observations of the Arab Spring, this book primarily focuses on the underlying societal and economic issues, including those that we associate with the ascent of the knowledge-based economy. The book is also one of the first to apply benchmarking and critical examination of the range of factors and policies that matter in this area. It represents a unique effort to link between the dramatic events of the present time and the long-term perspective. It mobilises multiple and diverse points of view, from within the region as well as from other parts of the world, by researchers and analysts as well as by policymakers and practitioners in various areas.

We hope that these pages will stimulate new discussion and help inspire the investments and actions required for the region's institutions and aspiring peoples to take further decisive steps to ensure a better use of resources and lay the fundamental building blocks for a prosperous future carved out on their own terms. We are aware that lengthy documents are not the preferred means of communication in this day, marked by the constant arrival of new impulses and pieces of information, including in the Middle East which lacks a "reading culture"; it is the instant messaging made possible through ICT that has carried the banner of recent change in this region. Yet, without some sort of balancing act, through which especially the young can connect to in-depth inquiry, research and quality education, the region will fumble in taking on its critical issues and finding its footing in the world that is in the making.

The book consists of three main parts. The first provides the wider context, sets out the issues, draws international comparisons and addresses methodologies in learning how to approach the policy agenda at stake. The second presents various perspectives on approaches to address key challenges for capacity building and empowerment in relation to S&T, innovation and the ascent of a knowledge-based economy. The third examines further ways of addressing outstanding issues, notably with considerations to the contributions of international collaboration, including within the MENA region. While Part I has been contributed by ourselves

(Thomas Andersson and Abdelkader Djeflat), as the editors of this book, Parts II and III have been written by a number of different authors and edited by us.

We have many people to thank for making this book possible. As editors, we are grateful to all the authors who contributed, as well as the Research Council of Oman, which hosted and organised the Muscat conference, and the participants at that event. We are also grateful to partners in the INCONET-GCC project, notably to Stavroula Maglavera and Euroconsultants, Thessaloniki, who are responsible for the overall organisation, and Jönköping University in Sweden, as the main coordinator of the project's Work Package I. Most of all, we are indebted to the many ordinary people we have met across the diverse societies and communities of the vast region we here refer to, who are open and ready to discuss, exchange experiences and assume new perspectives on all that is going on. While taking full responsibility as editors for any errors or omissions, we are also grateful to Qammar Abbas, Glenn Gran, Matthieu Roest and Sara Johansson de Silva for the compilation of data, supportive analysis and organisational assistance.

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Addressing Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship

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