

Out of Pocket: how much are parents paying for public education that should be free?

Policy Brief



Introduction

‘Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.’
(Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948)

‘We will ensure the provision of 12 years of free, publicly funded, equitable quality primary and secondary education... The provision of free education includes the removal of cost-related barriers to primary and secondary education.’
(Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action¹)

According to international human rights law, primary education should be free of charge, and secondary education should be made progressively free.² Yet in many developing countries education is rarely entirely free. Despite international obligations, many states continue to impose fees to access primary education. At the same time, families, many among the poorest in the world, have to pay the ‘indirect’ costs of education, such as for school books, uniforms or school maintenance.

These costs are one of the major factors keeping many children out of school, and the scale of the problem is enormous:

- Globally, 61 million children of primary school age are out of school³
- Of those, 34 million are in sub-Saharan Africa and 11 million are in South Asia.⁴
- Over half of all the out of school children across the world (32 million) are girls.⁵
- Girls are more likely than boys to be permanently excluded from education and in Sub-Saharan Africa alone UIS estimates that 9 million girls (compared to 6 million boys) will never attend school.⁶

This briefing provides new figures on the costs incurred by parents when sending their children to school. These costs must be paid by the state, and no child should ever be denied access to education because of inability to pay the fees. Governments need to invest much more in providing a quality education for all their children – one which is truly free.

Costs parents face

Both in public and private schools, direct costs include school fees in the form of either regular or periodic charges for registration, admission, attendance and tuition, as well as core components of education such as examinations, tests and certificates. Fees for school meals, basic health and sanitary amenities and insurance are also often charged directly. Other costs can include those for uniforms, textbooks, the maintenance of school buildings and infrastructure. Parents are sometimes ‘expected’ to supplement teachers’ allowances and support staff or school guards.⁷

The broken promise

States have promised to abolish school costs in various international fora including the 2015 World Education Forum which resulted in the Incheon Education 2030 Declaration and Framework for Action. In recent years, there has been some progress: in sub-Saharan Africa 15 countries have adopted legislation abolishing school fees since 2000. Seven have done so through constitutional guarantees and eight through other forms of legislation. An additional eight adopted free primary education through non-legislative policy measures.⁸

However, while fee-free public primary schooling is enshrined in laws of 135 countries, UNESCO notes that 110 countries still continue to charge some sort of fee.⁹ Meanwhile, parents in probably most, if not nearly all, schools in developing countries are still paying for a range of other costs.

How much do parents pay?

Recent detailed research by UNESCO shows **large out-of-pocket expenses** for families sending their children to both primary and secondary school. UNESCO provides data for several developing countries, listed in Table 1. Our analysis of the data finds that:

- *The average cost for families per primary school pupil is US\$80 for all the developing countries with data and US\$43 for African countries with data.* This means that the average cost for an African family with three children in primary school would be US\$129 a year. This is not sustainable for many Africans, 388 million of whom (43% of the continent) live on US\$1.90 a day or less.¹⁰
- *The cost of educating a single primary school pupil amounts to around 5% of average GDP per capita – a measurement used by UNESCO amongst others to measure the cost of education to families – for each primary school pupil alone.*
- *For secondary school, the costs are higher still – an average of US\$177 per secondary student across these developing countries, and US\$125 for Africa.* This makes secondary school simply unaffordable for hundreds of millions of people in African countries and other developing countries.
- *These costs are far greater for families in developing countries than in developed countries, measured as a proportion of income.* While families in developing countries spend around 5% of average GDP per capita per primary school child, the cost for families in the G7 developed countries is only around 2%.

Table 1: Costs of education in select developing and developed countries

Developing countries	Household funding per primary school child (US\$)	Household funding per secondary school child (US\$)	Household funding per primary school child as a percentage of GDP per capita (%)
Benin	67	180	7.3
Cambodia	76	na	7.0
Cameroon	41	134	3.4
Cape Verde	23	57	0.6
Chad	82	195	8.4
Côte d'Ivoire	61	256	4.3
El Salvador	337	440	8.0
Ethiopia	14	36	2.4
Gambia	31	113	6.4
Ghana	31	80	2.1
Nepal	55	128	7.9
Peru	238	473	4.0
Sao Tome & Principe	9	24	0.5
Togo	71	179	12.7
Vietnam	58	na	3.0
Average across African countries	80	177	5.2
Average across African countries	43	125	4.8
G7 developed countries			
Canada	55	55	55
France	55	55	55
Germany	55	55	55
Italy	55	55	55
Japan	55	55	55
United Kingdom	55	55	55
United States	55	55	55
Average across G7 countries	881	2,063	2.1

Sources: 'Education Data Release: New Indicators and More Data for Countries in Every Region', 6 January 2017, http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/education-data-release-new-indicators-and-more-data-countries-every-region#_ftn1. UNESCO database at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>: 'Initial household funding per primary student US\$', 'Initial household funding per secondary student US\$', 'Initial household funding per primary student as a percentage of GDP per capita'.

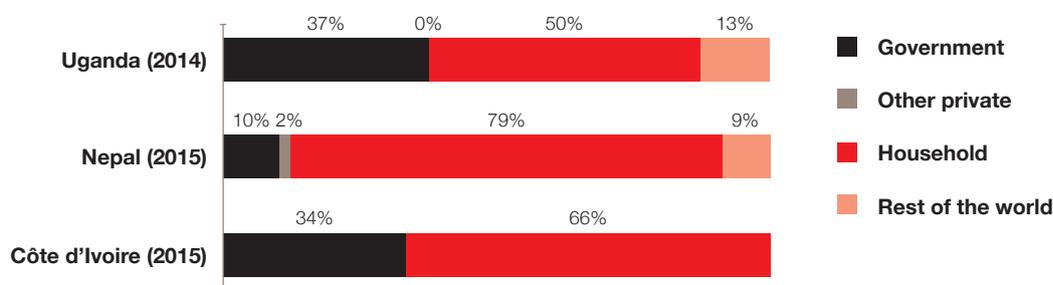
UNESCO figures also show that **household expenses on secondary education** amount to 20-25% of average GDP per person in countries such as Benin, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Niger, and more than 30% in Togo. By contrast, in almost all rich countries this share does not exceed 5%.¹¹

Fees and payments to schools are the most significant costs in private schools and at the secondary level in countries such as Uganda, Nepal and Côte d'Ivoire. These include official fees but also other types of charges to parents and students such as registration or exam fees, ancillary fees, contributions to parent-teacher associations or school management committee fees. But '**payments made outside of schools** for items such as uniforms, teaching materials, private classes and other expenses often represent more than one-half of what households are spending on education, especially in public schools'.¹²

- In **Nepal**, these 'outside payments' represent 82% of household spending for students attending public primary schools, and 65% for those attending public secondary schools. In Nepal's public primary schools, the largest expense is teaching materials (PPPUS\$19¹³ per student), followed by uniforms (PPPUS\$17 per student). In total, parents spend PPPUS\$67 on educating their children in public primary schools, compared to PPPUS\$720 in private primary schools.
- In **Uganda**, outside payments represent 56% of household expenditure on education in public schools at the primary level and 38% at the secondary level. The biggest spending area includes fees and payments to schools, although fees are fairly low in public primary schools (PPPUS\$26) compared to private schools (PPPUS\$217). At the secondary level, students pay on average PPPUS\$316 a year to public secondary schools, and PPPUS\$553 to private ones.¹⁴

UNESCO's research also makes another key finding: that **teaching materials** are mostly funded by households in some countries. Households fund 79% of the cost of teaching materials in Nepal at the primary level, 66% in Côte d'Ivoire, and 50% in Uganda (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Expenditure on teaching materials by source of funding in primary education (%)



Source: UNESCO, *Who Pays for What In Education?: The real costs revealed through national education accounts*, 2016, p.8, http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/who-pays-for-what-in-education-national-revealed-through-accounts-2016-en_0.pdf



Schoolchildren, Tanzania
PHOTO: EMANUELA COLOMBO/ACTIONAID

ActionAid's recent research

ActionAid recently conducted extensive fieldwork in schools in four countries assessing how many levy indirect costs on parents.¹⁵ The research found that *all schools in all four countries* charge costs of some sort.

- In **Malawi**, where primary education is formally free, all 20 schools investigated charge fees for examinations while 19 charge for 'school development', among other costs. These fees are compulsory in all schools. Sitting the Primary School Leaving Certificate exams for standard 8 pupils requires payment of MK 1,680 (US\$2.30). The average amount per family for all these costs is MK 3,512 (US\$4.80) a year.
- **Mozambique** abolished school fees for primary education in 2005 to make education accessible to all children. But ActionAid's research found that parents make voluntary contributions to school maintenance and school guards, and pay for school uniforms, in most of the 14 schools studied. However, they are required to pay for school guards in 9 of the schools, for school uniforms in 6 schools and for water/electricity and examination fees in 3 schools. The average amount paid was found to be Mts 300 (US\$4.10) for school uniforms but is much lower for school guards (Mts 50 (US\$0.69)) and water/electricity (Mts 10 (US\$0.14)).
- In all 30 schools studied in **Tanzania**, parents have to pay for school uniforms and writing materials. Parents also make compulsory payments for exam fees in 9 schools,¹⁶ for sanitation equipment such as brooms and buckets in 8 schools and for food contributions in 4 schools, among others.
- In **Nepal**, despite the Constitutional provision of free education until secondary level, all 25 project schools were found to charge fees of some kind which in most cases are compulsory. For example, 22 schools require examination fees to be paid, costing an average of Rs 133 (US\$1.24).

The large outlay on schooling by parents can constitute **a large proportion of a country's total education expenditure**. Household financing is making up for the fact that governments are not spending sufficient resources on education:

- The Global Campaign for Education has estimated that households in low-income countries spend about US\$5 billion on basic education, in comparison with US\$11 billion spent by governments.¹⁷
- Households fund about one-quarter of education expenditure in Vietnam, around one-third in Côte d'Ivoire, one-half in Nepal and more than one-half in Uganda.¹⁸
- Among 50 low, middle and high income countries in all regions with data for 2005–2012, household education spending accounted on average for 31% of the total. In almost a quarter of the countries, households spent more on education than governments.¹⁹
- The share of household contributions is highest in South Asian countries. In Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, where governments spend around 2% of GDP on education, households pay about 4% of GDP, which means that their contribution amounts to about two-thirds of the total expenditure.²⁰

Why costs must be abolished

Fees and costs can discourage poor people from starting or completing education and exacerbate poverty, by forcing parents to take on some of the burden of financing education.²¹ It can also discourage the schooling of girls in particular because where resources are limited families tend to prioritise the education of boys.²² The abolition of school fees had a strong positive impact on enrolment in the years after its implementation in countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda. Importantly, eliminating school fees increased the enrolment of disadvantaged groups such as girls and orphans in countries including Kenya, Malawi, Timor-Leste, Uganda, and Zambia.²³

It is unacceptable that, in some countries at least, parents are covering most of the costs of teaching materials. This is likely to mean that children from poorer households will have less access to adequate materials, which is likely to hamper their learning.²⁴

Low fee private schools excluding the poorest

In many countries, low fee private schools have emerged as an alternative for families disappointed with the poor quality of education provided in the majority of State schools. However, the amounts currently being charged by low-fee private schools such as Bridge International Academies remains substantially higher than the average of US\$43 per child per year families pay to send a child to public primary school in African countries where data is available.

Indeed, studies have shown that in Kenya, the cost of sending a child to a BIA school averaged US\$ 207 per year.²⁵ Similarly, in Nigeria, the total cost for sending a child to BIA in early primary grades was at least US\$129.91 per year.²⁶ In Uganda, the fees were calculated to range between US\$129 and US\$152 per year.²⁷ Such costs are not within reach of the poorest and risk entrenching patterns of discrimination and exclusion. In Kenya for example, where sending three children to a BIA school amounts to between 27 and 34 % of the monthly income of families living on US\$ 1.25 a day, 91.5 % of BIA parents admitted that they opted not to send all of their children to BIA, as they lacked sufficient funds.²⁸

If States committed to finding the resources to increase the size of their education budgets to meet globally agreed targets, all children, including the poorest and the most marginalised will be able to enjoy their basic human right to a free, quality public education without risk of exclusion.

Far from being part of the solution, so called low fee private schools exacerbate the problem and act as a distraction from the crucial effort to fully finance free quality public education.

Many governments are failing to meet the internationally-recognised targets of spending 15-20% of national budgets and 4-6% of GDP on education. At the same time, many are losing vast amounts of resources by providing tax incentives, such as tax holidays and exemptions on paying import duties or value added tax. ActionAid estimates that sub-Saharan Africa alone could be losing US\$38.6 billion from such tax incentives.²⁹

Governments' failure to honour their commitments to provide free, quality public education is placing a huge burden on families and preventing millions of children, especially girls from starting or completing their right to education. This must change.

What does ActionAid recommend?

ActionAid calls on developing countries to:

- 1. Spend at least 15-20% of their national budgets and 4-6% of their GDP on education.**
- 2. Expand their domestic tax take to at least 20% of GDP and ensure resources are targeted at improving the effectiveness, efficiency and equitability of public education.**
- 3. Taking measures to ensure education budgets are 'gender sensitive' and that measures proven to support girls' enrolment, attendance and completion are adequately funded.**

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COVER PHOTO: Aida, age 16, Malawi. 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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