NGO provision of basic education: alternative or complementary service delivery to support access to the excluded?

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This paper focuses on approaches by non-government organisations (NGOs) to reach primary school-aged children excluded from access to the conventional state education system. It highlights recent shifts in international literature and agency priorities from the portrayal of NGO provision as a (non-formal) 'alternative' to (formal) state schooling, towards developing approaches for 'complementary' provision. This shift is occurring as a means of making progress towards achieving Education for All (EFA) goals. The paper then compares these international trends with attention paid to NGO provision in national education plans across four countries (Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia and Ghana). Based on the analysis of international and national approaches, the paper argues that NGO provision continues to be seen as 'second-best' to state schooling, with state schooling remaining the focus of attention for EFA.

Keywords: non-government organisations; non-state providers; developing countries; sub-Saharan Africa; South Asia; educational exclusion

Introduction

This paper presents a critical analysis of changing perspectives towards the role that non-government organisations (NGOs) play in providing access to primary school-aged children.[1] As the paper indicates, many of the issues raised 30 years ago in Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) influential study on non-formal education are still relevant today. Concerns identified in their study remain of how to ensure NGO provision (often associated with non-formal approaches) is seen as equivalent to (if different from) state formal provision.

The paper begins by defining NGOs in the context of their role as education providers. It then considers the way in which international literature views NGO provision in comparison with formal government schooling. The paper notes the paradox that NGO provision is often associated with cost-effective, good quality provision, at the same time as being seen as a second-best alternative to formal government provision. Finally, it explores the ways in which NGO provision is addressed in international declarations, and how this relates to its portrayal in national education plans. Comparisons across four countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Bangladesh, India, Ethiopia and Ghana) are drawn upon for this analysis.

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NGO roles as education providers

NGOs play a variety of roles in supporting education service delivery. Some NGOs are primarily involved in advocacy aimed at putting pressure on governments to fulfil their commitment to Education for All (Mundy and Murphy 2001). Some provide support to improving the quality of government provision through 'school adoption' programmes (see Nair 2004 for examples in India). Others, which form the focus for this paper, are involved directly in education provision, primarily with the aim of providing educational opportunities to those children excluded from government schooling. Educational exclusion that such provision intends to address can take many multidimensional forms. It is often associated with being 'hard-to-reach' in terms of where children live as well as who they are. Street children, orphans, child soldiers, demobilised children in post-conflict areas, pastoralists, indigenous groups, ethnic, religious and language minority groups, the disabled, refugees, and child labourers are often amongst those identified as being most excluded from government provision (Sayed and Soudien 2003; UNESCO 2004). These children are amongst those targeted by NGO education providers.

Who are these NGO providers? As Bano (2008) argues, the term 'NGO' has become highly contested. NGOs are often associated with motivations associated with philanthropic, non-profit aims. In reality, motivations of NGOs can take a variety of forms. Not infrequently, they are established specifically as a means to acquire aid donor resources (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, and Wolf 2002). Even though the registration status of NGOs means they cannot distribute profit officially, those working for the organisations are often beneficiaries of donor resources. They may, for example, receive preferential salaries or other pecuniary benefits compared with those working within the government education system. This implies that their motivation can be both financial as well as philanthropic. While international NGOs are often at the forefront of education provision, NGO approaches have also developed within countries. BRAC in Bangladesh is a prominent example. One of the motivations of BRAC's involvement in education is related to a small (but growing) educated urban elite which has a commitment to modern education for the masses as a means of transforming the behaviour and attitudes of the poor (Hossain, Subrahmanian, and Kabeer 2002).

The influence of NGO education providers in terms of extending access is extremely difficult to assess in practice. Data on NGO provision are not generally collected in a systematic way either by ministries of education or by household surveys. Given the number of often relatively small NGO programmes that exist in some countries, obtaining an overall impression of the scale of provision is very problematic. As such, children enrolled in NGO programmes are often categorised as officially being out-of-school. As indicated below, NGO programmes in the four countries analysed in this paper are estimated to reach a relatively small proportion of the primary school-aged population, ranging from around 2.5 to 10%. Governments remain the main provider of primary schooling in all four cases. While NGO providers are potentially extending educational opportunities to the marginalised, concern remains that children living in extreme poverty or suffering acute forms of vulnerability continue to be excluded. Moreover, some evidence suggests that NGO programmes are more easily accessed by those who have already had some successful experience of education rather than those who have never been to school (Carron and Carr-Hill 1991, cited in Hoppers 2006).

NGO 'non-formal' education provision – alternative or complementary to formal schooling?

An important question that follows from the assessment of the limited coverage of NGO provision indicated above relates to what it is that children in NGO programmes are gaining access to. As this section discusses, international agency and NGO reports often suggest that students in NGO schools receive a better quality education compared with their counterparts in government schools, and that such provision is more cost-effective. However, one area that has been neglected in terms of understanding the benefits of these programmes relates to their impact on livelihood outcomes. Little is known about how access to NGO provision affects access to higher levels of education, or how it influences employment opportunities.

In order to reach the excluded, NGO provision is often viewed as aiming to develop an 'alternative' approach to education from the formal 'conventional' state system. This gives rise to questions of what is seen as 'conventional' and what is an 'alternative' to this. The 'alternative' associated with NGO provision is often related to 'non-formal' approaches. Coombs and Ahmed's analysis of non-formal education programmes (1974) articulated a now much-cited definition for non-formal education. Their approach started from the premise that 'education can no longer be seen as a time-bound, place-bound process confined to schools and measured by years of exposure', and so equated education with learning, regardless of where, how or when learning occurs (1974, 8). As they noted, and others continue to highlight (e.g. Thompson 2001; Hoppers 2006), there may be similarities between formal and non-formal education in as much as they are organised to augment and improve the informal learning process. There may also be differences with respect to their institutional arrangements, educational objectives and the groups they serve. Coombs and Ahmed's definition is concerned with *how* education is provided, not with *who* provides the different forms of education. Over time, however, the term non-formal education has become closely associated with NGO provision, while formal schooling is seen to refer to government (or private) provision.

The term non-formal education has gained common currency, with the definitions coined by Coombs and Ahmed continuing to be adopted by international agencies (see, for example, UNESCO 2006). However, debates amongst education researchers and NGO practitioners about terminology have become intense in recent years for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a concern that, where the term 'non-formal' is associated with being an 'alternative' to formal schooling, this implies that it is second-best. Secondly, given the diversity in non-formal programmes, as well as some changes in the way that formal schooling is delivered, the boundaries between formal and non-formal education have become increasingly fuzzy (Hoppers 2006; Rogers 2004).

Despite the debates over terminology, there is considerable consistency with the way in which the terms are used in literature – with non-formal education commonly viewed in a more positive light, while formal schooling is often associated with more negative connotations (Table 1). A 2006 UNESCO report, for example, includes a table comparing formal and non-formal approaches in a stereotypical way, associating the former with negative attributes of passive and decontextualised learning, and the latter with problem-solving approaches developed in a meaningful context (UNESCO 2006).

The comparisons in Table 1 present extreme views that could be challenged empirically. Much of the available literature is produced by agencies (aid donors and

Table 1.   Terms commonly associated with formal/non-formal approaches.

Formal	Non-formal
• State provided	• NGO provided
• Conventional	• Alternative/complementary
• Mainstream	• Compensatory/supplementary
• Accountable to Ministry of Education	• Accountable to civil society/community
• Teacher-centred	• Child-centred
• Homogenous	• Heterogeneous
• Rigid	• Flexible/participatory
• Top-down	• Bottom-up
• Over-crowded curriculum	• Accelerated learning
• Curriculum associated with modernisation	• Locally relevant curriculum
• Hidden curriculum promotes silent exclusion	• Girl-friendly
• Exam-driven	• On-going, formative assessment
• Large class sizes	• Small class sizes
• Centrally recruited teachers	• Locally recruited teachers
• Inefficient	• Cost-effective

NGOs) involved in supporting non-formal approaches, and so keen on portraying it in a positive light. As Molteno et al. (1999) note, in a report prepared jointly by an international aid agency (the UK Department for International Development – DFID) and a leading international NGO (Save the Children–UK), problems encountered in NGO provision are rarely documented. The authors argue that more attention is given to documenting the positive experiences with NGO non-formal provision than its challenges. They note that authors can face political difficulties in criticising NGO provision as this might involve also criticising governments with which NGOs are trying to partner, or endangering resources available to NGOs given their reliance on aid projects. In order to continue to receive aid funding, their evaluations need to display positive results.

One aspect of the positive image portrayed of NGO provision in the literature relates to their cost-effectiveness relative to government provision. However, assessments of cost-effectiveness of NGO education programmes have been plagued by limited data availability. Estimating their costs is further complicated by the type of information required for a full evaluation. As Coombs and Ahmed (1974) note, an evaluation requires information on financial as well as opportunity costs (including estimates of 'borrowed' facilities and volunteer help). Furthermore, the costs of monitoring and supervision of teachers – often viewed as a key benefit of NGO provision – are often not readily available. Similarly, evaluation of beneficial outcomes ought to include direct benefits (as assessed by improvements in incremental production and income) as well as indirect and non-economic benefits, neither of which is generally available.

Acknowledging these methodological and data challenges, a recent study finds that NGO programmes are more cost-effective in terms of the amount of completion and learning for the resources spent. Even so, in some programmes (for example, the School for Life programme in Ghana) the annual unit costs are higher than for government schools – partly because of the increased costs required in educating those who are most difficult to reach (DeStefano et al. 2006). A further question arises about whether these programmes can be extended to other children currently excluded from schooling, and whether the costs of doing so would be sustainable. A

key reason for the lower costs of NGO provision is due to inferior pay of 'voluntary' teachers, often supported by community contributions. For example, in Bangladesh estimates indicate that teachers in government schools receive around $70 per month, compared with $9 for those working in NGO centres (Groundwork Inc. 2002). The possibility of the government finding voluntary teachers on a nationwide-scale able to work at a rate of pay considerably below the $1 per day poverty line seems unlikely.

Rather than the negative image often portrayed of formal provision, as outlined in Table 1, such provision could also be viewed in a more positive light. Government provision could be attributed with a more professionally developed, regulated system aimed at providing children with access to jobs in the formal labour market. By contrast, non-formal, NGO-provided education often involves little external monitoring, with learning limited to basic literacy and numeracy. This provision could therefore lead to children unable to move beyond their existing environment and status. However, these views of formal and non-formal provision are rarely portrayed in recent literature. It appears that there is almost a fear of being critical about an approach that has gained exemplary status in the eyes of some international agencies.

In practice, NGO programmes are often offered in the form of a standard package, rather than through a wide variation of 'flexible' approaches as implied in much of the non-formal education literature. An assessment of NGO education programmes in Ethiopia, Guinea, Malawi and Mali (where USAID is supporting national NGOs through Save the Children–US) argues that the approaches of the programmes are similar across the four countries (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, and Wolf 2002). It is also apparent that a small number of programmes deemed to be successful (often ones that have expanded in coverage, and sometimes replicated in other countries) are frequently cited in literature – including School for Life in Ghana, and BRAC in Bangladesh (DeStefano et al. 2006). Others that are not seen as successful in terms of the quality of their provision are hardly referred to (or might be referred to in a positive light despite problems that have identified within countries).[2] According to Thompson (2001), in reality the majority of non-formal education programmes fall into the latter category of being less successful. Given the lack of systematic, critical analysis based on a diversity of programmes (beyond the reporting of well-known 'good practice' examples), it is not possible to draw conclusions to support claims either in favour of the benefits of NGO programmes or otherwise.

Despite the almost universal positive image of NGO non-formal education programmes, as noted, it is paradoxically often also viewed as a second-best alternative to government provision. In an attempt to shift the focus from this conventional perspective, USAID has recently adopted the terminology of 'complementary' approaches in its study of eight NGO programmes. The study notes that these programmes are '*not* meant to serve as non-formal alternatives to primary education' (DeStefano et al. 2006, 1) even though some were known as non-formal programmes at the time when they were established. This shift in terms from alternative towards complementary programmes is partly associated with a trend of seeing NGO provision as part of a process of 'mainstreaming' children into the formal system. For example, an equivalency system is currently being devised in Bangladesh to allow graduates from NGO programmes to join the formal system (DeStefano et al. 2006).

A consequence of moving towards equivalency and mainstreaming is that there are increasingly similarities between (formal) government and (complementary) NGO approaches in terms of the curriculum followed in order to prepare for higher levels of education. Complementary programmes are therefore converging towards government formal approaches to ensure children can transit from one system to another. This is contrary to the expectation that government provision will adapt to NGO programme innovations, as is often envisaged, particularly where NGO programmes are designed as pilots from which lessons are to be drawn for larger-scale provision. The move towards complementary NGO provision is commonly associated with a version of 'accelerated learning'. In this context, accelerated learning is used to refer to approaches which support a reduced curriculum compared with the state system, usually focusing on basic literacy and numeracy (Balwanz, Schuh Moore, and DeStefano 2006). The intention is that students learn the basic requirements in a short period of time to allow them to gain access to a later stage of formal schooling. Examples of complementary, accelerated learning approaches of this kind include Ghana's School for Life and Ethiopia's Alternative Basic Education programmes, both of which are modelled on the BRAC approach in Bangladesh (DeStefano et al. 2006; Rose 2003).

Integrating graduates from these NGO programmes into the formal system remains a challenge in reality. In Bangladesh, while the vast majority of BRAC graduates gain access to formal secondary schools (over 90%), their survival rates in school are low, and below rates for those who continue from formal primary schools (Nath 2002). Reasons for their dropout in secondary school are related to differences in learning styles and social background of students which can result in them being excluded within the formal school system. Insufficient supply of secondary schools is another reason for problems in the transition between non-formal and formal systems. In Ghana's School for Life programme, it is estimated that one-third of graduates have been unable to join the formal school system, with reasons for not doing so mainly due to lack of availability of a school in the vicinity rather than lack of interest (Akyeampong 2004).

Influence of international commitments and goals on NGO provision

Shifts in NGO education provision from being viewed as an alternative to being seen as complementary to formal provision, as outlined in the previous section, are associated with international political and economic priorities over the last four decades (Table 2). In the 1970s, Coombs and Ahmed's study (1974) gave rise to attention towards non-formal education in the World Bank and amongst international agencies more generally. Their study was motivated by the 'lopsided pattern' of development efforts which they argued had prioritised modernisation of urban areas, giving rise to a widening social and economic gap between urban and rural areas. They highlighted education as being partly responsible for this. Moreover, their study came at a time when standardised formal approaches to schooling were becoming heavily criticised from a variety of perspectives – including Illich's 'deschooling society' (1971); Freire's 'critical consciousness' (1972); Dore's 'diploma disease' (1977); and Bowles and Gintis' reproduction of social relations in schools analogous to 'mini factories' (1976). Furthermore, it was written in the light of anticipation that targets to achieve universal primary education by 1980, set by UNESCO conferences in the 1960s, would not be met. To achieve the goals with the

Table 2. Summary of international influences on non-formal, alternative and complementary approaches to education.

1970s: attention to non-formal approaches
• Basic needs approach to development
• Concern of achieving universal primary education by 1980
• Criticisms of formal schooling
1980s to 1990s: swing back to formal, with 'alternatives'
• Structural adjustment conditionalities resulting in a decline in resources towards state schooling
• Non-formal seen as 'band aid' and second-best
2000s: emphasis on 'complementary' approaches
• Education's role prioritised in the context of emerging democracies with emphasis on state provision
• Concern for achieving MDG/EFA by 2015
• Complementarities between state and non-state approaches – search for alignment

timeframe implied that alternative approaches would be needed. Despite the attention that Coombs and Ahmed's study received, spending patterns of the World Bank were not re-directed towards non-formal approaches (Jones 1988).

The focus in education during the 1970s was on alternative (non-formal) *approaches* rather than alternative (NGO) *providers*. However, during the 1980s and 1990s NGOs began to play an increasingly important and visible role in education provision. The rise of these NGO providers occurred in the context of an international economic policy agenda associated in particular with economic liberalisation and political democratisation (see Fine and Rose 2001; Rose 2005; Bano 2008; Edwards and Hulme 1995). NGOs were becoming more influential in development activities during this period as pressure was put on governments to downsize their own activities and cut back on expenditure. Paradoxically, within the international education agenda, attention to the non-formal education 'fashion' implicitly associated with NGO provision appeared to become 'more sober' in the late 1980s. By this time attention in international agencies had 'partly swung back to the formal system and ways to reform and spread it as widely as possible' (Bray n.d., 99). Non-formal education also became seen as a 'band aid' to maintain social structures and avoid reform. For example, alternative education schemes were developed for unemployed youth in urban slums to try to quell conflict, rather than trying to address the root causes of conflict (Carnoy 1982, cited in Bray, n.d.).

Renewed attention towards NGO (and other non-state) provision is again apparent over the last decade. One reason for this is an attempt to address concerns that the 2015 Education for All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will not be met through the formal state system alone (repeating concerns in the 1970s). The focus on NGO provision is also arising in the context of attention being given to youth education for security reasons in 'fragile states' (Rose and Greeley 2006), again often omitting to address the root causes of insecurity.

Despite wider attention to the role of NGOs in development discourse, within education much of the discussion about non-formal approaches continues to focus attention on alternative forms of education provision, rather than on alternative providers (NGOs). Within the more recent international education discourse, attention to non-formal, alternative approaches was barely visible in the 1990 EFA

agenda at Jomtien. Its Declaration viewed non-formal education for children and youth as gap-filling for malfunctioning formal primary schools:

> *Supplementary alternative programmes* can help meet the basic learning needs of children with limited or no access to formal schooling, provided that they share the same standards of learning applied to schools, and are adequately supported. (UNESCO 1990, emphasis added)

By contrast, in the light of the goals set at Jomtien not being met, the 2000 World Conference on EFA at Dakar was more forthcoming in recognising the contributions that 'alternative' programmes could make towards achieving the goal of ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality:

> All children must have the opportunity to fulfil their right to quality education in schools *or alternative programmes* at whatever level of education is considered 'basic'. (UNESCO 2000, emphasis added)

However, while non-formal/alternative programmes are recognised, emphasis continues to be placed on state-provided primary schooling as the main vehicle for achieving the goal. There is limited consideration of the form that such alternative programmes would take, and how this would relate to formal provision. It also does not address who would provide alternative programmes, and the role of NGOs in this provision.

NGO provision in national education policies and plans

As the previous section highlights, attention to non-formal education provision has become more apparent in the international arena in recent years. This section assesses how this international attention is reflected in national plans. The comparison between international and national priorities towards non-formal education and NGOs provides the opportunity to see how international trends are evident within countries, and how this varies across countries. The section presents a comparison of countries which have a history of NGO provision in South Asia with very different national planning approaches (Bangladesh and India), with ones in sub-Saharan Africa where NGO provision is a more recent phenomenon (Ethiopia and Ghana). These countries are chosen to provide different perspectives on NGO provision from a national planning perspective, rather than being representative of other countries in their regions.[3]

At the time of Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) study, few countries had included non-formal education programmes within their education and development strategies. This situation has only changed very recently. Since the Dakar conference, and in the context of changing aid modalities towards basket funding associated with sector-wide approaches (SWAps) and direct budgetary support, NGOs have become more involved in policy dialogue. This has been further enhanced by the creation of umbrella associations aimed at strengthening the voice of NGO providers in the policy process (Rose 2006). As a result, national education plans are beginning to pay closer attention to NGO programmes in recent years – no doubt reinforced by the fact that international agencies supporting SWAps are also funding NGO programmes and are keen to ensure their recognition in plans. However, as highlighted further below, this recognition often remains limited, and highly variable across countries.

In India and Bangladesh, there is a long history of indigenous NGO provision of education (with BRAC's renowned non-formal provision in Bangladesh dating from 1985, and in India dating from the nineteenth-century social reform movement) (Chowdhury and Rose 2004; Nair 2004). India is unusual in having a focus on non-formal education within government plans over an extended period of time, with attention given in these plans to programmes run by state governments. The non-formal education scheme in India was introduced in 1977–8 (i.e. not long after Coombs and Ahmed's study) on a pilot basis, and has expanded in subsequent years with a focus on primary school-aged children who are unable to access the formal system. The role of non-formal education, envisaged as closely related to formal education, is elaborated upon in the sixth Five Year Plan (1980–1984), which notes:

> Programmes for non-formal learning would be organised and oriented towards target groups and decentralised in regard to their contents, course duration, place and hours of learning and pattern of instructions. However, there would be a basic minimum package of inputs identified by the public educational authorities which would have correspondence to the formal system of education.[4]

By the eighth Five Year Plan (1992) there is greater recognition of the role of 'voluntary' organisations (and NGOs) in providing non-formal education. The ninth Five Year Plan (1997) marks a further shift in this regard (with non-formal education now appearing under a heading 'alternative education'), noting that

> It has been found by experience that NFE [non-formal education] centres achieve more meaningful results when these are run by NGOs. Accordingly, the number of centres run by NGOs will be enhanced significantly. Where NGO participation is not forthcoming, State-run NFE centres will be established.

While the Government of India has been supportive of non-formal education, it is also aware of the limitations of non-formal approaches. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Universalisation of Elementary Education Programme) provides a critical assessment of the 'ideological' debate surrounding alternative education, and its responses (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development 2002). Based on an analysis of experience in India, the plan suggests that non-formal education has not been achieving its intended objectives in terms of flexibility in provision, community involvement, inclusion of girls, and completion. Moreover, it notes that there is low overall coverage (less than 10% across the country), and absence of links for entry with formal schools. This assessment has led to the revision of non-formal education in India's education plan to a programme of 'Alternative and Innovative Education' (AIE) in 2000. This programme includes funding to support voluntary organisations and NGOs in providing education. In many ways, India has led the field in non-formal education, with its own policy and practice often pre-empting debates in the academic literature with respect to shifts associated with alternative to complementary approaches (even though in terms of terminology, it continues to refer to non-formal education and refers to this as an 'alternative'). In addition, despite the multitude of NGOs offering programmes independently of government (Nair 2004), the main focus in the plans is on government-supported non-formal initiatives.

By contrast, in Bangladesh where NGO provision is relatively prominent (and also renowned as a model replicated in other countries), it is invisible in the government's Primary Education Development Programme (PEDPII) (Table 3). Despite the invisibility in education plans, the Bangladesh poverty reduction strategy

Table 3.   Summary comparison of NGO provision in government plans.

India	Bangladesh	Ghana	Ethiopia
• Since 1970s • State-led through local NGOs/ 'voluntary organisations' • Integral to government plans • Complementary	• Since mid-1980s • Grown out of locally based relief NGOs (BRAC particularly influential) • Autonomous from government plans • Alternative	• Since 1990s • Donor-supported BRAC model supported by international NGOs • Included in government plans • Complementary	• Since 1990s • Donor-supported BRAC model supported by international NGOs • Included in government plans • Complementary

paper (PRSP) notes that, to address the government's commitment to EFA and the MDGs, there is a need to support non-formal primary education. It further states that 'Sufficient resources should be available for this purpose. A regulatory framework and code of practice for involved NGOs should be established' (Government of People's Republic of Bangladesh 2005, 137). The intention of the Ministry of Education developing guidelines on the quality of education is also mentioned, which are expected to apply to both government and NGO provision. However, in the absence of support from the Ministry of Education, notable by the silence in PEDPII, the path of NGO provision as a parallel system remains most likely. While NGOs in Bangladesh themselves increasingly see their role in terms of mainstreaming children from their centres into government schools (and so views their provision as complementary), the invisibility of NGO provision in government plans and lack of clear mechanisms for children to transfer from NGO to government provision means that, in reality, it remains an alternative to the mainstream. As noted previously, BRAC graduates are able to enter secondary schools in large numbers although the formal system does not sufficiently adapt to their needs resulting in high dropout. Given the informality of arrangements, the option of transferring from NGO to government provision is not as feasible for those in non-BRAC centres.

In contrast to Bangladesh and India, for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa NGO provision is a more recent phenomenon. In these countries it is more closely related to international aid agency priorities in terms of channelling resources through international NGOs. Ethiopia and Ghana provide illustrations of this trend. One of the objectives of the 1994 Ethiopian Education and Training Policy is to make available special and non-formal education in line with the needs and capability of the country; and to promote relevant and appropriate education training through formal and non-formal programmes. The first Ethiopian Education Sector Development Programme (ESDPI) indicated the intention that non-formal education would provide a second chance to school dropouts and those youths and adults who have never had the opportunity to attend schools, and that out-of-school children would benefit from an opportunity to become literate through non-formal education. However, ESDPI did not give much attention to this area. By contrast, 'alternative basic education programmes' (particularly those offered by NGOs) play an important role in ESDPII as a means to achieve universal primary education by 2015 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2002). Non-formal education models are proposed within the programme as an alternative to school-based primary education for out-of-school children and for very sparsely populated and remote communities, with options for graduates of these programmes to join the regular schools:

> To implement the program at a possible lower cost, the community and NGOs shall be encouraged to stand by the side of the government … A stronger and wider role for non-formal education and other alternatives for expansion of primary education shall be implemented. (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2002, 21, 22)

Although ESDPII places emphasis on 'alternative basic education' to reach out-of-school children, coverage of NGO provision remains low, constituting just 2.5% of the school-aged population, and was not projected to increase significantly. Moreover, non-formal education (including adult education) programmes are only estimated to receive 1.1% of the education budget.

ESDPIII continues to highlight the role of NGOs in expanding basic education through alternative basic education centres along similar lines to ESDPII (noting a stronger and wider role for non-formal education, and that the government will run these centres in areas where other providers are not available) (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2005). The education plan in Ethiopia continues to use terminology of non-formal education as an 'alternative'. Its approach, however, is more akin to complementary provision. The government intends to 'establish an equivalence system between skills and credentials obtained in schools and those obtained through non-formal programmes in order to increase the chance that learners who complete non-formal courses will subsequently find employment or enter the formal school system' (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 2005, 46). In practice, opportunities for the programme to expand sufficiently to reach the vast number of children who remain out of school is dependent on external resources that NGOs can mobilise, and on the motivation of NGOs to significantly increase their involvement although there is no evidence that NGOs are willing or able to do so. As in other places, the Ethiopian plan raises concerns that there are multiple NGO programmes which are not co-ordinated (with 35 NGOs running 85 programmes in one region of the country) and that these are not necessarily working in the most difficult areas of a country despite the intentions that they are reaching those most inaccessible (JRM Ethiopia 2006).

In Ghana, the 2003–2015 Education Strategic Plan similarly recognises 'complementary and alternative education programmes' for the 'disadvantaged', noting the need for an evaluation of these programmes. This is the first policy in Ghana to acknowledge and encourage complementary education (Hartwell 2004), and perhaps not a coincidence that this is in the light of USAID's support to it. As with Ethiopia, non-formal education in the plan is clearly aligned with a complementary approach, referring to the objective of designing and implementing 'programmes for the integration of complementary schools with formal schools' (Hartwell 2004, 22). Even so, emphasis within the Plan remains on the formal system – with the aim to 'reach and integrate excluded children (out-of-school, hard-to-reach, truants) intra-cycle dropouts and adolescent mothers within the formal system where possible' (Government of Ghana 2003, 21). The Plan does not discuss explicitly the role of NGOs in supporting complementary provision; nor the challenges around integration given the objectives of different providers. Marking a shift in this respect, the *2006 Education Sector Performance Report* provides some explanations for this omission, raising difficulties of co-ordinating NGO activities within a sector-wide approach, noting that

> On a number of occasions, the activities being undertaken [by NGOs reporting their activities] were very similar to those being undertaken or piloted at central Ministry level. The absence of communication between the Ministry of Education and NGOs is therefore leading to inefficiencies on two fronts:

- Programmes being undertaken by NGOs will be discarded once the Ministry of Education activity is introduced, or
- Successful programmes being piloted by NGOs may not come to the attention of MOESS, and, therefore, due to a lack of resources on the part of the NGO, such programmes will not be replicated across the country. (MOESS, Ghana 2006, 100)

In line with education plans in other countries, complementary approaches in the 2003–2015 Ghana Education Sector Plan are discussed primarily with respect to educational access. While increasing attention more generally is placed on quality within more recent plans, these refer only to quality within the formal system – with no explicit signs of an intention that lessons from innovative approaches from the complementary approaches are drawn upon. As such, integration of NGO and government approaches does not yet appear evident. While complementary approaches are referred to in the Ghana Plan, the term 'non-formal' education is not used in its strategies. However, the budget does include a line for non-formal education, but not for complementary approaches. Since the Non-formal Education Department is primarily responsible for the development and delivery of education programmes for out-of-school youth and adults, it would appear that the budget relates to this, rather than complementary approaches for children. In any case, the amount allocated is a mere 2.7% of primary school allocation, or 1.1% of the total education budget for 2003, with the proportion of the total budget projected to stay more or less constant up until 2015. Such policy evaporation in terms of prioritising NGO provision but not allocating government resources to support it, as is also apparent in Ethiopia, is not unusual. India is exceptional in earmarking resources for non-formal education, some of which is channelled through NGOs (Nair 2004).

Experience in Ethiopia and Ghana suggests that governments are happy to include NGO provision within their plans provided the provision is supported by external resources, rather than competing with government sources for formal schooling. This raises important concerns for sustainability of NGO provision dependent on international agency project funding. As such, despite evidence of increasing attention now being given towards recognising NGOs as a provider within education plans in Ethiopia and Ghana, it remains the case that government plans and resources focus on formal schooling. International aid agencies continue to be seen as responsible for providing financial support to NGOs, and are also often the ones promoting the inclusion of NGO provision within education plans. This is differentiated from experience in India where NGO provision has become integral to education plans, with particular programmes designed and funded within an overarching strategic approach. At the other extreme, NGO provision is run as a parallel programme to the education plan in Bangladesh.

Conclusions

The paper has highlighted a shifting emphasis towards the role of NGO education provision over the past three decades. This shift is in part related to whether its role is seen as contributing towards the achievement of internationally set goals which otherwise would not be met (whether these goals have been set for 1980, 2000, or 2015). Despite cycles in prioritising NGO provision, it has remained on a small scale, and is likely to remain so given that resources are often dependent on international agency funding. While NGO provision is reaching some children who otherwise

might not be able to access any form of education, questions remain of whether the provision is (and can) really be complementary to formal education in terms of the opportunities it gives rise to, or whether the ultimate goal is to gain access to formal education with NGO provision as a second-best alternative to this.

The focus in international frameworks generally suggests that NGO provision continues to be seen as a second-best alternative to formal state provision. However, a shift towards seeing NGO provision as complementary to state provision is becoming apparent in national education plans. Drawing on a comparison of four countries, India, Ethiopia and Ghana are now planning to ensure that education of children attending NGO schools is recognised as equivalent to state provision. Such recognition would, in principle, allow children in NGO schools to transfer to government provision, and to compete equally with graduates from formal provision for employment. Whether this intention is realised deserves further analysis. In addition, one possible outcome of adopting the complementary approach is that the flexible design of NGO provision, as a means to reach those excluded from government schools, could be lost. This also requires continued attention. By contrast to India, Ethiopia and Ghana, Bangladesh's provision continues to be regarded as an alternative to government provision from the perspective of national education planning. Despite the reluctance by government to recognise NGO provision as complementary to its own provision, there are efforts by NGOs (notably BRAC) to move in this direction. To be effective, this would ultimately require the support of government to recognise NGO provision as equivalent.

Despite continued attention to NGO provision in international and national policies since Coombs and Ahmed's study, very limited critical, systematic analysis has been undertaken to assess the outcomes and implications of such programmes – particularly those focusing on children and youth. Where analysis of programmes does exist, these are most often undertaken as part of an internal evaluation process in order to feed back into the programme itself, and to encourage further donor funding to support the programmes. Further work is needed in order to assess whether the programmes are indeed reaching the most marginalised as intended. Moreover, there is extremely limited evidence available on the returns to gaining access to NGO programmes. Analysis is needed to identify whether alternative/complementary provision can give rise to social mobility, or if the programmes exacerbate exclusion in the longer term. Where such provision does not provide further education possibilities or improved livelihood opportunities, those attending the programmes could remain trapped in a vicious cycle of exclusion.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. While NGO provision of adult education programmes is also important, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

2. One example of this is the Save the Children–US-supported Village-based Schools programme in Malawi which is not considered a success within the country (Kadzamira and Rose 2004), but is referred to in a positive light in a recent USAID document (DeStefano et al. 2006).
3. Developments in national planning approaches towards NGOs in education in Pakistan are, for example, closer to the experience of some sub-Saharan African countries. This provision has mainly developed in the context of international agency prioritisation of 'private–public partnerships' (Bano 2008).
4. Quotes from Five Year Plans are taken from website sources; as such, page numbers are not available (Government of India, http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/fiveyr/welcome.html, accessed January 18, 2008).

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