



# Primary education completion in Egypt: Trends and determinants

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## ABSTRACT

Egypt has committed to providing “education for all”. Annual Global Monitoring Reports show a Net Enrollment Ratio of 97%. We use data from the 1988 through 2014 Egypt Demographic and Health Surveys to assess progress in the Net Attendance Ratio and the Primary School Completion Rate. Economic equity in educational attainment increased. However, only children from wealthy families have achieved Universal Primary Education: middle-class and poor children lag. Educational attainment of girls and rural boys has improved; gender parity has been achieved. The attainment of poor urban boys has been stagnant. They are now the most educationally disadvantaged children.

## 1. Introduction

Education is critical for economic and social progress (Mamoon and Murshed, 2009; OECD, 2012). The Education Millennium Development Goal (MDG 2) (United Nations, 2005), and the revised and strengthened Education Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), encourage “Education for All” (EFA) and Universal Primary Education (UPE). They require nations to “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary” education (United Nations, n.d.: 21). Egypt has fully committed itself to these goals, pledging not just “education for all”, but “excellence for all” (MoE, 2003; NCERD, 2001, 2004; UNESCO, 2003). The education MDGs and SDGs also require the elimination of gender disparities in education (UNESCO, 2002).

Quality education is said to be central to the achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Education International, n.d.). It contributes to better workers and higher family incomes (Sultana, 2008). Educated females delay marriage and have lower fertility. Educated mothers have healthier and better educated children (Sultana, 2008). Moreover, reducing the gender gap in educational attainment is said to provide additional economic benefit (Klasen and Lamanna, 2009).

This research examines Egypt’s progress in primary education during the past 25 years. We compare attendance and primary completion, both computed from the 1988 through 2014 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). Focusing on primary completion, we analyze trends and differentials by gender, while also controlling for the effects

of family wealth and region of residence. We examine the quantity of education, providing new information that supplements, clarifies, and corrects the current literature.

## 2. Literature review

Although the levels of educational attainment reported by different sources are somewhat inconsistent, all published sources show that Egypt has made steady progress toward achieving UPE: both the absolute number of children enrolled in primary school, and the percentage of children of primary school age currently enrolled (that is, the Net Enrollment Ratio–NER), increased (World Bank, 2002; Gazaleh et al., 2004; Iqbal and Riad, 2004). As early as 1999, the Egypt Education for All 2000 Assessment asserted that the country was “about to reach the total universalization of children in the primary stage” (NCERD, 1999). Over the last decade numerous reports have claimed that Egypt is either close to, or has already achieved, UPE (NCERD, 2004; MoE, 2007; World Bank, 2007b, 2008). The EFA Global Monitoring Reports (GMRs) have credited Egypt with achieving UPE since the mid-2000s (UNESCO, 2007, 2015). However, other recent data show a Net Attendance Ratio (NAR)<sup>1</sup> and an NER of around 91% (El-Zanaty and Gorin, 2007; World Bank, 2007a). A 2008 Ministry of Education report found that between 400,000 and 3,000,000 children 6–14 years of age were out of school because either they did not join education at all, or they left school before completing basic education (MoE, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> The NER measures “enrollment” and is typically based on administrative data; the NAR measures “attendance” and is based on survey data. While some emphasize the difference between the NER and NAR (Porta et al., 2011), they effectively measure the same thing: the number of children of primary school age studying in primary school divided by the total number of children of primary school age in the population/sample. For a description of the NER and how it is computed see UNESCO (2009). El-Zanaty and Gorin (2007) provides a description of the NAR

Traditionally Egyptian females have been educationally disadvantaged. At least since the 1990s, however, enrollment of girls has increased faster than that of boys, thus reducing the gender disparity (UNDP, 2003). The National EFA 2000 Assessment asserted that the gender gap “is about to disappear” (NCERD, 1999). Some reports claimed that Egypt would achieve gender equality on schedule in 2005 (NCERD, 2004; El-Saharty et al., 2005), and more recent work finds that goal has been attained (World Bank, 2007b). Other studies, however, report that a small female deficit persists (El-Zanaty and Gorin, 2007; World Bank, 2007a; MoE, 2008).

Other educationally disadvantaged groups in Egypt include the poor, those who live in remote rural areas, and upper-Egyptians (NCERD, 1999; Iqbal and Riad, 2004; MoE, 2008). Several reports state that the greatest improvements in attainment have been made by children in these disadvantaged groups (World Bank, 2002; UNDP, 2003; NCERD, 2004). As a result, gender, wealth, and regional disparities in education have declined over time.

Increased educational attainment, particularly among the most disadvantaged, has been linked to extensive school construction beginning in the 1980s and lasting into the current decade (Ahlburg et al., 2004; Fergany, 2000; Iqbal and Riad, 2004; NCERD, 1999; UNICEF, 2002). During the decade of the 1980s more than 3600 schools were constructed, including about 1900 by USAID’s Basic Education Program (Creative Associates International, 1991; World Bank, 1993). From 1992 through 2006, almost 14,000 additional schools were built (MoE, 2007; NCERD, 2004), and there were plans to establish more than 13,000 community schools/classrooms by 2012 (MoE, 2008). Other programs such as UNICEF’s community schools (Zaalouk, 1995, 2004), government one-classroom schools (NCERD, 2004; UNESCO, 2003; UNICEF, 2002), and girl-friendly classrooms (MoE, 2008) also helped make primary education more accessible.<sup>2</sup> About 99% of all villages have access to primary schools, and some maintain that the problem of access to schools has been solved (World Bank, 2002). Other strategies for increasing enrollment and completion of primary education include more and better community participation and targeted subsidies (El-Saharty et al., 2005). Despite school construction and other programs, however, many children remain out of school, and access and enrollment remain problems for some communities (Langsten, 2016; MoE, 2008; UNESCO, 2003).

In sum, in the existing literature there is broad agreement that in recent decades Egypt has made substantial progress in expanding the number of children enrolled in primary education and in reducing the gender gap. But there are differences about whether UPE has been achieved and the gender gap closed. Moreover, the existing literature paints with very broad strokes: in-depth analysis is lacking. In this paper we compare attendance (the NAR) with completion (the Primary School Completion Rate – PSCR) and, focusing on the PSCR in conjunction with the proximate determinants of educational attainment, provide a more detailed description of progress toward UPE since 1988. Then we examine gender differentials, controlling for family wealth and region of residence.

### 3. Measuring educational attainment

As noted above, progress toward UPE has “typically been discussed in narrow terms of school enrolment and ‘gender gaps’” (Humphreys et al., 2015: 134; see also UNESCO, 2007, 2014, 2015). The EFA GMRs have used the NER as the critical indicator for “a systematic assessment of progress towards EFA” (UNESCO, 2007: 32). The 2008 GMR stated that “A country’s distance from UPE appears most clearly in terms of the

The Proximate Determinants Framework of Educational Attainment.

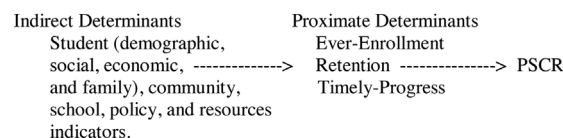


Fig. 1. The Proximate Determinants Framework of Educational Attainment.

net enrolment ratio (NER), the share of children of official primary school age who are actually enrolled in primary schools” (UNESCO, 2007: 42–emphasis added). The 2013/14 GMR recognizes that the NER is only a “partial measure of whether UPE has been achieved” (UNESCO, 2014: 57), and the new SDGs promise to consider not only enrollment, but also access and completion (UNESCO, 2016). Nevertheless, the NER remains the primary determinant of whether a country has met the UPE goal (UNESCO, 2014). The NER, however, does not directly address the true goal of the education MDG – primary school completion (UNESCO, 2002). Recent work has shown that, under some circumstances, the NER and NAR are poor indicators of a country’s progress toward UPE (Langsten, 2014). In our analysis we use the primary school completion rate (PSCR) and the proximate determinants of educational attainment framework.<sup>3</sup> This framework is described in Langsten (2014: Appendix A). A schematic representation of this framework is shown in Fig. 1.

This framework provides an outcome indicator, the PSCR and three proximate determinants of educational attainment: ever-enrollment, retention, and timely-progress. It also provides for partitioning the failure to complete primary education, showing the relative role of the complement of each of the proximate determinants: failure to enroll, dropout, delay in progressing through the grades. In this work we consider three indirect determinants of education: gender, family-wealth, and region of residence.

In the following sections we describe our outcome measure and the proximate determinants, explain the partitioning, and show how the indicators are computed.

#### 3.1. The primary education completion rate

Analyses of primary education in Egypt,<sup>4</sup> discussed in the literature review above, measure attainment and gender parity using the Gross and Net Enrollment Ratios (GER – NER), both based on administrative data, or the Gross and Net Attendance Ratios (GAR – NAR) which are based on survey data. Other reports (Bruns et al., 2003; Filmer and Pritchett, 1999; Lloyd and Blanc, 1996), though none focusing specifically on Egypt, use completion rates: the percent of children in a given age group who have completed at least a minimum number of years of schooling. The 2015 GMR introduced the Primary Education Attainment Rate (PEAR) (UNESCO, 2015), a measure similar to the PSCR. Completion rates are sometimes based on administrative data (e.g. Bruns et al., 2003), but more commonly use survey data (Lloyd and Hewett, 2003; UNESCO, 2015). In this work, our outcome indicator, the PSCR, is defined as the number of children 14–15 years of age who have completed primary school, divided by the total number of children 14–15 years of age in the sample.

<sup>3</sup> Our proximate determinants of educational attainment framework is based on and borrows terminology from Bongaarts’s (1978) proximate determinants of fertility model. Those familiar with Bongaarts’s work will recognize the schematic representation in Fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup> In Egypt there were 5 years of primary education for cohorts starting school from 1988 through 1998; 6 years of primary for all cohorts beginning school before and after this interval (MoE-Egypt 2003). The statutory age of enrollment has been 6 years of age throughout. NARs are based on children 6–10 years of age from 1988 through 2005; 6–11 years of age for the 2008 and 2014 surveys. The PSCR and proximate determinants are based on children 14–15 years of age throughout.

<sup>2</sup> While the one-classroom, community, and girl-friendly schools are said to make an important contribution to reaching students, particularly in remote, rural areas, only about 1% of all primary school students study in these special schools (estimated from numbers provided in MoE, 2008: 132). Therefore, throughout this paper, the trends and differentials shown reflect the situation in the mainstream school system.

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