



The role and impact of philanthropic and religious schools on education in developing countries

EVIDENCE BRIEF

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Philanthropic and religious providers can play an important role in complementing state education, but this role and impact varies widely by context. The evidence base is relatively weak, fragmented in terms of providers and geographically concentrated. Greater empirical evidence is needed, as well as a systems approach on how different providers interact with each other and the state.

About this brief

This paper summarises a rigorous review by Wales et al. (2015), entitled: *The role and impact of philanthropic and religious schools in developing countries: A rigorous review of the evidence*. It was commissioned by DFID and produced by a multidisciplinary team of researchers and advisers from the University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Institute of Education, University of London and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). It accompanies a rigorous review on private schools conducted by Day Ashley et al. (2014).

Key findings

Despite a growing body of evidence on the role and impacts of private schooling, there is much less analysis of other types of non-state provider. The available literature focuses on philanthropic and religious providers, but is highly fragmented by provider and limited in geographic scope.

Where evidence exists, it finds that philanthropic schools in particular have learning outcomes that are comparable to those in state schools

and can play useful roles in complementing state education, by expanding access to marginalised groups and improving school readiness. The role of innovative pedagogy, locally adapted teaching methods and greater flexibility of schooling structures is emphasised. Many families also send children to religious schools, but the evidence on their quality is much more limited. State recognition, collaboration and partnerships can improve sustainability and quality, but success is context specific, requiring overlapping interests between the state and the providers, and sufficient state capacity and knowledge.

Research gaps

Definitional challenges and the limits of the evidence base make it very difficult to generalise findings. There is a need for stronger quantitative analysis of learning outcomes and for more of a systems perspective to understand how different providers interact with each other and the state, and how families navigate between them. More research is needed on where and how international organisations can effectively support these providers. The evidence base

should also be expanded outside of South Asia, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

How to use this brief

This brief is designed to provide an overview of the key evidence discussed in the rigorous review, to assist policy-makers and researchers in assessing the evidence in this field. It summarises key findings and indicates the country contexts from which evidence is drawn. The evidence is deeply contextual and this evidence brief provides only a broad overview. It is not designed to provide advice on which interventions are more or less appropriate in specific contexts.

Methodology

A multipronged search strategy was used which entailed: (i) searching a wide range of citation and journal indexes; (ii) using key search terms; (iii) building on recent policy-oriented reviews; (iv) verifying an initial master bibliography. This resulted in 61 studies included in the rigorous review. All included studies were assessed as high or medium quality, have been published in or after 2008, and focus on DFID priority countries.

Summary map of evidence

Five summary evidence maps are presented below and cover the three thematic fields of analysis investigated in the review: *supply*, *demand* and *enabling environment*. Within each of these thematic fields, hypotheses (H1-H10) were identified as to how philanthropic and religious schools may or may not improve education for children in developing countries. Underpinning these hypotheses are testable assumptions (A1-A19) that were interrogated through the rigorous review.

Key

- * = Assessed as high quality (remaining are medium)
- STRONG** = Body of evidence rated as 'strong' overall.
- MODERATE** = Body of evidence rated as 'moderate' strength overall.
- WEAK** = Body of evidence rated as 'weak' overall.
- + = Positive findings supporting assumption.
- = Negative findings refuting assumption.
- o = Neutral findings ambiguous in relation to assumption.

These summary evidence maps show which studies produced positive, neutral and negative findings in relation to each of testable assumptions. The studies are numbered and are listed in the reference section of this evidence brief. The summary evidence maps indicate which countries were analysed, provide the overall strength of the body of evidence for each assumption, and identify whether the overall findings for each assumption were positive, negative or neutral. More information on how the strength of the body of evidence was assessed can be found in the full review.

Summary Evidence Map 1: Supply (I)

	[H1] Philanthropic and religious schools are better quality than state schools		[H2] Philanthropic and religious schools provide education to disadvantaged children	
	(A1) Philanthropic and religious school pupils achieve better learning outcomes than state school pupils	(A2) Teaching is better in philanthropic and religious schools than in state schools	(A3) Philanthropic and religious schools geographically reach the poor and the marginalised	(A4) Philanthropic and religious schools are equally accessed by boys and girls
ASSESSMENT	MODERATE (+)	STRONG (+)	STRONG (+)	MODERATE (+)
Positive	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [29*, 31, 34, 40] Ghana [31, 34] India [9] Zambia [31]	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [29*, 31, 33, 52, 58] Ghana [1, 31] India [9, 23, 53*] Uganda [22] Zambia [31]	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [4*, 10, 26, 29*, 31, 40, 52] Ghana [1, 27, 31] India [2, 9, 23, 28, 36, 53*, 54] Pakistan [14, 54] Sierra Leone [59] South Asia [16*] Zambia [31]	Afghanistan [25*] Bangladesh [4*, 7, 29*, 34, 52, 58] Ghana [1] India [9] Sierra Leone [59]
Neutral	Bangladesh [5, 33] India [23]	Ethiopia [49] Kenya [43] Malawi [49] Pakistan [11]	Bangladesh [4*, 10] Democratic Republic of the Congo [8]	
Negative	Bangladesh [58]			Bangladesh [10, 52, 58] Pakistan [14]

Summary Evidence Map 2: Supply (II)

	[H3] Philanthropic and religious schools are cost-effective and financially stable	
	(A5) Philanthropic and religious schools are cost-effective	(A6) Philanthropic and religious schools are financially sustainable
ASSESSMENT	MODERATE (+)	WEAK (o)
Positive	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [29*, 31, 33, 52, 58] Ghana [27, 31] India [9] Zambia [31]	Bangladesh [52, 58] Pakistan [14]
Neutral	Unspecified [49]	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [31, 48*] Ethiopia [49] Ghana [31, 49] India [9, 28, 48*, 49] Pakistan [48*] Sierra Leone [44] Yemen [21] Zambia [31]
Negative		

Summary Evidence Map 3: Demand

	[H4] Philanthropic and religious schools are affordable to the poor and poorest	[H5] Demand for philanthropic and religious schools is driven by a concern for quality and informed choice	[H6] Philanthropic and religious schools better respond to the needs, interests, beliefs and identities of particular social, cultural and religious groups	[H7] Philanthropic and religious schools are accountable to users		
	(A7) Philanthropic and religious schools are as affordable to users as state schools	(A8) Perceived quality of education is a priority for users when choosing philanthropic and religious schools	(A9) Users make informed choices about the quality of education	(A10) Users' choices reflect their identities, beliefs or membership of particular social, cultural or religious groups	(A11) Philanthropic and religious schools provide education that is suited to the needs and interests of particular social, cultural or religious groups	(A12) Users actively participate in or influence operational decision-making in philanthropic and religious schools
ASSESSMENT	WEAK (o)	WEAK (o)	WEAK (o)	MODERATE (+)	STRONG (+)	MODERATE (+)
Positive	India [53*]	India [9, 28]		Bangladesh [6*, 52] Pakistan [14, 42*] South Asia [46]	Bangladesh [4*, 6*, 10, 52] India [2, 9, 47, 48*] Nigeria [57] Occupied Palestinian Territories [35] Pakistan [14]	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [29*, 31, 33, 52] Ghana [31] India [9] Zambia [31]
Neutral	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [4*, 10, 31, 33, 52] Ghana [31] India [2, 9, 28, 47] Occupied Palestinian Territories [35] Zambia [31]	Bangladesh [6*, 52] Occupied Palestinian Territories [35] Pakistan [16*]	Bangladesh [52] India [28]		Pakistan [46]	
Negative	Democratic Republic of the Congo [8]	Bangladesh [26] Pakistan [46]	Bangladesh [26]	India [54] Pakistan [54]		Bangladesh [48*] India [48*] Unspecified [41]

Summary Evidence Map 4: Enabling Environment (I)

[H8] Financing and regulation, whether from the state or international bodies, improves philanthropic and religious school quality, equity and sustainability				
	(A13) States have the capacity, legitimacy and knowledge to implement effective policy frameworks for collaboration and regulation of philanthropic and religious schools	(A14) State regulation of philanthropic and religious schools improves quality, equity and sustainability	(A15) State , subsidies, co-operation and partnerships, and contractual arrangements with philanthropic and religious schools improves quality, equity and sustainability	(A16) International support effectively strengthens philanthropic and religious provision of education
ASSESSMENT	WEAK (-)	MODERATE (+)	WEAK (+)	WEAK (-)
Positive	Bangladesh [4, 12, 48*] India [40, 48*] Pakistan [48*] Range [50]	Afghanistan [31, 37] Bangladesh [4*, 12, 31, 48*] Ghana [31] India [40, 48*] Pakistan [48*] South Sudan [32] Zambia [31] Range [16*]	Bangladesh [4*, 12, 15, 17, 48*] India [12, 15, 17, 48*] Pakistan [12, 15, 17, 48*] Range [50]	Afghanistan [24] Bangladesh [46] Democratic Republic of the Congo [19, 24] Ghana [27] India [46] Pakistan [46, 48*] Somalia [20] Range [16*]
Neutral	Afghanistan [31, 37] Bangladesh [31, 48*, 49, 58] Ethiopia [49] Ghana [31, 49] India [36, 48*, 49] Nigeria [45] Pakistan [48*] Range [16*, 61]		Bangladesh [48*] Ghana [1] India [48*] Pakistan [48*] Range [16*]	Bangladesh [13] India [13] Pakistan [13] Range [45]
Negative	Bangladesh [10] Democratic Republic of the Congo [30, 55] India [48*, 54] Liberia [24] Nepal [21] Pakistan [14, 46, 54] South Sudan [32] South Asia [51] Range [16*]	Bangladesh [48*] India [36, 48*] Pakistan [48*] Uganda [22] Range [16*]	Bangladesh [15, 48*] India [15, 48*] Pakistan [15, 48*] Uganda [22] Range [16*, 61]	Afghanistan [31] Bangladesh [31, 48*] Democratic Republic of the Congo [19] Ghana [31] India [48*] Liberia [24] Nepal [18*, 21] Pakistan [11, 48*] Sierra Leone [18*] Yemen [21] Zambia [31] Range [3, 16*, 61]

Summary Evidence Map 5: Enabling Environment (II)

	[H9] Philanthropic and religious schools and education providers have positive effects on the overall education system	[H10] Philanthropic and religious schools support social cohesion and peace-building	
	(A17) Philanthropic and religious education provision complements or strengthens the state	(A18) Philanthropic and religious provision does not increase tensions between different groups	(A19) Philanthropic and religious provision can help to support peace-building
ASSESSMENT	MODERATE (+)	WEAK (o)	WEAK (+)
Positive	Afghanistan [37, 50] Democratic Republic of the Congo [19, 38] Ghana [27] India [23, 48*] Pakistan [42*] Somalia [20] South Sudan [32]		Democratic Republic of the Congo [30] Uganda [22]
Neutral	Range [39]	India [2] Occupied Palestinian Territories [35] Pakistan [42*]	
Negative	Afghanistan [21] Bangladesh [48*] India [48*] Nepal [21] Pakistan [48*] Yemen [21] Range [16*, 45, 60*]	India [54]	

Outline of evidence

This section provides a narrative description of headline findings in relation to each testable assumption (A1-19) as listed in the summary maps of evidence. Traffic light colour codes indicate whether the body of evidence under each assumption yielded mainly positive findings, supporting the assumption, negative findings refuting it, or neutral findings that were ambiguous. This outline of evidence can be cross referenced with the summary maps of evidence, to identify in which countries and in which numbered studies positive, negative and neutral evidence can be found.

Supply	<p>There is strong evidence that philanthropic providers tend to use more innovative, child-centred pedagogies and have curriculums and content that are adapted to the needs and abilities of their pupils. Schooling structures are also found to be more flexible and the literature also identified benefits from locally-hired staff, community involvement, smaller class sizes and greater staff support and management. However, there is little evidence for religious schools.</p>	A2
	<p>There is strong evidence that philanthropic and religious schools can geographically reach the poor and marginalised. Philanthropic schools often purposefully locate themselves in marginalised areas (e.g. slums) and adapt their practices to cater to the needs of these groups. There is also evidence that religious schools, and particularly madrasas, serve more marginalised areas and reach out to poor communities. Madrasas are also more concentrated in rural areas in certain countries, although there is not clear evidence as to whether they serve poor or marginalised groups in these areas. The external validity of this evidence is unclear, however, as there is a lack of consistent or clearly defined measures of poverty by income level or degree of marginalisation and the literature is heavily concentrated in India and Bangladesh.</p>	A3
	<p>There moderate evidence that learning outcomes for students in philanthropic schools are better than, or as good as, those in state schools. The evidence for religious schools is ambiguous with a mixture of negative and neutral findings. These findings must be treated with caution, as studies concentrated on a relatively small number of providers; there is a lack of direct empirical studies that compare learning outcomes for philanthropic and religious providers with state schools; and much of the literature does not take into account socio-economic factors or 'unobservables'.</p>	A1
	<p>There is moderate, but fragmented evidence for gender parity. Philanthropic providers often target female enrolment and achieve gender parity. However, the evidence on religious schools, mainly madrasas, is more mixed. Evidence from Bangladesh shows rising female enrolment and gender parity for certain types of madrasa; while madrasas in other contexts continue to be male dominated. The evidence focused on enrolment, with little evidence on retention or attainment.</p>	A4
	<p>There is moderate positive evidence that philanthropic schools are more cost effective than state schools. Most studies find that these providers have lower operating costs than state schools, due particularly to lower teacher wages and smaller input costs. The few studies that examine cost-effectiveness directly find that philanthropic provision is more cost-effective than state provision. Precise estimates need to be treated with caution due to limited data on "hidden costs" (e.g. donated resources, monitoring and volunteers). Few studies focused on religious providers.</p>	A5
	<p>There is a major gap in evidence in terms of the financial sustainability of philanthropic and religious schools. The literature does identify some successful strategies and providers, but much of the evidence highlights the broad challenges of financial sustainability, particularly for philanthropic schools operated by NGOs. There are some examples where these schools have diversified their funding, including through government part-financing or individual or corporate contributions, enabling greater financial sustainability, but this can create issues of organisational coherence.</p>	A6

Mostly neutral /
ambiguous evidence

Mostly positive
evidence

Mostly negative
evidence

Demand

There is strong, consistent evidence that indicates that some philanthropic and religious schools adapt their teaching methodologies, curricula and structures to users. Madrasas will tailor the content of teaching to particular religious positions or preferences, while incorporating secular content and materials to meet community demand for both forms of education. Philanthropic provision, such as by NGO schools, can offer more adapted curricula and flexible forms of organisation, for instance to reach particular marginalised groups. These findings come with the caveat that few direct comparisons are made with government schools, and although the general tone of the literature suggests that state schools are less flexible and adaptive, there are examples of the state changing approaches. A11

There is moderate but consistent evidence, largely focusing on madrasa schooling and South Asia, that parents choose these schools on the basis of religious preference, although other factors are identified as important too. The paradigm of choice is complicated by the fact that the evidence also highlighted practices whereby a child may attend a madrasa with other children in the family attending other school types, such as private or government. This emphasises the extent to which choice reflects not just which school to choose, but which child to choose for which school type. This evidence is concerned with choices of madrasas over other types of school, rather than the choice of one particular madrasa school over another (as can be found in private-school choice). No evidence was found regarding users' choices and their identities and beliefs for philanthropic schools. A10

There is moderate evidence that philanthropic schools provide opportunities for users to participate in, and influence, decision making through a variety of mechanisms. However, these accountability relationships are generally not explored in detailed and it is unclear how substantive this participation is and how effective these mechanisms are in practice. A12

The affordability of philanthropic and religious schools is a major evidence gap. The available literature does suggest that many philanthropic providers absorb costs that would be shouldered by parents in government schools and that lower charges are a major source of demand for these providers. However, these providers may also rely on in-kind contributions and so are not costless. Certain providers also charge fees, but the comparative expense is unclear, and low fees that are affordable may also be associated with under-resourcing. There is some suggestion that religious schools may be more expensive than state schools in some contexts and the provision of particular financial incentives by some madrasas suggests they are generally not affordable to students from poorer families. However, this is an area of weak evidence overall. A7

There is weak evidence regarding whether perceived quality of education is a priority for users when choosing philanthropic and religious schools. The evidence indicates that choice of philanthropic or religious school is based on multiple complex priorities, which may include quality, such as cost, distance, accessibility, safety of learning environment, perception of child's academic ability and religious factors. A8

There is a very limited evidence base for assessing whether users make informed choices about the quality of education in these schools. A9

Mostly neutral /
ambiguous evidence

Mostly positive
evidence

Mostly negative
evidence

There is moderate, positive evidence regarding the impact of state regulation on philanthropic and religious providers, but the specific impacts of policies on quality, equity and sustainability are not fully explored. Basic recognition of non-state schools is identified as a key precursor for developing more collaborative relationships and can enable smoother transitions for pupils to higher levels of education, although recognition itself is not sufficient to ensure this. There are also successful examples of regulation helping to implement a broader and more coherent national curriculum, in some cases with the assistance of subsidies. However, regulation also often focuses more on inputs than outputs, controlling and restricting market entry, and so appears less likely to have a positive influence on education quality. A14

There is moderate evidence that philanthropic provision is complementary to provision by the state. This is largely due to these organisations specifically targeting gaps in state provision and groups that state provision is too rigid to accommodate. There are examples of state schools adopting teaching methodologies and adapting curricula in line with models used in philanthropic schools, however, relatively little of this literature analyses the impacts on state-school teaching or student outcomes. Challenges are identified where the presence of philanthropic and religious providers undermines the visibility and penetration of the state, as well as the ability to create standardised education. There are also significant gaps, with a lack of literature examining differing impacts between different types of non-state provider; or whether some types of provider or types of delivery arrangements may have more positive or negative impacts. A17

The evidence on state collaboration, partnership, subsidy and contracting with philanthropic and religious schools is inconsistent and therefore weak overall. The balance of findings was positive, but are particularly context- and provider-specific. A range of positive examples are found to improve sustainability, and some aspects of equity and quality, with emphasis placed on the need for overlapping interests between the state and non-state provider, and the nature of the informal relationships between state and non-state actors as a key factor. A15

A limited number of studies suggest that religious providers can reinforce differences between groups. However, they do not establish a clear link with sectarian conflict or violence. There is a significant evidence gap on philanthropic providers, particularly considering the prominence of these and other non-state providers in fragile states. A18

There is limited evidence that philanthropic and religious schools can assist peace-building by helping to re-integrate children in post-conflict environments or by supporting local level mechanisms that sustain social peace. Further evidence may be found in existing grey literature on non-formal and temporary programmes that fall outside the scope of this review. A19

There is inconsistent, and therefore weak, evidence and regarding whether states have the capacity, legitimacy and knowledge to effectively implement policy frameworks. The balance of findings is negative, but they are strongly conditioned by context. There is some high-quality evidence that suggests that, under some circumstances, governments are able to develop and implement effective policy frameworks for philanthropic and religious schooling of different types. However, overall the literature emphasises the inability of the state to engage with and regulate philanthropic and religious providers, due to a combination of low capacity, a lack of information, an inability to co-ordinate actors and an absence of skills cited. Overlapping interests and incentives for engagement are necessary for politicians, bureaucrats and non-state providers. A13

Evidence on the role of international funders and organisations is inconsistent and therefore weak. The balance of findings is negative, but context and the strategies and aims of both international donors and providers appear to be key elements affecting success. There is some evidence that international funders and organisations can effectively support philanthropic and religious schools by pushing for regulatory frameworks and helping to broker and negotiate relationships. Much of the evidence focuses on philanthropic providers, with international funders including both donor agencies and international NGOs. There are also concerns if providers are over-reliant on external funding it can create incentives and funding cycles that are misaligned with national and local priorities.

Mostly neutral /
ambiguous evidence

Mostly positive
evidence

Mostly negative
evidence

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This evidence brief summarises: Wales J, Aslam M, Hines S, Rawal S, Wild L, Batley R, Day Ashley L, Mcloughlin C, Nicolai S, Rose P (2015) *The role and impact of philanthropic and religious schools in developing countries: a rigorous review of the evidence*. Department for International Development.

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