

**Speech of H.E. Dr. Savaş Alpay, Director General of the Statistical, Economic, Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) at the Fourth Islamic Conference of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Baku Republic of Azerbaijan on 6 – 8 October 2008**

**Excellencies, Honourable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

*Assalamu Alaikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu,*

At the outset I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the Republic of Azerbaijan and ISESCO for organizing and hosting this important conference.

The Statistical, Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRIC) is a subsidiary organ of the OIC that collates, processes and disseminates socio-economic statistics and information on and for the utilization of member countries. We also study and evaluate the economic and social developments in the member countries to help generate proposals that will initiate and enhance cooperation among them. Currently SESRIC hosts the most comprehensive statistical database on the OIC member countries.

**Distinguished Delegates,**

I would like to take this opportunity to brief you on the Education Report that we have recently published and distributed to you yesterday. The Report identifies prospects and challenges of the OIC Member Countries in the field of primary, secondary and higher education, and explores some policy recommendations that we need to follow in order to improve both the quantity and quality of our overall educational level.

The objective of the report is to discuss the current situation in the OIC member countries, the progress made to ensure access to primary education and its completion, the developments in secondary and higher education, the commitments of the member countries to invest in education at various levels, the achievements of the member countries in improving the quality of education and in generating some headway in the development of knowledge-based economies, and their contributions to research in various fields of academic interest.

Generally speaking, most of the member countries have made significant progress in increasing Net Enrolment Ratios in the primary and secondary education. The member countries in Central Asia and Europe have been maintaining fairly high ratios, higher than the world

averages. Similarly, some member countries such as Malaysia in East Asia and Maldives in South Asia, have accomplished excellent results in most of the main education-related indicators. However, most of the South Asian member countries could not increase their literacy rates above the 50% mark and have been struggling with low secondary enrolment ratios. The situation in the MENA region has been encouraging. Many member countries could increase their primary and secondary ratios above the world average. The conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, indicate some improvements in the primary enrolment ratios, but the secondary enrolment ratios are well below the OIC and world average.

### **Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As we are all aware, building a knowledge-based economy is one of the major challenges faced by most of the member countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This would require developing a scientific culture that supports and encourages the contributions of the scientist and attaches importance to higher education. It would also require the implementation of policies to ensure good quality education for all at the primary and secondary level. In general, the transition process of OIC member countries to Knowledge Economy has followed a slow but promisingly upward trend as the rank of 27 out of 40 OIC countries increased in 2008. Five member countries, UAE, Malaysia, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, could accomplish placement among the top 50 countries in the world. The recent data of Turkey, Tunisia, Algeria and Mauritania also indicates that these countries could improve their KEI scores in the recent years.

On the other hand, the overall situation in the OIC countries, in implementing policies to build such a knowledge-based economy, appears to be discouraging. Most of the member countries in the high income group have been spending a mere 0.16% of their GDP on average on Research & Development (R&D) as compared to the 2.43% spent by the non-OIC countries in the same group. Nevertheless, some countries, such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Malaysia, have successfully implemented policies to encourage research at the university level. The publications statistics in the world-renowned journals indicate that Turkey, Iran and Egypt alone contribute more than 58% of the total OIC publications.

It is against such a background that the OIC Ten Year Programme of Action adopted in December 2005 has outlined an elaborate set of recommendations and policy prescriptions related to education and R&D in the member countries. The “New Vision” of OIC calls for a system-wide education reform in the member countries. It includes improving gender parity, increasing access to primary and secondary education and placing greater emphasis on science and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It also calls for more investment in R&D and for devising of policies to reverse the brain drain from the member countries. The

New Vision strongly recommends the adoption of a strategy whereby each country should contribute at least 1% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to R&D activities.

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The results presented in the SESRIC's Education Report on primary and secondary education show that the target of establishing the required environment for mass education has been achieved. Improving the quality of education has to be the next and inevitable focus for the OIC member countries. In this respect, it seems evident that the organization of the existing education systems should change. Among the different aspects of this organization, pedagogy, structure, finance and management can be listed. For the pedagogical aspect, student-centred and competency-based learning can be suggested. In terms of the structural aspect, lifelong learning can be important. When financing is considered, diversification of funding is possible. Although providing and improving education is mainly the responsibility of governments, supporting civil organisms is also a must for better quality education. In terms of management, a coordinated decentralization can help to a large extent.

One final word is that higher investment in education should be associated with faster economic growth. Most OIC member countries have committed substantial resources to expand and improve their education systems, but these investments in education have not generated the maximal benefits for the individuals and the societies because of the lack of associated economic growth. The link between the improvements in the level and quality of education and economic growth should be strong.

At SESRIC we are continuously increasing our contribution to the OIC member countries by producing important reports on many subjects in the macro-economic areas. In this regard, our centre is becoming more and more involved in the areas of education and science and technology as seen in the important roles taken by the Centre in different projects such as university ranking and the Atlas of Islamic-World Innovation. In this context we collaborate with OIC General Secretariat, ISESCO, IDB, COMSTECH and other institutions. We firmly believe that this kind of joint and cooperative efforts will bring out enormous benefits to the OIC member countries.

I would like to once again express my deep gratitude to the organizing committee for organizing and being host to this memorable conference. Thank you for your attention.