
Backing the Wrong Horse: How Private Schools Are Good for the Poor

BY JAMES TOOLEY

Last fall the High-Level Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly brought together more than 170 heads of state—"the largest gathering of world leaders in history"—to review progress toward the Millennium Development Goals. It was, we were told, "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to take bold decisions," a "defining moment in history" when "we must be ambitious."

One of the internationally agreed-on development goals the heads of state reviewed was the achievement of universal primary education by 2015. The UN was not happy with progress. There are still officially more than 115 million children out of school, it reported, of which 80 percent are in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. But even for those lucky enough to be in school, things are not good: "Most poor children who attend primary school in the developing world learn shockingly little," the UN reported.

Something had to be done. Fortunately, the UN could call on Jeffrey D. Sachs, special adviser on the Millennium Development Goals to Secretary-General Kofi Annan and author of *The End of Poverty*. He's also director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University.



Pupils at River of Life private school in the slum of Mukuru, Nairobi, Kenya

He proposed as the way forward "Quick Wins," which have "very high potential short-term impact" and that "can be immediately implemented." Top of his list is "Eliminating school fees," to be achieved "no later than the end of 2006," funded through increased international donor aid. To the UN it's as obvious as motherhood and apple pie.

But the UN's "Quick Wins" are backing the wrong horse. For the past two and a half years I've been directing and conducting research in sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana) and Asia (India and China). And what I've found is a remarkable and apparently hitherto unnoticed revolution in education, led by the poor themselves. Across the developing world the poor are eschewing free state education, disturbed by its low quality and lack of accountability.

Meanwhile, educational entrepreneurs from the poor communities themselves set up affordable private schools to cater to the unfulfilled demand.

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Take Kibera, in Nairobi, Kenya, reportedly the largest slum in Africa, where half a million people live in mud-walled, corrugated iron-roofed huts that huddle along the old Uganda Railway. Kenya is one of the UN's showcase examples of the virtues of introducing free basic education. Free Primary Education (FPE) was introduced in Kenya in January 2003, with a \$55 million donation from the World Bank—apparently the largest straight grant that it has given to any area of social services. The world has been impressed by the outcomes: Former President Bill Clinton told an American prime-time television audience that the person he most wanted to meet was President Kibaki of Kenya, “because he has abolished school fees,” which “would affect more lives than any president had done or would ever do.” The British chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, visiting Olympic Primary School, one of the five government schools located on the outskirts of Kibera, told the gathered crowds that British parents gave their full support to their tax money being used to support FPE. Everyone—including Sir Bob Geldof and Bono—raves on about how an additional 1.3 million children are now enrolled in primary school in Kenya. All these children, the accepted wisdom goes, have been saved from ignorance by the benevolence of the international community—which must give \$7 billion to \$8 billion *per year* more so that other countries can emulate Kenya's success.

The accepted wisdom, however, is entirely wrong. It ignores the remarkable reality that the poor in Africa have not been waiting helplessly for the munificence of pop stars and Western politicians to ensure that their children get a decent education. The reality is that *private schools for the poor* have emerged in huge numbers in some of the most impoverished slums in Africa and southern Asia. They are catering to a majority of poor children, and outperforming their government counterparts, for a fraction of the cost.

I went to Kibera to see for myself, with a hunch that the headline success story might be concealing something. In India I had seen that the poor were not at all

happy with the government schools—a recent study had shown that when researchers called unannounced on government schools for the poor, only in half was there any teaching going on at all—and so were leaving in huge numbers to go to private schools set up by local entrepreneurs charging very low fees. Would Kenya be any different? Although the education minister told me that in his country private schools were for the rich, not the poor, and so I was misguided in my quest, I persevered and went to the slums. It was one of Nairobi's two rainy seasons. The mud tracks of Kibera were mud baths. I picked my way with care.

Within a few minutes, I found what I was looking for. A signboard proclaimed “Makina Primary School” outside a two-story rickety tin building. Inside a cramped office Jane Yavetsi, the school proprietor, was keen to tell her story: “Free education is a big problem,” she said. Since its introduction, her enrollment had declined from 500 to 300, and now she doesn't know how she will pay the rent on her buildings. Many parents have opted to stay, but it is the wealthier of her poor parents who have taken their children away, and they were the ones who paid their fees on time. Her school fees are about 200 Kenyan shillings (about \$2.80) per month. But for the poorest children, including 50 orphans, she

offers free education. She founded the school ten years ago and has been through many difficulties. But now she feels crestfallen: “With free education, I am being hit very hard.”

Jane's wasn't the only private school in Kibera. Right next door was another, and then just down from her, opposite each other on the railway tracks, were two more. Inspired by what I had found, I recruited a local research team, led by James Shikwati of the Inter-Region Economic Network (IREN), and searched every muddy street and alleyway looking for schools. In total we found 76 private schools, enrolling over 12,000 students. In the five government schools serving Kibera, there were a total of about 8,000 children—but half were from the middle-class suburbs. The private schools,

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it turned out, even *after* free public education, were still serving a large majority of the poor slum children.

A Typical Experience?

Was Jane's experience typical since the introduction of free primary education? Most of the 70-odd private-school owners in Kibera reported sharply declining enrollment since the introduction of FPE. Many, however, were reporting that parents had at first taken their children away, but were now bringing them back—because they hadn't liked what they'd found in the government schools. We also found the ex-managers of 35 private schools that had closed since FPE was introduced, 25 of whom said that it was FPE that had led to their demise. Calculating the net decline in private-school enrollment, it turned out that there were many, many more children who had left the private schools than the 3,300 reported to have entered the government schools on Kibera's periphery and who were part of the much celebrated one million-plus supposedly newly enrolled in education.

In other words, the headlined increase in numbers of

enrolled children was fictitious: the net impact of FPE was at best precisely the same number of children enrolled in primary school—only that some had transferred from private to government schools.

I discussed these findings with senior government, World Bank, and other aid officials. They were surprised by the number of private schools I had found. But, they said, if children had transferred from private to state schools, then this was good: "No one believes that the private schools offer quality education," I was told. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission for Africa agrees: conceding that mushrooming private schools exist in some unspecified parts of sub-Saharan Africa, it reports that they "are without adequate state regulation and are of a low quality."

But why would parents be as foolhardy to pay to send their children to schools of such low quality? One school owner in a similar situation in Ghana, where we later conducted the research, challenged me when I observed that her school building was little more than a corrugated iron roof on rickety poles and that the government school, just a few hundred yards away, was a smart, proper brick building. "Education is not about buildings," she scolded. "What matters is what is in the teacher's heart. In our hearts, we love the children and do our best for them." She left it open, when probed, what the teachers in the government school felt in their hearts toward the poor children.

Exploring further in Kenya, my team and I spoke to parents, some of whom had taken their children to the "free" government schools, but had been disillusioned by what they found and returned to the private schools. Their reasons were straightforward: in the government schools class sizes had increased dramatically and teachers couldn't cope with 100 or more pupils, five times the number in the private-school classes. Parents compared notes when their children came home from school and saw that



A typical private school in rural Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria

in the state schools pupil notebooks remained unmarked for weeks; they contrasted this with the detailed attention given to all children's work in the private schools. They heard tales from their children of how teachers came to the state school and did their knitting or fell asleep. One summed up the situation succinctly: "If you go to a market and are offered free fruit and vegetables, they will be rotten. If you want fresh fruit and veg, you have to pay for them."

Perhaps these poor parents are misguided. Certainly that's what officials believe. But are they right? We tested 3,000 children, roughly half from the Nairobi slums and half from the government schools on the periphery, using standardized tests in math, English, and Kiswahili. We tested the children's and their teachers' IQs and gave questionnaires to pupils, their parents, teachers, and school managers so that we could control for all relevant background variables. Although the government schools served the privileged middle classes as well as the slum children, the private schools—serving only slum children—outperformed the government schools in mathematics and Kiswahili, although the latter had a slight advantage in English. But English would be picked up by privileged children through television and interaction with parents. When we statistically controlled for all relevant background variables, the private schools outperformed the government schoolchildren in all three subjects.

But there was a further twist. The private schools outperformed the government schools for considerably lower cost. Even if we ignore the massive costs of the government bureaucracy and focus just on the classroom level, we find the private schools are doing better for about a third of teacher-salary costs: the average monthly teacher salary in government schools was Ksh. 11,080 (\$155) compared to Ksh. 3,735 (\$52) in the private schools.

Free primary education in Kenya, a showcase example of the UN's "Quick Wins" strategy, has simply trans-

ferred children from private schools, where they got a good deal, closely supervised by parents, with teachers who turn up and teach, to state schools, where they are being dramatically let down. One parent was clear what the solution was: "We do not want our children to go to a state school. The government offered free education. Why didn't it give us the money instead and let us choose where to send our children?" For this parent, a voucher system was the obvious way forward, putting her right back in control.

Perpetual "Aid"

Perhaps some will argue that these are teething problems and the UN's "Quick Wins" need time to bed down. The evidence does not support this either. Take Nigeria, for example, which introduced its free primary education act in 1976. Ever since, state education has been backed by huge dollops of international aid, but it doesn't seem much to celebrate.

Drive across the low highway viaduct over toward Victoria Island, in the bustling city of Lagos, for instance, and you'll see the shantytown of Makoko, home to an estimated 50,000 people, sprawling out into the black waters below. Wooden huts on stilts stretch out into the lagoon; young men punt; and women paddle dug-out canoes down into narrow canals weaving between the raised homes.

Across the top of the shantytown, there is a veneer of drifting smog created by the open fires used for cooking. Again, it's the last place that you'd expect to witness an educational revolution taking place. But, again, that's precisely what's happening.

To get to Makoko by road, you'll need to turn off Third Mainland Bridge, into the congested Murtal Muhammed Way and sharply into Makoko Street, easing past the women crowding the streets selling tomatoes, peppers, yams, chilies, and crayfish. At the end of this road, there is the entrance to two parallel and imposing four-story concrete buildings. These buildings contain

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One of 76 private schools the author and his team found in the slum of Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya

three public primary schools, originally church schools nationalized by the state in the 1980s, all on the same site, designed by the state officials to serve the whole population of Makoko.

Visiting these three public schools is a dispiriting experience. Our visit was a scheduled one; the schools had had time to prepare. But even so, in most of the classrooms, the children seemed to be doing very little. In one the young male teacher was fast asleep at his desk, not aroused even when the children rose to noisily chant greetings to their visitors. In others the teacher was sitting reading a newspaper or chatting with someone outside the door, having written a few simple things on the board, which the class had finished copying. In one of the three schools, Grade 1 had 95 children present, three classes put together because of long-term teacher absenteeism. The children were doing nothing; some were also sleeping; one girl was cleaning the windows. The one teacher was hanging around outside the class door. No one, certainly not the headmistress, seemed remotely embarrassed by any of this. I asked the children what lesson they were doing—when no one responded, the head teacher bellowed at the pupils to get an answer; “It is a mathematics lesson,” she reported, pleasantly, without any sense of incongruity, for no child had a single book open.

This one of the three schools alone could accommodate 1,500 children. The headmistress told us that par-

ents left the school en masse a few years earlier because of teacher strikes. But things have improved, and children have returned, she said, with 500 now enrolled. On the top floor of the stark building, however, there were six classrooms empty, all complete with desks and chairs, waiting for children to return. “Why don’t parents send their children here?” we asked the headmistress. Her explanation was simple: “Parents in the slums don’t value education. They’re illiterate and ignorant. Some don’t even know that education is free here. But most can’t be bothered to send their children to school.” We innocently remarked that we’d heard that, perhaps, parents were sending their children to private schools instead, and were greeted with laughter: “They are very poor families living in the slum . . . They can’t afford private education!”

But she is entirely wrong. Continue past the three public schools, past where the tarred road ends at a raised speed bump, and enter Apollo Street, too muddy for a vehicle. Here you’ll need to pick your way carefully, squelching your way from one side of the street to the other, avoiding the worst excesses of the slime and mud and excrement and piled rubbish. Walk alongside the huts visible from the highway—homes made of flat timbers, supported by narrow slithers of planks sunk into the black waters below—and you’ll come to a pink plastered concrete building with colorful pictures of children’s toys and animals, and “Ken Ade Private School” emblazoned across the top of the wall.

Ken Ade Private School, not on any official list of schools, so unknown to government, is owned by Mr. Bawo Sabo Elieu Ayeseminikan—known to everyone as “B.S.E.” B.S.E. had set up the school on April 16, 1990, starting with only five children in the church hall, parents paying fees on a daily basis when they could afford to do so. Now he has about 200 children, from nursery to primary 6. The fees are about 2,200 Nigeria naira (\$17) per term, or about \$4 per month, but there are 25 children who come for free. “If a child is orphaned, what can I do? I can’t send her away,” he says.

Philanthropy and Commerce

His motives for setting up the school are a mixture of philanthropy and commerce—yes, he needed work and saw that there was a demand for school places

from parents disillusioned with the state schools. But his heart also went out to the children in his community and from his church—how could he help them better themselves? True, there were the three public schools at the end of the road, but although they were only about a kilometer from where he set up his school, the distance was a barrier for many parents, who didn't want their girls walking down the crowded streets where abductors might lurk. But mainly it was the educational standards in the public school that made parents want an alternative. When they encouraged B.S.E. to set up the school 15 years earlier, parents knew that the teachers were frequently on strike—in fairness to the teachers, protesting about nonpayment of their salaries.

We arrange to meet some parents, visiting in their homes on stilts. The parents from the community are all poor, the men usually fishermen, the women trading in fish, or selling other goods along Apollo Street. Their maximum earnings might amount to about \$50 per month, but many are on lower incomes than that. The parents tell us without hesitation that there is no question of where they send their children if they can afford to do so—to private school. Some have one or two of their children in the private school and one or two others in the public school, and they know well, they tell us, how differently children are treated in each. One woman said: "We see how children's books never get touched in the public school." Another man ventured: "We pass the public school many days and see the children outside all of the time, doing nothing. But in the private schools, we see them everyday working hard. In the public school, children are abandoned."

And of course, Ken Ade Private School is not alone in Makoko. In fact, it is one of 30 private primary schools in the shantytown. I know, because I sent in a research team, graduate students from Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan, to find as many of the schools as they could. In the 30 private schools found, enrollment was reported to be 3,611, all from the

slum itself, while the enrollment in the three public schools was reported to be 1,709, but some of these children came from outside Makoko. That is, the great majority, at least 68 percent, of all schoolchildren in Makoko attends private school.

Whether it's in Nigeria or Ghana, which started its own free primary education process in 1996, or India, where free primary education dates back to 1986, in poor areas my researchers found exactly the same story: the majority of poor schoolchildren attend private schools that outperform the state schools for a fraction of the teacher-salary cost.

Not only is the UN backing the wrong horse, it is also missing a trick: for the existence of private schools for the poor provides a grassroots solution to the problem of achieving universal basic education by 2015—without the huge dollops of aid supposedly required. If so many children are in private unregistered schools, then education for all is much easier to achieve than currently believed. Dramatically, in Lagos State, Nigeria, the experts tell us that 50 percent of school-aged children are out of school. My research suggests that it is only 26 percent—the remainder in private unregistered schools, off the state's radar.

But all of this is a success story that's not being celebrated. And perhaps the reasons why are obvious. National governments are threatened by the existence of this counterrevolution in private education, for if they can't get basic education right, then people might wonder: what *can* they do? Aid agencies might wonder whether they have been backing the wrong horse for decades. And development experts feel ideologically snubbed: they believe that the poor need aid channeled through government schools; they're offended that instead, the poor seem to have their own ideas about how educational needs can best be provided. But poor parents know what they are doing. They want the best for their children and know that private schools are the way forward. The question is: will anyone with power and influence listen to them?

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