The power of partnership

Working together for secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Private involvement in secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) affects both provision and financing. Private provision includes elite schools often owned and operated by faith-based organisations (FBOs); low-quality 'dwelling house' type schools owned by small private-for-profit operators; community schools run by parents or community associations; fee-paying classes offered by teachers after hours in government schools; and private tutoring. Private sources of financing include formal and informal fees and charges paid by parents of public school students; contributions from NGOs who provide support for school improvement or expansion; and grants from former students, well-wishers and corporations.

While governments everywhere have the responsibility to establish a policy framework that ensures access to secondary education of acceptable quality to eligible students, private school operators and suppliers of services, parents, and communities all contribute to its implementation. At the school level their contributions are often inextricably intermingled. Sometimes their involvement reflects official policy, and oftentimes it is based on local ad hoc arrangements. Table 1 is a stylised presentation of the different combinations of public and private involvement in secondary education. Almost everywhere all models occur simultaneously, although the mixed models – with different combinations of public and private involvement – in the top-right quadrant and the bottom-left quadrant are the most common.

At independence, education was considered a central public responsibility in much of SSA; the expansion of secondary education was pursued largely through the provision of government-provided or heavily subsidised schooling. Private schooling was forbidden in some countries, tolerated in many others, but usually limited to a few elite schools. Non-government schools were only rarely integrated in national education development strategies. This is now changing. Almost everywhere the demand for places is exceeding the available supply in government and subsidised private schools by a very large margin. Communities and private operators are responding to this excess demand by establishing schools that often do not receive any public subsidy. Even when they do receive government funding they almost always require considerable additional private resources. In many countries, public schools also receive insufficient public funds and increasingly have to rely on parental contributions for development and operation.

In many countries, these developments have taken place by default rather than by policy design. Box 1 provides an example of the development of secondary education in the absence of clear regulation. Many education officials and analysts regard the private-sector providers – especially the for-profit ones – with suspicion, emphasising concerns about low quality, affordability and the impact of the profit motive on instruction. However, these issues are rarely unique to private schools, as many government schools are overcrowded, underfunded and suffer severe performance problems. Often a two-tier system has developed in which a few government, grant-aided or elite private schools are well funded and cater to high performing students, most of whom come from the upper income groups, while other schools operated by private operators or communities with little or no public subsidy offer low-cost low-quality schooling to low-income parents. But even these may be unaffordable for the poorest.

Most governments regard the current situation as unacceptable and are searching for sustainable ways to expand access to secondary education of acceptable quality and do so equitably. Many are considering how public–private partnerships (PPPs) can help; in fact, many local, small-scale and informal partnerships have emerged in almost every country. They usually involve private not-for-profit providers, are sometimes designed to include for-profit operators, and are recognising increasingly the importance of including parents and communities. The challenge often is not to create them, but to strengthen them, broaden them, and make them more effective in addressing the challenges of secondary

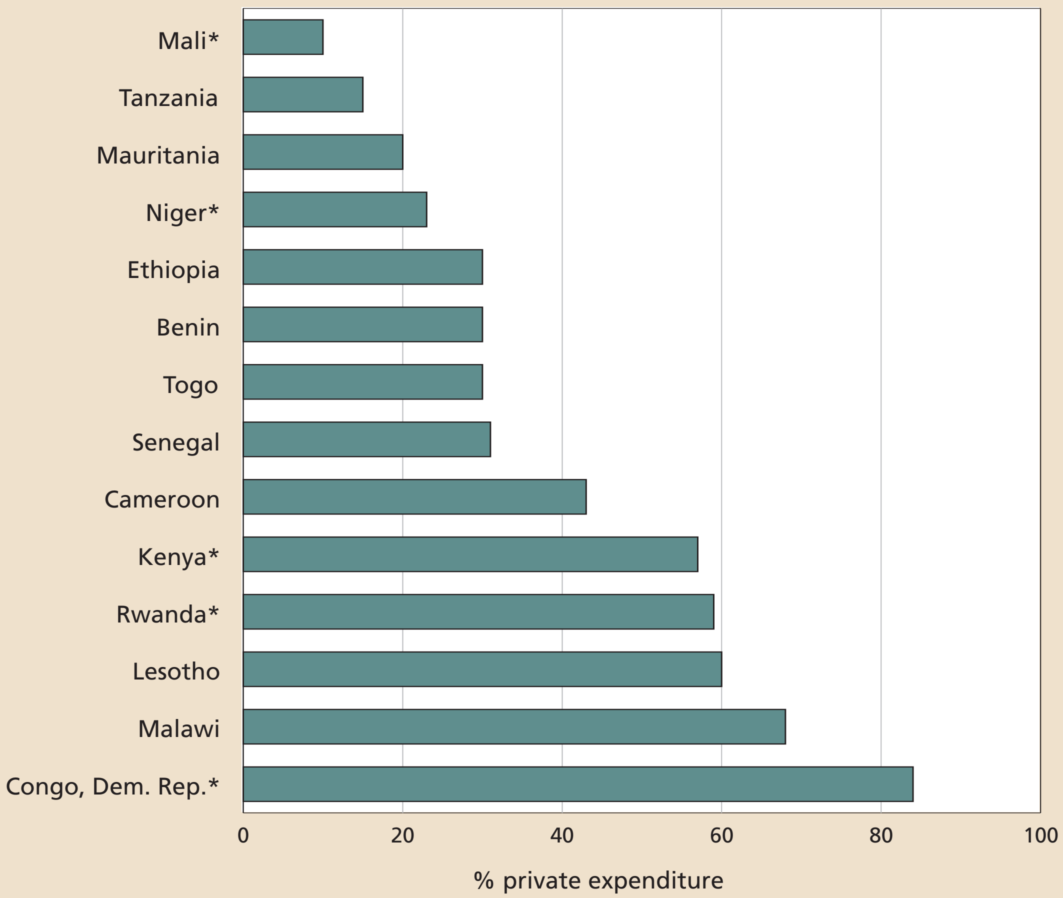
Table 1 Models of Financing and Provision

	Public financing	Private financing
Public provision	Free government schools	User fees complementing public financing
Private provision	Public subsidies complementing or replacing payment of tuition and other charges	Pure private schooling, including unsubsidised community schools

Source: Based on Patrinos and Sosale (2006)

Figure 1 **Private/Household Expenditure**

Private/Household Expenditure as % of total secondary education expenditure



* excludes public capital expenditure
Latest data available (1998–2004)
Source: Verspoor, 2008a

education development in a resource-constrained environment. The experiences with PPPs in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest five important conclusions.

1. Private-sector involvement is diverse and significant both in finance and provision

Much about the extent of private-sector involvement remains unknown. UNESCO data report 13% of secondary enrolments in SSA as private. This surely is a significant under-estimation. Many private schools do not register and are not included in the education statistics. Only about one-third of the private schools in Uganda are captured in the education-management information system. Little is known about what parents spend on private tuition or informal school level charges. At the same time, the boundaries between public and private are becoming increasingly blurred: parents are paying fees and other charges for students enrolled in public schools; community schools receive public subsidies; and public school teachers moonlight in private schools or run private fee-paying classes in government schools. Private funding of secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa is very significant – perhaps more so than in any other region (Figure 1).

There is considerable variation in school performance. Some private schools are high-performing elite schools; many others are low-cost low-quality operations. In several countries, public schools mainly serve the high performing students, many from upper income families; in some cases they are free, in others they charge high fees. In other countries, public schools are low quality and parents prefer to send their children to private schools. The variation on cost per student within and between public and private sectors is considerable and only weakly correlated with student performance. Ultimately, once a reasonable level of resources is available, the quality of management in the school may be more important than ownership and the sources of funding.

2. Most governments are committed to develop public–private partnerships

The contribution of the private-sector providers, parents and communities in secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly recognised. Yet few countries have established the institutions and the policy framework necessary for tapping the full potential of partnerships with private providers, parents and communities, and implementation often lags far behind policy intent. In many countries, the divide between the public and private providers remains. Much of private provision is developing in a public policy vacuum; it is unregistered, sometimes illicit, usually underfunded and almost always unaffordable for the poorest. Regulations for parental and community involvement are often unclear. This adversely affects the development of secondary education. Experiences in East Asia and Latin America suggests that within a well-designed framework, public, private and community provision and financing can complement each other and can contribute to accelerated and sustainable access to secondary education of acceptable quality. Promising broad-based schemes for public–private partnership in general secondary education are currently being implemented in Burkina Faso, Uganda, South Africa and Mauritius.

3. Public funds often are not effectively targeted to promote quality and equity for all

Inequities in access to secondary education remain pervasive throughout the region. While equity is a major strategic objective of secondary education policy almost everywhere, in reality, the higher income groups benefit disproportionately from public expenditures. The often significant private cost of public and private secondary education precludes disadvantaged students from enrolling, or forces them to enrol in low-cost low-quality private or community schools. Equity and quality issues will need to figure prominently in private-sector regulatory frameworks. Two policy objectives are critically important in this regard:

- First, ensuring that eligible primary school graduates – including those of poor families and those living in rural areas, especially girls – will not be excluded from good schools because of inability to pay.
- Second, moving towards a more equitable allocation of public subsidies to avoid a two-tier system with high-performing schools for the rich and low-performing schools for the poor.

Addressing these issues will in many countries require significant and often controversial changes in public resource allocation policies. Public financial support will need to give priority to helping poor children enrol through targeted fee waivers and bursaries at public and private schools.

4. Recognition of the strengths of all partners is essential for effective PPPs

Governments have the ultimate responsibility to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to pursue their education; that the education offered to them is of acceptable quality; and that no eligible children will be denied access to the opportunities available because of inability to pay. This does not imply that governments can or should be the sole providers. In fact, there is little doubt that

Box 1 Malawi Growth without a Policy Framework

Secondary enrolments have more than doubled since 1994, with much of the growth occurring in the government-supported Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) and in private schools. In 2004, 180,000 students were enrolled at the secondary level: 38,000 were enrolled in government schools; 16,000 in grant-aided schools operated mainly by FBOs; 83,000 in CDSSs; and at least 42,000 were in private schools. Public funding per CDSS student is probably no more than 25% of that for a student in a conventional government or grant-aided school. CDSSs came into existence when distance education centres were converted into day secondary schools. Enrolments surged and class sizes increased dramatically. However, instructional quality was very low and examination results often lower than those of private schools. After constraints on class size were imposed, enrolments in CDSSs dropped by as much as 50%. But many parents still prefer to enrol their children in private schools. CDSSs can only survive by charging fees of about 3,000–4,000 Kwacha (US$20–30) a year. Low-end private schools – many so-called 'dwelling house' schools – typically charge around 5,000 Kwacha (US$35). The older, more established private-sector schools mainly serve a rich clientele. Most of those enrolled are there because they do not have the grades required to access government schools, but can afford the fees and value what the school has to offer (including denominational education). The non-government – community and private – schools have developed without a clear policy or regulatory framework. They do increase access, but even the low-cost schools are only accessible to households with incomes well above the poverty line.

Source: Lewin and Sayed, 2004.

Box 2 PPPs for Secondary Education at Independence in Zimbabwe

School development committees – comprising seven parents, the school head, a teacher and the elected local councillor – were formed and responsibilities were defined: (i) parents and community built the school infrastructure; (ii) parents paid and controlled fees for construction, furniture, learning materials and the payment of additional teachers; they also ran the schools and ensured attendance; (iii) the government provided assistance to ensure safety standards and paid a building subsidy for the purchase of specialised building materials, including pre-fabricated pillars and roofing; (iv) the government provided and paid for teachers at the fixed teacher–pupil ratio of 1:30; (v) the government paid a per capita grant to the school for teaching and learning materials; and (vi) the government provided free materials and in-service training courses for teachers. Regulations allowed parents to charge themselves a fee and improve upon state provision. Parents who could not afford the fee were supposed to pay in kind or provide labour for school projects.

Source: Chung, 2007

Box 3 Registering a private school in Kenya

- An application for registration of a school is submitted through the District/ Municipal/City Education Officer accompanied by the following documents: (i) inspection reports from the Public Health Officer and the inspector of schools; (ii) minutes of the District Education Board in which the application was discussed; (iii) certification of registration of business name; (iv) names of school managers and their education certificates; and (v) proof of land-ownership.
- Once the registrar receives the application, it is presented to the Ministerial Committee on Registration of Schools for evaluation.
- If approved, the application is forwarded to the Ministry of Education for authorisation.
- The minister issues authorisation to operate.
- The registrar issues a certificate after the final inspection.

Source: Glassmann and Sullivan, 2008

separating financing and provision of secondary education can accelerate secondary education development. There is ample experience in the region – documented, for example, in the cases of Mauritius, Lesotho, The Gambia, Rwanda, Burundi and Kenya – to suggest that there are non-government providers that can ensure the efficient delivery of secondary education services. The case of Zimbabwe in the years immediately after independence, illustrates the potential contributions that communities can provide (Box 2).

International experience suggests that the ability of private schools to produce higher student learning will often be related to their ability to select better prepared and more motivated children; but that almost always they are able to produce that performance at lower cost. These findings apply also to schools that are locally managed, have considerable leeway to allocate their resources, and are able to select the most appropriate instructional strategy. This suggests that public authorities would do well to consider how they can use management strategies that are common in the better private schools.

5. An enabling environment is critical

Overly complex procedures for registration and licensing (Box 3), exacerbated by the weaknesses of the institutions that administer the policy, often hamper the development of private-sector provision. Policy development for PPPs often takes place without much knowledge of the scope and performance of non-government operators and without their involvement in the process. The contributions of parents and communities are rarely adequately recognised and regulated.

But even where the policy is relatively simple and straightforward, it often falters in implementation. Country experience highlights the importance of strengthening the capacity of public-sector agencies that are responsible for regulating, monitoring and contracting the non-government sector, creating institutions for discussion of policies and implementation procedures with stakeholders, and ensuring public access to information on cost and performance of schools. At the same time, it will be important to strengthen the capacity of private providers to mobilise and manage resources and deliver instruction of acceptable quality by facilitating access to capital, enhancing financial management, and improving instructional delivery and school leadership. Similarly, promoting and regulating the involvement of parents and communities is an equally important part of a well-structured framework for public–private partnership.

In short, PPPs have considerable potential to contribute to a sustainable acceleration of secondary education development. Only by strengthening the capacity of the public sector to manage PPPs, creating an enabling environment for private providers to access finance and improve instruction, and by recognising and establishing a regulatory framework for the participation of parents and communities in PPPs, will there be the possibility of equitable access to quality secondary education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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Endnotes

1 This paper draws extensively on Verspoor, 2008a, which synthesises the Secondary Education in Africa (SEIA) work sponsored by the World Bank and papers commissioned for the 2008 ADEA biennale. An expanded version (Verspoor, 2008b) was presented at that meeting.

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