

Low quality of public schools drives parents towards private education in Malawi

Policy Paper



This policy paper shows how the right to education in Malawi is undermined by the low quality of public education. The Government of Malawi has the duty to ensure the right to free, public education of good quality for all. But the low quality of public schools is driving many parents towards paying for private education. Privatisation aggravates existing inequalities and marginalises vulnerable groups and children from poor families. Therefore, the government of Malawi needs to fulfil its responsibility and ensure free, public quality education for all.

Education is a human right and the duty of the government of Malawi

The right to free, quality education is established by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and reaffirmed with the *Sustainable Development Goals*. In Malawi, the right to education is enshrined in the Constitution, and the government should ensure free education of good quality to all the citizens. But a recent study by ActionAid International shows that the government does not live up to this, and leaves a large part of its responsibility to the private sector (ActionAid, 2017b).

Low quality public education drives parents to pay for private education

Primary education was made free in Malawi by the constitution of 1994, which led to a massive increase in enrolments from 18.7% in 1991 to 50.9% in 1994 (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009, p. 165), today reaching 97% (EPDC, 2014). The poorest children enrolled in substantial numbers, proving that school fees had been a major barrier to education (World Bank & UNICEF, 2009, p. 177). But the government did not adequately respond to the high demand, and the quality of education deteriorated drastically. Among SACMEQ countries, Malawi remains at the bottom: 15th out of 15 in reading and 14th in mathematics (JICA, 2012, p. vi). Teacher motivation in Malawi is low because of the irregular payment of salaries, poor working conditions in remote areas, and lack of professional career development¹; and teacher absenteeism is estimated at an average of 15–20 days of instruction per teacher per academic year (World Bank, 2016, p. 40). Moreover, the increase in primary education enrolment has put enormous pressure on secondary schools, which are insufficient in number and in resources, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and high pupil-teacher ratios (EMIS, 2015, p. 76). In secondary education, only 52% of teachers are trained, while 48% are untrained (MoEST, 2015). The low quality of public education is driving many parents to pay for private schooling, and private education keeps growing. The share of private schools increased from 3.6% in 2007 to 9.5% in 2015. At secondary level, one in every five secondary students is currently enrolled in a private institution (EMIS, 2015).

Figure 1: School types (primary and secondary) Malawi 2015

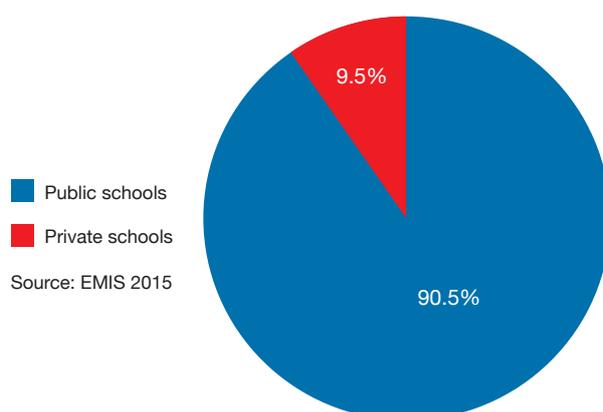
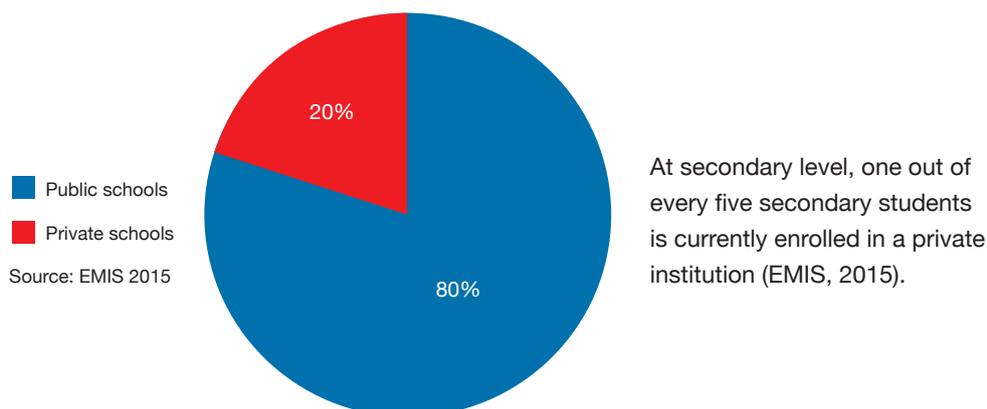


Figure 2: Secondary enrolment per type of school Malawi 2015



Existing inequalities are aggravated by private education

Education is a heavy financial burden for households. Even though public primary school is tuition free, the indirect costs (such as school uniforms, meals, transportation, learning materials, infrastructure maintenance or cleaning) pose a barrier for poor families in Malawi. At secondary level, public school fees can range from MK 18,000 (\$20) for community day schools to MK 90,000 (\$102) for national boarding schools, while the average national income per capita is only MK 300,000 (\$340) (World Bank, 2017). According to most informants interviewed in the ActionAid study, the middle class has found “refuge” in the private education sector because of the low capacity of the public sector to absorb students transitioning from primary to secondary education, and because of the perceived poor quality of public education. However, there is a great variation in terms of private school fees: private church schools charge fees between MK 85,000 (\$100) and up to MK 150,000-200,000 (\$170-\$230)²; other private schools can cost from MK 50,000 per term (\$57) in individual-owned private schools (often criticised for their low quality) to MK 1 million (\$1,135) per term in elite international schools. Proprietors determine the fees without any restriction from the government.³ Not surprisingly, the cost of education hinders the attendance of the poorest households, with net attendance rates at secondary level ranging from 41% in the highest income group (top quintile), to 19% for the next highest, and below 11% for the lower income groups (National Statistical Office, 2017, p. 28). This in turn shapes the learning opportunities of children in Malawi, and creates and entrenches social inequalities.

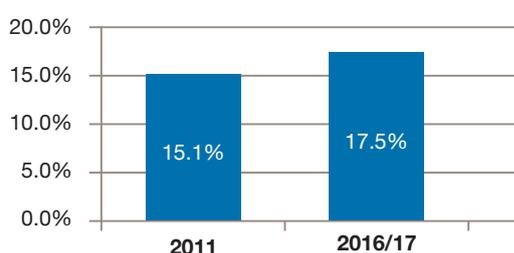
The government neglects its responsibility to fulfil the right to education

In the context of declining quality, the private sector has grown and the Government of Malawi has explicitly announced that it relies on the private sector to meet the right to education. In its 2015/16 Education Sector Performance Report it states that “more learners are enrolling into private primary schools, thereby lessening the burden of government” (MoEST, 2016, p. 22). The National Education Sector Plan 2008-2017 outlines, among its priorities for secondary education, the higher participation of the private sector (MoEST, 2008, p. 16). The Government of Malawi is thus neglecting its responsibilities as duty bearer in the fulfilment of the right to education for all Malawian children. Moreover, the government recognises the existence of many substandard private institutions as the result of the “absence of a comprehensive education policy to guide all the stakeholders in the provision of education services”, and is thus neglecting its duty to regulate and enforce minimum standards (Government of Malawi, 2013, p. 2).

The government should ensure free, public education of good quality for all

The Government of Malawi should take appropriate steps to ensure equitable access to education and equality of learning opportunities, by eliminating direct and indirect school costs and improving the quality of education at public schools. It needs to allocate sufficient resources to meet minimum education standards (such the ratio of pupils to qualified teachers, safe facilities, etc.) and ensure monitoring and evaluation and the improvement of data collection. Adequate resources should be allocated to improving the quality of learning by attracting, training and retaining good teachers, investing in infrastructure and learning materials, and improving accountability by reinforcing monitoring and inspection of schools. Investment is also needed to expand access to public secondary schools, so that more students from public primary schools can continue their education.

Figure 3: Education budget as a percentage of total public expenditure, Malawi



Source: UIS, <http://uis.unesco.org/country/MW>

The education budget in Malawi as a percentage of total public expenditure grew from 15.1% in 2011 to 17.45% in 2016/17 (UIS). This is a step in the right direction, but the education budget needs to increase further to meet international targets of a minimum of 20% of total public expenditure or 6% of GDP. The national budget should also be expanded through more progressive and effective taxation. A recent study estimated that Malawi had lost MK20 billion (\$117.6 million) a year on average during 2008-12 from tax incentives given to corporations, which could have increased the education budget by 27% (ActionAid, 2017a). The education budget should promote equity and improve the learning opportunities

of disadvantaged groups such and girls and children from poor families. The allocation and utilisation of the education budget should be scrutinised (through participation in decision making processes and constant monitoring) at all levels by civil society organisations and parent teachers associations among other stakeholders.

Recommendations

The Government of Malawi should:

- **Right to education** - Guarantee the right to free quality education for all children as stipulated in the Constitution. Primary (and progressively secondary) education must be free and compulsory, not only in law but also in reality. The government should not delegate its responsibility for ensuring the right to education to the private sector.
- **Education financing** - Increase the education budget to 20% of the national budget or 6% of GDP; increasing the size of the overall budget by expanding the tax base through progressive and effective taxation; increasing the sensitivity of the budget by allocating more resources to promote equity and increasing scrutiny to ensure that the budget is allocated and utilised efficiently.
- **Cost of education for parents** - Ensure that primary (and progressively secondary) education is free, not only in law but also in reality. This means abolishing all compulsory direct and indirect costs (e.g. enrolment and exam fees, uniforms and learning materials amongst others) to parents and ensuring that the State education budget adequately covers all these costs.
- **Quality education** - Improve the quality of public schools so that parents do not feel the need to pay for private education. Allocate sufficient resources to attracting, training and retaining qualified teachers, to providing sufficient learning materials and to improving school infrastructure such as classrooms, toilets and playgrounds.

- **Regulation and monitoring of schools** - Strengthen the regulatory control of private schools, holding them to account and inspecting them regularly to ensure that they comply with national education standards. Impose sanctions if private schools do not comply with requirements relating to teacher salaries and conditions, level of fees, etc. Ensure transparency by reporting accurate and detailed data on private schools (including data on school owners, profits, categories of schools etc.).
- **Gender equity** - Take firm action to achieve gender parity and equality in education by ensuring appropriate policies are funded and implemented in order to tackle persistent barriers to girls' education, including but not limited to: gender-related school-based violence; lack of sanitation facilities; lack of female teachers and gender bias in teaching and learning materials. Engage with communities, civil society and policy-makers to shift deep-seated discrimination against girls at all levels.

Civil society organisations in Malawi should:

- **Right to education** - Raise citizens' awareness and hold the government to account for delivering the right to free, compulsory, quality education. Expose violations of the right to education arising from the privatisation of education.
- **Education financing** - Raise awareness and support citizens to advocate for the government to increase the size of the overall budget to 6% of GDP by expanding the tax base through progressive and effective taxation; increase education's share of the budget to at least 20%, increase the sensitivity of the budget by allocating more resources to promote equity and increase scrutiny to ensure that the budget is allocated and utilised efficiently.
- **Cost of education to parents** - Raise awareness and support citizens to carry out participatory budget monitoring and analysis in order to fully understand what is spent on education by government and by households and to campaign for an end to compulsory direct and indirect costs to parents for public education.
- **Quality education** – Hold government to account for providing quality education for all children, making the case for the financing of sufficient quality trained teachers, improved school infrastructure and learning materials.
- **Regulation and monitoring of schools** – Hold the government to account for ensuring that private schools are properly regulated and regularly inspected to ensure that they comply with national education standards.
- **Gender equity** – Engage with communities and policy makers to raise awareness and shift deep-seated discrimination against girls. Identify, highlight and oppose issues such as violence against girls in schools and child marriage. Promote positive alternatives of quality inclusive and equity-focused education.



School friends, Malawi.
PHOTO: SAMANTHA REINDERS/
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Notes

1. Interview with TUM, Lilongwe, February 2017.
2. Interview with MoEST Director for Secondary Education, Lilongwe, February 2017.
3. Interview with MoEST Director for Secondary Education, Lilongwe, February 2017.

Farness, age 7, Malawi
PHOTO:KATE HOLT/ACTIONAID



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 Kakaran 79yct வினா DZIDZO MmATA
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EDUCATION
A RIGHT IN EVERY LANGUAGE
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COVER PHOTO: SCHOOLGIRLS, MALAWI. CREDIT: ACTIONAID

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ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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