Building Preschools to Improve Child Development and Mothers' Agency in Morocco

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Regions in Morocco: Beni Mellal-Khénifra, Casablanca-Settat, Drâa-Tafilalet, Fès-Meknès, l'Oriental, Marrakech-Safi, Rabat-Salé Kénitra, Souss-Massa, Tanger-Tétouan-Al Hoceïma

Sample: 160 douars

Partner organization(s): Observatoire National du Développement Humain, Initiative Nationale pour le Développement Humain

Investing in preschools to foster children's education from an early age may be a way to improve child development by increasing cognitive stimulation. By providing free and sustainable childcare, preschools may also have a significant impact on the lives of mothers who bear the bulk of childrearing. Researchers are conducting a randomized evaluation to measure the major preschool construction program underway in Morocco.

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Young children worldwide risk not achieving their full developmental potential due in particular to low levels of cognitive stimulation, including 250 million children in low- and middle-income countries.[1], Early childhood education, or preschool, understood here to mean schooling between the ages of three to six, may be an effective solution and is becoming increasingly popular in low- and middle-income contexts. Evidence shows that children who do not attend preschool are less likely to obtain basic socio-cognitive abilities.[2], Moreover, in the absence of preschools, the burden of childcare tends to fall disproportionately on women, which has been shown to have a negative impact on women's income generation and well-being.[3] However, existing studies on the impact of preschools are mostly limited to high-income settings, and evidence on the impact of lower-income countries' efforts to expand access to preschool, in settings where a large proportion of young children are often not in school, remains scarce.

Does increased access to preschool foster child development? Does this form of childcare provision promote women's participation in the labor force and their overall agency?

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In Morocco, while preschool enrollment overall stands at 72.5 percent, about 50 percent of enrolled preschool children in Morocco are in traditional schools whose priority is religious education. Access to modern preschools with a curriculum that explicitly targets children's cognitive and non-cognitive development (e.g., their social-emotional and motor skills) thus remains limited. This is particularly the case in rural areas where access to preschool education is generally more limited and preschools

are more often traditional.

In 2018, King Mohammed VI launched an extensive program aimed at creating 10,000 modern preschool units for children in rural areas aged four to six, and to rehabilitate 5,000 additional preschools by 2023. The intervention is implemented by the Initiative Nationale pour le Développement Humain (INDH). The researchers partnered with INDH to study whether the preschools built under this program have the desired impact on child development and, incidentally, whether it has any impact on mothers' overall agency.



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To assess the impact of the preschool construction program, researchers randomly selected a set of 160 douars (the basic Moroccan administrative unit equivalent to a small village) from a comprehensive list that included the names of all douars located in nine regions that, according to the INDH programming plan, were not scheduled to become eligible to the intervention before September 2024. To measure the causal impact of the intervention on children and mothers, researchers then randomly selected half of the 160 sampled douars to receive a preschool from September 2022.

In each sampled douar, a census was carried out and a representative subset of households with at least one child of preschool age was constituted. Sampled households completed a first survey in July-August 2022. A first follow-up survey is scheduled for July-August 2024, just before the first cohort of children who will have benefited from the two-year intervention enters primary school. The surveys aim to collect data on children's educational background, parents' opinions of preschool institutions, their

aspirations for the children in terms of education and career path, household members' income-generating activities, mothers' time use, and collect data on children's level of development. In order to track the implementation and quality of the program, data is also being collected on the opening of each preschool, location of preschools, length of teacher training, and teacher qualifications.

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Research ongoing; results forthcoming.

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1. Lu, C., Black, M. M., & Richter, L. M. (2016). Risk of poor development in young children in low-income and middle-income countries: an estimation and analysis at the global, regional, and country level. The Lancet Global Health, 4(12), e916-e922.

2. Greg J Duncan and Katherine Magnuson, "Investing in Preschool Programs," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 2 (January 2013): pp. 109-132, https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.27.2.109.

3. International Labor Organization, "Having Kids Sets Back Women's Labour Force Participation More so than Getting Married," ILOSTAT, August 23, 2022, https://ilostat.ilo.org/having-kids-sets-back-womens-labour-force-participation-more-so-than-getting-married/.