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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ATTAINING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: SOCIAL CLASS REPRODUCTION, EDUCATION DISTANCING AND JOB COMPETITION

PAUL BENNELL

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**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ATTAINING UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA:**

**SOCIAL CLASS REPRODUCTION, EDUCATION DISTANCING AND JOB COMPETITION**

1. **Introduction**

This is the first of two articles on the political economy of primary education reform in sub-Saharan Africa. It explores three key sets of factors which could be influencing the degree to which the goal of universal primary education in SSA is likely to be attained. These are the rapid emergence of new social class relations which are related to key educational developments in many countries, (in particular the rapid growth of higher education and private schooling provision), the overall demand for primary education and the competition for jobs in the formal sector. This provides the essential contextual background for the second article which explores the politics of UPE and, in particular, the level of elite political commitment for the attainment of UPE.

The most recent World Bank review of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) concludes that the overall progress in achieving the goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE) has been ‘nothing short of astounding’ (Bashir et al. 2018, xxxi). In particular, total primary school enrolments increased from 63 million in 1990 to 152 million in 2015. And yet, it is clear that the ultimate goal of UPE, namely that all children complete primary education is far from being achieved in most countries in SSA. In its 2015 review of the UPE Millennium Development Goal, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report concluded that progress has ‘stagnated since 2007’ (p.6)[[1]](#footnote-1). Other commentators have also expressed significant concerns about the prospects for attaining UPE in the foreseeable future (see, for example, Frederiksen, 2020; Kosack, 2008).

*1.1 Standard explanations*

Getting the large numbers of children who remain ‘out-of-school’ to complete primary schooling is the key issue in ensuring the attainment of UPE. The latest World Bank review exemplifies the approach typically adopted by educational economists and other expert commentators in analysing this issue. While reference is made to the ‘social, cultural, economic, security and political context’, little or no attempt is made to investigate any of these contextual factors in any detail. Instead, the World Bank Review postulates the following seven ‘challenges’ that are preventing the attainment of UPE: large populations, high annual child population growth, low GDP growth per capita, high inequality, high share of population in poverty, high linguistic diversity index, and high conflict. While these are undoubtedly important factors, what is required is a broader conceptual framework which is able to analyse key economic, social and political developments during the last 30 years or so.

Other explanatory frameworks are similarly economistic and ahistorical with no substantive political economy analysis. A notable example is the high profile UNESCO annual Global Monitoring Report. While these reports periodically recognise that ‘lack of adequate commitment’, ‘insufficient implementation’ and the persistence of ‘key structural barriers’ are important issues, the main analytical focus is on the identification and quantification of a range of economic/financial ‘demand’ and ‘supply’ access constraints mainly at the school, individual student and household level[[2]](#footnote-2). This is very much in line with the standard theoretical and empirical approaches adopted by most education economists in order to explain low primary school attendance and completion rates. The growing popularity of natural experiments based on randomised control trials in assessing specific ‘interventions’ aimed at improving school access and quality is just the latest manifestation of this attachment to primarily quantitative, econometrics-driven analysis.

This two-article review seeks to go beyond these narrowly technicist explanations by adopting a broader approach which is rooted in the rapidly evolving political economy in SSA. Its main proposition is that the lack of progress in attaining UPE in SSA can only be properly understood by focusing on the wider impact on primary education attainment levels of the combined social, political and economic forces and processes that characterise this new political economy. The main conclusion arising from this analysis is that, given the prevailing situation in most countries, it is unlikely that UPE in SSA can be attained in the foreseeable future.

Since its inception[[3]](#footnote-3), UPE has been at the very centre of national pro-poor strategies which aim to improve the competencies and overall capabilities of the poor while, at the same time, reducing educational and income inequalities. However, as early as 2005, Govinda concluded that ‘public policies to promote the expansion of primary education tend not to benefit the poor’ (p.87). With some important caveats, our analysis tentatively supports this basic contention. UPE has exacerbated the ‘poverty trap’ amongst the poorest especially in rural areas who are increasingly being ‘left behind’ as a result of intensifying competition with respect to social class forces, jobs/employment and educational opportunities/access.

*1.3 Article organisation*

The discussion is organised as follows. Section 2 describes the review methodology. Section 3 summarises the progress to date of UPE with particular attention being paid to primary school completion rates in rural areas. Section 4 provides a very brief overview of the evolving political economy in SSA during the last two-three decades. Section 5 then discuss how social class, employment and educational competition and distancing could be affecting levels of political and financial commitment to UPE. Section 6 summarises the main economic benefits of UPE. Finally, section 7 presents the main conclusions and future areas of research.

1. **Review methodology**

*2.1 Conceptual framework*

The overall conceptual framework of the paper focuses on the analysis of three inter-related aspects of competition, namely competition between social classes, competition for good education and competition for ‘good jobs’. The role of education in the reproduction of class systems and the privileged positions of elites has been extensively researched by sociologists throughout the world (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Giddens 1989; Gintis and Bowles 1975). The job competition model is an extension of internal labour market theory which highlights the role of formal education in determining an individual’s place in employment queues for job vacancies (see Doeringer and Priore, 1971; Thurow, 1975) . With regard to education competition, since educational attainment and formal qualifications are widely used by employers as proxies for trainability, individuals seek to gain a competitive advantage at the head of employment queues by acquiring the best education and thus qualifications as possible. This in turn leads to qualification escalation especially in situations where excess demand exists for the available jobs (see Dore, 1976).

 *2.2 Data analysis*

The review attempts to pull together relevant information and data from all available sources. However, it is fully recognised that there is currently insufficient data to be able to make robust assessments of all key propositions/hypotheses concerning the evolving political of UPE in SSA.

Much of the academic analysis of the education sector in SSA relies on data that is over 10 years old. In order to be as up to date as possible, the analysis of the progress to date of UPE only utilises household survey data that is less than five-six years old.

With over 50 countries in SSA, it is necessary to exercise considerable caution in drawing continent-wide generalisations about the political economy of education reform in SSA. Only further research will be able to test and refine what are, at this stage, quite tentative generalisations and conclusions.

*Household and labour force surveys*

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) are the two most important, consistent sources of household data on education completion/attainment in SSA. The global DHS programme is funded by USAID while the MICS are funded and managed by UNICEF. This review focuses on the 18 countries in SSA where DHS and/or MICS have been conducted since 2014. Between them, these countries are reasonably representative of countries in SSA with respect to population size and economic and educational development.

The DHS and MICS are large national surveys based on randomised cluster sampling of population census enumeration areas[[4]](#footnote-4). They should be conducted by national statistical organisations every five years although this is frequently not the case[[5]](#footnote-5) which leads to gaps in coverage both geographically and over time.

With regard to education, each survey requests information on the current education status of every member of the sampled household as well as their overall level of educational attainment which can be disaggregated by sex, location, and wealth quintile. In analysing the overall political economy of UPE, it is essential to have an overall picture of the educational attainment profile of the population over time. For this reason, therefore, the age group 18-24 has been selected as the reference population with the year 2000 (or nearest year possible) as the initial baseline year. Both the DHS and MICS employ the same, tried and tested, and thus very robust survey methodology over relatively long time periods which yields consistently accurate estimates of primary and secondary school completion rates.

Three other organisational data sets have been utilised for this review, namely the ILO (labour force and employment), UNESCO Institute of Statistics (education) and the World Bank (economic and poverty data).

1. **Progress to date**

*3.1 Primary school completion rates: levels, increases and trends*

The only accurate indicator for assessing the degree to which UPE has been attained is the primary school completion rate (PSRC) for each individual country based on the most recent household survey data[[6]](#footnote-6). Figure 1 shows that PSRCs remain persistently low in the majority of countries in SSA[[7]](#footnote-7). In a sizeable minority of countries they still remain below 50% over 25 years after the first global UPE declaration was made in Jomtien in 1990.

Net enrolment rates are much higher in most countries which indicates that there has been considerable success in getting children to enrol in primary school. The challenge has been keeping them there.

The overall increase in PSCRs is another important indicator of the relative performance of countries in meeting the UPE target. Figure 2[[8]](#footnote-8) shows that in only around one-quarter of the 33 countries for which survey data is available, have PSCRs increased by more than 20 percentage points. All but one of these

countries had very low PSCRs of below 30% in 2000. The performance of nearly one-third of countries has been particularly poor with lower than 10 percentage point increases in PSRCs[[9]](#footnote-9).

Not only are the absolute increases in PSCRs generally small, but, after 2010, the rate of growth in PSCRs declined in more than half of all countries (see table 1). This slowdown occurred during the run up to the 2015 MDG UPE target deadline when countries were expected to accelerate their efforts to attain UPE. In four countries (Benin, Madagascar, Malawi, and Sudan), PSCRs actually fell after 2010.

The proportion of children sitting and passing primary school leaving examinations is another key UPE performance indicator. This is because in most countries, these are high stakes examinations which determine access to secondary schooling and thus an individual’s future livelihood prospects. Unfortunately, however, no systematic efforts have been made to collect data and analyse this data.

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| **Table 1: Growth trend for country primary school completion rates in SSA, 2010-2015/lya** |
|  |
| **PSCR growth** | **Average annual rate**  | **Primary school completion rate 2015/lya** |
| **Trend** | **of growth PSCR** | **High >70** | **Medium 50-69** | **Low <50** |
| **Strongly positive**  | > 5% |   | DRC | CAR |
| **Speeding up** | 1-4% | Cameroon | Cote d'Ivoire | Niger |
|  |   |   | Guinea | Uganda |
|  |   |   | Rwanda |   |
| **No change** | 0-1% | Congo-Brazzaville | Ethiopia |   |
|  |   | Eswatini | Gambia |   |
|  |   | Tanzania |   |   |
|  |   | Zambia |   |   |
|  |   | Zimbabwe |   |   |
| **Slowing down** | <0 | Kenya | Burundi | Burkina Faso |
|  |   | Namibia | Ghana | Chad |
|  |   | Nigeria | Lesotho | Guinea Bissau |
|  |   |   | Sierra Leone | Mali |
|  |   |   | Togo | Mozambique |
| **Going backwards** | Absolute decline | Benin | Sudan | Madagascar |
|  |   |   |   | Malawi |

The post-2015 economic slowdown in much of SSA coupled with the COVID pandemic crisis are likely to have very significant impacts on the attainment of UPE.

*3.2 Progress among the rural poor*

Table 2 shows the percentages of the poorest[[10]](#footnote-10) females and males aged 18-24 in rural areas who have completed primary schooling among the 18 countries with DHS/MICS surveys since 2014. Excluding the much higher completion countries in Southern Africa, the PSCRs are less than 40% in 11 countries for females and nine out of 14 countries for males. Increases in PSCRs have generally been well under 20 percentage points for most of these countries. The main exceptions are in post-conflict countries most notably DRC and Sierra Leone. In three countries, Cote d’Ivoire (female), Malawi (female and male) and Zambia (male), completion rates actually fell[[11]](#footnote-11).

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| **Table 2: Percentage of 18-24 year olds in rural areas who have completed at least primary education,**  |
| **2000/nya-2015/lya (rounded)** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | **2000/NYA** | **2015/LYA** | **Change** |
|  | **Female** | **Male** | **LYA** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** |
| **Western Africa** |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Cote d'Ivoire** | 13 | 26 | 2016 | 12 | 27 | -1 | 1 |
| **Gambia** | 27 | 39 | 2018 | 39 | 39 | 12 | 0 |
| **Ghana** | 37 | 45 | 2018 | 55 | 63 | 18 | 18 |
| **Guinea** | Na | na | 2018 | 8 | 31 | Na | Na |
| **Guinea Bissau** | 4 | 22 | 2014 | 13 | 35 | 9 | 13 |
| **Mali** | Na | na | 2015 | 7 | 24 | Na | Na |
| **Sierra Leone** | 5 | 19 | 2017 | 36 | 44 | 31 | 25 |
| **Central Africa** |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Congo** | 23 | 45 | 2018 | 62 | 79 | 39 | 34 |
| **Congo-Brazzaville** | Na | na | 2015 | 49 | 62 | Na | Na |
| **Malawi** | 31 | 28 | 2014 | 14 | 25 | -17 | -3 |
| **Eastern Africa** |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Kenya** | 27 | 30 | 2014 | 30 | 48 | 3 | 18 |
| **Madagascar** | 10 | 13 | 2018 | 22 | 26 | 12 | 13 |
| **Mozambique** | 2 | 4 | 2016 | 12 | 20 | 10 | 16 |
| **Uganda** | 15 | 33 | 2016 | 24 | 37 | 9 | 4 |
| **Southern Africa** |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| **Lesotho** | 50 | 24 | 2018 | 83 | 42 | 33 | 18 |
| **Swaziland** | 59 | 47 | 2016 | 71 | 66 | 12 | 19 |
| **Zambia** | 37 | 65 | 2016 | 38 | 50 | 1 | -15 |
| **Zimbabwe** | Na | na | 2019 | 83 | 84 | Na | Na |

Notes: LYA is latest year available and NYA is nearest year available

*3.3 Educational inequality and resource allocation*

The implementation of UPE was widely expected to lead to a decrease in educational inequality as a result of a more equal distribution of human capital in each country. However, the limited evidence available indicates that only in a minority of countries in SSA has educational equality improved. The gap between the average number of years of education between the richest and poorest wealth quintiles has increased in 13 out of 18 countries for which survey data is available[[12]](#footnote-12). As will be discussed below, this is not surprising given the increasing levels of educational competition which are closely linked to economic liberalisation and ‘jobless growth’.

Schooling systems in SSA are ultra-competitive especially in urban areas where parents can freely shop around for the best performing public and private schools. National assessment systems at both the primary and secondary schooling school levels are also highly elitist since ‘they focus on and reward the few candidates who perform well in high stakes national examinations while ignoring the rest’ (Fox, 2016:34)[[13]](#footnote-13).

Rural-urban educational inequality is likely to be increasing quite rapidly for two main reasons. Firstly, the poorest rural households especially in remoter areas are usually only able to access poor quality primary schools. The unequal resourcing of primary schools is a direct consequence of the wider political economy along with the major (intrinsic) challenges of staffing these schools. The poorest regions generally have the lowest educational expenditures per pupil.

And secondly, the examination performance of urban schools is fast out pacing that of rural schools. This spatial inequality in examination results is being driven by the explosive growth in private schools which have generally better examination results. Uganda is a good example of the very sizeable examination performance differences across the country. In nearly half of all districts and municipalities, most of which are predominantly rural, fewer than five percent of pupils gained a Division One pass in the primary school leaving examination in 2018. By contrast, in the seven percent of predominantly urban municipalities (equivalent to districts), over 30% of students in each municipality passed at this level[[14]](#footnote-14).

**4. Social class competition**

*4.1. Capitalist, private sector-led development*

UPE was introduced in most countries in SSA at the same time as far reaching economic and political transformation. The superordinate economic reform goal was to replace the previous model of quasi-socialist, state-led development with a neo-liberal, market-driven development strategy with the private sector taking the leading role. The key elements of this reform model have been widespread economic restructuring (commonly termed ‘structural adjustment’) entailing comprehensive privatisation of state enterprises, the opening of the economy to national and international competition, encouragement of foreign investment, and the liberalisation of key product and factor markets. In order to maximise economic growth, national development strategies have increasingly focused on promoting growth sectors which have a clear comparative advantage especially in natural resource-based activities such as agriculture, mining and tourism. Deindustrialisation from an already low base generally ensued.

More recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in more traditional ‘modernisation’ theory which highlights the critical importance of implementing comprehensive national human resource development strategies which directly facilitate skills formation for the new growth sectors including services. Plugging these ‘skills gaps’ has become a top priority.

*4.2 Class restructuring: the expansion of a reconstituted middle class*

Successful private sector development in SSA hinges on a historically decisive realignment of economic, social and political structures and processes which, in a variety of ways, facilitates the rapid development/strengthening of an indigenous business class of capitalists and entrepreneurs usually coupled with significant increases in foreign direct investment (especially targeted at key growth sectors on greenfield sites)[[15]](#footnote-15). New and rejuvenated national and foreign enterprises must also be staffed by a growing cadre of managers and other skilled personnel with the appropriate skills and attitudes. In those countries where economic liberalisation has been most far reaching (especially in Anglophone Africa), this amounts to nothing less than a major restructuring of the national class system with economic and political power shifting decisively away from the previously dominant bureaucratic middle class which, since political independence[[16]](#footnote-16), had controlled the central state apparatus and the public sector as a whole (which included large swathes of the formal economy) towards a newly empowered business/private sector based middle class spearheading a process of national capitalist development.

While there is widespread acknowledgement of the significant growth in size and overall influence of the middle class as a whole in SSA during the last two-three decades, surprisingly little detailed research has been undertaken on this phenomenon[[17]](#footnote-17). With marked reductions in poverty rates in many countries, there has been a rather sterile and misconceived debate about the key features of this expanding middle class in the academic literature much of which has revolved around delimiting the income levels at which an individual can be considered ‘middle class’ (see, for example, Visagie and Posel, 2011). However, as elsewhere, the two key defining characteristics of the middle class are occupational and educational status. The middle class is comprised mainly of professional and semi-professional occupations entry to which normally requires the acquisition of university and other higher-level qualifications.

In the absence of large surveys where individuals are categorised by socio-economic status (e.g. A, B, C1, C2, D, E), it is difficult to gauge the overall size of the middle class in most countries in SSA. However, a rough proxy indicator is the percentage/number of adults with post-secondary education. This is now between 5-10% in the majority of countries in SSA. While the numerical size of the middle class is clearly important, it is its overall economic and political power (which is not necessarily directly correlated with its demographic size) which is most crucial.

As will be discussed in more detail in the second article, while political elites in SSA continue to protect their own interests, in those countries where economic and political liberalisation is most advanced, these interests have become increasingly intertwined with those of the newly reconstituted middle class[[18]](#footnote-18). With regard to education, we argue that the growing social, economic and political power of an expanding and increasingly empowered middle class has resulted in the partial restructuring or reconfiguration of the education system in ways which has facilitated the consolidation of their new class position[[19]](#footnote-19). The rapid expansion of higher education and private education provision at all levels are particularly important (see below).

*4.3 Poverty reduction, income inequality, and social mobility*

Capitalist, market-led development has become the dominant economic strategy in SSA at the same time as increasing, predominantly international attention has focused on reducing endemic poverty in SSA. While not necessarily incompatible, historically, income inequality has usually increased during the early stages of capitalism (the Kuznets Hypothesis). This is likely to generate tensions and contradictions between the dual objectives of rapid economic growth and significant poverty reduction.

Certainly, national poverty head count rates have fallen in most countries in SSA since the early-mid 2000s largely as a result of strong, resource-led economic growth, generally higher prices for agricultural products (improved internal terms of trade), improved basic services especially health and rural infrastructure, and high levels of donor support. However, poverty rates are still high in most countries.

According to World Bank analysis, ‘income inequality in Africa is not moving in a clear direction’ (Beegle et al. 2014:126). In global terms, inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) is high in SSA. Inequality has risen in about half of countries for which data is available and has fallen in the other half[[20]](#footnote-20). However, the already very low share of the poorest wealth quintile increased in only eight out of 34 countries for which reasonable date is available, remained the same in 11 countries, and declined in 15 countries.

Income inequality is not necessarily inimical to high levels of educational attainment including UPE. The countries in SSA with the largest income and wealth inequalities (Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, and Swaziland) are also among the richest (with per capita incomes at least five times greater than in low-income countries) but have the lowest poverty rates and the highest educational attainment levels in SSA.

Evidence on the impact of liberalisation on social mobility in SSA is very limited. However, research by Azomahou and Yitbarek (2015) shows that the likelihood of the sons of farmers continuing to farm increased markedly in some countries including Ghana and Uganda during in the 1990s and 2000s. The main reason for this is the increasingly limited economic opportunities for self-advancement in both the formal and informal sectors.

**5. Educational competition and distancing**

*5.1 Educational privatisation: the growth in private schooling*

Good quality official and unofficial data on private schooling is scare in most countries in SSA. The otherwise comprehensive DFID-sponsored systematic review of the ‘role and impact’ of private education provides no information on the absolute and relative size of private school enrolments’ (see Rawal et al. 2014). Some governments are themselves reluctant to furnish information which would reveal the extent of educational privatisation especially in politically-sensitive urban areas. Thus, the on-going challenges of producing up-to-date and accurate real-time education management data in most countries is likely to be for both technical and political reasons[[21]](#footnote-21).

UNESCO data on overall enrolments in private education would seem to indicate that the extent of the growth in private sector education provision has been over-stated in SSA. According to this data, the share of private primary school enrolments in SSA as a whole only increased from 10% in 2000 to 14% in 2015. The corresponding figures for secondary schooling are 17% and 21%[[22]](#footnote-22). Table 3 shows that in around only one-quarter of countries did the private sector share of total primary school enrolments increase by 10 percentage points or more. For secondary education, this figure is barely 10% of all countries.

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| **Table 3: Percentage point change in share of private enrolments, 2000-2015/lya,** |
| **number of countries in SSA** |  |  |  |  |
| **Education** | **Decrease** | **No change** | **Small increase** | **Large increase** |
| **Level** | <-3 | minus 2 -plus 2 | 3 to 10 | 10> |
| **Primary** | 3 | 14 | 11 | 9 |
| **Secondary** | 6 | 8 | 7 | 3 |
| **Higher** | 7 | 5 | 4 | 13 |
| **Source: UIS** |  |  |  |  |

More disaggregated data from five recent MICS national household surveys[[23]](#footnote-23) enables a more detailed analysis to be made of the significance of private education provision. Table 4 shows the percentage share of private primary and secondary school enrolments broken down by wealth quintiles and by rural, urban, and capital city location. Two main conclusions can be drawn from these data. Firstly, they highlight the extent to which the richest groups in predominantly urban areas and especially in capital city conurbations now enrol their children in private primary schools and, to a slightly lesser extent, in private secondary schools. In four out of the five countries, private school enrolments among the richest quintile account for more than two-thirds of all primary school enrolment. This gives these relatively affluent groups a decisive advantage in ensuring that their children achieve the highest grades in all-important primary school leaving examinations and are, therefore, able to enrol in the best-performing government and private secondary schools. And secondly, the shares of private school enrolments among the poorest groups are much lower. This is especially the case among the rural poor; for the poorest quintile in rural areas, in four out of the five countries, the private schooling shares for both primary and secondary education are well under 10%. However, private school enrolment shares are considerably higher for the poorest groups in urban areas. They are exceptionally high in some capital cities. For example, in Accra (Ghana) 43% of all primary school pupils from the poorest wealth quintile attend private schools and in Bamako (Mali), this figure is 34%. It is certainly the case, therefore, that in some but not certainly not all countries in SSA, a sizeable minority of the urban poor have enrolled their children in low-cost private primary schools[[24]](#footnote-24).

Even where the share of private sector enrolments is small, private sector education provision can still have a significant impact on the education sector and the wider economy. For example, while enrolments in private secondary schools in Tanzania only accounted for 18% of total enrolments in 2016, the absolute number of private school enrolments doubled from around 600,000 in 2008 to 1.2 million in 2016. Given the relatively small number of higher education enrolments and the acute shortage of higher-skilled formal sector jobs, this increase in enrolments from private schools is likely to have led to a sizeable increase in the proportion of secondary school leavers from private schools who managed to be admitted to universities and other higher education institutions and as well as being successfully recruited to fill vacant jobs.

More anecdotal evidence also shows the extent of private school provision particularly in capital cities. Private schools accounted for nearly 60% of total school enrolments Lagos State, Nigeria in the late 2000s (see Harma, 2013). In Uganda, private schools account for 84% of all primary school enrolments in the Kampala and 77% of all secondary school enrolments. The private sector has, therefore, almost supplanted public sector schooling (see Harma and Pikholz, 2017). Similarly, in Kenya, over half of all school students in Nairobi are enrolled in private schools.

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| --- | --- |
| Table 4: Private enrolments as % of total enrolments by education  |  |
| level, wealth quintile and location in selected countries (rounded percentages) |
| **GHANA** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|   | Location | Poorest | 2 | 3 | 4 | Richest |  |
| Primary | Rural | 4 | 9 | 13 | 21 | 38 |  |
|   | Urban | 18 | 25 | 40 | 53 | 68 |  |
|   | Accra | 43 | 34 | 51 | 66 | 75 |  |
| Secondary | Rural | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 18 |  |
|   | Urban | 7 | 15 | 22 | 25 | 36 |  |
|   | Accra | 2 | 31 | 35 | 40 | 49 |  |
| Higher | Rural | 13 | 0 | 17 | 3 | 1 |  |
|   | Urban | 3 | 7 | 15 | 14 | 19 |  |
|   | Accra | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 25 |  |
| **MALI** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|   | Location | Poorest | 2 | 3 | 4 | Richest |  |
| Primary | Rural | 13 | 15 | 19 | 17 | 29 |  |
|   | Urban | 25 | 27 | 42 | 50 | 74 |  |
|   | Bamako | 34 | 35 | 46 | 55 | 80 |  |
| Secondary | Rural | 5 | 9 | 8 | 11 | 16 |  |
|   | Urban | 18 | 19 | 28 | 38 | 62 |  |
|   | Bamako | 29 | 26 | 30 | 39 | 66 |  |
| Higher | Rural | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |  |
|   | Urban | 0 | 0 | 7 | 10 | 21 |  |
|   | Bamako | 0 | 0 | 11 | 7 | 27 |  |
| **DR CONGO** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|   | Location | Poorest | 2 | 3 | 4 | Richest |  |
| Primary | Rural | 8 | 10 | 7 | 7 | 6 |  |
|   | Urban | 17 | 32 | 32 | 38 | 41 |  |
|   | Kinshasa |   | 28 | 46 | 45 | 39 |  |
| Secondary | Rural | 3 | 13 | 6 | 5 | 7 |  |
|   | Urban | 16 | 29 | 32 | 30 | 31 |  |
|   | Kinshasa |   | 16 | 41 | 38 | 28 |  |
| Higher | Rural |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|   | Urban | 7 | 33 | 22 | 18 | 21 |  |
|   | Kinshasa |   |   |   | 8 | 20 |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **MADAGASCAR** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|   | Location | Poorest | 2 | 3 | 4 | Richest |  |
| Primary | Rural | 4 | 10 | 12 | 20 | 33 |  |
|   | Urban | 7 | 22 | 36 | 55 | 79 |  |
|   | Antanarivo | 12 | 25 | 33 | 60 | 84 |  |
| Secondary | Rural | 7 | 13 | 19 | 22 | 44 |  |
|   | Urban | 14 | 33 | 46 | 53 | 63 |  |
|   | Antanarivo | 0 | 28 | 48 | 71 | 58 |  |
| Higher | Rural | 0 | 0 | 0 |  | 60 |  |
|   | Urban | 0 | 0 | 40 | 30 | 46 |  |
|   | Antanarivo | 0 | 0 | 75 | 19 | 60 |  |
| **LESOTHO** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|   | Location | Poorest | 2 | 3 | 4 | Richest |  |
| Primary | Rural | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 11 |  |
|   | Urban | 5 | 11 | 17 | 29 | 81 |  |
|   | Maseru | 12 | 12 | 20 | 28 | 67 |  |
| Secondary | Rural | 0 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 9 |  |
|   | Urban | 7 | 6 | 12 | 10 | 24 |  |
|   | Maseru | 6 | 4 | 14 | 11 | 37 |  |
| Higher | Rural | 0 | 17 | 26 | 18 | 2 |  |
|   | Urban | 0 | 37 | 23 | 23 | 37 |  |
|   | Maseru | 0 | 36 | 10 | 14 | 31 |  |
| Source: MICS |  |  |  |  |  |  |

*Private schooling and educational distancing*

The rapid expansion of private education in many countries in SSA is, in part, the result of the new neo-liberal, pro-market economic development strategy as well as democratisation and a general increase in political freedoms. However, it is also directly related to the UPE reform strategy itself.

Prior to economic and political liberalisation, most governments strongly opposed private schooling for both ideological and pragmatic/opportunistic reasons. Ideological because it conflicted with the egalitarian principles of ‘African socialism’ and pragmatic because the political and economic elites were usually able to send their children to high-performing government and government-assisted, not-for-profit (mainly church) schools.

As elsewhere, the massification of schooling represented by UPE posed a potentially serious threat to the privileged class position of the established political and economic elites. The liberalisation/privatisation of education provision has enabled them to educationally distance their children from the rest of society by enrolling them in private schools. To a large extent, therefore, the populist, egalitarian goals of UPE have been subverted by the creation of a sizeable public-private class divide in the schooling system itself. Liberalising private education was the (political) price that governments had to pay in order to placate powerful class interests and other specific stakeholders in particular in the education sector itself.

The abolition of school tuition fees which has been a central plank of the UPE reform strategy led to a surge in enrolments. Schools became seriously overcrowded and teacher recruitment could not keep pace. As a consequence, pupil-teacher ratios increased rapidly and already very limited teaching and learning materials were stretched even further. The net result was a serious decline in quality with poorer learning outcomes leading to plummeting pass rates in primary school leaving examinations[[25]](#footnote-25). The ‘UPE bulge’ of primary school leavers eventually fed through to secondary schools with similar outcomes. Faced with this situation, mainly better-off parents enrolled their children in private schools. As noted above, this has amounted to a mass exodus in many countries and particularly in capital cities which has potentially major implications for both government and donor education policies and practice[[26]](#footnote-26).

Medium of instruction language policy has also contributed to growth of private schooling. The adoption of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early grades of primary school grades has been part and parcel of UPE in the majority of countries in SSA. However, this has conflicted with parental preferences for two main reasons. Firstly, most parents and children recognise that metropolitan colonial language competency (English/French/ Portuguese) is indispensable in maximising their chances of obtaining good jobs in both the public and private sectors. More generally, these remain the aspirational languages of the middle class which are inextricably linked to powerfully ingrained notions of modernity in a rapidly globalising/transnational world. And secondly, most parents of children from minority language groups residing in major urban centres do not want to send their children to primary schools where the medium of instruction is the dominant urban mother tongue language. Thus, many have no option but to send their children to private schools where metropolitan languages are the medium of instruction. This also gives them a head start in very competitive schooling systems where ultimate success in high-stakes examinations still mainly depends on being competent in these metropolitan languages.

*5.2 Basic education*

UPE is part of the overall concept of Basic Education which, broadly speaking, entails the extension of primary education to eight or nine years either through the incorporation of the lower secondary school grades into a new basic education cycle or the extension of the primary education cycle to eight years. This even more ambitious goal of Basic Education for All was strongly supported by UNESCO and later the World Bank during the 1990s. However, comprehensive restructuring was only adopted in a limited number of countries (including Namibia and Zambia). The main reason for this was that the segmentation of secondary education was strongly opposed by powerful social class and stakeholder interests since it threatened to undermine the overall quality of secondary education as well as its key social filtering/selection role.

The abandonment of the basic education restructuring in Zambia in the early 2010s is the prime example of the potency of the political opposition to this reform. Concerted efforts were also made in Kenya during the late 1990s to abandon the new 8-4-4 education cycle. These were unsuccessful in part because the government placated the predominantly middle class opposition by creating a strong enabling environment for the expansion of higher education (see below).

*5.3 Secondary education*

Politically, secondary education is the most powerful sub-sector of the education system in most countries in SSA[[27]](#footnote-27). Given its central sorting function in reproducing the social class system, it is heavily protected by powerful vested interests. The potential impacts of too rapid expansion of primary education on secondary education were serious. However, through a combination of high stakes examinations, relatively high school fees (especially for poorer households) as well as expanded private schooling, the fundamental sorting role of secondary education has been preserved in most countries.

UPE has certainly led to large increases in secondary school enrolments in many countries. However, as Table 5 shows, lower secondary school completion rates (SSCR) remain at below 30% in over half of the countries for which data is available. Equally significant, since the start of UPE, there have been large percentage point increases in SSCRs (of more than 20) in only a handful of countries most of which already had relatively high initial SSCRs and are heavily concentrated in Southern Africa. The difference in SSCRs between the richest and poorest wealth quintiles has also increased in seven out of the 11 countries for which data are available.

Central Ministry of Education control over secondary education has been complicated by the fact that, in many countries, a sizeable proportion of schools were originally established by churches. While governments have increasingly taken responsibility for resourcing these schools (especially paying teacher salaries), church authorities remain a major political force in some countries.

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| **Table 5: Lower secondary school completion rates among the 18 24 age cohort, 2015/latest year available**  |  |  |  |
| **<10%** | **11 to 20%** | **21 -30%** | **31-40%** | **41-50%** | **51-60%** | **60%>** |
| Burkina Faso (0) | Benin (7) | Burundi (25) | Gabon (10) | Cameroon (21) | Congo (21) | Kenya (26) |
| Niger (3) | CAR (4) | Cote d'Ivoire (15) | Guinea (18) | Gambia (15) | DRC (29) | Nigeria (27) |
|   | Chad (4) | Ethiopia (15) |   | Sierra Leone (29) | Eswatini (10) | South Africa (na) |
|   | Madagascar (12) | Lesotho (15) |   |   | Ghana (1) | Zimbabwe (11) |
|   | Mozambique (12) | Liberia (na) |   |   | Namibia (22) |   |
|   |   | Malawi (6) |   |   | Sudan (11) |   |
|   |   | Mali (20) |   |   | Zambia (20) |   |
|   |   | Rwanda (20) |   |   |   |   |
|   |   | Senegal (14) |   |   |   |   |
|   |   | Togo (12) |   |   |   |   |
|   |   | Uganda (13) |   |   |   |   |
|   |   | Tanzania (21) |   |   |   |   |
| **Notes: Figures in parentheses percentage point increases between 2000/nya and 2015/lya**  |  |  |
| **Source: UIS** |  |  |  |  |  |  |

As the number of primary school leavers has grown, governments have come under growing political pressure to expand secondary education which has become itself an important component of the new educational political settlement. Ministries of Education have been strongly supportive especially in those countries where, as a result of decentralisation, direct responsibility for primary education has been transferred to Ministries of Local Government (see second article). A number of governments[[28]](#footnote-28) have adopted free Universal Secondary Education policies. However, the resource implications of rolling out free USE have been so serious that it has failed to get off the ground and, in some countries (for example, Uganda), has been abandoned altogether.

The maintenance of high stakes primary school leaving examinations enables better-off children to be filtered into top performing public secondary schools and, where they are not successful, to elite private schools. Tuition fees and other costs are typically five-ten times higher for secondary schooling than for primary schooling which makes secondary education prohibitively expensive for most of the poor. Official regulation of these fees and other expenses is generally lax with the result that fee differentials between schools are large. The costs of secondary schooling has become a highly charged political issue with some countries convening special commissions to investigate and make recommendations[[29]](#footnote-29)

In short, in most countries in SSA, secondary education continues to benefit the relatively better-off urban population and remains inaccessible for rural populations. In many rural locations, long distances to the nearest secondary school is a key constraint.

*5.4 Higher education and TVET*

The expansion of the higher education sector has been central to the process of neo-liberal class formation and, in particular, the consolidation of the economic and political power of the newlt reconstituted middle class. The share of the richest groups attending higher education has increased dramatically during the last 20 years while barely any children from poor households ever attend these institutions (see tables 6 and 7). For example, in Kenya, whereas only six percent of males aged 20-24 in the richest wealth income quintile attended higher education institutions in 2000, this had increased to almost half by 2014[[30]](#footnote-30). With the exception of Lesotho, these percentage point increases were appreciably larger among males than females. Given domestic budgetary and political constraints and donor education priorities, the share of the public education budget allocated to higher education has not increased appreciably in most countries in SSA. However, new education policy regimes have promoted the liberalisation and privatisation of higher education with the commercialisation of public universities (based on increased cost recovery) and the emergence of private universities with relatively permissive accreditation requirements. This enabling environment has facilitated the continued appropriation (capture) of the higher education sector by the expanding and increasingly powerful middle class. As with secondary education, the higher education sector in SSA is

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| **Table 6: Higher education enrolment for each wealth quintile as a percentage** |
| **of total national higher education enrolment among 18-24 year olds, 2015/last year available (rounded percentages)** |
| **Country** | **Sex/quintile** | **Poorest** | **4** | **3** | **2** | **Richest** |
| **Congo** | **Female** | 0 | 0 | 2 | 16 | 82 |
|  | **Male** | 1 | 0 | 2 | 20 | 77 |
| **Cote d'Ivoire** | **Female** | 1 | 2 | 7 | 18 | 73 |
|  | **Male** | 0 | 0 | 3 | 11 | 85 |
| **Ghana** | **Female** | 0 | 2 | 6 | 19 | 73 |
|  | **Male** | 2 | 2 | 8 | 21 | 73 |
| **Kenya** | **Female** | 1 | 4 | 11 | 24 | 60 |
|  | **Male** | 3 | 6 | 14 | 21 | 57 |
| **Lesotho** | **Female** | 1 | 3 | 10 | 24 | 62 |
|  | **Male** | 2 | 6 | 9 | 34 | 50 |
| **Malawi** | **Female** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 96 |
|  | **Male** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 97 |
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| **Table 7: Percentage of richest and poorest wealth quintiles aged 20-24 who ever**  |
| **attended a higher education institution, 2000/nya and 2014/lya (rounded percentages)** |
|  | **Survey** | **Female** | **Male** |  |
| **Country** | **Year** | **Richest** | **Poorest** | **Richest** | **Poorest** |  |
| Congo | 2000 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 |  |
|   | 2019 | 24 | 0 | 29 | 0 |  |
| Cote d'Ivoire | 2000 | 21 | 0 | 11 | 0 |  |
|   | 2016 | 22 | 0 | 37 | 1 |  |
| Ghana | 2006 | 10 | 0 | 10 | 0 |  |
|   | 2018 | 18 | 0 | 20 | 0 |  |
| Kenya | 2000 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 0 |  |
|   | 2014 | 33 | 1 | 46 | 3 |  |
| Lesotho | 2000 | 9 | 0 | 4 | 0 |  |
|   | 2018 | 26 | 1 | 16 | 1 |  |
| Madagascar | 2004 | 8 | 0 | 7 | 0 |  |
|   | 2018 |   |   |   |   |  |
| Malawi | 2014 | 11 | 0 | 10 | 0 |  |
| **Source: DHS and MICS**  |  |  |  |  |  |

becoming increasingly institutionally differentiated - ranging from elite national and private universities to much lower cost providers. Moreover, the upper echelons of the middle class are increasingly send their children to overseas universities whose internationally recognised qualifications give them a preferential place in local job queues and also the possibility for permanent migration to higher paying jobs overseas[[31]](#footnote-31).

In the past, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was an important pathway for both primary and secondary school leavers into skilled, mainly manual jobs. However, it is increasingly being supplanted by higher education because traditional TVET with its focus on the core artisan trades is no longer consistent with the skill requirements of the new resource and services-driven development strategy. This largely explains the fairly widespread failure to reform TVET systems in SSA in particular by making them demand rather than supply-driven. Most private sector enterprises have shown little interest in this reform strategy especially when it includes the introduction of costly payroll training levies (see Bennell, 2020). As a result, levels of political commitment have been insufficient to push through these reforms.

**6. The economic benefits of UPE**

*6.1 Individual and household demand for primary education*

The key factor shaping household and individual decisions about primary school attendance and completion is the expected economic returns. Initially, these were expected to be high but, for the reasons discussed below, these have not materialised and may even have deteriorated for a significant section of the population and especially among the poorest rural households.

In the majority of countries in SSA, UPE has enabled most of the poor to access primary schooling. However, as a result of low and often declining learning outcomes coupled with still low completion rates, this has not led to a significant increase in their human capital. Even if it did, for the majority of households, the main motivation for their children attending and completing primary education is not to acquire foundational skills per se (especially literacy and numeracy) but to pass terminal exams in order to gain access and then successfully complete secondary education which gives them some chance of getting a good job in the formal sector[[32]](#footnote-32).

*6.2 Job competition: education-employment linkages*

*Jobless growth:* Despite the outpouring of concern about ‘jobless growth’ in SSA, robust data on trends in formal sector wage employment is surprisingly scarce. Formal sector employment is typically less than 15% of total employment (see table 8) and, in many countries, this share continues to decline[[33]](#footnote-33) especially with rapid population-growth driven increases in the labour force[[34]](#footnote-34).

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| **Table 8: Share of formal sector employment in total employment, 2015/latest year available** |
| **(percentages)** |  |  |  |  |
| **<5%** | **6 to 10%** | **10 to 15%** | **15-20%** | **20%>** |
| DRC | Cameroon | Ghana | Botswana | Angola |
| Mozambique | Cot d'Ivoire | Kenya | Gambia | Eswatini |
| Senegal | Ethiopia | Rwanda | Zimbabwe | Namibia |
|   | Liberia | Tanzania |   | South Africa |
|   | Madagascar | Togo |   |   |
|   | Malawi | Zambia |   |   |
|   | Mali |   |   |   |
|   | Sierra Leone |   |   |   |
|   | Uganda |   |   |   |
| **Source: ILO**  |  |  |  |  |

In nearly all countries in SSA, the informal sector has become the main source of off-farm employment but it is very much ‘employment of the last resort’. Typically, the size of the informal sector is five-ten times greater than the formal sector while median earnings are two-three times lower. A growing reserve army of the un- and under-employed keeps informal sector wage rates at or below subsistence levels. No minimum education requirements are stipulated for most informal sector jobs so there is little or no incentive to invest in education in order to access jobs in this segment of the economy.

The combination of rapidly expanding numbers of school and university leavers and limited growth in formal sector employment means that even for the small minority of children who successfully complete lower secondary education, the probability of finding a good job is less than 15% in most countries[[35]](#footnote-35).

*Intensifying job competition in segmented labour markets:* Improving access to primary education has had only limited effects in equalising employment opportunities in most countries in SSA. As discussed earlier, educational attainment and related qualifications remain the key sorting device for gaining preferential positions in ever-lengthening employment queues for ‘good jobs’ in the formal sector. Members of the middle class have the power and resources to ensure that they remain at the front of these job queues through a process of educational distancing and qualification escalation. Unfortunately, very little data is available, but the minimal threshold of educational attainment needed for the rural poor to access good jobs is likely to have become increasingly out of reach for most of them. In short, intensifying job competition effectively filters out most of the poorest.

The UPE related expansion of secondary schooling has intensified job competition at a time when ‘jobless growth’ remains the norm in most countries. Overall economic growth has increased and been largely sustained in many countries during the last two decades but formal employment expansion has been limited for four main reasons: Firstly, there have been very sizeable job losses related to public sector restructuring (downsizing), privatisation and de-industrialisation. Secondly, African economies have become increasingly services oriented (particularly financial services, telecommunications (especially mobile telephony), information technology, tourism, and the education sector itself) which, being more skill-intensive, further advantages the middle class who have the requisite higher education qualifications for these jobs. The growth industries in productive sectors are also generally both skill and capital intensive (in particular, agri-business, and (modern) construction and mining technologies). Thirdly, with the increasing involvement of foreign capital (especially in higher tech sectors such as mining and oil and telecommunications), the number of expatriate workers (especially from China) has grown appreciably. And fourthly, the casualisation of formal sector employment has grown rapidly in some countries. As elsewhere, zero hour contracts have become more common[[36]](#footnote-36).

The low share of female employees in formal employment remains largely unchanged. In conjunction with other factors, especially early marriage and bride price, this reduces the incentive to complete both primary and education among females.

Rural school leavers are at a particular disadvantaged in competing for wage employment because most formal sector jobs are in urban areas which means that most have no alternative but to migrate to these areas. As the probability of finding a good job decreases, the expected income gain from migrating declines[[37]](#footnote-37). Moreover, the substantial weakening of the extended family system in recent decades has made it harder for young rural migrants to be supported by their urban relatives in what is typically a very protracted period of job search. Established rural migrants increasingly try to distance themselves from their relatives in the village (to the extent they often do not inform them of the actual incomes that they are earning in the urban areas).

Generally speaking, kinship networks are all important in gaining access to good jobs in SSA. It is who you know as much as what you know that determines one place in employment queues. This further depresses demand for education especially among rural households who generally lack the established kinship networks needed to secure formal sector jobs.

Taken together, the combined impact of these various factors is that the incentives to migrate to urban areas are declining and that, as a result, rural-urban migration is beginning to slow down in many countries (see Potts, 2008; Beauchemin 2011).

*6.2 Self-employment*

Smallholder agriculture in most of SSA remains predominantly subsistence- based which does not require the foundational skills imparted by primary education. Evidence, especially from South Asia, shows that significant returns to primary education only generally occur in those contexts where farmers are modernising their agricultural practices. Similar conclusions apply to non-farm informal sector employment.

*6.3 Private rates of returns to education*

*RORE estimates:* Robust estimates of rates of return to education (ROREs) are notoriously difficult to calculate. While many country estimates in SSA are also quite dated, they are still relevant since most cover the period 10-15 years immediately after the start of the implementation of UPE.

At a national level, the broad RORE pattern clearly shows the very high differentials which exist between basic education (primary and lower secondary), on one hand, and post-basic education, on the other. In Table 9, it can be observed that the basic-tertiary education differential is between three-six hundred percent in all but two of the 11 countries in SSA for which there are RORE estimates. Reliable time series data is not available, but it is certainly no longer the case that ROREs to primary education are higher than those for secondary and tertiary as was widely contended in the 1990s and 2000s (see Psacharopolous, 1994)[[38]](#footnote-38). Adjusting basic education ROREs downward to take into account the much lower incomes in rural areas and in self-employment and the decreasing (actual and subjective) probabilities of finding formal sector employment would increase these differentials still further.

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| **Table 9: Private rates of return to education by education level**  |
| **in selected countries in SSA (rounded percentages)** |  |
|   |   | **Upper** |   |  |
| **Country** | **Basic** | **secondary** | **Higher** |  |
| **Burundi** | 11 | 16 | 39 |  |
| **Ghana** | 11 | 13 | 31 |  |
| **Mali** | 11 | 59 | 7 |  |
| **Nigeria** | 4 | 16 | 16 |  |
| **Rwanda** | 20 | 54 | 33 |  |
| **South Africa** | 5 | 21 | 29 |  |
| **Sudan** | 10 | 15 | 16 |  |
| **Tanzania** | 8 | 59 | 41 |  |
| **Togo** | 8 | 18 | 29 |  |
| **Uganda** | 8 | 30 | 30 |  |
| **Notes: Elaborate RORE method (non-linear)** |  |
| **Source: Barouni and Broecke, 2014.** |  |  |

Other supportive evidence comes from the ILO School-to-Work Transition surveys which were conducted in eight countries in SSA between 2013 and 2015 (see Table 10). The clear pattern[[39]](#footnote-39) which emerges from these surveys with respect to income differentials between educational levels is as follows: (i) In half of the countries, mean incomes earned by youth with no education are higher than earned by youth with primary education. The never attended school-primary education income differential is positive and reasonably large in the remaining four countries. (ii) Secondary-primary education income differentials are generally quite small; and (iii) Tertiary-secondary education differentials are general much higher.

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| **Table 10: Mean monthly wage income differentials between education levels among youth**  |
| **in ILO School-to-Work Transition survey countries, 2013-2015 (rounded percentages)** |
|  | **Less than primary-** | **Primary-** | **Secondary-** |  |
| **Country** | **Primary** | **secondary** | **Tertiary** |  |
| **Benin** | 81 | -14 | 108 |  |
| **Congo-Brazzaville** | -8 | 25 | 59 |  |
| **Liberia** | 40 | 19 | 60 |  |
| **Malawi** | -1 | 20 | 829 |  |
| **Tanzania** | -155 | 229 | 77 |  |
| **Togo** | 43 | 78 | -164 |  |
| **Uganda** | 103 | -1 | 64 |  |
| **Zambia** | Na | 62 | 389 |  |
| **Note: Youth are aged from 18-34. Benin and Uganda figures are for all employed persons** |
| **Source: ILO** |  |  |  |  |

*The direct and indirect costs of primary education*

Most research shows that the main reason for student drop out in primary schools in SSA is that it is ‘too expensive’ or ‘too costly’ (see Snilsveit et al. 2015). Given that direct schooling costs are small in most rural schools, this is indicative of very low rates of return to primary education. Information collected by MICS and other household surveys also indicate that household demand for child labour is unlikely to be a major contributory factor for primary school dropout, certainly not at least up until early-mid adolescence[[40]](#footnote-40).

It is not just the immediate direct and indirect costs of primary education that reduces the commitment of poor households to primary education but the typically much higher costs of secondary education. For most parents, there is little point in investing time and resources in sending their children to primary school if this does not lead to their subsequent enrolment and completion of secondary education. In other words, primary education should be treated as a joint product with secondary education[[41]](#footnote-41).

In addition, the potential, longer-term impacts of formal schooling may also be a major deterrent among poor households. The perceived parental returns to primary education could be significantly negative if this schooling results in their children no longer be available for core household and farm activities without any corresponding increases in household income from the non-farm activities of these children. This is especially because formal education increases the likelihood that youth will migrate to urban centres or work in low-income non-farm rural activities. Primary education can, therefore, pose a real threat to already precarious livelihoods and, as such, may fuel parental resistance. In some countries, customary bride price practices continue to be a major incentive to marry off daughters as soon as possible.

High levels of open unemployment can drive parental demands for increased educational provision. However, there is little open unemployment in rural areas in SSA.

**7. Conclusion**

This article has sought to demonstrate that the lack of progress in attaining UPE in SSA can only be properly understood by focusing on the wider impact on primary education attainment levels of social and economic forces and processes that characterise the new, neo-liberal political economy in the majority of these countries. In particular, it is contended that the increasing ‘market power’ of a newly reconstituted middle class is leading to the restructuring or reconfiguring of national education systems in ways which facilitate the consolidation of their new class position. The rapid expansion of the higher education and private education have been central to these related process of educational distancing and class reproduction.

While UPE was expected to promote greater educational quality, it has become part of wider economic, social and political processes that are leading to increasing educational inequality. In particular, UPE has fuelled qualification escalation and resulted in lower learning outcomes. Paradoxically, as a result, it may have led to reduced demand for both primary and secondary education among the poorest especially in rural areas but boosted demand for private schooling and higher education among the middle class.

*7.2 Future research*

Given the lack of data, most of the conclusions in this article paper are quite tentative which require considerably more research before they can be properly substantiated. In particular, the causal links between the growing economic, social and political power of the reconstituted middle class and changes in education policy and provision needs very careful investigation. Well-grounded empirical country case studies are essential in order explore the three main inter-related areas of social class competition, educational competition and job competition.

Six specific research priority areas can be identified. (i) ) Sociological research on the size, composition, attitudes and behaviours of the reconstituted middle class; (ii) Ethnographic and economic analysis of household decision making and behaviour with respect to both primary and secondary education (schooling costs, access, progression and completion); (iii) Longitudinal tracer studies of primary and secondary school leavers and university and other tertiary level graduates (education-employment linkages, social mobility, class formation); (iv) Regular surveys of formal sector employees in order to ascertain their educational profiles and incomes (sorting/qualification escalation); (v) Analysis of private sector schooling, in particular enrolment characteristics and learning outcomes by well-defined geographical and socio-economic categories and the growth prospects for private education provision as a whole; and (vi) National public and donor funding over time of key sectors (education, health, economic services, etc.).

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1. This statement is with respect to increases in net enrolment rates. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The main theme of the 2017/18 GMR report is ‘accountability’. The report notes that for education systems to be accountable requires ‘adequate resources, capacity and genuine commitment’ (p.24). However, the underlying reasons why governments lack commitment and, in particular, the nature of the wider political economy including the political system and the state itself are not explored in any depth (see below). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. International declarations and other pronouncements and policies to universalise primary education pre-date the early 1990s. However, there were no concerted efforts to follow-up them with sustained pressure and the necessary levels of financial support. A few governments in SSA did mount ambitious campaigns (most notably Nigeria and Tanzania during the 1970s) but, by the late 1980s, none had managed to achieve and/or sustain UPE. While gross enrolment rates increased rapidly during the first 20 years of independence (during the 1960s and 1970s), they stagnated and even declined during the next 20 years (mainly as result of deep and protracted economic crisis and the relative ease of increasing GERs from a low base). It was only after the Jomtien Declaration in 1990 that there was a decisive increase in the overall commitment to achieve UPE in all developing countries with a clear target date of 2015. Initially, this was largely driven by the major donor agencies but it was quickly taken up by the large majority of governments in SSA and elsewhere in the developing world. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National sample sizes for DHS surveys vary from 30,000 to 70,000 individuals depending on national populations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. MICS survey coverage both over time and countries is particularly patchy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The UNESCO Global Monitoring Report relies heavily on net enrolment rates as the main performance indicator for UPE. However, net enrolment rates are poorly correlated with PSCRs (the r-squared value is only 0.23). Gross enrolment rates are even less correlated. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The five small island states of Cap Verde, Comoros, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Seychelles have been excluded from all the analysis in this review. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The first group of countries (on the left in Figure 2) are PSCR ‘lower starters’ (<30% in 2000), the second group ‘medium starters’ (30-50%) and the third group ‘higher starters’ (50%>). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. At the regional (continental) level, progress in attaining UPE has been lowest in SSA. This is due to many factors but relatively very low initial enrolment rates in many countries (especially in Francophone West Africa with relatively large Muslim populations) and very limited growth in formal sector employment are likely to be particularly important. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I.e. they are in the lowest, fifth wealth quintile. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Just why these declines have occurred in these three countries requires further research but differences in levels of urbanisation are likely to be important with respect to Malawi and Zambia. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The 2015 Global Monitoring Report also concludes that ‘educational policy reforms have benefited wealthier households more substantially’ (p.nn) but no reasons or evidence are presented in support of this statement. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Assessment is a primary function of school examinations but the way very high-stakes examinations (especially at the end of primary schooling) are used to select out a small minority of ‘successful’ students is very evident and has been widely criticised. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Unfortunately, information on the relative performance of government and private primary schools is not usually publically available. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In most countries in SSA, foreign companies dominate the key growth sectors including construction, hospitality and tourism, finance, telecommunications and mining. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A small African middle class first emerged during the mid-late colonial period members of which dominated most nationalist movements after the Second World War. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The main exception is South Africa (see, for example, Southall, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The renewed policy commitment to industrial development in many countries during the last decade is perhaps the most striking example of this convergence of interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This should not, however, seen in crudely instrumentalist terms as part of a deliberate/ explicit class strategy of the middle class as a whole but rather the result of wider economic, social and political forces in society. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It remains to be seen to what extent declining income inequality in some countries is part of a wider long-term continental trend towards greater equality. These poverty rates are an absolute measure while income/wealth quintiles are relative measures. Consequently, decreasing poverty rates are entirely consistent with increasing inequality. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For example, EMIS in Uganda has not collected any information from primary schools since 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There are a number of problems with the official data provided to UNESCO. Some of these are definitional but under-reporting of enrolments in some sectors (private schooling and TVET) is also an important issue.. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Unfortunately, these are the only five countries out of a total of over 25 countries in SSA with MICS where this data was requested. Earlier data from these countries is also not available. None of the DHS contain this information. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. There has been a longstanding and, at times quite acrimonious debate about the size and relative education performance of low-cost private schools in SSA and in other developing countries. See Lewin, 2007 and Tooley, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The selection/sorting role of examinations remains regardless of trends in examination performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, to what extent should donors switch their support from public to private education to reflect the new patterns of education provision especially in urban areas? This will depend partly on the extent to which the rapid growth in private sector enrolments is sustained. It is unlikely that private school provision will increase markedly in most rural areas. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This assertion is largely based on the fact that secondary education is much larger than, what until recently, has been a much small higher education sector and is also more autonomous from state control especially in countries where there are relatively large numbers of church-managed schools. The pressure on students and their parents for them to gain admittance to higher education institutions is also intense. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ghana, Sierra Leone in West Africa Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda in East Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mwiria Task Force on Secondary Education in Kenya is the most well-known. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Gruber and Kosack (2014) examine the adverse implications for income inequality on the ‘tilt’ towards tertiary education at a global level. They conclude that in ‘countries with higher “tertiary tilts”, rising primary enrolment is associated a decade later with far higher inequality’ (p.1). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. National higher education markets are too small for northern universities to establish overseas campuses in SSA. Similarly, franchised courses offered by northern universities based on collaborative links with domestic mainly private training providers are confined to only a few countries in SSA (see author, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. There also significant non-economic benefits of primary education (lower fertility, improved health, greater self-efficacy, increased political participation etc.) but these do not have direct economic payoffs for individuals/households in the short term. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For the 12 countries for which data is available, the share of non-agricultural wage employment in total employment declined in nine countries during various periods (depending on mainly labour force survey data) during the last 20 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The ILO database on wage employment include wage employment in the informal sector which typically accounts for the large majority of employees. For example, in Kenya, all wage employment was 38% of total employment in 2015 but formal sector wage employment accounted for only 12% of total employment. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The data needed to calculate estimates of the total number of primary and secondary school leavers and tertiary graduates is available from the UIS database for fewer than 15 countries in SSA. Estimates of net annual job increase as a percentage of total school and tertiary leavers can only be derived for the following six countries: Ghana (6%), Kenya (11%), Senegal (19%), Tanzania (9%) and Uganda (2%). Even taking into account the rate of annual attrition of the existing formal sector workforce (probably in the region of 2-4% in most countries), these percentages remain under 15% (with the exception of Senegal). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Around two-thirds of formal sector employment in Kenya and Uganda is ‘causal’ with employees being paid on a daily basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. This is the basic proposition of the Harris-Todaro model of rural-urban migration (see Harris, J. Todaro, M, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The much cited RORE evidence presented by Psacharopolous and Patrinos is seriously distorted (see Author, 1996). Time series data on ROREs by education level are generally not available or are unreliable but in those countries with reported very high primary education ROREs in the 1960s and 1970s, they have fallen appreciably since then. With the rapid expansion of primary education, it was widely anticipated that primary ROREs would fall. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The surveys adopt a common methodology and are, therefore, comparable between countries and ove time. While a clear pattern can be discerned with regard to income differentials between education levels, there are still marked differences in these differentials between countries. Further research is required in order to explain these differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Research in India has reached similar conclusions. See Banerji, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Lavy (1995) was the first to point this out in the early-mid 1990s. He notes that ‘the market treats this level of schooling (primary) as no schooling.. Increasing the cost of post-primary education can largely offset any positive effects on enrolments gained by reduced costs of primary education and optimal schooling years’ (p.312). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)