

For-profit education in developing countries*

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James Tooley The Beautiful Tree

A Personal Journey Into How the World's Poorest People are Educating Themselves

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In his book, *James Tooley*, a professor of education policy with extensive on-location experience in numerous developing countries who has been researching the topic for over a quarter of a century, demonstrates the value attributed to learning by the poor through the example of the poorest people of Africa, India and China, and how resourceful the market is in providing the available opportunities in places plagued by poor local public administration and failing support from the developed world and international aid agencies.

The book is based on the author's years of on-location research and experiences in India, Nigeria, Ghana, China, Kenya and Zimbabwe, and addresses the elementary education of these countries' poorest students.

While on an assignment funded by the World Bank to research high-end private schools offering top-shelf education to the Indian elite in 2000, *Tooley* discovered in his free time that a multitude of low-cost private schools served the poor in the slums of Hyderabad at a far higher standard than local state-funded public schools. This surprising discovery spurred *Tooley* to investigate other developing countries to determine whether he was dealing with a fortuitous exception or whether affordable, for-profit private schools run as small enterprises could really be the solution for the world's poorest.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official view of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

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Tooley's research team, comprising local experts, students and a handful of young nuns in India, examined several locations across different continents, initially encountering puzzlement and resistance everywhere. Not only were local education policymakers and officials completely unaware of the numerous low-cost private schools operating in their country, but they could not even believe their existence was possible. Besides Hyderabad, India, *Tooley* also discovered a number of private schools serving the poor in Nigeria, including the Ken Ade School located in the Lagos lagoon, catering to 200 kindergartners and elementary school pupils, just one of the 26 schools operating in the Makoko slums in Lagos.

The author's research conducted in Ghana came to similar conclusions, where he found private schools in every randomly chosen village around Accra. Likewise, *Tooley* also found a myriad of private schools in China's northwest Gansu province, despite local officials finding the existence of private school logically impossible given the country's official ideology. There were also many schools operating in both large urban and rural areas in Kenya, even after public education had been made free. Free public education has only recently been introduced in many developing countries, but in some places parents still have to pay for public schools.

Tooley was interrogated in Zimbabwe two days prior to the April 2005 elections in a basement cell of the ruling party, as his research on private schools was seen as suspicious and incomprehensible. He was finally released following a phone call from party leaders because the daughter of the party's local president attended the private school run by one of *Tooley's* local assistants.

When local functionaries could no longer deny the existence of private schools serving the poor in the face of the facts, they called the schools' standard of education into question. The general argument claimed that poor, uneducated parents were incapable of assessing educational standard and thus to choose the adequate school for their children and to check the quality of education they provided. However, the author's numerous visits to public and private schools debunked this assertion. While public schools did in fact have more funding and operate in larger and nicer buildings, there was often very little actual teaching going on. Teacher absenteeism, inaccuracy, corruption related to teaching positions and a lack of attention to students' learning and issues were prevalent. Public schools accommodated more children but were located far from their homes, and could only be accessed through crowded and dangerous slums. By contrast, the owners of private schools were strict with teacher absences and requested adequate attention to students, as their own livelihood and business depended on it. These typically smaller private schools were also situated locally, with the owners and teachers well acquainted with the daily struggles faced by the children and parents, and thus better able to adapt to these situations. Another general trait shared by all the investigated locations was that orphans and those even poorer than their peers were allowed to study free of charge.

Besides exploring various regions across the globe, *Tooley's* book also delves into the past. He discusses how the British rule – primarily under Whig politician *Thomas Babington Macaulay* – ruined the traditional public education system in India, a system that had been successfully modelled and applied in England during that period under the pioneering work of the priest *Dr Andrew Bell*. Using historical data comparing the development of the Indian and English educational systems of that period, *Tooley* confirms that the British reforms implemented in the 19th century not only failed to establish the new Indian educational system, but also destroyed the existing and smoothly functioning former system, or using a metaphor *Tooley* adopted from an Indian author, uprooted the beautiful tree.

Finally, the book presents the general opinion of educational development experts working for international organisations and the governments of supporting and supported countries and highlights the underlying factors behind the deeply rooted hostility towards low-cost private education for the poor. The experts' principles do not work in practice, due to the absence of adequate incentives and the severe shortcomings of public administration in developing countries, while affordable private schools offer real solutions in practice for educating the majority of poor children.

Tooley is also involved in this effort. He participates as co-founder in the work of two organisations engaged in establishing affordable, low-cost private schools for the poorest in underdeveloped regions. Omega Schools operates in Ghana and Empathy Learning Systems in Hyderabad, India. *Tooley's* involvement in the work of these two organisations demonstrates that the author not only believes in the success and advantages of the solution presented in the book, but is indeed well versed in the opportunities and advantages of for-profit private education for the poorest.