**KSD WORKING PAPER 10**

**AN EGALITARIAN ALTERNATIVE?**

**THE INCIDENCE AND PATTERNS OF PRIVATE SCHOOLING PROVISION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews new evidence on the incidence and patterns of private schooling provision (PSP) in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It addresses three main questions, namely; (i) what is the overall country incidence of PSP across SSA? (ii) Can any patterns of provision be discerned across the continent as a whole and, if so, what are the likely reasons for this? And, (iii) what is the potential for the future expansion of PSP and, relatedly, to what extent is PSP a ‘viable alternative’ to public schooling in SSA?

**AN EGALITARIAN ALTERNATIVE? THE INCIDENCE AND PATTERNS OF PRIVATE SCHOOLING PROVISION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

1. **Introduction**

This paper reviews new evidence on the incidence and patterns of private schooling provision (PSP) in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Concerns about growing educational privatisation in SSA have become more pervasive during the last decade mainly because rapidly increasing private sector involvement in education provision is viewed by many as undermining the attainment of Education for All and other education-related Sustainable Development Goals. Proponents of PSP, on the other hand, contend that the scale of private education is not only ‘huge’ but also accessible to the poor. Thus, given a supportive policy environment, PSP could become a viable, ‘egalitarian’ alternative to often poor quality public schooling in many parts of the continent. As the leading advocate of PSP, James Tooley, puts it ‘private schooling has an important role to play in helping governments meet EFA targets’ (Tooley, 2005:4).

With an existing ‘sizeable body of research’ (Baum, 2020:101) on PSP in developing countries, it could be argued that a review of this kind is not necessary. However, what is striking is that the available evidence on the overall incidence and patterns of PSP is so limited. This is especially the case in SSA where the bulk of the research on PSP has been undertaken in high density informal settlements (slums) in just six capital cities namely, Accra (Ghana), Freetown (Liberia), and Lagos (Nigeria) in West Africa and Juba (South Sudan), Kampala (Uganda) and Nairobi (Kenya) in East Africa[[1]](#footnote-1). A rigorous literature review of research on PSP in developing countries which was conducted in 2014 also concludes that ‘arriving at general conclusions is difficult due to the diversity of the private school sector, the significant gaps in the evidence, and the fact that available research is rarely generalizable in itself. .. The majority of the assumptions at the heart of the debate are, in fact, weakly evidenced’ (2014:50).

To date, therefore, no in-depth analysis has been undertaken which seeks to establish the incidence and patterns of PSP in SSA as a whole and especially in recent years. It is only on the basis of this kind of analysis is it possible to reach more robust conclusions about the potential role of PSP in SSA in the future.

*1.1 Key questions*

The review addresses three main questions, namely; (i) what is the overall country incidence of PSP across SSA? (ii) Can any patterns of provision be discerned across the continent as a whole and, if so, what are the likely reasons for this? And, (iii) what is the potential for the future expansion of PSP and, relatedly, to what extent is PSP a ‘viable alternative’ to public schooling in SSA?

The core proposition underpinning this review is that the dominant explanation for the growth of PSP in SSA namely that it is driven by the poor and often declining quality of public schooling is overly simplistic since, more often than not, it is the limited availability of schooling as a whole, especially in rural areas that is the key issue.

*1.2 Discussion organisation*

Section 2 describes the review methodology and, in particular, the main data sources which have been drawn on. Based on a brief review of the existing literature, section 3 identifies the main shortcomings of the PSP research in SSA that has been conducted to date. Section 4 then presents the key features of PSP in SSA as a whole focusing in particular on incidence by country, regions and other geographical groupings and, at the subnational level, by gender, locational and socio-economic status. Section 5 draws together the main conclusions of the review and provides a set of recommendations for future research in this area.

1. **Review methodology**

2.1 Definitional issues

The most common definition of private schooling is based on funding source rather than school organisation and management. According to the funding definition, a private school depends on user fees or other sources of private funding to cover its operational and development costs and it does not receive, therefore, any financial support from national or local government. There are two types of private schools namely for-profit and not-for-profit. The latter include faith-based/religious schools (which are common in some countries in SSA most notably DRC, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Uganda and some Francophone countries in West Africa) and secular non-governmental organisations and individuals.

*2.2 Data sources*

Two main statistical data sources have been utilised for this review, namely UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics (UIS) and UNICEF’s Multi-Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

*UNESCO UIS*

The UIS data on private education is limited to annual aggregate figures of national primary and secondary school enrolments which are available for most countries in SSA up until 2016/17. This data is furnished by national Ministries of Education and is based on school census questionnaires which are expected to be completed at least annually by all registered schools. As a result of a combination of non-returns, poor or incomplete data and omission of non-registered private schools, it has been suggested that UIS data generally under-estimates the overall incidence of private education. A comparison of UIS estimates with private primary and secondary school enrolment rates derived from seven MICS surveys as well as those from a similar survey[[2]](#footnote-2) conducted in nine Francophone countries does indicate that this is an issue[[3]](#footnote-3) for both primary and secondary schooling in around one-third of these countries which does indicate that sizeable numbers of non-registered ‘ghost’ private schools are not being reported in official statistics. For this reason, household survey data on private schools has been used wherever possible for this review.

*UNICEF MICS*

This review draws in particular on data from national Multi-Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) which have been sponsored and managed by UNICEF working in collaboration with national statistical agencies in over 70 countries during the last 30 years. MICS surveys are well designed with well-established population-based national sampling frameworks and large household samples (see table 1). They are professionally executed with well-trained enumerators.

For the first time, the latest five-year survey round (MICS6) includes a question on school ownership type. By late 2020, survey data had been released for seven countries in SSA. Although these are not a fully representative sample of all 50 countries in SSA, they are a good cross-section of countries with respect to population size and levels of economic and educational development (see table 1). As the MICS6 data from more countries in SSA becomes available during the next two years, this will enable a more accurate analysis of the incidence and patterns of private schooling to be undertaken.

2.3 Other issues

The focus of the review is solely on access and equity rather quality and cost-effectiveness issues.

The presentation of the main findings of the review relies on descriptive statistics derived from UIS data and the MICS6 country surveys. A subsequent article will present the results of econometric modelling including probit analysis in order to explore the key determinants of PSP country incidence.

**3. *The current evidence base***

*3.1 Overview*

For-profit schools

The rapid growth of for-profit PSP in low and middle income developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan and South Asia, has been consistently identified as being one the most important education developments during the last three decades. In some countries, enrolments at these schools now account for large shares of total enrolments in primary and secondary schools, particularly in urban areas.

This emergence of sizeable for-profit PSP in SSA and elsewhere has generated a lively and, at times, acrimonious and polarised debate about the overall significance and desirability of private schooling especially among the poor in developing countries. James Tooley and Pauline Dixon have become the leading advocates of ‘low-cost private schools’ for the poor during the last two decades. Their research evidence comes mainly from school and household surveys of PSP in ‘different African and Indian (sic) settings’ (Tooley, 2005: i) which were mainly undertaken during the 2000s. The findings of the initial surveys were summarised in 2005 in a report entitled ‘Is private education good for the poor?’ Their main conclusion was that ‘in each (of these settings), we can say that the majority of poor school children attend private unaided schools, which generally perform better than government schools, at between half and a quarter of the cost’ (ibid: i). By the mid-2010s, they were sufficiently confident to assert that, such was the strength of the evidence in support for low-cost schooling for the poor, their protagonists must be in a state of ‘denial.’ (Dixon, 2013:1).

Three main arguments have been advanced against for-profit PSP. Firstly, as a basic human right, education should be free for all. Secondly, getting the poorest members of society to pay for their own education is highly inequitable. And thirdly, most of the poor cannot afford to send their children to ‘low-cost private schools’ and this will, therefore, fundamentally constrain PSP growth in the medium-longer term. In short, ‘depending on non-government providers to achieve Education for All or Millennium Development Goal targets is a flawed proposition’ (Lewin, 2007:42).

*Not-for-profit schools*

The growing involvement of large, secular non-state, not-for-profit institutions (NGOs) in establishing and running primary and, to a lesser extent, secondary schools has been particularly noticeable in South Asia, and especially in Bangladesh where BRAC has established a large network of primary schools. By contrast, in SSA, the role of these types of national NGOs in direct schooling provision has been limited. What is significant though is the longstanding involvement of faith/religious-based organisations (FBOs) as well as local communities themselves as non-state aided school providers in many countries in SSA. Historically, most schools during the colonial period were established by churches as part of their missionary efforts and were largely non-state aided. Since Independence, governments have either ‘nationalised’ church school systems or taken increasing responsibility for the funding of these schools. Nevertheless, in some countries, significant numbers of FBOs remain fully or partially unsupported and still own the physical infrastructure of the schools themselves. As such, most church authorities continue to insist that these remain ‘our schools’.

National networks of ‘community schools’ have also been established where the state lacks the resources to establish government schools particularly in rural areas as well more widely in ‘fragile and conflict affected’ (FCAS) states. The expectation is that governments will eventually take over these schools once resources become available. This has happened in countries such as Uganda but in many FCAS countries, non-state schooling provision remains widespread.

It is also important to recognise that, until the advent of UPE in the mid-1990s, parents in most of SSA were required to pay burdensome tuition fees for both the primary and secondary schooling of their children. Coupled with a high degree of schooling provision by FBOs and community schools of various kinds, national education systems remained highly privatised until well after Independence in most counties in SSA.

 *2.2 Evidence shortcomings*

The main shortcomings of the evidence advanced by the proponents of PSP can be grouped into four broad areas. Firstly, as noted earlier, there has been excessive reliance on a limited number of one-off surveys in mainly slum settlements in four Anglophone countries[[4]](#footnote-4). The great majority of the population who live in non-slum urban settlements and rural areas are not covered nor is there any comparable, longitudinal or time-series data which could be used to identify trends over time. Surprisingly, other relevant data has not been drawn on to any significant degree especially national enrolment and examination results statistics and relevant data from household surveys of various kinds[[5]](#footnote-5). The limited survey evidence is itself becoming increasingly dated with only one major urban survey (in Kampala) having been undertaken during the last five years (see Harma and Pikholz, 2017). Moreover, it is important note that the bulk of the research on PSP has been undertaken in South Asia. Only 12 out of a total of over 90 references cited in the 2014 PSP rigorous literature review directly relate to empirical studies in SSA. Published research (in either English or French) is virtually non-existent in Francophone Africa which, as a country grouping, has the highest incidence of PSP in SSA[[6]](#footnote-6).

Secondly, the focus is mainly on for-profit rather than not-for-profit schooling and on private primary rather than private secondary schools. Consequently, private entrepreneurs are seen (at least implicitly) as the main drivers of non-state schooling provision when, as noted above, this is frequently not the case and certainly not when viewed from a broader historical perspective. By focusing mainly on private primary schools, the much greater challenge of providing accessible private secondary schooling is not adequately addressed.

Thirdly, the conceptual/theoretical framework is not sufficiently developed to be able to account for the complexities of the functioning of school markets in markedly different contexts. The dominant explanation is that PSP has grown rapidly because parents have ‘abandoned’ or ‘shunned’ government schools in favour of low-cost private schools which generally achieve better learning outcomes and examination results. In other words, school markets are viewed as being highly competitive with parents choosing to substitute public schooling for PSP. However, as will be discussed in more detail below, this type of market situation is, in fact, is far from being the norm in much of SSA.

More generally, the analysis of PSP in not situated in the wider context of educational privatisation. This includes the often large-scale and, in some countries, growing prevalence of private tutoring among primary and secondary students, increased financial ‘cost-sharing’ especially in secondary schools and ‘cost-recovery’ in higher education institutions, and increasing reliance on casual ‘contract’ teachers including ‘PTA teachers’ in primary and secondary schools who are not state funded. The inter-relationships between these difference types of educational privatisation have yet to be analysed in any detail. A particularly pertinent issue is to what extent PSP and private tutoring are competitive or complementary forms of private provision. [[7]](#footnote-7)

And fourthly, the analysis lacks historical context. Prior to UPE, government primary and secondary schools especially in urban areas were, in certain key respects, already operating in a similar manner to for-profit private schools because schools were permitted to compete openly with another for students since parents were able to choose freely which school they wanted their child to attend (i.e. there were no clearly demarcated school catchment areas) and, school themselves had considerable latitude in deciding what level of tuition and other fees they wished to levy. While not incentivised in the same way as a conventional for-profit private school proprietor, tuition fees were frequently used to improve the welfare of teachers through various forms of salary supplementation, improved housing etc.

Similarly, in the context of pervasive economic and political liberalisation in SSA during the last two-three decades, there is little or no recognition of the key role that PSP is playing in the consolidation of a reconstituted middle class in many countries. Private schooling enables members of this social class to educationally and economically distance themselves from intensifying competition from the rural and urban poor (see below).

2.3 Typology of school markets

The analysis of PSP requires a sound conceptual framework which identifies the key characteristics of school markets both generally and in the specific contexts of developing countries. As with any market, the price and availability of a specific product or service is the combined, usually complex interplay of both demand and supply conditions. For the purposes of this analysis, three distinct types of school markets can be identified.

*Open competition in saturated school markets*

In these (typically urban) contexts, the (actual or potential) degree of substitution between private and public schooling is high with little complementarity with regard to additional enrolments. This occurs when schooling markets are (or, are potentially) openly competitive (and thus spatially homogeneous and non-segmented) and where all or most children in a well-defined geographical area/locality attend (or could, if they wanted to), a government school. However, as a result of growing parental dissatisfaction with government schools (poor examination results, low learning outcomes, overcrowded classrooms, double shifting, mother tongue language policy (in primary schools), unprofessional teacher behaviour, high teacher absenteeism, strikes, other disruptions, excessive fees, poor student behaviour (bullying, sexual harassment etc.)), increasing numbers of parents choose to enrol their children in private schools which typically charge a range of fee levels. The key supply side factor is the availability of sufficient numbers of entrepreneurs (edupreneurs) along with buildings that can be used for school premises and an adequate supply of adequately competent and motivated teachers (usually unemployed teacher graduates from teacher trainer colleges and universities and/or moonlighting public school teachers). Where this switch to private schools is large enough, then the shares of private school enrolments in specific localities increase and, if private school enrolments increase sufficiently, it is possible that enrolments in government schools can decline in absolute terms.

*Limited private-public competition in spatially segmented markets*

These markets are characterised by low rates of direct substitution between private and public schooling and a high degree of complementarity with regard to additional enrolments. These types of localities have relatively few, if any, government schools[[8]](#footnote-8) and where there are available schools places elsewhere, these are at schools which are too far away for children to commute daily (due to both large distances and/or high transport costs). This is the typical situation in high density urban settlements (slums), and where, therefore, often large numbers of entrepreneurs (many of whom are trained teachers) have established low-cost, for-profit private schools. However, where the local school market is not sufficiently large (due to low population size/density and/or low household income levels/poverty) in order to generate the necessary certain minimum level of effective demand to support a for-profit private school, as is typically the case in sparsely populated rural areas, communities themselves have no other option but to establish their own not-for-profit schools.

*Open competition in non-saturated school markets*

This school market situation arises where, large numbers of parents switch (or enrol for the first time) their children in private schools but, due to (usually very high) excess demand for school places, enrolments in nearby government schools remain largely unchanged. This is typically the situation with regard to secondary schooling especially in urban areas. If over time, total enrolment capacity increases sufficiently for all children (who want to) to attend secondary school, then the continued expansion of private schools could lead to declining enrolment shares in government schools.

1. ***Country incidence levels and trends and provision patterns***

* 1. *Continental and country incidence*

According to UIS statistics, in the mid-late 2010s, around one in seven primary school students and one in five secondary school students in SSA attended private schools. However, as can be observed in Figures 1 and 2, the country incidence of private schooling varies very considerably across the continent with respect to both primary and secondary education. At one extreme, over 40% of

All primary school students attend private schools in countries such as Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Togo whereas, at the other extreme, private schools account for less than 2% of primary school enrolments in Burundi, Eswatini (Swaziland), Malawi, and Mozambique. A similar incidence pattern prevails with regard to secondary education. The challenge is, therefore, is to account for these large variations in the incidence of private schooling between countries and also within countries themselves.

*4.2 Geographical country patterns*

Countries in SSA can be broadly divided into low and medium-high private schooling incidence groups. For primary education, the first group comprises roughly 40% of countries where private school account for less than 10% of total enrolments and a second group of the remaining 60% of countries where private schools account for more than 10% of primary school enrolments. Figure 1 and Table 2 show that the countries in the low incidence group are mainly Anglophone, are located in East, Central and Southern Africa and have stable, relatively strong states with limited conflict while the medium-high incidence group of countries is predominantly francophone, located in west and central and Africa and are ‘fragile and conflict affected’.

A similar dichotomous country incidence pattern exists for private secondary schooling except a more appropriate dividing line between the low and medium-high incidence groups is a national private school enrolment rate of 15% (see Figure 2).

The standard narrative offered by PSP advocates is of little help in explaining how this particular geographical pattern of PSP has emerged. This is because it focuses in a very general, ahistorical and geographically non-specific way on how low and, in some instances, declining standards in government primary and secondary schools have been the principal reason for growing numbers of parents choosing to send their children to private schools. The introduction of UPE coupled with the abolition of school fees led to a surge in enrolments in many countries. Schools and classrooms became seriously overcrowded and already low learning outcomes declined even further. Faced with this situation, parents who were able to do so, have opted to educate their children at low-cost private schools. As noted above, in most countries in SSA, most parents were already paying tuition and other fees in order for their children to attend government schools, so the notion of paying for schooling was already well established in most communities.

This explanation holds for established urban communities where networks of government primary and secondary schools are well established and where, therefore, sufficient enrolment capacity exists for most children to be enrolled. However, it has been the relatively limited government school enrolment capacity in many urban areas in SSA and particularly burgeoning urban slums that has obliged parents to send their children to low-cost private schools which have been established in these under-provided for areas. Since almost of the research on PSP has been conducted in slums in capital cities in Anglophone Africa, this tends to give the false impression that private enrolment rates are pervasively high not in other urban areas but also across these countries as a whole.

In francophone and FCAS countries, it is the relatively underdeveloped state of their public school systems which is the principal reason for the relatively high incidence of private schools. A combination of relatively low public education funding levels per capita coupled, particularly in francophone countries, with relatively high unit costs has led to low enrolment and completion rates for primary and especially secondary education in the public school system[[9]](#footnote-9). In FCAS countries such as DRC, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Madagascar, protracted economic, political and military crises resulted in dramatic declines in central government funding of national schooling systems which has meant that either private for-profit schools have been established or, where this is not feasible, parents and communities (especially in rural areas) have had to take the lead in in establishing their own not-for-profit ‘community’ schools[[10]](#footnote-10). This amounts, therefore, to a kind of enforced privatisation of the school system in order that children in these crisis situations can continue to be educated which is far removed from the simplistic schooling choice model of well-established public schools competing with newly established for-profit private schools.

At the national level, the overall country incidence of private primary schooling in SSA is negatively correlated (albeit weakly) with overall economic development (as measured by GDP per capita), the financial commitment of governments to education as a whole (as measured by the share of public education expenditure in total public budgets) and the overall enrolment capacity and performance of the primary school system (as proxied the gross enrolment rates and primary school completion rates). Poorer countries and countries with relatively low government commitment to education provision coupled with low primary school completion rates tend, therefore, to have higher incidences of PSP. As expected, Francophone and FCAS countries in SSA are heavily represented among this group[[11]](#footnote-11).

Further afield, there also appears to be an inverse relationship between overall economic and educational development and PSP incidence. In India, for example, ‘the presence of private schooling is actually greatest in the economically poorest states’ (Ashley et al, 2014:23). This would seem to suggest that in high incidence PSP countries, PSP (both for-private and not-for-profit) supplements rather than substitutes for government schooling provision.

*4.4 School type*

The share of private secondary school enrolments is higher than share of private school enrolments in nearly three-quarters of (mainland)[[12]](#footnote-12) countries in SSA (see Figure 3). This enrolment share difference is appreciably higher (five percentage points) in 40% of countries. Although private secondary schooling is typically considerably more costly then private primary schooling, it is the greater scarcity of secondary school places that it is likely to be the main reason for the larger incidence of private secondary school enrolments. Certainly gross enrolment ratios are much lower for secondary than primary education in much of SSA[[13]](#footnote-13).

*4.5 Incidence trends*

The overall enrolment shares of PSP increased by only around four percentage points for both primary and secondary schooling between the early 2000s and the late 2010s. Again, however, these averages mask sizeable variations between countries. For primary education, the private sector enrolment share increased by over 10 percentage points in six countries, remained largely unchanged in 11 countries and declined in only two countries. By contrast, this pattern of change has been markedly different for private secondary education (see Table 3). In particular, whereas the enrolment shares of secondary private schools declined in over 10 countries (37% of the total) which suggests that in these countries, the market for secondary PSP is becoming saturated. Only in a small minority of countries has the rate of growth in the share of the private sector increased during the last 20 years. For most, it has remained unchanged.

*4.6 Gender*

The 2014 systemic review of PSP concludes that ‘there is rigorous evidence, largely from Pakistan and India, that private schooling is not equally accessed by boys and girls’ and that gender disparity is generally greater in private than in public schools, (op.cit:24). In short, there is strong selection bias towards boys.

The MICS survey data indicates that this is certainly not the case in SSA. In the seven MICS6 survey countries, there is almost complete gender parity with respect to enrolments at private primary schools regardless of location. For private secondary schooling, the overall enrolment share of female students is, in fact, appreciably higher in five of the seven countries (see Table 4). Similarly,

among each gender group, while the percentages attending private schools are roughly equal for primary schooling enrolments, they are slightly higher among female students for secondary schooling (see Table 5). This pattern is borne out with respect to the gender parity indexes (GPI) for private schools and for total enrolments. Table 3 shows that for primary education, the GPIs for private education are the same or slightly higher than for the primary school population as a whole while they are appreciably higher for secondary school private education. This suggests that there is a female preference for private education and that the provision of private schooling frequently increases gender enrolment imbalances in favour of girls.

*4.7 Location*

Even though the large majority of school-aged population in the seven MICS countries reside in rural area (see Table 6), there is a strong urban bias with respect to private school enrolments particularly at the secondary school level. This urban bias is most acute in Sierra Leone, where despite the fact that rural dwellers account for 55% of the total school aged population, only 17% of private primary and 9% of private secondary school enrolments are in rural areas. Guinea Bissau and Madagascar are only the two countries where rural schools account for at least half of private primary school enrolments. Only in Ghana and Madagascar do rural private secondary schools enrol more than 30% of total private secondary school students.

Table 7 shows that in rural areas private primary schools account for under 10% of total primary school enrolment in four out of the seven MICS6 countries. By contrast, over 20% of urban primary school students attend private schools in all these countries with the exception Zimbabwe (which has had an exceptionally well developed school system since the mid-late 1980s). A broadly similar incidence pattern is evident for private secondary schooling in both rural and urban areas.

The thinness of private schooling markets in rural areas is largely due to sparsely scattered, low density populations along with much higher poverty levels among the rural population as a whole. As discussed earlier, it is only in countries such as Guinea Bissau and Madagascar where the paucity of public schooling provision in rural areas has obliged parents and communities as a whole to establish their own private ‘community’ schools that the incidence of PSP is relatively high.

The concentration of private schooling in urban areas contributes significantly to growing rural-urban inequalities in education provision in many countries which, in turn, is fuelling growing economic inequality (see Bennell, forthcoming). This is reflected, in particular, by the extent to which schooling is being increasingly privatised in capital city conurbations. In five out of the 10 capital cities in SSA where data is available, private primary schools now account for over half of all enrolments in five of these cities (see Figure 5). The enrolment shares of private secondary schools are generally somewhat lower (but still noticeably large) which, in part, reflects the key function of private education in ensuring that privately educated students are better able to secure places in government and elite private secondary schools. Time series data is limited, but it appears that in cities such as Kampala and Lagos, the extent to which private sector enrolments are supplanting public provision has led to sizeable (absolute falls) in enrolments in government primary schools.

The MICS6 survey data enables PSP to be broken down by location. Since the nature of schooling markets is so distinctively different in rural and urban areas, this enables a more in-depth analysis of the likely key relationships between private school incidence and key economic and social indicators. Given the small number of countries in SSA where this data is available, the MICS6 surveys from three South Asian countries, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan have also been included in the analysis. For primary schooling, no significant (positive or negative) relationships are discernible which is perhaps not surprising given relatively high gross enrolment rates (in the range of 120-130%) in most of these countries coupled with the thinness of rural school markets. However, a reasonably strong negative relationship between the incidence of PSP and the GERs for secondary schooling is observable especially for urban secondary schooling (see Figure 4)[[14]](#footnote-14). As discussed above, probably the main reason for this is the acute excess demand for secondary school education in major urban areas which, in varying degrees private schools can cater for and, in doing, play a complementary role in boosting overall secondary school enrolments.

*4.8 Socio-economic status*

The 2014 Rigorous Literature Review asks ‘do private schools geographically (sic) reach the poor?’ The overall strength of the evidence is rated as ‘weak’ and ‘ambiguous’ (p.52) in part this is because studies do not usually investigate ‘head-on’ who accesses private schools. The Review concludes that ‘there are opposing views on whether low fee schools geographically reach the poor – with some arguing they are mainly confined to urban areas where the market conditions are more viable (i.e. there is a willingness and ability to pay) other suggesting they are extending to previously under-served rural areas where large portions of poor people typically live’ (op.cit:22). ‘There is some evidence of a small minority of children from lower economic quintiles attending private schools’ (p.52).

The evidence from the seven MICS6 countries (plus Mali)[[15]](#footnote-15) shows that the enrolment incidence of children from the poorest (wealth quintile 1) households attending both primary and secondary private schools is (with a few exceptions) less than 10% in rural areas and less than 20% in urban areas (see Table 8). By contrast, in five out of these eight countries, more than two-thirds of primary school students from the richest (wealth quintile 5) households in urban locations now attend private schools. The most extreme case is in Guinea Bissau, where only 10% of children from the richest households now attend government schools. The limited scope for private schooling provision in rural areas means that the incidence of private schooling among the richest students is considerably lower than in urban areas[[16]](#footnote-16). It is also lower for private secondary schooling in urban areas which is probably due to the relatively high costs of private secondary schooling as well as the considerable extent to which public secondary education

in major urban areas (especially at the most prestigious schools) has been captured by children from the wealthiest socio-economic groups[[17]](#footnote-17). The private school enrolment dominance of the richest households in private secondary school provision is particularly significant since successful completion of secondary schooling is essential for progression to higher education and ultimately securing the best jobs in the formal sector. In rural areas, the limited numbers of private schools is the most obvious reason for low private school enrolment rates among not only the poor but for all children. In those urban areas, where there is a genuine choice between and among private and public schools, the most likely reason for the limited enrolment of children from the poorest households poor at private schools is due mainly to the unaffordability of even ‘low-cost’ provision[[18]](#footnote-18).

Total primary school enrolments surged with the introduction of national UPE policies precisely because UPE was usually directly linked to the abolition of fees which, until then, had kept enrolments very low (see Morgan et al. 2014). While there has been some reduction in poverty levels during the last 30 years, there is, therefore, no reason to believe that the mass of poor households in rural areas can now afford to send their children to low-cost private schools. It is reasonable to hypothesise that those parents/household heads who were able to afford the tuition and other fees levied by public primary schools prior to the advent of UPE are likely to have formed the core group of people who opted for PSP for their children especially as education standards in government schools came under pressure with rapidly increasing enrolments.

Despite the claims of the PSP low-cost school advocates, PSP enrolments among the poorest households account for less than 10% of total PSP private school enrolments in the majority of the MICS6 survey countries (see Table 9). The under-representation of the poorest households is particularly marked with respect to private secondary schooling where in all but in but two countries, their share of total private school enrolments is under 10%. By contrast, the PSP share of the richest quintile households is typically over one-third particularly at the secondary school level.

1. ***Conclusions***

Six main conclusions can be drawn from this review of private schooling provision in SSA.

Firstly, the high degree of dispersion in the incidence of PSP across the 50 or so countries in SSA makes it very hard if not impossible to be able to draw robust continent-wide conclusions and generalisations both about the overalls level of PSP but also likely trends in the future.

Secondly, the evidence base remains weak and needs, therefore, to be considerably strengthened. In particular, data should be systematically and regularly collected and analysed on the incidence and other key characteristics of PSP especially on student socio-economic backgrounds, fees, costs, learning and examination outcomes and subsequent education and employment outcomes.

Thirdly, none of the key arguments forwarded in favour of much expanded PSP in SSA can be robustly substantiated. In particular the access of the poorest households to PSP remains very limited especially in rural areas and for secondary schooling as a whole. However, in so far as PSP enables children to attend school who would not otherwise have been able to do is then PSP reduces enrolment rate disparities and, as such, is (educationally) egalitarian. However, when the poorest in society have to incur significant costs in order to benefit from this schooling, then, from an income distribution perspective, PSP is certainly not egalitarian.

It is, in fact, quite perverse that the implementation of free UPE national strategies in SSA should lead to the emergence of even more costly forms of private primary schooling which are held up as expanding access for the poor. With the implementation of Universal Primary Education national strategies, better off socio-economic classes/groups have increasingly resorted to private school providers in order to maintain sufficient educational distance between their children and those from lower economic status groups (see Bennell, 2020). PSP and educational privatisation in general is, therefore, a key driver of growing class inequality in SSA.

Fourthly, the degree of school choice is generally quite limited in most countries. Government schools and especially government secondary schools are not being universally ‘shunned’. Instead, it is the overall shortage of places in government schools which is the major issue. By soaking up some of this excess demand, PSP is playing a complementary role.

Fifthly, the surge of mainly urban PSP enrolments which occurred in the aftermath of free UPE especially during the 2000s is, in the absence of sizeable government interventions, unlikely to be sustained in the future in most countries in SSA. Urban markets are becoming saturated and there are acute limits to enrolment growth in rural areas given their basic topographical and demographic characteristics coupled with high poverty levels.

And sixthly, governments should take full responsibility in ensuring that all children are able to access freely good quality basic education. In certain situations, private sector organisations may be able to play an important supportive role in managing schools as well in the delivery of other key educational services[[19]](#footnote-19). However, on its own, for-profit PSP is not a viable alternative to public school provision.

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| Table 2: Low and medium/high PSP incidence countries in SSA by colonial heritage, geographical  |
| region and FCAS country status (rounded %) |  |  |  |  |
|   |   | Low incidence |   | Medium/high incidence |
| Schooling | Anglophone | Eastern/Southern | FCAS | Francophone | West/Central | FCAS |
| Level |   | Africa |   |   | Africa |   |
| Primary  | 75 | 88 | 33 | 65 | 69 | 65 |
| Secondary | 87 | 87 | 33 | 76 | 76 | 43 |

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| Table 3: Change in the share of private sector schooling provision in SSA, 2000/nya to 2018/nearest year available (number of countries) |
| % point change | <-1 | minus 1 to plus 1 | 1 to 5 | 6 to 10 | 10> |
| Primary  | 2 | 11 | 13 | 5 | 6 |
| Secondary | 10 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 3 |

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| Table 4: Share of female students in total private sector enrolments and gender  |  |
| parity indexes for private schools and all primary and secondary school enrolments, 2017-2019 |
|   | % female | GPI primary | GPI secondary |  |
| Country | Primary | Secondary | All | Private | All | Private |  |
| DR Congo | 49 | 50 | 1.00 | 0.96 | 1.03 | 1.00 |  |
| Ghana | 50 | 53 | 1.01 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.13 |  |
| Guinea Bissau | 51 | 50 | 0.93 | 1.04 | na | 1.04 |  |
| Lesotho | 51 | 63 | 0.95 | 1.04 | 1.26 | 1.34 |  |
| Madagascar | 50 | 55 | 1.01 | 1.00 | 1.03 | 1.22 |  |
| Sierra Leone | 52 | 54 | 1.03 | 1.08 | 0.97 | 1.12 |  |
| Zimbabwe | 49 | 56 | 0.98 | 0.96 | 0.99 | 1.30 |  |

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| Table 5: Private school students as a % of total primary and secondary school enrolments by gender, |
| MICS6 countries, 2017-2019 (rounded %) |  |
|   | Primary | Secondary |
| Country | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| DR Congo | 18 | 17 | 22 | 19 |
| Ghana | 26 | 25 | 17 | 14 |
| Guinea Bissau | 55 | 50 | 47 | 42 |
| Lesotho | 9 | 8 | 9 | 7 |
| Madagascar | 20 | 20 | 39 | 37 |
| Sierra Leone | 10 | 10 | 15 | 13 |
| Zimbabwe | 5 | 5 | 11 | 8 |

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| Table 6: Share of school age population living in rural areas and share of private  |  |
| school enrolments in rural areas, MIC6 countries, 2017-2019 (rounded percentages) |
|   | % school age pop | Rural private enrolments % total PSP  |  |
| Country |  living in rural areas | Primary | Secondary |  |
| DR Congo | 56 | 31 | 14 |  |
| Ghana | 57 | 37 | 30 |  |
| Guinea Bissau | 64 | 50 | 19 |  |
| Lesotho | 68 | 25 | 36 |  |
| Madagascar | 79 | 63 | 47 |  |
| Sierra Leone | 57 | 17 | 9 |  |
| Zimbabwe | 74 | 36 | 21 |  |

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| Table 7: Private school students as a % of total primary and secondary school enrolments by location, |
| MICS6 countries, 2017-2019 (rounded %) |
|   | Primary | Secondary |
| Country | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban |
| DR Congo | 7 | 30 | 9 | 21 |
| Ghana | 16 | 38 | 9 | 21 |
| Guinea Bissau | 45 | 64 | 30 | 50 |
| Lesotho | 3 | 21 | 5 | 12 |
| Madagascar | 16 | 35 | 31 | 50 |
| Sierra Leone | 3 | 20 | 5 | 17 |
| Zimbabwe | 2 | 12 | 3 | 22 |

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| Table 8: Private school students as a % of total primary and secondary school enrolments  |
| by location and household wealth quintile. MICS6 countries, 2017-2019 (rounded %) |
|   |   | **PRIMARY** |   |   | **SECONDARY** |   |
|   | Rural | Urban | Rural | Urban |
| Country | Poorest | Richest | Poorest | Richest | Poorest | Richest | Poorest | Richest |
| DR Congo | 8 | 6 | 13 | 41 | 4 | 7 | 16 | 32 |
| Ghana | 3 | 13 | 18 | 68 | 3 | 18 | 7 | 35 |
| Guinea Bissau | 42 | 51 | 38 | 90 | 29 | 38 | 18 | 77 |
| Lesotho | 0 | 11 | 5 | 81 | 1 | 10 | 7 | 24 |
| Madagascar | 6 | 33 | 7 | 79 | 7 | 44 | 15 | 63 |
| Mali | 13 | 29 | 25 | 74 | 5 | 16 | 18 | 62 |
| Sierra Leone | 1 | 6 | 6 | 41 | 2 | 6 | 5 | 22 |
| Zimbabwe | 1 | 7 | 15 | 21 | 2 | 8 | 24 | 33 |

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| Table 9: Poorest and richest (quintile 1 and 5) household shares of total private  |
| school enrolments in in urban areas, MICS6 countries, 2017-2019 (rounded %) |
|   | Primary | Secondary |
| Country | Poorest | Richest | Poorest | Richest |
| DR Congo | 16 | 41 | 10 | 26 |
| Ghana | 12 | 29 | 6 | 33 |
| Guinea Bissau | 14 | 27 | 5 | 55 |
| Lesotho | 6 | 46 | 11 | 38 |
| Madagascar | 5 | 31 | 1 | 37 |
| Sierra Leone | 7 | 37 | 4 | 31 |
| Zimbabwe | 25 | 32 | 17 | 26 |

1. See Tooley and Longfield, 2014 (Freetown). Tooley et al, 2007 (Accra). Tooley and Yngstrom, 2004; Larbi et al 2004; Tooley et al, 2007; Harma and Adefisayo, 2009; Harma, 2011 (Lagos). Longfield and Tooley, 2014 Juba). Dixon and Tooley, 2012; Oketch et al 2010; Tooley et al. 2008 (Nairobi). Harma and Pikholz, 2017 (Kampala). See also Schirmer, 2010 (South Africa), and Somerset, 2009 (Nairobi). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See CONFEMEN, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Where there is more than a two-percentage difference in the overall private school enrolment rates between the UIS and MICS/PASEC surveys. For more detailed analysis of this and other summary statistics presented in this review see Bennell, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. PSP surveys in rural areas are rare. See, for example, Akaguri, 2013 (Ghana) and Harma, 2013 (Kwara State, Nigeria). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Household income and expenditure surveys frequently request information on educational expenditures of various kinds including private schooling and private tuition. Akyeampong (2009) and Chimombo (2009 do rely quite heavily on national enrolment statistics in their analysis of PSP in Ghana and Malawi respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Only one study on Madagascar could be located (see Lassibille et al, date). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is separately analysed in a second accompanying article. See Bennell, 2021. Forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In slum settlements, the shortage of land to build new schools is a major factor. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The French colonial strategy of assimilation resulted in a particularly elitist secondary school system. Teacher salaries are also relatively high in all Francophone Africa which, in some countries, is due to the relatively high proportion of university graduate teachers who are employed in both primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, teacher trade unions are also particularly strong in many Francophone countries with frequent disruptions to schooling caused by (often protracted) strikes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For an excellent analysis of the reasons why the state has withdrawn from public education in DRC see Kante, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The series of scatter plots figures which illustrate these correlations are presented in the extended paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The five small island states of Cap Verde, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritius and Syechelles are not included in this analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The median difference in country primary and secondary GERs is 58 percentage points. The lower and upper quartile values are 43 and 76 percentage points respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bangladesh is the only noticeable country outlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The data for Mali comes from the Demographic and Health Survey (see Bennell,2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It may also be the case that richer households in rural areas are sending their children to schools in urban areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Unfortunately, no time series data is available which would enable changes in access to private schooling among the poorest to the richest households to be ascertained. As early as the 1990s, a study of private schooling in Tanzania noted that ‘the expansion (of private schooling) has been accompanied by a decline in access to secondary schooling among children from disadvantaged backgrounds’ (Lassibille and Tan, 2000:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. There are only a few studies on the relative costs of private schooling in SSA (see, for example, Oketch et al., 2010, Languille, 2016). However, the majority of PSP studies in SSA raise concerns about the affordability of private education (See Akaguri, 2011, Akyeampong, 2009, Chimombo, 2009, Harma, 2016, Rose, 2009, Stern and Heyneman, 2013, Zeitlyn et al., 2015). A similar consensus prevails for PSP in South Asia. For example, a study by Harma in India concluded that ‘low-cost private schools are inaffordable to the bottom two wealth quintiles’ (2011: 350) and that, therefore, ‘the main determinant of school choice is poverty’ (p.355). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For example, the government in Liberia has recently outsourced the management of some government primary schools to a private sector provider, the Rising Schools Academy. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)