Every child counts:  
Universal primary education in the  
Middle East and North Africa

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1. Introduction

Many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, see Figure 1) have already reached or are close to reaching the Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3, which seek to achieve universal primary education and gender parity by 2015. According to an assessment by UNICEF (2007b), the region as a whole is on track to reach MDGs 2 and 3. However, some of the countries in the region are not keeping pace with the overall trend. Even in countries that are on track, some disadvantaged groups are lagging behind the general population.

Figure 1: Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

UNICEF estimates that in total 6.9 million children of primary school age are still out of school in the Middle East and North Africa. Groups that suffer from limited access to education include rural children, children from poor households, child labourers, disabled children, orphans, children from nomadic populations, and children living in situations of conflict. Among all these groups, girls are particularly at a disadvantage. The education systems in the different countries

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have not been able to respond to the needs of these children, hence the need to design alternative approaches to reach children out of school.

The objective of this paper is to suggest some options to address the problem of limited access to primary school in the Middle East and North Africa. Section 2 presents basic statistics on school attendance in the countries in the region. Section 3 describes three policy options: conditional cash transfers, fast-track teacher training, and alternative learning opportunities. Section 4 discusses the cost of implementing the proposed policies. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Groups excluded from access to education

On average, 85 percent of all children of primary school age in the MENA region are in primary school. Table 1 gives an overview of primary school enrolment or attendance in all countries in the region. The enrolment or attendance rates for boys and girls are 87 percent and 83 percent, respectively, yielding a gender parity index (GPI) of 0.95. Gender parity is defined as a GPI between 0.97 and 1.03.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Primary NER or NAR (%)</th>
<th>Assessment of progress toward MDGs</th>
<th>Data source and year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>97 98 95 0.97</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>97 97 97 1.00</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>79 80 78 0.98</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>MICS 2006 (NAR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>94 96 91 0.95</td>
<td>Insufficient progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran (Islamic Republic of)</td>
<td>95 91 100 1.10</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>88 94 81 0.86</td>
<td>Insufficient progress Insufficient progress</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>99 99 99 1.00</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>DHS 2002 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>87 87 86 0.99</td>
<td>No progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>92 93 92 0.99</td>
<td>Insufficient progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libyan Arab Jamahiriya</td>
<td>- - - -</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>86 89 83 0.93</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupied Palestinian Territory</td>
<td>80 80 80 1.00</td>
<td>No progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>73 73 74 1.01</td>
<td>No progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2006 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>96 96 96 1.00</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>78 77 79 1.03</td>
<td>No progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>58 60 57 0.95</td>
<td>No progress Insufficient progress</td>
<td>MICS 2000 (NAR)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Arab Republic</td>
<td>95 97 92 0.95</td>
<td>On track Insufficient progress</td>
<td>UIS 2002 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>97 97 97 1.00</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>71 71 70 0.99</td>
<td>No progress On track</td>
<td>UIS 2005 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>75 87 63 0.72</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>UIS 2004 (NER)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>85 87 83 0.95</td>
<td>On track On track</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: UNICEF (2007a, 2007b)

The lowest primary NER or NAR values are observed in Sudan (58 percent), the United Arab Emirates (71 percent), Oman (73 percent), Yemen (75 percent), Saudi Arabia (78 percent), and Djibouti (79 percent). Moreover, although most countries have already reached gender parity in primary education, gender disparity continues to exist in Yemen (GPI 0.72); Iraq (GPI 0.86); Morocco (GPI 0.93); Egypt, Sudan and Syria (GPI 0.95); and Iran (GPI 1.10).5

In spite of relatively high enrolment and attendance rates, UNICEF estimates that 6.9 million children of primary school age – 3.9 million girls and 3 million boys – were out of school in the

5 In Iran, Oman and Saudi Arabia, girls are more likely to attend primary school than boys.
region in 2006. Figure 2 shows the number of children out of school in the countries for which data was available, ranging from 2000 children out of school in Bahrain to 2.5 million out of school in Sudan.

**Figure 2: Children out of school, 2006**

![Bar chart showing children out of school by country, 2006](chart.png)

Data source: UNICEF (2007a)

To illustrate the challenges faced by different countries in the region, compare the situation in Algeria, Iraq and Sudan. Algeria has reached gender parity in primary school and is close to universal primary education but has pockets of non-enrolment among the poor in remote rural areas. Iraq has maintained high primary school attendance rates in spite of the war but girls are far less likely to be in school than boys. Sudan is close to gender parity, but at low levels of school attendance for boys and girls.

Algeria, Iraq and Sudan conducted household surveys in 2006 and 2007 that provide detailed information on school attendance patterns and on the characteristics of children out of school. Algeria and Iraq conducted MICS surveys. Sudan conducted a Household Health Survey (HHS).

In Algeria, 97 percent of all children of primary school age were attending primary school (Ministère de la Santé, de la Population et de la Réforme Hospitalière; and Office National des Statistiques 2007). A disaggregation of the data reveals which groups are disadvantaged: rural children, children of mothers with no formal education or only primary education, and children from the poorest household quintile. Among children from the poorest quintile, the primary NAR is only 93 percent, compared to an NAR of 98 percent in the richest quintile. Girls from the poorest quintile are especially disadvantaged, with a primary NAR of only 91 percent.

In Iraq, large regional disparities in primary school attendance are observed. The primary NAR is 92 percent in urban areas and 78 percent in rural areas (Central Organization for Statistics & Information Technology, and Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office 2007). Gender disparities are
also much larger in rural than urban areas. In urban areas of Iraq, 94 percent of boys and 89 percent of girls are in primary school. In rural areas, the primary NAR is 87 percent for boys and only 68 percent for girls. As in Algeria, children of mothers without formal education are less likely to be in school, and this is especially true for girls.

The evidence for Sudan is mixed. The SHHS of 2006, which covered both northern and southern Sudan, reports a primary NAR of 54 percent, with little gender disparity: 56 percent of boys and 52 percent of girls of primary school age are in school (Central Bureau of Statistics, and Southern Sudan Commission for Census, Statistics and Evaluation 2007). However, there are big differences in school attendance among children from different wealth quintiles. The primary NAR is 93 percent in the richest quintile and only 19 percent in the poorest quintile. In addition, gender disparities as wide as 12 percentage points are observed in subgroups of the population, for example in the poorest households and in certain states.

The countries in the region share similar reasons for non-attendance by children. The main underlying causes for non-enrolment include the high opportunity cost of educating children in the form of forgone income from child labour; a bias against the education of girls, especially in rural areas; non-availability of educational services and distance from the school, for example for nomadic populations; and a preference for traditional learning. Some of the basic causes are household poverty, lack of security and systemic gender discrimination in the pockets in which gender gaps prevail. In countries with high enrolment rates that have otherwise been successful in providing quality education to almost all children, the last few percentages of out-of-school children are typically most difficult to reach.

To summarize, the MENA region as a whole is close to universal primary education and gender parity, but disaggregation of the data reveals relatively large regional disparities, as well as disparities linked to gender, area of residence, household wealth and other factors.

3. Policy options and key strategies

To increase access to education, three policies are proposed. The first option, conditional cash transfers, attempts to increase the demand for education by lowering its cost for poor households. Two other options, fast-track teacher training and the provision of alternative learning opportunities, increase the supply of educational services. Alternative learning opportunities can also address the specific lifestyles and value systems of excluded groups.

3.1 Conditional cash transfers

Conditional cash transfer programmes have been successfully implemented in several countries. Their main objective is to increase the demand for education among poor families by giving them the means to educate their children. Such programmes not only reduce short-term monetary poverty and fulfil children’s right to education, they are also important for long-term poverty reduction – and thus the achievement of the first Millennium Development Goal – because they constitute an investment in human capital.
Schooling does not only impose direct costs on poor families. The loss of income from children’s labour is also an opportunity cost of education. The transfer of cash to poor families compensates them for the cost of schooling and encourages parents to send their children to school. The constraint being addressed is the fact that the demand for education in the form of attendance by boys and girls is affected by poverty. This is particularly relevant in the Middle East and North Africa, where many families live below the poverty line.

A conditional cash transfer programme complements supply-side investments in school services in countries where these have been underutilized by the poor because of high out-of-pocket expenditures and opportunity costs. To implement this strategy the following actions are proposed.

The first step is the identification of beneficiaries. With data from household surveys or censuses, groups of the population with low enrolment rates and high dropout rates are identified. Depending on the findings, certain geographic regions, poor households, or other disadvantaged groups will be targeted.

The payment amount is determined according to the cost of education. With data from household consumption surveys the proper amount will be fixed and tested in small, limited pilot studies.

The flexibility of cash transfers gives spending discretion to households and provides incentives to families to invest in their children. This is done by attaching the condition of regular school attendance to the cash transfer.

Funding sources include finance ministries, foreign donors, international development agencies and the private sector. In the context of the Middle East and North Africa, zakat, the donation of 2.5 percent of a Muslim’s wealth to the poor is a potentially important source of funding.

A fund for community education will be created in each country. This fund will encourage the pooling of resources from the various sources, including from the government and communities, to ensure sustainability in the long-term. A regional board will be created to raise funds, manage the programme and ensure monitoring and evaluation.

### 3.2 Fast-track teacher training

The second policy option is fast-track teacher training. With 6.9 million children of primary school age out of school in the MENA region, the need to avail them basic education is immediate. There are a number of reasons why these children are out of school. However, one of the main factors that contribute to this dilemma is the unavailability of educational services, in particular the absence of trained teachers. Many of the trained teachers are concentrated in cities and in communities where professional and economic opportunities are greater or the security situation is better. The situation is further exacerbated by the low production of new teachers in countries in the MENA region and high turnover of teachers as they leave the education system for better paid jobs. Unfavourable teacher pre-service training requirements also have a negative effect on access to schools. In many of the countries in the region, the minimum qualification for certified teachers is a three- to four-year pre-service college or university degree.
Against this background, the recruitment and training of a large number of teachers in a fast-track mode in areas and communities where the high demand for education is unmatched by the supply of teachers is a major strategy to deal with the problem. Teachers will be hired from the affected communities. These teachers will be trained and employed in institutions close to their communities to avoid the temptation of working in schools in big cities.

The main target group are students who completed their primary level education as well as those who completed the first two years of secondary level schooling. Girls will be encouraged to join as they tend to remain in their communities longer than boys. A pre-service training should last a maximum of one year, focusing on basic pedagogical and essential classroom management skills. This will be coupled with continuous on-the-job training, supervision and mentoring. Currently existing teachers will be re-trained and equipped for this new initiative and strong and rigorous supervision, mentoring and inspection will be instituted.

The project will provide incentives and some material support for the first two years. However, payment of salaries, management and administration will remain the responsibility of education authorities. From the outset, an agreement will be forged with the Ministry of Education to absorb the new teachers by the third year of the project to ensure a smooth transition and sustainability.

### 3.3 Alternative learning opportunities

The third policy option is the provision of free, flexible, relevant alternative learning opportunities for the 6.9 million children and young people out of school. The proposed option seeks to respond to the causes of non-enrolment of children which include the low valuing of girls’ education and the cultural lifestyles of nomadic populations which constrain educational participation.

The main beneficiaries will be (a) children, especially girls 7 to 8 years of age who have missed the first chance of enrolling in school; (b) children, especially girls 8 to 12 years old who have never attended or have dropped out of school; (c) youth, especially girls out of school of post primary school age who need employable skills in addition to basic literacy, numeracy and life skills.

The main strategy is to enable children out of school, especially excluded girls, to learn and to strengthen the capacities of facilitators and local service providers to expand learning opportunities for them. Flexibility will be the overarching principle so that children and young people will be free to learn in their own pace and on their own terms. The use of flexible approaches will be supported so that different children with different learning needs and life circumstances can participate. Evidence will be used as a basis for performance monitoring and feedback to rights holders as well as duty bearers. Young people’s participation will be rigorously promoted.

To implement this strategy the following interventions are proposed:
An assessment of participatory learning needs and capacity will provide information and data which will be used to (a) facilitate the identification and registration of learners, especially girls; (b) develop gender-sensitive life skills-based learning curricula that are relevant to the needs of learners and their communities; (c) identify key duty bearers (teachers/facilitators of learning, parents, community leaders, education officers) and define their roles and responsibilities; (d) define performance standards and means of measuring them; (e) develop a capacity development plan that is supportive of the alternative learning programme.

Children will be connected through social networking. Through these child-to-child networks children would participate in determining what should be learned and how to network with other members of the community of learners to share ideas, life experiences and build a future together.

Flexible learning approaches will be developed and introduced for the three learning groups as follows: (a) the provision of information on how learners can learn most effectively; (b) provision of catch-up classes for children 7 to 9 years of age, especially girls, to enable them to re-enter the formal system if they so wish; (c) a shortened four-year curriculum focusing on literacy, numeracy and life skills learning through alternative means including community radio, TV and computer-assisted web-based learning; (d) use of existing learning centres and private enterprises to encourage livelihood skills development alongside literacy, numeracy and life skills learning; and (e) the learning approach will be determined by the learning community and learning schedules flexible enough to allow for active participation of boys and girls.

The development and delivery of the curriculum and instructional material will be based on identified learning needs. The learning programme will provide a spiral curriculum that focuses on gender-sensitive literacy, numeracy, life and livelihood skills tailored to the developmental levels of the three groups. The methodology would be learner-centred and interactive. Teaching and learning materials will be developed for the three learning communities and their facilitators. Supplies (radios, digital doorways, TVs, solar panels, cell phones) will be procured to facilitate delivery of the curriculum.

Facilitators drawn from the same communities in which the learners live, will study interactive learner-centred methodologies for literacy, numeracy and life skills delivery. Teams of resource and master facilitators will be identified from existing learning programmes to support the training and mentoring of facilitators. The capacity development of the facilitators will be action-research based. Investments in capacity development will aim to reduce disparities by targeting interventions to the areas with the greatest numbers of children out of school.

In order to ensure smooth implementation of the programme, further policy development will be pursued, especially on information and communication technology (ICT) and the use of community radio in education. Broad-based partnerships will be built between service providers, universities and government to support the programme. Partnerships can focus on studying alternative approaches, mobilizing additional resources, pooling technical resources, for example for livelihood skills or take home food rations for children in food insecure areas, building data systems and scaling up interventions.
4. Costing and financing

In terms of feasibility, fast-track teacher training appears to be the option that is easiest to implement because it can rely on existing structures in the education system. A conditional cash transfer programme can build on the experiences of other countries. Similar to cash transfers, the provision of alternative learning opportunities would have to be tailored specifically to the targeted groups in each country. Pilot studies would be carried out to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each proposed approach.

The cost of the proposed reforms can be divided into an initial investment and recurrent costs. A precise costing exercise is beyond the scope of this paper and this section is therefore limited to a broad outline of the financial implications of each policy option.

For a conditional cash transfer programme, the initial investment would consist of the identification of the targeted groups and an establishment of a network to provide the payments and track the recipients. Kakwani, Soares, and Son (2006) argue that targeting linked to household income, as commonly practiced in Latin America, is too costly in the context of Africa and that regional targeting, for example of rural children, is therefore the better choice. If cash transfers lead to an increased demand for education that exceeds the capacity of the existing system, additional investment may be necessary, for example for the construction of additional schools and the hiring of additional teachers. The recurrent cost is the sum of monthly payments to each household covered by the program and the wages of teachers and other staff that have to be hired to meet the increased demand for education.

The cost of fast-track teacher training consists of an initial expansion of training facilities and the recurrent cost of training. However, part of this added cost can be recuperated through savings from a reduced reliance on traditional teacher training methods that typically last longer and therefore cost more. The programme will also guard against the hiring of teachers without ensuring that they are included in the existing salary structure.

The cost of the provision of alternative learning opportunities is the most difficult to quantify because it is likely to vary considerably depending on the national context. As with cash transfer programmes, the excluded groups that can benefit from alternative learning opportunities would have to be identified at the outset. If such programmes rely on technologies like radio or web-based learning, additional infrastructure investments may be necessary. The recurrent cost consists of the provision of learning materials, wages for teachers, and maintenance of the education infrastructure.

The financing methods depend on the availability of funds in the national budget and on investments from international development agencies and other foreign donors. In countries with a high GDP per capita and a sound tax base, aid payments from foreign donors would play a limited role. In poorer countries without sufficient government revenue, foreign aid would play a larger role. Guided by the Paris Declaration on new aid modalities, sector-wide approaches and partnerships among governments, donors and international development agencies – for example through the EFA-Fast Track Initiative (World Bank 2006) – are a powerful way of building and sustaining long-term commitments to quality education for every child. This is particularly
important for achieving a high social rate of return and economic growth. The social and economic benefits justify the cost of programmes aimed at reducing the number of children out of school.

5. Expected results and indicators

The expected result of the proposed interventions is increased and equitable access to education and universal primary school completion in the Middle East and North Africa by 2015. To measure the progress toward this objective, several indicators can be used. The main indicators, summarized in Table 2, are the primary school net enrolment rate, the number of children of primary school age out of school, the dropout rate, the repetition rate, the survival rate to the last grade of primary school, and the transition rate to secondary education.

Table 2: Indicators to track progress toward universal primary education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school net enrolment rate</td>
<td>Number of children of primary school age enrolled in primary school, expressed as a percentage of the total population of primary school age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children out of school</td>
<td>Number of children of primary school age not enrolled in or attending school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropout rate by grade</td>
<td>Percentage of pupils who drop out from a given grade in a given school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition rate by grade</td>
<td>Number of pupils who are enrolled in the same grade as the previous year, expressed as a percentage of the total enrolment in the grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival rate to the last grade of primary school</td>
<td>Percentage of a cohort of pupils enrolled in the first grade of primary school in a given school year who are expected to reach the last grade of primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition rate to secondary education</td>
<td>Number of new entrants to the first grade of secondary education in a given year, expressed as a percentage of the number of pupils enrolled in the final grade of primary education in the previous year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All indicators are to be disaggregated by gender, area of residence, household income and other characteristics.

Data sources for the indicators above include administrative records of school enrolment, national Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), household surveys like the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) of UNICEF, and school surveys. Special surveys may be required because excluded children, for example street children or child labourers, are not always captured by traditional surveys.

Regular monitoring is necessary to assess whether the interventions are successful. In addition, each indicator should be disaggregated as much as possible and measured for the specific groups of children that are targeted by the interventions. Success is defined as primary school completion across all groups of the population.
References


