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General Introduction

In recent years, countries around the developing world have introduced universal primary education programmes in an attempt to meet the Millennium Development Goal on education by 2015. This has involved intense expansion of government education systems. One consequence of these programmes has been a dramatic growth in the size of the private education sector and in particular, the emergence of a private education institution that charges a fee that is low enough to be affordable by poor families. These institutions are increasingly being seen as a popular alternative to the public education system. This book aims to investigate this low-cost private education sector and its impact on the goal of achieving universal primary education in India, Nigeria and Uganda.

Defining precisely what we mean by a ‘low-cost private school’ is easier to do in terms of what it is not rather than what it is. It is not a school run by a non-governmental organisation for charitable or development purposes. It is not a school run by a religious organisation for the furtherance of a particular set of moral values or beliefs. It is not a school offering an educational advantage to its pupils and charging a high price for the privilege of gaining access to it. Finally, it is not a school set up by the local community until the government agrees to take over ownership. In contrast to these distinctions, the low-cost private school is a school that has been set up and is owned by an individual or individuals for the purpose of making profit.

Government systems for collecting educational information naturally function according to the category into which any given school might fit. Thus arises the first problem we encounter when looking at this particular phenomenon; governments have very little information indeed about how many low-cost private schools there are and the children who attend them. Added to this is the fact that owners of such schools often attempt to remain below the radar of the education authorities, as they fear, rightly or wrongly, that they will attract extra costs and constraints.

The emergence of the low-cost private education sector can be explained by the combination of two factors. The first is a widespread perception that the free education provided by the government is somehow low quality. The second is the entrepreneurial action of individuals who have been quick to identify an opportunity and are willing to operate their school at the subsistence level of business. Added to this is the presence of a surplus of educated labour in the countries being studied (especially in India), in particular trained teachers who cannot find work in the public education system. Their desperation for work allows these low-cost schools to pay

them a pitiful wage and thereby make their enterprises viable. This book suggests that the dedication of these teachers is the primary advantage that these low-cost private schools have over their competitors. Assessing the quality of the education provided proved to be a very difficult task. It is clear that both parents and pupils feel like they are getting a better deal than their counterparts in government schools. This constitutes one of the main attractions of this new education provision, although there is very little concrete evidence to suggest the quality is any better or worse.

The methodology of the study highlighted in this book was designed to shed some light on the lack of data on these schools and to estimate the extent to which this sub-sector is currently being under-estimated. This was to be done using three independent methods. First, the researchers in each country were to gain access to the national Education Management Information System (EMIS) data and interrogate it to assess what details were available on low-cost private schools. Secondly, they would compare this data with information gathered from local officials, representatives of teachers unions and school proprietors in the area. Thirdly, the country consultants were to undertake a rapid tour of the area to verify for themselves the number of low-cost private schools to be found there. A series of case studies was also carried out in each location to gain an insight into people's experience of the low-cost private education sector.

India

Private schools have a history of more than two decades in India. A proportion of this sector is recognised by the government, but there has been a particular growth in unrecognised, low-fee private schools in recent years. Both recognised and unrecognised schools are accessed by the poor.

The growth of this sector is so great that its impact can be seen in the slowing down of the growth of the government system. Enrolment in government schools is actually declining in over a quarter of districts in India.

Education in low-fee private schools in India is essentially 'subsistence level' education and a preoccupation with economic survival permeates all activities in such schools. Although difficult to quantify, it is widely reported that children who attend private schools are also enrolled in their local government school. This entitles them to a midday meal and allows them to sit the government-administered end-of-year exams in the government school. This dual enrolment results in considerable wastage in the government system. Resources such as teachers, supplies for meals and a host of other entitlements are provided based on enrolment numbers.

Another impact of this growth of the private school system is that more powerful families are tending to reduce their dependence on the public system. This in turn reduces the accountability that the government school demonstrates, since teachers and officials perceive parents from the most disadvantaged groups as being

powerless. This has a disheartening effect on the government system, as it is perceived as being less valued and becomes seen as the poor alternative.

The low-cost private schools featured in this book were found to be more concerned with the staging of education than with its quality. Calling themselves 'English Medium' schools, even when no member of staff can speak nor understand English, and presenting props of education such as books and a computer to visitors in an attempt to prove that they are better than the local government alternative.

What is more, many government schools have subtly begun to ape the practices of private schools in an attempt to stem the flow of pupils. The most worrying example of this is the introduction of English from grade 1, despite a widespread shortage of English language among primary schoolteachers.

In sum, the successful 'selling of the superficial' by the private sector in India has led to a dilution in both the notion and practice of education itself.

Nigeria

The general neglect and collapse of Nigerian public schools in the late 1980s and 1990s led to a dramatic increase in the number of private schools, particularly of the unregistered and unrecognised variety.

The study featured in this book, which took place in 2007, found that enrolments in private schools made up 26.9 per cent of the almost 14,000 enrolments in the public and private schools in the selected areas of study. Thus the private schools' share of enrolment is relatively high at over a quarter of total enrolment in this sample.

Although there are concerns about the quality of tuition provided in some of the private schools, the informants to the study had a positive attitude towards the private sector as a contributor to the goals of Education for All (EFA).

There was a consensus among the informants to the study that there are more unregistered and unrecognised schools than government-recognised, registered schools. Estimates range between 30 per cent and 50 per cent more unregistered/unrecognised schools than registered, recognised schools.

Despite the rhetoric of intent of all three tiers of government in the three sampled states in Nigeria, primary education is not free in public schools. In all the three states, parents buy uniforms, textbooks, exercise books and writing materials for their children and these cost an estimated 4,500 naira (N)¹ per annum and constitute one of the hidden costs of public primary schooling.

All the proprietors of private schools were optimistic that the private education sector would continue to grow, largely because of widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of public schools and the inability of government to build enough schools to address sufficiently the demand for education among the poor.

It is quite clear that private schools do provide access to education for children in poor urban and rural areas of Nigeria. What is more, if their potential is properly harnessed, they can help facilitate the attainment of universal *good-quality* primary education. The policy implication of this is that these schools, whether registered or unregistered, cannot be ignored. The current policy of closing down the latter can be counter-productive in so far as the emergence of these schools is the direct consequence of the failure of public schools to provide access to good-quality primary education to an increasing number of poor people.

Government has so far focused not on supporting low-cost private schools (e.g. through matching grants, provision of instructional materials), but on intimidating their owners and threatening them with closure on the pretext that they do not meet the prescribed minimum standards for the establishment of schools and are therefore of poor quality. This approach is unhelpful and even hypocritical, since many government-owned schools are also of very poor quality but are not threatened with closure.

Uganda

When the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in Uganda was started in 1997, the government funded a large number of private schools in peri-urban and rural areas for about four years. This included providing UPE funds for teachers' remuneration, on the condition that the schools' fees do not exceed an agreed level. As classroom construction continued in government/government-aided schools, most private schools lost this funding and the majority of low-cost private schools now charge fees that are higher than the agreed level.

As in other countries, there are hidden costs to both supposedly 'free' government education and to low-cost private education in Uganda. The mean average expenditure on schooling among pupils attending public schools was about one-fifth the mean average for pupils attending non-public schools. The low-cost private schools are, however, mainly in peri-urban areas. Here payment for goods and services is frequently offered in kind, and it occasionally happens that children drop out of 'free' government education and instead attend the local low-cost private school, where their parents can pay the fees partly in materials such as maize or beans. Only 22 per cent of children enrolled in the first year of primary school in 1997 reached the seventh year in 2003. This is mainly attributed to the lack of a midday meal provision and parents' inability to pay for the hidden costs of schooling.

Government schools are overall slightly better resourced in terms of infrastructure, especially in sanitation facilities, compared to private schools. In view of the fact that more people are choosing to send their children to private schools, it seems that they are making up for this lack of infrastructure with dedicated and hardworking staff and an average teacher-pupil ratio of 1:35.

One of the primary factors for choosing to send a child to a low-cost private school in Uganda is the perception that it will give them a better education. Part of this

perception is attributable the widespread dissatisfaction that is felt towards government education. There is also, however, a perception that low-cost private schools provide quality education. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lower teacher absenteeism and the lower teacher-pupil ratio in private schools allow teachers to teach more effectively and even offer remedial classes to the slower learners.

The Ugandan government alone may not be able to cope with the demand for basic education, and therefore needs non-state actors such as private individuals, institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to contribute to achieving the EFA goals. Public education alone may not be adequate to guarantee all children access to quality education because of resource constraints in the public sector. It is these gaps in public education that the private schools fill. Private schools can help to achieve EFA through proper regulation, supervision and government support in both financial and material terms.

Note

1. £1 was equivalent to N232.40 in January 2008.

