Youth and the Fertility Plateau in Egypt: The Alignment of Two Policy Objectives

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Egypt’s Youth: A Unique Point in its Fertility Transition

Egypt’s demographic profile, like many countries in the Middle East, is marked by a large youth population. This situation, often described as a “youth bulge”, has been of great impact on Egypt’s recent political situation. Suffice it to say that youth in Egypt have been in the vanguard of the recent political developments that toppled the country’s leadership in quest for democratic change in the now called January 25th revolution. While a strong movement on the street that involved Egyptians of different ages and backgrounds, the Arab Spring in Egypt was triggered and populated by hundreds of thousands of young people eager for political and economic change.

Egypt’s youth bulge is the outcome of a specific stage in the country’s fertility transition. Egypt’s modern history shows a significant decline in fertility. Its current total fertility rate (TFR) of three children per woman (Zanaty and Way, 2009) is to be compared to a TRF of seven in 1960 (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:168). This significant drop in fertility has led to a youth population that is larger in size than those who are younger and older, hence showing a “bulge” in the country’s population pyramid. As a result of this transition in fertility rate, the birth cohort of 1985-1990 is Egypt’s last large age cohort (Gould, 2009). It is this group that has been at the center of the country’s more recent political change.

Despite the documented decline in fertility, Egypt has not reached the fertility replacement-level of two children per woman. The documented sharp decline started to reach a plateau by the mid-1990s, with the fertility rate rates hovering around 3.3 in 1997,

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1 This paper was done under the project “Policies to address fertility plateau in Egypt” coordinated by the Social Research Center (SRC) of the American University in Cairo (AUC) and supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Cairo Office.
2 The fertility transition is a term that refers to the change from a system in which the total fertility rate is high to a system in which the rate is at or below replacement level, in which fertility is kept in check by conscious use of fertility-control measures (Henry 1961).
3 TFR is interpreted as the number of children a woman would have by the end of her childbearing years if she were to pass through those years bearing children at the currently observed rates.
3.4 in 1998, 3.5 in 2000, 3.2 in 2003 (Zananty and Way, 2008). The target to reduce the crude birth rate (CBR) to 20 per thousand by the year 2000 was never achieved (Ibrahim and Ibrahim, 1998:24). CBR remained stagnant around the level of 27 births per thousand in 2000 (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006). In the first decade of the twenty first century, the decline continues to be slow and steady, hovering around 25.7 in 2006 and 26.6 in 2007 (ibid.). This stagnation in fertility rate continues to alarm many demographers about the impact of the population momentum.

This paper attempts to capitalize on the focus of youth in Egypt to rejuvenate a longstanding debate on population growth and fertility planning in the country. Given Egypt’s large youth population and their newly assumed position in the country’s political arena, this paper seeks to address the fertility plateau issue using the lens of youth inclusion. The paper analyzes the situation of three of the development parameters most related to population growth regulation, youth inclusion and social integration. These are women’s education, women’s labor market participation and access to contraception. The paper will also look at the attitudes of young people in relation to the desired number of children and the discourse of youth about population issues in post-revolution Egypt.

I start in the following section with a discussion of population policies in Egypt in the recent decades. I get back to the issue of population policies in the discussion section drawing examples from other countries in the region, particularly Iran, for its significant population regulation experience post the 1979 revolution. The paper seeks to provide recommendations that are both youth and population relevant.

**Egypt’s Population Policies**

Egypt’s modern history shows one of the world’s acclaimed success stories in family planning and population regulation. The country’s current TFR of three children, although not yet at replacement level, is to be compared to that of the 1960s with seven births per woman (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:168). This success has been paralleled with the implementation of number of population policies. A growing concern that population growth hindered economic development has been the impetus for the evolution of these policies (ibid.). Population issues, more precisely overpopulation, did not totally disappear from the policy discourse since then. However, the intensity and level of interest varied significantly throughout the past fifty years. Ibrahim and Ibrahim (1998) document phases in population policy when the country had the objective of reducing growth rate without specific policies for that purpose and others when the country had policies in place that had no connection with a clear population objective. A general observation about population policies in Egypt is that they have been described as top-down, with the policy process limited to the policy elite (Jain, 1998:2). Many elements of these programs have been generally criticized on grounds of efficiency and effectiveness.
Policies to reduce the high rate of population growth in Egypt emerged in the political discourse in the 1960s. Egypt’s “National Charter” of 1961 shows the first documented mention of population issues in the policy discourse in Egypt. This earlier phase, however, is described by Ibrhaim and Ibrahim (ibid.) as a period of having the objective of population growth control, without clear policies addressing the issues. Many studies note that the “Free Officers” of the 1952 coup d’état did not have this population regulation objective at the beginning. Ibrhaim and Ibrahim (ibid.) note that the military background of these officers inclined them to believe in the power of numbers. While the civil society had a pioneering role in first dispensing family planning methods as early as in 1945 (Baron, 2008), these efforts were sporadic and hardly documented. These efforts had to wait for the government’s adoption of the concept of family planning for the implementation of large scale programs to start.

In the ensuing decades, Egypt’s population policies followed two major and consecutive approaches. The first has been the family planning approach. This approach focused on the supply of contraception services. The largest supply-oriented governmental program of this sort has been first initiated in 1966 (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:46). This program integrated family planning with other health services, as a measure to save on its costs. Despite criticisms to its mechanism, the program created a “mandate” and a nation-wide service delivery mechanism for family planning methods (ibid: 47). International donor funding for family planning, particularly that of USAID, gained momentum after Egypt’s peace treaty in ?? (Donaldson, 1990:53) notes that at that relatively early stage, the donor community defined the population problem in terms of lack of contraceptive supplies - this enabled to intervene quickly, cheaply and without much attention to local circumstances. Programmatic activities with focus on family planning included information about and services for contraceptive methods, media motivational messages, and subsidized provision of contraceptives (Jain, 1998:3).

Following Sadat’s ascension to power in 1970, the focus on the supply side was gradually replaced by a focus on the socio-economic environment, which aimed at raising the demand for contraception. This approach was critical of the viability of the family planning approach without addressing the root causes of the need to have more children. Robinson and El-Zanaty (2006) note that the Sadat government adopted this approach particularly because it resonated with conservative views vis-à-vis the family planning approach, which was seen as a Western concept that does not fit with religion. This approach started with the premise that there is need to “restructure” the village life in order for families to want fewer children (ibid.). The shift to this approach was not unique to Egypt. “Development as the best contraceptive” has been largely noted in the 1974 World Population Conference held in Bucharest. Ibrahim and Ibrahim (1998) have been very critical of this approach and its impact on population growth in Egypt, noting that the slowest decline in fertility was between 1970 and 1986, due to the diffusion of the population agenda within the overarching development objective.
While seemingly different, the two approaches address the major requisites that Ansley Coale (1973) highlights in his classic study on demographic transition. The demand approach speaks to encouraging the calculus of conscious choice for family planning and the perceived benefit of reduced fertility and the supply side speaks to the third prerequisite of making effective methods available. Whether it is the supply of contraceptives that made family planning possible or the demand of couples for fertility control, it seems plausible that the causation is reciprocal. There is also little consensus among researchers on the comparable validity of each of the approaches. Jain (1998:4) cynically notes that “family planning proponents usually interpret a decline in fertility as an indication of the success of these programs, whereas detractors interpret it as reflecting changes in broader socioeconomic environment”. However, it is the implementation and governance deficiencies that hampered the impact of these policies.

At the time the interest in population regulation started, Egypt had a total fertility rate of 7 to 8 in the 1960s (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:26). Up to that point in Egypt’s modern history, “normal fertility” was the only population policy approach, with no efforts aiming at encouraging “stopping” behavior. The major factor controlling population growth has been mortality in pre-modern Egypt and the first six decades of the twentieth century has been mortality. Other factors that limited fertility related to prolonged breastfeeding, infecundability and widowhood (ibid., 129). With the decline in mortality rates with modernization and relative improvement of health standards, Egypt started to witness what was described in the mid-1940s as the “population jam” (Clyde, 1944, quoted in Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:3).

The slowing in fertility decline starting the mid-1990s exposes the many deficiencies in the two approaches adopted in Egypt. The earlier supply-oriented approach has been described as a “poorly-led, badly managed, ill-supplied, and under-financed effort” (Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:47). The demand-oriented approach, on the other hand, was criticized for the over-reliance of village-level community workers “raayda rifea”, who had a job description of three single-spaced typed pages (ibid.). Other highlighted problems relate to weakening of the system of supplying family planning methods, the focus of the earlier approach. This related to interrupted supply of pills in the field, problems with the incentives payment to clinic staff and lack of engagement of private sector (ibid.). While governance issues were endemic to both approaches, it is safe to note that each approach failed for acknowledging the values of the other one. The supply-oriented approach failed in not addressing the demand side for family planning methods and the socio-economic approach failed in providing efficient supply mechanisms of the service. More seriously, the limited success of fertility regulation programs has been attributed to lack of sincere interest and a sense of urgency by the political leadership. (ibid.:48).
Youth and Fertility Issues: the Conceptual Alignment

A discussion of population issues with focus on youth is relevant for a number of reasons. First, youth as a powerful and large demographic group in Egypt are the outcome of a specific point in Egypt’s demographic transition. The fertility decline achieved since 1980 meant that the current youth cohort is larger than other birth cohort. The demographic weight of this youth cohort is of paramount relevance to the Arab Spring in Egypt and to the economic development of the country in general.

Second, the issues that are most relevant to youth are also most relevant to fertility decline. Specifically, issues relevant for the social integration and inclusion of youth relate improving education, employment for all particularly women, and efficient and accessible health care including the effective provision of family planning methods. These conditions are favorable to fertility decline. Research has repeatedly documented the positive impact of girls’ education on fertility decline. Educated women are more likely to have fewer children, to have less incidence of infant and child mortality, and to use contraceptives. Education, combined with wage work, is very likely to increase the opportunity cost of having more children, which might disrupt the woman’s economic role. A focus on the situation of youth in Egypt as relates to these issues can explain reasons for the stalling in fertility decline in Egypt.

Third, successful youth-focused policies will have a positive impact on both youth as a group and on the fertility profile of the country. Jain (1998:14) notes that population policies, regardless of their emphasis, are likely to be effective if a large majority of men and women want small families along with access to means of fertility regulation (ibid.). A focus on young people’s attitudes towards the ideal number of children is, therefore, relevant and important. Al-Zeini (2008) confirms this notion, arguing that the research and policy priorities have now shifted from seeking intermediate-level fertility to replacement-level fertility. This is a situation where the two-child family is sought to be the ideal family size. For this ideational change to take place, Al-Zeini highlights three major steps that are central to young married couples. These are accepting the two-child ideal, preferring to have two children for one’s own family, and achieving the two-child family goal. The current data shows that young people do not have the two-child family ideal yet.

Classic theoretical approaches to demographic transition (e.g. Notestein’s 1953) have focused on modernization as the general driving factor for fertility decline. While this grand theoretical approach has come more recently under attack as tautological (Hirschman 1994), its tenets still hold truth. Youth-related issues are central to the battery of modernization factors long associated with fertility decline. The rising level of human capital, which starts at a young age, is a sign and a driving force for an “ideational change”, where smaller families and use of contraceptive use well-received (Cleland and
Wilson, quoted in Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006:145). Investment in the education of children, prolonged years of education for women, and women’s labor force participation all increase the “perceived cost” of a child and hence leads to reducing the number of wanted children.

A focus on youth allows for integrating the demand and supply sides of population regulation interventions. Youth inclusion issues, as noted earlier, speak to increasing the demand for family planning through investment in education and youth-focused services. It also speaks to the supply side, where young couples are an important target group for use of family planning methods. Increasing their knowledge about methods of contraception is central for the success of population regulation interventions.

The following section addresses these modernization issues as relates to the youth population. The focus on the results for this group also allows for the projection of future trends in different population-related factors.

**Women’s Education in Egypt: Celebrated Achievements and the Road Ahead**

One of the long established correlations in population studies is between women’s education and fertility decline. Longer years in school delay marriage and open opportunities for women’s economic participation. Data from Egypt confirm this connection. The 2008 EDHS shows large differences in age at first marriage by educational level. The median age at first marriage among women with a secondary education or higher is 22.9 years, compared to 19.3 years for those who only completed the primary education stage, and to 18 years for those who never attended school (Zanaty and Way, 2009). The correlation between education and age at marriage does not vary greatly across age cohorts, suggesting that much of the upward trend in the age at marriage over the past several decades in Egypt has been due to increases in educational attainment among women (ibid.).

Education and the ensuing delay of age at marriage increase the productive potentials of women and reduce the emphasis on their reproductive roles. Educated women are more likely to use contraception. Data from Egypt’s 2008 DHS show a difference in use of family planning methods between women who never attended school and those who had at least some schooling (a prevalence of 58% vs. 62%). The Mean number of children ever born to women with no education by the end of their fertility years (among those 40-49) is 4.8 children, compared to 3.1 for women with secondary education and above in the same age cohort.

For youth as a policy target group, investment in education is central for their preparedness for adulthood and for a successful transition to productive life. Education is an essential life transition for youth. It provides young people the skills to be productive workers, good parents and responsible citizens (World Bank, 2006:68).
Technological change and the growing importance of knowledge limits the opportunity of those with limited or no education to compete for jobs in locally globalized communities.

Despite the government’s efforts to invest in education, recent data on young people aged 10-29 show that thirteen percent of females and 3% of males aged 10 to 29 have never been to school (Barsoum, Ramadan and El-Kogali, 2010). There is little consensus on how much education is needed to reduce fertility. However, the non-enrollment for this large group of young women is alarming. The following graph shows that school non-enrollment decreases among younger cohorts, which shows that recent government efforts to achieve the millennium goal of universal education and reaping fruit.

Source: Population Council, December 2010

School dropout also plagues the system and is similarly correlated with high fertility. Overall, 16% of young people aged 10-29 dropped out before finishing the basic education stage (till grade 9). Females constitute 53% of this group and rural areas are residence to almost two thirds of those who drop out of school before completing basic education.

Similar to the fact that fertility is high in rural areas, so is school non-enrollment and dropout for females. While the nationwide data shows that 13% of females have never been to school, data on rural Egypt shows that about 23% of females have never been to school. Females in rural Egypt constitute 82% of those who never enrolled in school. Not surprisingly, the TFR in rural Egypt is 3.2 children, compared to 2.6 in urban areas.

The above data show deficiencies in terms of access to education that continue to linger despite government’s investment in education. The expansion of education should not
be, however, at the expense of quality. Lower education quality is responsible for the high drop out rate, particularly in rural and squatter urban areas. Rural young people are nearly twice as likely to drop out during primary school as urban young people, with drop out rates of 4.3% and 2.2% respectively.

Investment in education should remain a major objective for policies in Egypt. Such investment carries a double positive impact on inclusive transition to adulthood for young people and for reducing fertility.

**Young Women’s Employment in Egypt**

There is worldwide evidence that female wage workers are consistently more likely to want to limit childbearing than other women. Chapman et al. (1999) show that women’s work increases the indirect or opportunity costs of having children and hence lowers fertility (quoted in Robinson and El-Zanaty, 2006). The EDHS 2008 shows that women who were working for cash were consistently slightly more likely to want to limit childbearing than other women (68 percent and 59 percent, respectively). Women who work for cash are more likely to prefer having two children than women who do not (71% vs. 57%).

Despite increased access to education over the past decades, women’s labor market participation rate in Egypt is very low. The 2008 report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks Egypt 120th out of 128 countries in terms of gender gap. Egypt’s worst ranking is in women’s economic participation (WEF, 2008:18). Among educated youth, women experience slow and limited school-to-work transition compared to their male counterparts. In an ILO/UNFPA study on school-to-work transition among youth (15-29), the analysis shows that only 4% of females experienced a complete transition, compared to 30% of males (Zanaty and Associates, 2006). Unemployment among females is four times the unemployment rate among males, reaching 27% (Assaad, 2002). Analysis of data from a recent youth survey shows that the pattern is very pronounced among youth. Young women’s labor force participation rate is very low. Among those who are not in school in the age group 15-29, only 18% of females are economically active, compared to 86% of males in the same age group.

Many studies postulate about the barriers women face in labor market participation. While some researchers have concluded that cultural issues relating to gender propriety remain a central barrier, others have focused on the structure of the economy and the labor market in the country. For instance, Joekes (1987) suggests that the structure of the economy in Egypt limits female participation due to the paucity of labor-intensive export-oriented industries which traditionally employ females. Barsoum (2004) highlights the disjuncture between workplace conditions, in an economy primarily based on small and micro-enterprises, and the need of female workers to be at more populated workspaces for fear of sexual harassment. Assaad and Arntz (2005), on the other hand, attribute the limited female labor participation to women’s limited geographical mobility. They note
that working women’s commuting rates were significantly lower than men’s at time when private sector employment required men to commute significantly more. They also show a growing defeminization of the Egyptian labor market comparing data from two surveys in 1988 and 1998.

McDonald (2000) argues that gender equity is central for fertility decline as has been shown in advanced societies. He notes that when women are provided with opportunities that are similar to those of men in education and market employment, they tend to restrict the number of children that they have. However, while unemployment and job creation remain central policy issues, there is no evidence of a policy commitment to promote female labor market participation in Egypt. Female wage work in the country had its highest rate of increase upon the introduction of guaranteed employment scheme of the mid 1960s. Increased female labor force participation was parallel to the sharp decline of fertility throughout the past five decades. Economic restructuring and structural adjustment policies lead to the stagnation of hiring in the government, which limited the work opportunities for women. Interviewing young women in Cairo, Barsoum (2010) argues that despite the paucity of jobs in the government, young women valorize these jobs for a number of reasons. These relate to job security and a generally better job quality compared to jobs available in the private sector in terms of hours, workplace suitability and workload. When these jobs are not available, many educated young women decide to stay home (ibid.)

There is need for policies that would particularly seek to address young women’s limited labor force participation. Such targeted policies would have a positive impact in addressing gender equity and in population growth regulation.

Age at Marriage among Youth
Family formation is an important life transition to adulthood for young people. Young people’s ability to form new families is a sign of their social and economic integration in the Middle East (Singerman, 2009). The high cost of marriage, primarily housing costs, and lack of economic stability for working young people, have been major reasons for delaying at marriage (ibid.). This has been particularly the case for urban youth. While the extended family tradition survives in rural areas, young people in urban areas have to cover the costs of housing to start new families. Delayed marriage, particularly among urban men, continues to be one of the major signs of youth exclusion in Egypt (Assaad and Barsoum, 2009).

Marriage is also a major determinant of fertility in Egypt. Recent data from a youth survey shows that that marriage means motherhood in Egypt. Among the 2,496 married females aged 15-29 interviewed in survey, all but one had at least one child (Population Council, 2010). Family size increases with age, as young women have greater exposure to the “risk” of childbearing the longer that they are married. Among married females aged 15-21, 63% have one child and 29% have two. Among married females 22-29, 21% have one child, 36% have two children, and 25% have three children (ibid.).
Delayed marriage, particularly the delay of age at first marriage for young women in rural areas who tend to marry during their teen years, has often been described as a developmental blessing. Age at marriage determines the duration of exposure to the risk of pregnancy. Thus, trends in age at first marriage can help explain changes in fertility levels in Egypt. Marriage is almost universal among young women in Egypt. According to SYPE data, by age 24, about 40% of females are married. By age 29, 81% of females are married. The EDHS shows that the median age at first marriage among urban women age 25-49 was 22.2 years, around three years higher than the median age at first marriage among rural women (19.4 years).

Despite the overall trend of a rise in the average age of marriage in the Egypt, early marriage is still prevalent in certain pockets in the Egyptian society, particularly in rural areas. According to the 2008 EDHS, the median age at first marriage in rural areas is very low, reaching the age 18.3 among women in rural Upper Egypt, the region with lowest human development indicators in Egypt. Early marriage is closely tied to early childbearing. It has been confirmed by many studies that younger married women do not start using contraception until after the first child. The Egyptian Demographic and health Survey of 2005 shows a staggering 93% of women who believed that family planning should start after having the first child (EDHS, 2009:69). Early marriage is also closely tied to higher fertility. By the age of 25, Egyptian women have already experienced one-third of their births (1.1 children) (EDHS, 2008:9). In rural Upper Egypt, where early marriage is most practiced, the TFR is 3.6 births per woman (EDHS, 2009).

Research has long established the relationship between early marriage and girls’ access to formal education. Adolescent marriages concur with school dropout. In most cases, girls who marry early are school dropouts or have never entered school. This perpetuates a cycle of generational poverty, with limited access to education, more children, and limited means to support these children. In 2008, Egypt amended its Child Law whereby the minimum age at marriage for women has been raised from 16 to 18. Nevertheless, age misreporting is a common strategy for parents to marry off their daughters at a younger age. The absence of birth registration and legal documents allow for this misreporting to continue.

**Use of Family Planning among Young Married Couples**

Use of family planning methods is key to fertility decline. Parallel to the documented decline in fertility in Egypt, Zanaty and Way (2009:66) show that level of ever-use of any family planning method increased from 40% in 1980 to 81 percent in 2008, an average of 1.5 percentage points per year. This increase in use of contraception has been the primary trigger for fertility decline. Ensuring that couples use family planning, that women do not discontinue the use of contraception and that there are no unmet needs are primary objectives of family planning interventions.
Knowledge of family planning methods is a first step to use. The EDHS 2008 shows that such knowledge is universal among currently married women in Egypt. Data from a youth-focused survey on knowledge of family planning methods also confirm this. About 95% of young people aged 15-29, regardless of their martial status, reported having some source of information about family planning. Radio and television were the main source identified (by 78.5%), followed by health care providers (25.1%) and parents (11.5%). This shows that family planning promotion programs have been successful in sending out the message on family planning methods.

However, data on current use of family planning shows a prevalence of only 60% among married women in fertility age. This level of prevalence is inversely correlated with age. Younger women are less likely to use family planning methods than older women. EDHS data shows that among married women ages 12-19, the prevalence of family planning use is at 23.4%, increasing to 44.6% among married women ages 20-24.

Data on ever-use of contraception among married female respondents aged 15-29 in the youth survey shows that about 75% of them have used some form of contraception, with IUDs being the most commonly used method. These results on young females correspond with results from the EDHS, although results on married women aged 15-49 show higher prevalence of IUDs compared to other methods. As discussed earlier, women who work for cash show the highest prevalence in current use of contraception. The prevalence rate among these women is 68% compared to 59% among women not working for cash (Zanaty and Way, 2008:73). Education also increases the level of use of family planning methods, with 58% of women without education using these methods compared to 62% of women with some education (ibid.).

Closely linked to use of family planning methods is the level of fertility awareness as relates to knowledge about the ovulatory cycle and when a woman is most likely to become pregnant. The EDHS (2008:63) shows that understanding of the ovulatory cycle is limited among Egyptian women, with only one-fifth of the ever-married women age 15-49 interviewed in the EDHS able to answer that a woman has a greater probability of becoming pregnant if she has sexual intercourse halfway between two periods. The survey also showed that more than four in ten respondents either were unable to say when a woman is most at risk of pregnancy or believed that a woman’s risk is the same throughout the ovulatory cycle. Writing about issues of sexuality among Arab youth, Shepherd and DeJong (2003) highlight youth’s limited access to knowledge of reproductive and sexual health issues. Despite increased access to education and the growing availability of websites on these issues, the culture of shame surrounding issues of sexuality and reproductive health prevents young people from getting the answers they need. This, combined with a lack of access to reproductive health services, has left young Egyptians at the risk of many physical and psychological health problems. Using data from the survey of young people in Egypt, Barsoum and El-Feki (2010) show that lack of knowledge among young people in Egypt is reflected by young women’s memory

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4 The youth survey only inquired about ever-use among young married women.
of their reaction to menarche, with almost two thirds reporting that their first reaction was shock and fear.

**Desired Number of Children**

The road to fertility replacement is marked by the adoption of young couples of the concept of having two-child family. However, Al Zeini (2008) notes that replacement fertility is a relatively new concept in Egypt both as a policy approach and as a reality. In terms of policy approach, population-control messages have focused for decades on having three children as the divide between “small” and “large” families. In reality, the two-child ideal is not the norm. Among EDHS respondents at the end of their reproductive life (aged 45–49 years), about 10% reported having only two children (Zanaty and Way, 2009). Results from a specialized study on stalled fertility shows that the proportion of respondents who grew up in a two-child family is less than 4% (Zeini, 2008). However, lack of widespread adoption of a two-child family ideal has been described as the main obstacle to achieving replacement fertility in Egypt (Casterline and Roushdy, 2007).

Looking at the desired number of children across age groups among married women in fertility age, the EDHS data shows that younger women generally desire fewer children than older women. In EDHS 08, the mean ideal number of children (MINC) was 2.9 for ever-married women. Only 39% of ever-married women wanted a two-child family, while 27% considered a three-child family ideal. Among married young women in the age group 15-19, MINC was 2.7, compared to 3.4 among older women in the age group 45-49.

Data from the 2009 Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE) show that young people’s ideal number of children is higher than the replacement level. Among the unmarried (15-29), the MINC is 2.7 among male young people and 2.6 among females. Among those married, the MINC is 2.8 among males and 2.9 among females.

The above differentiation in the desired number of children between married and unmarried young people aged 25-29 is deliberate. For married couples, the answer to the question on the ideal number of children is often mediated by the actual number of children. The EDHS 2008 notes that the ideal number of children tends to be fairly closely associated with the actual number of children a woman has had. For this reason, SYPE respondents who were married had consistently higher mean ideal number of children than unmarried young people. The mean ideal number of children for married males is 2.8 compared to 2.7 for unmarried males. For married females, the mean ideal number of children is 3.0 compared to 2.5 among unmarried young females. These results can also be interpreted in relation to the prevalence of early marriage, given the fact that this is an age-censored sample focusing on youth. Those who marry early tend to be less educated and hence tend to prefer larger families as noted earlier.
The data shows a number of patterns with relation to the preferred number of children. One major observation is that the education level decreases the preferred number of children. Among unmarried male youth, while the mean ideal number of children is 2.8 for those who are illiterate, it decreases to 2.6 for those with university education. Among unmarried females, while the mean ideal number of children is 2.9 for those who are illiterate, it decreases to 2.5 for those with university education.

Regional disparity in mean ideal number of children persists. Young people living in rural Upper Egypt had the highest mean ideal number of children. Among unmarried males, the mean ideal number of children in rural Upper Egypt is 2.9, only surpassed by those in Frontier governorates (3.2). Conversely, it is 2.5 for unmarried youth living in urban governorates. For unmarried females, the mean ideal number of children in Frontier Governorates and rural Upper Egypt are 2.8 and 2.9 respectively, compared to 2.3 in urban governorates.

Qualitative data done in rural Upper Egypt illuminates some of the reasons for the preference for more children. The following data is from the governorate of Sohag in Upper Egypt. This governorate has one of the lowest levels of current use of family planning method, and is currently the lowest among all Upper Egypt governorates (Zanaty and Way, 2008:78). In a focus group discussion, informants repeat what they know is commonly accepted in their socio-cultural environment. For this reason, data coming from focus group discussion present views that can be confirmed by large-scale surveys. On the ideal number of children, a woman presents her logic for why she would want four children with focus on the gender of the children. The ideal family for this woman would be:

".. two boys and two girls. Because (having) a boy is not like (having) a girl. This is better than having one girl and one boy. A family of four children is an ideal family. The girl is sister to the girl and the boy is brother to the boy."

Another woman seems to echo this same notion noting:

"The minimum is two boys. This is to keep the name (of the family) and for jealousy from other brothers. (people would say) why did X or Z have five children and you only have two."

The above quotes show that children are seen as a source of power and social pride. Having more children seems to be a social achievement from the above quotes. More importantly, preference for boys is clearly pronounced in the above quotes. This is an issue that El-Zeini (2008) highlights as one of the major hindering obstacles to the adoption of the two-child ideal among couples in Egypt.

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5 Frontier governorates have about 2% of Egypt’s population. Some of these communities are tribal in nature with a low prevalence of female education.
Discussion

This paper is written a few months after the January 25th revolution of youth. It is difficult to predict what the Arab Spring will bring to population policies in Egypt. At this early stage, the policy discourse on population issues seems to discount the population agenda, blaming the ills of modern Egypt to the failings of the earlier government due to corruption and weak governance rather than on the balance of resources and population. Over-population, as the issue has been often framed by the earlier regime, is seen as a problem of the making of this old regime. Many young people interviewed noted that they believed that population growth should be a dividend and not a hindrance to development. Population growth, it is argued by many groups of young people, is the main asset of the country and a dividend towards achieving economic growth. Voices calling for populating the desert with agricultural and industrial projects contradict with the serious concerns that many demographers voice about population issues. What is obvious, however, since the January 25th revolution is the disappearance of the population issue from the policy discourse. The elimination of the Ministry of Family and Population and the annexing of population issues to the Ministry of Health are signs that many researchers see as signifying the sidelining of the population agenda in Egypt.

That over-population is not a given issue is not a new argument even among scholars. While not adopting a pro-natalist discourse, some scholars discount the Malthusian pessimism of demographers, and agree with the notion of Boserup that population growth can trigger economic growth and development, with a focus on people as producers not just as consumers (Gould, 2009). In Egypt, for instance, Mitchel (2002) notes that over-population is a construct that needs to be questioned, arguing that issues of social justice and the inequitable distribution of landholding is the reason for poverty in Egypt and not over-population. Similarly, Ali (2002:13) argues that family planning programs represent post-colonial subjugation of bodies to create socially controlling institutions that are similar to western industrialized societies.

However, pronatalist policies seem to be a common factor in Middle Eastern revolution. The Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979 sets a magnificent example of the connection between social movements and population policies. Baron (2008:32) notes that when the new regime came to power in Iran post the revolution, it adopted pronatalist policies. These policies were based on interpretations of religious teachings, condemning the earlier population regulation policies of the Bahlevis as western. Iran witnessed a decade of rapid population growth, from 34 million in 1976 to 49 million in 1986 (ibid.). The demographic pressure of these years, along with an economic crisis, forced the regime in Iran to reconsider its population policies. Baron (ibid.) describes the policy shift as elevating Iran to becoming “a model for developing nations in the area of population control”. The Iranian program had the following components, as illustrated by Baron (ibid.)

6 Interviews with young people who participated in the January 25th demonstrations, conducted March 2011
The new program included an Islamic rationale and the involvement of clerics (who advise people on sexual matters); free contraceptives in a variety of forms; education of midwives on contraceptive technologies; integration of family planning with primary health care; legal abortion up to the fourth month of pregnancy; sex education in schools and factories; and compulsory family planning classes before marriage.

It is difficult to predict if Egypt will take the path of Iran. Egypt is different from Iran in its majority of Sunni population compared to Iran’s Shia majority. Riddell (2009) notes that the mainstream Islamic religious discourse in Egypt has been receptive of the notion of birth planning and child spacing, with an emphasis on allowing partners to choose their family size. Fertility regulation, as opposed to control, has been justified for its wider benefit for the mother and family (ibid., quoting Ammar, NPD,1). However, Iran’s more recent success represents a potentially effective advocacy tool for fertility regulations programs in Egypt.

While the Iran model could help in ideational change towards the voluntary adoption of the two-child family. Egypt has a number of structural issues leading to fertility increase and the stalling in fertility decline that need to be immediately addressed. These relate to women’s education and economic participation. They also relate to addressing unmet needs in family planning through efficient health services. These fertility factors are at the heart of youth-focused policy agenda that should seek to improve the education system to eliminate the conditions leading to early school drop out and school non-enrollment. They also relate to having policies that seek to encourage female labor force participation. Education and employment two are important life transition for young people that are central for their social and economic inclusion.

**Conclusion**
A discussion of population issues with focus on youth is relevant and most timely. Youth have been at the center of the political scene in 2011, championing what has been acclaimed at the Arab Spring for democratic change. This magnificent group is the outcome of a certain point in Egypt’s fertility transition, being the largest in size compared to cohorts that are younger and older. The power demonstrated in their sheer size of this group is to be attributed to demographic changes in Egypt in the recent decades. More importantly, young people’s transition to adulthood is mediated by the battery of modernization factors long highlighted in the population and demographic transition literature. Education, particularly women’s education, is central for the inclusion of female youth as well as for fertility decline. Similarly, women’s economic participation has a pivotal role in reducing fertility and continues to be a major marker for youth inclusion.

Despite Egypt’s documented success in reducing fertility, the country has not reached replacement level. Decades of population policies have shown that the focus on the
supply of contraception without addressing the root causes for families to need more children is less successful. The optimal model now is to make family planning methods available while addressing deficiencies in the education and labor market to increase the opportunity cost of having more children.

Also, despite decades of investment in education, recent data on young people show that school non-enrollment and early dropout persists, particularly in poorer areas in rural Upper Egypt. These areas continue to show rates of fertility that lag behind the national average and that of metropolitan areas. Data on women’s economic participation also show very weak level of participation, with no clear policies that seem to address this ongoing issue.

Delayed marriage has been considered as a developmental blessing for its implications on girls’ education and the economic participation of women. Delayed marriage has a direct impact on reducing the span of fertility years for women, particularly since childbearing out of wedlock is culturally ostracized. However, the extended delay in age at marriage, particularly for urban young men, constitutes a form of youth exclusion that relates to housing costs and lack of economic stability. In a cultural context where “completeness” is only achieved through marriage, delayed marriage is a delay in reaching the fullness of adulthood (Singerman, 2007).

In all cases, ideational change among young people to accept and seek replacement level family size has not been achieved. Ideals of large families persist, slowing the adoption of family planning methods.

**Recommendations for actions**

The above argument shows that there are no quick fixes for the fertility plateau issue in Egypt. Egypt’s population profile is tied to its human development index, particularly as relates to how its youth are economically and socially integrated. Particular focus should be placed on young women’s education and economic integration. In education, there is urgent need to addressing school drop-out education quality issues and the connection with poverty, particularly in rural Upper Egypt. In terms of women’s employment, this issue remains absent from the policy discourse in Egypt. There is need to make women’s employment a priority policy issue, away from allegations that the focus on women’s labor force participation is part of a Western agenda. Rather, women’s employment is measure of their economic inclusion with the latent objective of regulating fertility. Similarly, there is need for law enforcement to stop under-age marriages.

However, the international experience has shown the positive impact of certain interventions in the field of population regulation. These relate to the promotion of long-term family planning methods and addressing women’s complaints from side effects to prevent discontinuation. The promotion of life skills among young people has also been
emphasized as a means to instill values of responsible parenting, gender role attitudes and reproductive health. The above discussion on lack of information about the ovulatory cycle highlights the importance of promoting life skills. Programmatic activities for fertility regulation rarely devote efforts to fertility awareness-based methods of family planning, despite their low cost. There is also need to address young married couples with targeted services to promote use of family planning methods. Experience in sub-Saharan countries shows the viability of using new technology such as SMS messages in promoting reproductive health issues. This is an experience that can be replicated to young married couples to inform them about family planning methods at a very low cost. Specific to Egypt, Al-Zeini (2008) relates the lack of support to the two-child family ideal relates to public population messages that have shown the three child family as an acceptable “small” family size. It is therefore important to make clear the difference between a two-child versus three-child families and the impact of both on population momentum.

Addressing fertility plateau with focus on youth issues is relevant and timely. However, it requires a holistic policy agenda that gives priority to issues of young people’s education, economic integration and awareness raising.

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