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School fee abolition and changes in education indicators



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ABSTRACT

Fee abolition is said to play a vital role in achieving Universal Primary Education, and in reducing education differentials by gender and wealth. I use DHS data to examine changes in the Net Attendance Ratio (NAR) and the Primary School Completion Rate (PSCR) in sub-Saharan African countries following fee elimination. In countries that abolish fees NARs generally increase more than do PSCRs. NAR differentials in gender and wealth often shrink, while in the same countries corresponding PSCR differentials remain unchanged, or increase. Changes may not coincide with fee abolition. Conflicting results are widely found. Reasons for differing results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The Education Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE), a reformulation of the second Dakar Education for All (EFA) goal (UNESCO, 2000), states that ‘by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling’ (Statistics Division, 2008; see also UNESCO, 2007: 41). The gender equality MDG asked nations to ‘eliminate [the] gender disparity in primary and secondary education . . . by 2005’ (UNESCO, 2002: 13; Statistics Division, 2008). The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reiterate the need to “ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary” education and “eliminate gender disparities in education” (Economic and Social Council, 2016: 19–20). School Fee Abolition (SFA) is seen as “a must for achieving” UPE (Avenstrup, Liang, and Nelleman 2004: 3). It is said to play a “vital role . . . in determining the degree to which the growth” in enrollment and progress toward UPE can be maintained (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009: 3; UNICEF and World Bank, 2006). SFA is also seen as important for achieving educational equity while serving as a “catalyst for other basic reforms needed to reach equity in both access [to schooling] and quality learning opportunities for all” (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009: 3; Avenstrup et al., 2004).

In this paper I consider the effect SFA has had on progress toward UPE and on wealth and gender equity in primary education in a number of SSA countries that have eliminated fees in the last 20 years. I use two different measures of UPE: 1) the net

enrollment/attendance ratio (NER/NAR); and 2) the primary school completion rate (PSCR). I show that: a) in countries where the NER/NAR increases following fee abolition, these changes in enrollment/attendance tend to exaggerate progress toward UPE, as measured by the PSCR; b) the size of gender and wealth differentials, and in some cases even the direction of change, can differ, sometimes dramatically, depending on the educational outcome indicator used; and c) changes similar to those attributed to fee abolition in some countries have occurred in other countries even before fees were eliminated. I argue that these inconsistent results occur largely because of differences in the way that the NER/NAR and the PSCR respond to the three proximate determinants of educational attainment – ever-enrollment, retention, and timely-progress. (The proximate determinants are explained below; see also Langsten, 2014a).

2. Background

Early in the post-colonial era African leaders recognized the importance of “education for all” (Lesoli et al., 2014; SAPRIN, 2004). Some SSA countries did away with school fees at this time (Bedi et al., 2004; Muyanga et al., 2010; Vos et al., 2004). These policies resulted in growing primary school enrollments, but the quality of education often declined, as did retention and transition rates to the next level of education (Bediet et al., 2004; Muyanga et al., 2010). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, responding to the poor quality of education and the pressures of structural adjustment programs, some countries reversed their policies and reinstated fees (Bedi et al., 2004; İşcan et al., 2015; Muyanga et al., 2010; Stewart, 1994; World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). The adverse effects of these fees,

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and of structural adjustment as a whole, soon became apparent (Cornia et al., 1987; Stewart, 1994). As a result, during the 1990s, some SSA countries again eliminated primary school fees (UNESCO, 2007:113 Map 3.2; see also Horn et al., 2009; Tomasevski, 2003); since 2000, another 15 SSA countries have abolished fees (UNESCO, 2015).

As long ago as 2007 some observers claimed that several African countries were 'on track to reach the MDG of universal completion' by 2015 (Filmer, 2007:166). More recently there has been a growing trend in the development community to declare that '[b]y 2015, the universal primary education . . . MDG will be met in nearly all countries' (Beatty and Pritchett, 2012:i; also World Bank, 2012:12). At the same time, the most recent Global Monitoring Report (GMR) notes that though there has been progress both in increasing access and reducing gender, wealth and other educational disparities, many children will still not have completed primary education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2015). Sub-Saharan Africa is the region 'lagging the most' (UNESCO, 2014:52; UNESCO, 2015).

Though SSA countries may fall short of UPE, studies in some of these countries do find substantially increased enrollment, along with greater socioeconomic and gender equity following elimination of fees (Abbott et al., 2015; al-Samarrai and Zaman, 2007; Deininger, 2003; Morgan et al., 2012; Sifuna and Sawamura, 2010; World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). Recent work has questioned the size of the impact of SFA, as well as its equity effects (Langsten, 2014a).

3. Data and methods

Although the NER is usually computed from administrative data, there is a survey based equivalent, the net *attendance* ratio (NAR).¹ The PSCR is a survey based indicator. Often, even in the EFA GMRs, analyses by gender and especially wealth are carried out using survey data—usually data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. In this work I use DHS data from six SSA countries – Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia – that eliminated school fees at some time since the early 1990s. All of these countries also participated in the Fast Track Initiative/Global Partnership for Education. All the countries have four surveys, with at least one of the surveys having been completed before the elimination of fees and the most recent survey taking place around 2010, and being more than 10 years after the first survey.

The most commonly cited studies of the impact of SFA use the NER or NAR in their analyses (al-Samarrai and Zaman, 2007; Deininger, 2003; World Bank and UNICEF, 2009). The EFA GMRs² call the NER the critical indicator for 'a systematic assessment of progress towards EFA' (UNESCO, 2007: 32). The gender parity index (GPI) is officially measured by the ratio of gender-specific gross enrollment/attendance ratios (GER/GAR) (UNESCO, 2007:200), though some researchers focus on NER/NARs to assess gender equity (al-Samarrai and Zaman, 2007; Deininger, 2003).

In the early years of this century the grade four completion rate (UNESCO, 2002) and primary school completion rates were suggested as better 'criteri[a] for evaluating progress toward the goal of EFA' (UNESCO, 2001:42; see also Bruns et al., 2003; Carr-

Hill, 2009; Kane, 2004; UNESCO, 2003, 2007, 2010), but completion rates then fell from favor. Recent work studying UPE in SSA has used the primary school completion rate (PSCR) (Langsten, 2014a), a measure closely related to the grade-4 and grade-5 completion rates used in earlier work (Filmer, 2005; Lloyd and Blanc, 1996; Lloyd et al., 2000). The PSCR is the survey based outcome measure of the proximate determinants of educational attainment framework (Langsten, 2014a).

I present detailed results for Malawi and Rwanda. These two countries provide excellent examples of the inconsistent results obtained when using the PSCR rather than the NER/NAR as the main indicator of progress toward UPE. Malawi, one of the first SSA countries to eliminate fees, illustrates how, after fee abolition, levels of educational attainment and trends in gender and wealth equality differ substantially depending on the outcome indicator used. Rwanda eliminated fees too recently for the effect of fee abolition to be evident in the PSCR. Still, Rwanda exhibits some of the same inconsistencies in about the same time frame as those seen in Malawi. I provide summary results for the remaining four countries. The results from these countries are broadly similar to those seen in Malawi and Rwanda. The proximate determinants of educational attainment (ever-enrollment, retention, and timely-progress) are used to explain the inconsistencies between the outcome indicators.

DHS provide all the data necessary to compute the outcome indicators (NAR and PSCR) and the survey-based proximate determinants. The proximate determinants framework also provides for analysis of indirect determinants of educational attainment (Langsten, 2014a: Appendix A). DHS data allow computation of two key student/family related indirect determinants of primary attendance and completion: gender and wealth. International agencies (World Bank and UNICEF, 2009) and the peer-reviewed literature (Abbott et al., 2015; al-Samarrai and Zaman, 2007; Deininger, 2003; Morgan et al., 2012; Sifuna and Sawamura, 2010) have argued that these two indirect determinants exhibit greater equity after fees are eliminated.³

In assessing changes in equity I use very simple measures. When considering wealth, I look at the change in the absolute difference in rates between wealth groups. For gender I use the GPI: that is, the male to female ratio of the indicator in question. A GPI between 0.97 and 1.03 is considered parity.

4. Results

4.1. Overall educational attainment

Malawi abolished fees in 1994, and was said in the 2008 GMR to have a high chance of achieving UPE by 2015 (UNESCO, 2007). It is said to have met that goal in the 2013/14 GMR (UNESCO, 2014). In Rwanda, though technically primary education had always been free, there was a small fee to be paid each term (Obura, 2003). All fees were finally abolished in 2003 (Abbott et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2015). Having been designated as at 'serious risk of not achieving' UPE in 2008 (UNESCO, 2007: Table 5.1, p. 180) Rwanda is singled out in the 2013/2014 GMR as one of the 'top three performers since 2006' at reducing the number of out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2014: 53). In that GMR it is found to have reached the enrollment target (UNESCO, 2014). The four remaining

¹ Throughout this paper, I will use the abbreviation NER when I am referring to GMR-reported, administrative-statistic-based figures, and NAR when discussing survey-based results.

² The World Education Forum gave UNESCO the responsibility to "co-ordinate the global efforts to achieve" and "monitor progress toward" EFA (UNESCO n.d.:6). The United Nations and the World Bank also issue annual reports on the MDGs in general, including basic information about the education MDG. EFA GMRs can be found here: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/>

³ There are, of course, many other indirect indicators that affect ever-enrollment, retention, and timely progress. For example, there are school factors such as class size, teacher training, curriculum, etc.; and other social, economic and political factors such as child nutritional status and well-being, conditional cash transfers, development programs, and political will. These other indirect indicators, though important, are beyond the scope of this paper.

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