



# **From global policy to local practice: Assessing the long-term effects of neoliberal reforms on education in sub-Saharan Africa**

**Case studies of Ghana and Ethiopia**

By

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under supervision of

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of

**B.A. in International Relations**

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024

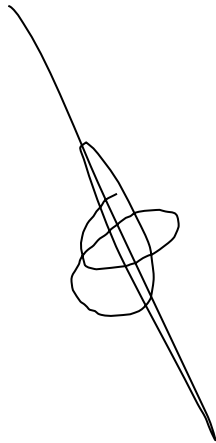
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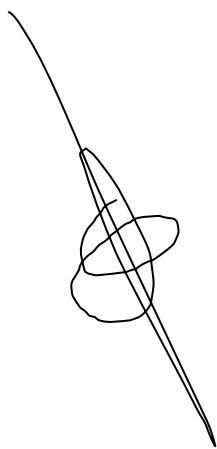
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# Abstract

This article investigates the causal relationship between neoliberal reforms and educational outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990's, focusing on the mechanisms of marketization, privatization, and deregulation. It examines how these reforms, enacted under the Structural Adjustment Programs by the World Bank and the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities by the International Monetary Fund, have impacted universal access to equitable and quality education in Ghana and Ethiopia. Employing a process tracing method (Bennett and Checkel, 2015) and analysing data from the World Bank Education Statistics and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics from 1990 to 2020, this comparative study aims to identify the causal chains linking these reforms to educational outcomes. The findings reveal a nuanced landscape: while access to education has improved, challenges in equity and quality persist, significantly influenced by how governments implement these reforms. The thesis highlights the need for careful policy assessment and implementation to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal reforms, Education, Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana, Ethiopia

# Résumé

Cet article examine la relation causale entre les réformes néolibérales et les résultats éducatifs en Afrique subsaharienne depuis les années 1990, en se concentrant sur les mécanismes de marchandisation, de privatisation et de déréglementation. Il étudie comment ces réformes, mises en œuvre dans le cadre des Programmes d'Ajustement Structurel par la Banque mondiale et des Facilités d'Ajustement Structurel Renforcées par le Fonds Monétaire International, ont affecté l'accès universel à une éducation équitable et de qualité au Ghana et en Éthiopie. En utilisant une méthode de traçage de processus (Bennett et Checkel, 2015) et en analysant les données des Statistiques de l'éducation de la Banque mondiale et de l'Institut de Statistique de l'UNESCO de 1990 à 2020, cette étude comparative vise à identifier les chaînes causales reliant ces réformes aux résultats éducatifs. Les résultats révèlent un paysage nuancé : si l'accès à l'éducation s'est amélioré, les défis en matière d'équité et de qualité persistent, influencés de manière significative par la manière dont les gouvernements mettent en œuvre ces réformes. La thèse souligne la nécessité d'une évaluation et d'une mise en œuvre minutieuses des politiques pour atteindre des résultats éducatifs équitables.

**Mots-clés :** Réformes néolibérales, Éducation, Afrique sub-saharienne, Ghana, Éthiopie

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Mr. Johannes Karremans, for his invaluable mentorship. His dedication to scientific rigor and clarity has profoundly shaped my approach to research. Thank you for your constant availability and caring support—you have been an incredible mentor.

I am also grateful to Mrs. Ilze Plavgo for our enriching discussions about my thesis topic. I extend my thanks to Mrs. Johannes Karremans for introducing us. Mrs. Plavgo's extensive knowledge of education in sub-Saharan Africa has immensely helped me simplify complex ideas. Thank you for the time and insights you have generously shared with me.

My appreciation also goes to Louis Brouard for engaging me in critical debates about my career aspirations in education in sub-Saharan Africa. These discussions were crucial in helping me critically examine and ultimately strengthen my beliefs, leading me to a dissertation topic that has truly captivated me. Thank you, Louis, for inspiring me to push my boundaries of thought and understanding.

To my father, who has always highlighted the critical influence of economic power in shaping the world during our discussions. Thanks dad, I finally understood.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their endless love and support. Your encouragement and belief in my abilities have been invaluable throughout this journey.

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# Introduction

With over one-fifth of children of primary school age out of school, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion of all regions in the world (UNESCO, 2023). Considered as a fundamental enabler of opportunities for individuals, economic growth at a country-level, and global benefits, education is fundamental to build any functioning society. During periods of swift social, technological, and economic transformations, investing in this field is also important for enhancing the resilience of countries. As underlined by the OECD, “investments in human capital can be a source of resilience over the long term and help ensure the well-being of future societies, especially in countries with large youth populations” (Runde, Bandura, and McLean, 2023). Considering that the trends show a continued rapid growth of the youth population in Sub-Saharan Africa, 60 percent of whom are currently less than twenty-five years old, urgent efforts must be concentrated to respond to this rising demand and achieve universal, equitable and quality education. Ensuring that every individual has access to education, receiving the necessary support to succeed regardless of background, and benefiting from effective teaching and learning are the main educational ideals towards which to strive to prepare young people for a productive life. The essence of a school's effectiveness lies in providing them with the necessary skills to explore, analyse, think critically, and comprehend. It readies individuals for cohesive community living, active political participation, and meaningful economic contribution (Thomson, 1981; Psacharopoulos, 1985). To this extent, acquiring the basic knowledge constitutes an elementary foundation for all future learning and personal development. Primary education lays the critical groundwork for ongoing, framing it as an essential first step in the educational journey. If a child does not gain the fundamental abilities necessary to thrive and contribute responsibly to society, the loss is felt not only by the individual but also by society at large. The expenses associated with educating children are substantially less than the economic burden of uneducated people. Adults without essential skills often face challenges securing higher-paying employment and breaking the cycle of poverty.

Despite this statement, sub-Saharan African countries struggle to implement a functioning and efficient system to provide a universal, equitable and quality education. According to micro-theories, individuals and families are confronted to significant, and educational ideals are far to be reached. In terms of ability, health and nutrition are fundamental to participate in and benefit from education (Bundy, 2006). Poor condition regarding these aspects may affect attendance and learning ability. If the primary needs are not met, no others can be considered. While health and nutrition directly impact a child's cognitive and physical ability to engage in educational activities, poverty is another variable determining whether those educational opportunities are accessible or not. Direct costs such as schooling fees, materials, and uniforms are not affordable for the poorer people (Collier, 2007). The opportunity cost of sending a child to school and losing an income from child labour, especially weighing in rural areas, is also an indirect form of cost seen as a burden by the families (Psacharopoulos, 2007). Beyond economic factors, societal norms rooted in traditional views, along with safety concerns during commutes to and from school, contribute to a gender gap in education across many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in fewer girls attending school compared to boys (Stromquist, 2002). From a national, international, and collective point of view, macro-theories emphasize the limited financial resources for public services sub-Saharan African countries must grapple with. Insufficient funding is available for education, leading to a lack of educational infrastruc-

ture, inadequate or no learning materials, and poorly paid teachers (Lewin, 2008). This situation heavily relies on policy decisions made by the government that can either foster or hinder educational access (Pritchett, 2013). Economic and political instability prioritize short-term investments to overcome the immediate difficulties over long-term investments like education (Glewwe and Jacoby, 2004; Machel, 2001).

Economic constraints and social consequences dramatically increased in the 1980's with the involvement of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in economic policies in developing countries, directly impacting societies and their conditions of living. Guided by neoliberal values since the 1970's, both international economic institutions emphasize the efficiency of private enterprises, liberalized trade, increased profits, capital accumulation and open markets to promote economic growth and social development. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology, advocates for a reduction of government intervention in economic activities and the promotion of free trade to achieve higher productivity, a more efficient allocation of resources, and greater economic results in general. To reach these goals, three main mechanisms are put forward by World Bank and IMF neoliberal policies : marketization which refers to the process of transforming public sectors or services into market-oriented entities to introduce competition and improve their efficiency and responsiveness to consumer needs; privatization that erases bureaucratic issues by transferring the ownership and management of public services, businesses or assets from the government to private entities; and deregulation entailing the reduction of the scope and complexity of government regulations by reducing barriers to enter and operate in different sectors. In this framework, the role of the government should be limited to creating and defending markets (Williamson, 1975; World Bank, 1993). Convinced by its economic benefits, the World Bank and the IMF promoted this ideology while responding to the debt crisis in the early 1980's in Latin America and sub-Saharan countries (Siddiqui, 1998; Ocampo and Taylor, 1998). Afterwards, the doctrine has been generalized to many other fields beyond markets, as important changes appeared specifically in the fields of communication and transport, which have rapidly and extensively spread the Anglo-American model of 'free market'. This means that national economies had no choice but to accept neoliberal policies to integrate into one global economy facilitating free flow of capital and goods. Eventually, it is the society as a whole is subordinated to the logic of the market (Siddiqui, 2012). The World Bank launched its Structural Adjustment Programs a little while before the IMF led Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities introduced in the mid-1980's, both aiming promoting economic stability and growth through policy reforms, fiscal austerity, and economic restructuring. These reforms were often imposed as conditions for financial assistance from international institutions, significantly impacting public services (Adésinà, 2009). By the end of the decade, about seventy of the developing countries had accepted the World Bank and IMF programs that advised them to adopt neoliberal policies of deregulation in capital and trade. These policies were supposed to boost their exports, and overall economy (Bello, 2005).

Even though some economic benefits were achieved in sub-Saharan African countries —such as more macroeconomic stabilization, increased exports, and foreign investment— they remained unevenly distributed. More importantly, these changes were socially detrimental, increasing poverty and inequality, and reducing access to essential services such as health and education. Widely critiqued for prioritizing economic stabilization and debt repayment over social spending, both organizations have, over time, modified their approaches to acknowledge the importance of social investment for long-term economic growth and to include more direct support for social services, especially education. This shift was part of a

broader push for education that began in 1990 with the Education for All (EFA) World Conference led by UNESCO in Jomtien, Thailand. It was reaffirmed in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in the same year as the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, which led up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Both EFA and the second and third goals of the MDGs aimed at universalizing education and making it accessible and equitable. Partially driven by these initiatives, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have abolished fees for basic education, and enrollment rates have increased, particularly at the primary level (Lewin, 2009). Given the significant shifts in educational policy driven by both neoliberal reforms from economic institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as global initiatives prioritizing the achievement of universal access to education, it seems relevant to examine the effects of these changes. This investigation will focus on how neoliberal reforms have impacted the achievement of universality, equitability, and quality in educational outcomes in developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990's.

## Literature review

Many past studies have explored the relationship between neoliberalism and education in developing countries, fueling the ongoing debate about the potential benefits or drawbacks faced by the educational system due to neoliberal reforms.

Supportive theories suggest that neoliberal reforms enhance educational outcomes in developing countries by improving efficiency, fostering economic prosperity, and responding better to local needs. Viewing investing in education as a tool for social change, these reforms are thought to lay the groundwork for economic growth through the development of a more skilled workforce. This growth, in turn, is believed to generate additional resources for improving the overall education system. According to the human capital theory, the quality and knowledge of the population constitute the main determinants of future human welfare (Schultz, 1963; Giroux, 1983). Moreover, the privatization mechanism that creates competition in education can improve efficiency and incentivize innovation. Market efficiency theorists (Friedman, 1962) argue that deregulation and school choice can lead to better quality education for all, including those in underserved communities. In theory, inefficient schools will lose students and be forced to improve or shut down. Thus, the arguments for cost savings and quality improvements are attractive to developing countries looking to expand education with their limited resources. Lastly, Bray (1999) supports a pragmatic theory that decentralizing education decision-making and empowering local communities can foster ownership and improve responsiveness to local needs. However, he warns that this approach requires strong institutional capacity and safeguards against resource inequality across regions.

Despite the few theories that suggest neoliberalism is beneficial to education, most of the literature on this topic is critical of neoliberal reforms and their social impact. According to Jane Arnold Lincove (2009), two key conflicts highlight the complex relationship between neoliberal reforms and education policy. On the one hand, there is a paradox where market-based policies that are supposed to reduce socioeconomic inequalities actually hinder efforts to achieve equality. Marketizing education as part of neoliberal educational policies has made it difficult for low-income families to access education, often resulting in low achievement (Chimombo

1999; Kadzamira & Rose 2003; Banya, 2010). Contrary to the goals pronounced by the EFA initiative and the MDGs, education is still not accessible to all individuals. In practice, privatization provides school choices primarily to the wealthiest families who can afford them (Zajda, 1995) while excluding the poorest segments of society due to economic constraints (Kihika, 2009). Additionally, fiscal austerity policies and deregulation have led to an inequitable repartition of educational resources and infrastructure, particularly affecting rural areas and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Ochwa-Echel, 2013). Girls are also disproportionately affected by these exacerbated inequalities (Gatwiri et al., 2020). This shift towards outcomes-based education and cost-cutting measures has compromised learning outcomes by resulting in under-resourced schools and overworked teachers, thus degrading the quality of education (Shizha, 2017; Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008). Overall, neoliberalism reinforces existing inequalities in resources and capabilities within education (Crook and Manor, 2000), and creates significant barriers (Stiglitz, 2002). Schools functioning as market-oriented systems impede social mobility, as the costs from gains in efficiency are outweighed by the losses in terms of equity (Colclough, 1996). Tensions arise from a fundamental dilemma facing governments in developing countries: the need to promote equal opportunity and build national identity through education versus the drive for efficiency imposed by the neoliberal agenda (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1992). From a global perspective, Wallerstein (1979) proposes that the neoliberal world-system creates a core-periphery structure. In this system, developing countries —positioned in the periphery— might prioritize attracting foreign investment over social spending, thereby neglecting education and perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment. Consequently, the free markets promoted by the World Bank and the IMF primarily benefit the core countries and fail to “free” everyone (Siddiqui, 2012).

On the other hand, Jane Arnold Lincove (2009) underlines that the World Bank and the IMF tend to adopt a holistic approach to education policy, rather than tailoring their policies to fit specific local contexts. This one-size-fits-all model may not be effective or equitable, given the insufficient capacities of understaffed education administrations at both central and local levels, along with low capabilities and insufficient incentives for teachers (Jane Zajda, 1995; Kazuro Shibuya, 2012). Additionally, the influence of the World Bank and IMF often limits state sovereignty over the education agenda (Jane Arnold Lincove, 2009). Jane Zajda (1995) further criticizes the focus on efficiency in market-based educational systems, which can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and school pressure to prioritize test scores over a well-balanced education.

The overall consequences of the neoliberal policies have been observed over the past decades, manifesting as slower growth, greater trade imbalances, and deteriorating social and economic conditions in most of the developing countries (Siddiqui, 1998; Ocampo and Taylor, 1998). However, it remains an open question whether these outcomes can be directly attributed to the neoliberal mechanisms themselves. This ambiguity prompts a more focused inquiry within the realm of education: How exactly have neoliberal reforms such as marketization, privatization, and deregulation specifically impacted the universality, equitability, and quality of educational outcomes in developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s? While broad economic indicators have been extensively studied, there is a significant gap in detailed, systematic research examining the direct causal relationships between these specific neoliberal policies and educational outcomes.

This investigation aims to provide empirical evidence analysing the direct correlation between educational outcomes and the three main neoliberal mechanisms. This longitudinal study assesses the long-term effects of these policies in terms of universality, equitability, and quality

in education, offering insights into the sustainability of the impacts of economic reforms. Furthermore, many previous studies on the relationship between neoliberalism and education in sub-Saharan Africa have focused on specific aspects of education, such as access or gender equity. More comprehensive research is needed across a broader spectrum of educational achievements, mixing quantitative and qualitative measurements in a dual approach for a more nuanced understanding of the impacts. Finally, this research intends to bridge a major gap in comprehending how exactly the mechanisms of marketization, privatization, and deregulation have been implemented in various educational contexts within Sub-Saharan Africa and their specific impacts on educational institutions and practices. This requires an exploration of the interplay between global policy prescriptions and local educational policies, focusing on specific case studies.

## **Research Design**

### **Case selection**

The case selection is guided by several criteria, focusing on socioeconomic factors within developing countries and specifically within sub-Saharan Africa. The chosen countries must have undergone similar neoliberal reforms during the same period, specifically the Structural Adjustment Programs and the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities. These reforms should have led to significant economic restructuring, including in the education sector, characterized by reduced public spending through marketization, the introduction of private schools as a form of privatization, and the decentralization of the educational system as a form of deregulation, which shifts decision-making from central to local authorities. Additionally, the selected countries must face similar challenges in achieving universal access to equitable and quality education. The interest in selecting these particular countries lies in the variations in their educational outcomes. Two countries that meet these conditions yet show contrasting educational results are ideal for this research. However, it is crucial that these countries do not have major differing variables that could affect the results, such as current political instability, a history of social segregation, or a significant role of religion in education.

Gathering all these criteria, Ghana and Ethiopia emerge as two relevant case studies that have undergone similar neoliberal reforms during the 1980's-1990's yet have yielded different outcomes. Although they differ in their original economic and political situations, both countries shared underdeveloped and poorly implemented primary educational systems at the onset of these reforms. These similarities and contrasts make Ghana and Ethiopia particularly suitable for this specific research, providing valuable insights into the varied impacts of neoliberal policies.

Since the 1990s, Ethiopia has seen improvements in primary educational outcomes, though economic inequalities have persisted. Prior to the neoliberal reforms, the Ethiopian education system was highly centralized, which made it slow to respond to local needs. Educational opportunities were limited during this period, as reflected by low literacy rates. In response, the government formulated and implemented education policies aimed at realizing the EFA

goals. Central to these efforts was the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP), which introduced free public education at primary levels and launched the first of a series of five-year Education Sector Development Programs in 1997. This program was part of a twenty-year plan to enhance educational quality, relevance, efficiency, and equity, with a particular focus on promoting education for girls and expanding access in rural and underserved areas. With an estimated total population of over fifty million people in the 1990's, of which 85-90 percent lived in rural areas and half of the population was composed by females, equity issues were in urgent need to be addressed.

Rural development and poverty reduction have indeed been central to the government's policies since the 1990's, within a broader perspective of economic development. Traditionally, Ethiopia had a centralized and state-controlled economy that began significant liberalization after the fall of the Derg regime (1974-1991). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which took power in 1991, adopted the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities in 1996, implementing neoliberal reforms. These reforms included deregulating the treasury bill market, allowing banks to trade surplus funds in the interbank market, liberalizing the investment code, and expanding credit to the private sector. Through these measures, the government aimed to build capacity and enhance skills, abilities, processes, and resources to achieve sustainable results, guided by a long-term vision for economic and political stability. Despite these efforts, Ethiopia remained one of the world's poorest countries in the 1990s.

Contrarily, Ghana has experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades but still faces challenges in ensuring quality and equitable education for all. Before reforms, the Ghanaian education system was marked by limited access, particularly for girls in rural areas, along with teacher shortages and resource constraints due to a lack of public funding. In the 1990's, Ghana's population size was approximately 17.3 million. The proportion of the population living in urban areas was around 36 percent, while 64 percent of the people were living in rural areas. As a significant educational advance, Ghana's 1992 Constitution declared that basic education "shall be free, compulsory, and available to all", reinforcing the first legislative act advocating for universal primary education in 1961 under the Education Act. It resulted in 1995 in the launch of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education program as a governmental commitment to the realization of the constitutional mandate of 1992. This led to a dramatic increase in admission and enrollment rates in basic education, largely due to the elimination of school fees in public basic schools. Demonstrating a deep commitment to educational achievement, Ghana was among the first group of African countries to join the EFA initiative. Since then, education has been the top priority of the government, as outlined in "Ghana Vision 2020".

Along with these goals, Ghana, as Ethiopia, has undergone neoliberal reforms. On the economic plan, Ghana experienced a more stable environment relative to Ethiopia, which allowed for earlier and possibly more consistent implementation of neoliberal policies. In an effort to reverse the steady deterioration of the economy since 1970, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), which came to power by military coup on December 31, 1981, developed an Economic Recovery Program announced in April 1983. This program aimed at stabilizing the economy and promoting economic growth through substantial devaluation of the cedi, monetary and fiscal austerity, measures to increase the private sector's share of bank credit, extensive price reform and a structured increase in the availability of foreign exchange to the private sector for the rehabilitation of capital and the purchase of inputs. Although economic performance under the Structural Adjustment Program improved rapidly, wide regional disparities in poverty and human development indicators remain.

## **Data and methods**

For this investigation, data on the impact of marketization, privatization, and deregulation in education are collected from both Ghana and Ethiopia. This study specifically examines how these neoliberal policies, as outlined in the countries' Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities and Structural Adjustment Programs reports from the 1990s, have influenced the achievement of universal access to equitable and quality education. Looking through the Project Information Document related to the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programs is also very helpful to trace the process of implementation. It aims to understand how these neoliberal mechanisms were translated into educational policies, how these policies were implemented, and what have been their educational outcomes overtime. The research methodology includes a qualitative enquiry based on these reports, supplemented by a quantitative analysis of the evolution of educational outcomes in terms of universality, equitability, and quality. The relevant data, spanning from 2000 to 2020, are sourced from the World Bank Education Statistics (EdStats) and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). It is important to note that the study excludes data on international involvement and external financing flows, focusing solely on internal policies implemented by the restructuring programs of the IMF and the World Bank. However, some data updates are missing from the two countries, which complicates the findings. Many years are not recorded in the data fields studied, which creates an irregularity in the research carried out.

The aim of this research is to study the causal mechanism relating neoliberal reforms and educational outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa, based on the comparative study of Ghana and Ethiopia. The recollection of quantitative and qualitative data through time helps in elaborating a process tracing method (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). Process tracing is a method used in social science research to identify the causal chain and sequence of events that connect causes and outcomes. It involves the detailed, empirical examination of how causal mechanisms operate. By systematically collecting and analysing data from multiple sources at different points in time, sequences of events or decision points can be traced and explain the processes leading to particular outcomes. This method is particularly useful in understanding complex and context-dependent phenomena such as the impact of neoliberal policies on educational systems. The hypothesis proposed at the initial stage of this research, in response to the raised question, suggests that while neoliberal mechanisms implemented through World Bank and IMF reforms are generally associated with exacerbating issues in educational outcomes, favouring quantitative development over qualitative improvements, the actual implementation by governments and accompanying measures can either improve or worsen these outcomes.

## **Analysis and discussion**

### **Marketization**

Through the Structural Adjustment Programs and Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities, the marketization of education translated into policies aimed at reducing public expenditures in this sector to eventually stabilize the economy. However, Ghana and Ethiopia followed different paths in implementing these policies. In Ghana, cuts in government spending were drastic, imposed through a fiscal policy within the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities in the end of the 1990's. Supported by the World Bank and the IMF, the government intensified its efforts under its Public Financial Management Reform Program (PUFMARP), which was launched in July 1995 to revise its public expenditure management. The government's strategy aimed to generate the savings necessary to achieve significant surpluses, which in turn support external financial objectives, and reduce the overall budget deficit. These savings were primarily made in public services, including education. This trend towards fiscal prudence was underscored by the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education program. The fact that education had become free intensified its evolution toward a market-based system, necessitating more efficient use of resources and focusing expenditures on areas that would yield the highest returns in terms of educational outcomes. To reinforce this fiscal austerity, a structural reform, part of the National Institutional Reform Program (NIRP) of 1994, was implemented in 1998 as outlined in the Budget of 1998 plans. It provided for the rationalization of all public spending related to public services, including education. This reform impacted the management of schools by affecting the allocated subventions, reducing staffing levels, and rationalizing the hiring practice, which resulted in fewer qualified teachers. However, Ghana's public expenditures on education relative to income are among the highest in the World. In the early 1990's, education spending was approximately 5-6 percent of GDP, but it has steadily risen since the start of the millennium, reaching double the average for Africa and other developing regions (World Bank, 2012). Additionally, several key initiatives have been established or expanded to counterbalance neoliberal reforms. These include the school feeding program, distribution of textbooks and uniforms, improvement of school infrastructure, and provision of supplements for teachers, and a high-profile annual award for the best performing teachers in a neoliberal outcomes-based approach.

However, even though public primary education is officially free in both countries, parents are still required to assume indirect costs. This cost-sharing mechanism shifts the financial burden of services from the government to users, leading to the introduction of various fees in public schools, such as for registration, uniforms, textbooks, and lunches, despite the policy of free basic education. These additional costs contribute to the opportunity cost of schooling, which is particularly burdensome for low-income families that rely on their children's economic contributions to the household (Psacharopoulos, 2007). Consequently, this often results in the exclusion of poor children whose families cannot afford these expenses (Nkinyangi 1982; Chimombo 1999). While the factor of poverty exacerbates these costs, improvements in the quality of education can mitigate them. Thus, enhancing universal and equitable access to quality education remains a critical challenge to address in Ghana and Ethiopia.

In response, the first five-year phase of the Education Sector Development Program in Ethiopia was focused on increasing access, particularly for girls and in rural areas, and improving quality through enhanced teacher training and curriculum development. In line with this perspective, the public expenditure policy on education was strategically oriented to increase the budget share allocated to education annually, consistent with maintaining macroeconomic stability. Public expenditure on education rose from 3.8 percent to 4.6 percent of GDP between 1997 and 2002, marking the primary launch phase of the initiative. Moreover, a significant

refocusing of public expenditures was introduced under the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Credit I in April 1993. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia began this overhaul by shifting expenditures away from defence and towards basic social services, such as primary education. This shift was aimed at improving access for all and enhancing the quality of education (World Bank, 1997). The strategy also focused on increasing the relevance and quality of education and expanding primary education to meet the demand. Under its Education Sector Development Program, the Ethiopian government has consistently adopted a 'learning by doing' approach within its capacity-building activities. This method has enhanced the targeting of needs and enabled more efficient responses, ultimately leading to demand-driven outcomes.

Due to different public expenditures policies in education, outcomes in both countries are contrasted. Both governments have successfully increased enrollment rates and improved access to primary education. In Ghana, school enrollment at the primary level rose from 75 percent gross in 1999 to 97 percent gross in 2000. Similarly, in Ethiopia, enrollment increased from 47 percent gross to 115 percent gross during the same period. Thus, access to education has substantially improved since the 1990's. Despite this impressive increase in primary school coverage, it has been challenging to improve the proportion of qualified teachers and materials such as textbooks, particularly for Ghana, which has affected the quality of education.

Under pressure to meet educational goals, Ghana has managed to maintain a steady Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) at the primary level, which has remained around 32:1 over the past decades. This stability has been achieved through the recruitment of a large number of new teachers. However, the rapid increase in teacher numbers has come at the expense of teacher qualifications, with many of the new recruits being untrained. In 1999, 72 percent of Ghanaian teachers were trained, but by 2009, this proportion has dropped to just 49 percent. In response, Ghana implemented a major training campaign, raising the proportion of qualified teachers to 67 percent by 2020. Despite these efforts, the large-scale teacher training programs may not ensure a high-quality education. These programs, as a direct result of the marketization of education, prioritize quick training to meet efficiency goals. This approach can lead to the standardization of teaching methods, potentially stifling creativity and reducing responsiveness to local educational needs. Furthermore, these programs often fail to fully develop pedagogical skills, which are crucial as Ghanaian schools strive to meet the increasing demand for enrollment. Additionally, the government struggles to provide enough textbooks and educational materials, impacting learning conditions and outcomes. Since more than 90 percent of the public expenditures in the educational sector are allocated to teachers' salaries, there is no much left for material needs (World Bank, 2010). According to a government report (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018), the pupil-textbook ratio at the primary level ranges from 3:1 to 6:1 in central areas like Addis Ababa and from 3:1 to 10:1 in more deprived regions, with no improvement since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This shortage of textbooks and educational materials hampers efforts to attract and retain students. Consequently, there is a growing concern about the relevance of education. As Serpell (1993) highlighted, many parents are disappointed with the current education system, which remains detached from students' daily lives and does not equip them with practical skills.

Whereas increased access to education in Ghana has led to more unqualified teachers, Ethiopia responded by increasing the student-to-class ratio. According to its PTR in primary schools, this ratio rose from 27:1 in 1993 to 47:1 in 1998, peaking 62:1 before decreasing, according to available data. It is important to note that the shortage of qualified teachers, as reflected in the PTR, varies significantly between the first primary cycle (grades 1 to 4) and

the second (grades 5 to 8). Based on the Ethiopian standard for teacher qualifications, which requires the appropriate diploma or degree, 96.5 percent of teachers in the first cycle were qualified at the national level in 2001/2, an encouraging figure. However, only 23.8 percent were qualified at the second cycle. This discrepancy is due to the government's focus on targeted teacher training programs intended to ensure educational quality. While this strategy has led to slower improvements in teacher quality nationwide due to the limited number of trained teachers, it has resulted in deeper pedagogical knowledge for those who received more focused training and a more context-specific teaching approaches tailored to local situations. Moreover, the Ethiopian government has improved the supply of textbooks and educational materials to ensure good learning conditions and enhance the quality of education. In the 2013–14 academic year, the first General Education Quality Improvement Project (GEQIP-I) helped achieve a 1:1 textbook-to-student ratio for most subjects for the first time (World Bank, 2017). This long-term vision, emphasizing the importance of quality education, is expected to yield significant improvements in the coming decades as more teachers are trained and the PTR is lowered. For now, we conclude that both Ethiopia and Ghana have made compromises regarding educational quality, which have respectively resulted in overcrowded classrooms or untrained teachers.

Did increased access to education result in universal access and thus advance equity? To investigate this, the study focuses on two aspects: gender equity and geographical disparities. To address gender disparities, a gender mainstreaming guideline and a five-year female education strategy were developed as part of the Education Sector Development Program in Ethiopia. A female education forum in 2005, led by female lecturers, aimed to facilitate the implementation of policies, strategies, and guidelines on girls' education. Initiatives included programs to enhance community awareness of the importance of girls' education, construction of separate latrines for boys and girls, creation of girls' clubs, and assignment of female teachers and head teachers to provide support to girls and make schools more girl friendly. Consequently, the proportion of female teachers in primary education in Ethiopia increased from 28 percent in 1997, when the first Education Sector Development Program was implemented, to 41 percent in 2020. Similarly, the enrollment of girls has also improved, as indicated by the Gender Parity Index (GPI). The GPI, a statistical measure that compares the ratio of females to males in various educational outcomes, increased from 0.92 in 1999 to 1.02 in 2020, achieving positive discrimination to promote education for girls and achieve equity within an inclusive educational system.

The GPI in Ghana, although initially low, has shown improvement, increasing from 0.61 to 0.90 over the specified years. Along the same path of improvement, Ghana has set various goals, supported by measures and policies, to close the gender gap in education. As affirmed in the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, equal educational opportunities for all are promoted through initiatives such as community sensitization campaigns, gender-segregated sanitation facilities that ensure girls can continue their education even during menstruation, and mentorship programs that connect girls with female role models in various professions. These initiatives motivate them to continue their education and pursue ambitious career paths. Established in 1997, the Girl's Education Unit within the Ghana Education service is a cornerstone of these broader educational reforms and gender parity initiatives, supported by international development agencies and the Ghanaian government. The unit focuses on addressing the challenges girls face in accessing and completing education and develops targeted interventions to remove barriers that disproportionately affect them. Legislative frameworks also play a crucial role in protecting girls' rights, particularly through the Children's Act of 1998

and the Domestic Violence Act of 2007, which provide a legal basis for promoting girls' education. While both Ghana and Ethiopia are making strides in addressing gender parity issues, ongoing efforts are needed to change mentalities and achieve gender equity in education and society as a whole.

While investigating geographical disparities, it is evident that Ethiopia has particularly focused on addressing the educational gap between rural and urban areas. As outlined in the Education Sector Development Program, this focus includes expanding educational infrastructure in underserved areas, offering flexible learning options such as distance education, and equitably allocating resources. By 2015, these efforts helped achieve a rural enrollment rate at the primary level of 64.6 percent, closely approaching the 66 percent rate observed in urban centres. In contrast, Ghana faces ongoing challenges related to regional disparities in its educational system. One significant issue is the unequal distribution of teachers, particularly trained teachers. Currently, more than 1,700 public primary schools in rural areas lack trained teachers. Teachers generally prefer employment in better-endowed urban centres and are reluctant to accept positions in remote areas with poor infrastructure and sanitation. Without substantial investment in rural infrastructure, Ghana will struggle to overcome these geographic preferences and achieve educational equity.

To put it in a nutshell, the marketization of education through the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs and related policies in Ghana and Ethiopia have led to an increased access to a yet lower-quality and less equitable education. In Ghana, the implementation of aggressive fiscal policies under the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities in the late 1990's led to substantial cuts in public spending as a mean to reduce the government intervention in all activities, including education. Even though Ghana has increased its education spending relative to GDP over time and introduced several initiatives to improve educational access and quality, the high proportion of untrained teachers and inadequate educational materials significantly have impeded the quality of education. In contrast, the Ethiopian Education Sector Development Program has helped redistributing expenditures towards primary education and improving quality and equitability through target teacher training and even allocation of educational resources, both in terms of staff and materials. This strategy has contributed to significantly enhance primary school accessibility and quality, although disparities in teacher qualifications between different educational cycles persist. Both countries have focused on increasing gender parity in education, with various programs and policies aimed at enhancing girls' access to education. However, issues of geographical disparities remain, particularly in Ghana, where rural areas suffer from a lack of trained teachers and poorer infrastructure compared to urban centres. Overall, while both Ghana and Ethiopia have successfully expanded access to primary education, they continue to face challenges in ensuring high-quality educational outcomes and equitable access across different regions and among different genders.

## **Privatization**

Neoliberal reforms facilitate the transition of the educational system towards a market-based model, reducing the government's role to primarily creating and regulating markets (Williamson, 1975; World Bank, 1993). These policies thus promote the involvement of private actors and encourage private investment in education through privatization mechanisms.

In Ethiopia, the IMF's Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities, alongside the Education Sector Development Programs, aimed to facilitate private sector involvement in education through government strategic planning. Since the 1990's, there has been a notable acceleration in private development. This has been significantly supported by the establishment of a broad-based forum for regular consultations between the private sector and the government through Public-Private Partnerships. For instance, in 2009, the Ministry of Education established a partnership with private publishers to procure textbooks and teaching guides. This initiative was supported by the World Bank under the first General Education Quality Improvement Program. It was thanks to this partnership that the ratio of textbook could reach 1:1 in 2014 (World Bank, 2017). However, the results of privatization have been limited so far in the educational sector. The private sector has yet to achieve its potential role, as the Ethiopian government continues to prioritize public education and the strengthening of public schools. Evidence of this is seen in the declining proportion of private primary schools, which decreased from 14 percent of total primary schools in 1992 to just 4 percent in 2020. Ethiopia's strong central control over policy implementation has resulted in more equitable access to education across all socioeconomic groups, emphasizing the importance of high-quality public education as a crucial resource for fostering social development. However, this centralization also leads to slower improvements due to limited resource allocation by the government and a lack of variety in educational approaches compared to systems with less centralized control.

However, privatization in Ethiopia is far less extensive compared to Ghana. In Ghana, the development of private schools was initially facilitated by the 1961 Education Act as part of the government's effort to implement the free and compulsory education policy outlined in the Act, which required that all school age children find places in primary schools. However, due to insufficient infrastructure and resources, the rapid increase in enrolment following this policy could not be adequately supported. To ensure the full implementation of the Act, the government permitted private individuals' involvement in education, as recommended by the World Bank under the neoliberal framework of the SAP. More recently, private participation in education has been further encouraged by the 2008 Education Act (Act 778). This Act states that 'a person or an institution may establish, manage or operate an educational institution in accordance with the guidelines issued, and regulations made on that behalf by the Minister in consultation with the Education Service Council and/or the National Accreditation Board'. Consequently, Ghana experienced a rapid and widespread increase in private educational institutions. This includes a significant number of private primary schools, which emerged as alternatives to the public system. In 1992, 10 percent of the Ghanaian primary schools were private, and this proportion dramatically increased to 30 percent by 2020, meaning nearly a third of all primary schools were non-governmental.

This dramatic increase in the number of schools has been accompanied by improvements in infrastructure and resources. However, the perception that private schools offer better quality education than public schools is often misleading (Macpherson, Robertson, Walford, 2014). The proportion of untrained teachers in private schools increased from 84.7 percent in 2002 to 88.8 percent in 2008, which likely impacts learning outcomes negatively. Additionally, the expansion of private schools exacerbates social inequalities based on geographic and economic factors. According to the Ministry of Education's 2013 statistical report, private schools are less prevalent in poorer urban and rural areas, worsening regional disparities and the inequitable allocation of educational resources (World Bank, 2010). Despite the existence of the Private School Desk within the Ghana Education Service (GES) and District Education Offices, which are tasked with supervising private schools to ensure quality and equity, these

bodies are often understaffed and under-resourced, making them ineffective in fulfilling their responsibilities. The poor enforcement of the regulatory framework for private institutions, as outlined in Section 23 of the Education Act 2008 (Act 778), provides no assurance that children are receiving the quality of education their parents pay for. Families are making significant financial sacrifices, spending about 40 percent of their income to educate one child in private schools. Faced with poor resources and governance within the educational system, low-income households have opted to create low-cost private schools (LCPS), which are primarily intended to serve poorer segments of society and avoid the dilapidated conditions of public schools, characterized by overcrowded classrooms and frequent teacher absenteeism (Darvas and Balwanz, 2013). However, these LCPS, while designed to offer better-quality education, have adopted a problematic daily payment system, making it challenging for the poorest families who might afford to pay one day but not the next. Furthermore, to minimize costs, these schools often employ untrained high school graduates as teachers, leading to overcrowded classrooms and ultimately reducing the quality of education—a primary concern these schools were meant to address (Reip, 2013).

Driven by neoliberal reforms advocated by the World Bank and the IMF, Ghana and Ethiopia both aim to accelerate their economic and social development through increased private investment. In Ethiopia, private education has seen modest growth due to Public-Private Partnerships. However the government primarily focuses on public education, which has led to more equitable access to education but slower improvements due to central control. In contrast, Legislative changes in Ghana have led to a significant increase in private schools, exacerbating social inequalities accompanied by a rise of untrained teachers, although it has also expanded educational access. However, Ghana intends to facilitate sustainable growth by attracting private investment. From this perspective, significant improvements in government operations are necessary, particularly in the delivery of public services like education. Additionally, both countries require specific structural reforms aligned with neoliberal principles. A crucial aspect of these reforms is the deregulation through the decentralization of school system governance, aiming to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of educational services.

## Deregulation

Decentralization, through the transfer of decision-making power from the central government to local authorities and communities, is the third main neoliberal mechanism aiming at decreasing the state's role, improving accountability and the involvement of the community toward the social concern of education. It has indeed been realized that community involvement is one of the most critical requirements for successful educational reform (Oxfam, 2001). Leadership is a central notion which requires to be strengthened at a local level. Since the mid-1990's, major decentralization reforms have been forcefully driven in Ethiopia and Ghana. In Ethiopia, the educational sector programs are primarily implemented and managed by regions, zone, "woredas"<sup>1</sup> and municipalities, coordinated by steering committees established at the central and regional levels. To facilitate the implementation of this decentralization process, the Ministry of Education has developed Guidelines for the Organization of Education Management,

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<sup>1</sup> district-sized administrative subdivision of Ethiopia.

Community Participation and Education Finance (2002). Based on these basic guidelines, regions have developed their own guidelines focusing on specific areas such as education finance, community participation, or school administration. The deepening of decentralization to Woreda level has contributed to strengthen Woreda level educational institutions. This local approach has also offered opportunities to strengthen local governance, encourage initiatives, increase accountability, broaden the participation of communities, and improve school management and transparency (Corporate Evaluation and Methods, Operations Evaluation Department, 2005). However, Ethiopia maintains a centralized budgeting and accounting of counterpart funds streamlining how external grants and funds are managed and ensuring they are channeled through the central budget rather than individual ministries, which could lead to more effective and transparent allocation of resources in education.

Contrarily, Ghana has met structural and administrative difficulties while decentralizing its educational system since 1988. At the scale of the State, the fragmentation of the system of funding primary education in terms of planning, budgeting, and accounting systems and reporting mechanisms has led to disparities in the allocation of financial resources. In terms of budgeting, apart from the salary expenditure, there is not much less to spend on items such as textbook campaigns. The education financing is fragmented among many sources and among an even larger number of flows of funds. As these types of expenditures are not sufficiently regularized, funds and resources to local level flow through a variety of channels, which constitute a risk of delays and leakages. Consequently, planned and executed budgets differ, limiting the capacity of agencies to pursue a coherent spending strategy.

The State's administration has too many vertical levels which 'blur' responsibility. On top, there are four agencies in charge of allocating the resources, namely the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MoFEP) that is responsible to set the overall budget and to determine through the Civil Service Agency the remunerations; the Ghana Education Trust (GET) Fund, responsible for investments; the Ghana Education Service (GES) which is responsible for allocating recurrent expenditure, set teacher numbers, and pay teachers and other educational staff; and finally the Ministry of Education (MOE), responsible for coordinating donor funds and proposing the annual education budget to the Government. Then, Ghana is divided into 10 regions which have a monitoring role, serving as an intermediary between the national level and the local one. Reporting to them, the 170 districts and municipalities administrate the resources given by the four agencies of the central government at the local scale. In recent years, the total number of districts and municipalities has increased to better manage each locality. Moreover, some districts, mainly localized in the Northern Savannah regions, are categorized by the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service as deprived districts based on criteria such as poor infrastructure, low educational outcomes, and economic challenges. The aim is to qualify them for particular programs or support and therefore address problems of regional disparities in the educational field.

The implementation of decentralization varies by country, impacting social outcomes differently. This study examines family socioeconomic background and geographic location. In Ghana, decentralization has failed to equitably distribute resources, adversely affecting those in low-income and rural areas. According to a World Bank report in 2010, children from the wealthiest quintile in Ghana are significantly ten times less likely to have never attended school compared to those from the poorest quintile. Additionally, children living in urban areas are three times more likely to attend school than those in rural areas. Despite policies intended to aid deprived districts, they receive less than their fair share of educational funding. Resource deprivation is a crucial factor driving and worsening socioeconomic and regional disparities. It

can be concluded that Ghana's system, which is more diffused than decentralized, allocates central resources inefficiently, thereby deepening existing inequalities.

Similarly, Ethiopia faces significant regional disparities in education access, particularly in pastoralist regions like Afar and Somali. In 2005, the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in these regions was only 20.9 percent and 23.3 percent respectively, compared to over 125 percent in the urban capital Addis Ababa. To address this rural-urban gap, the government focused on improving rural education through the series of Education Sector Development Programs. This initiative led to an annual average growth rate of 11.7 percent in primary school enrolments and an increase from 6,958 schools in 2000 to over 32,000 by 2014 (UNESCO, 2015), 85 percent of which were constructed in rural areas. Furthermore, during the National Education Conference in 2000, the Ethiopian government adopted the 'Alternative Basic Education' program. These programs were designed to improve access to education and to adapt the educational system to meet the unique needs of nomads, pastoralists, and semi-agriculturalist communities in emerging regions such as Afar, Somali, Oromia, Amhara, Tigray, and the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR). The implementation of the 'Alternative Basic Education' program was supported by a policy study conducted in 2002 by IIEP/UNESCO on Nomadic Education in East Africa, which influenced the development of guidelines by a dedicated Task Force within the Ministry of Education for the 'Alternative Basic Education' program implementation. Specific learning teaching materials are allocated as part of the 'Alternative Basic Education' program in Mother Tongue, English, Mathematics, and Environmental Science from level 1 to level 3 of primary education. It has also targeted school feeding as a crucial component to boost and sustain enrolment in areas challenged by chronic food insecurity and vulnerability. The program has successfully stabilized attendance rates, reduced dropout levels, and enhanced the learning capabilities of children, thus helping to narrow the educational disparities across gender and geographical lines. This has been achieved through the effective enforcement of the 'Alternative Basic Education' program in a localized approach, tailored to the needs of children in the woredas where 'Alternative Basic Education' centres are located (World Bank, 2010). These efforts reflect the Ethiopian government's commitment to achieving the educational goals outlined in the Education for All (EFA) initiative and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, further efforts are necessary to continue addressing these pervasive regional disparities.

In summary, Ethiopia and Ghana have both pursued significant decentralization reforms in their educational since the mid-1990's, as part of a mechanism of deregulation. In Ethiopia, a successful management and implementation of a decentralized education system at regional and local levels has resulted in strengthened local educational institutions, improved school management, and increased community participation, notably in rural areas and among disadvantaged groups through initiatives like the 'Alternative Basic Education' program. In contrast, Ghana has faced challenges in its efforts to decentralize its educational system, leading to structural inefficiencies and administrative complications, increasing existing socio-economic and regional disparities affecting low-income families and rural areas. Overall, further improvements in governance and a more equitable distribution of resources are necessary to fully realize the benefits of decentralization, particularly in Ghana.

# Conclusion

This comprehensive study investigates the complex causal relationship between neoliberal reforms and educational outcomes in developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically focusing on the impacts of marketization, privatization, and deregulation in the education sectors of Ghana and Ethiopia since the 1990's. While promoting the neoliberal agenda, the World Bank and the IMF, through their Structural Adjustment Programs and Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities, have tried aligning with the EFA initiative and the MDG, aiming at universalizing education and making it accessible and equitable. However, as economic institutions, the World Bank and the IMF are driven by market-oriented measures to reach efficiency and quantitative achievements rather than socially qualitative. The findings thus illustrate mixed results in terms of universality, equitability, and quality of education.

While Ghana has intended investing in human capital to address educational problems by readjusting the budget to reach a higher level of efficiency, establishing partnerships with the private sector for the provision of basic education, and decentralizing its management to reallocate resources toward disadvantaged groups, the outcomes have not met the anticipated expectations. Due to a top-down approach, neoliberal reforms have been implemented centrally without sufficient consultation with local stakeholders like teachers and communities, increasing their impact on inequalities. The Ghanaian government may have lacked the administrative capacity to effectively manage and monitor the reforms nationwide. In Ethiopia, the development of the educational system has been much more qualitative than its regional and global peers. Even if its capacity building objectives may have led to a slower effective implementation, the Ethiopian government has focused on the importance of long-term sustainability, considering key elements while implementing the reforms such as teacher training, curriculum development, and resource allocation.

Overall, the research proves that neoliberal policies have led to quantitative improvements, notably through the increased access to education in both Ghana and Ethiopia. However, the dimensions of equitability and quality have been challenged by these reforms. In Ghana, improved access to education thanks to the introduction of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education program has otherwise resulted in an increase in unqualified teachers and insufficient educational materials, hindering the quality and availability of educational resources for all individuals. Oppositely, in Ethiopia, initiatives such as the Education Sector Development Programs and the 'Alternative Basic Education' strategy have helped addressing regional disparities, gender gap, and quality issues in addition to significantly improving primary school enrolment.

As underlined by the findings, socioeconomic factors and geographical disparities significantly impact educational outcomes. As shown by the comparative study, the community involvement are key aspects to foster the local development, very beneficial to educational outcomes at a national scale. Ethiopia has achieved an effective decentralization aiming at increasing the weight of local ownership and leadership, empowering local communities, contrary to Ghana that faces inadequate funding and corruption challenges due to a blurry administrative management.

The evidence from both countries reflects that the success of educational policies in the context of neoliberal reforms heavily depends on their implementation regarding the broader so-

cio-political and economic contexts. Even though the marketization of education has conducted to increasing efficiency, it has also resulted in cuts in public spendings and cost-sharing measures that may discourage low-income families to send their children to school. The mechanism of privatization has primarily contributed to exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities and has not led to a better-quality education. Finally, deregulation through decentralization faces challenges in equitably allocating resources and managing efficiently through a coherent administration while showing potential in enhancing local accountability and responsiveness.

In conclusion, the hypothesis that while neoliberal mechanisms implemented through World Bank and IMF reforms are generally associated with exacerbating issues in educational outcomes, favouring quantitative development over qualitative improvements, the effectiveness of these reforms can be significantly influenced by the accompanying measures and the robustness of implementation by local governments is confirmed. Neoliberal reforms should include social safeguards ensured by the government, otherwise they undermine the educational goals, as shown by the evidence in this study. Accompanying targeted measures and sufficient public investment were necessary to achieve these educational ideals. Government should critically assess these policies regarding their educational goals of universality, equity, and quality. This reassessment should prioritize sustainable social development in coherence with the fundamental human right to education promoted by the EFA initiative and the MDG. Further efforts must be supported by national authorities in developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa to respond to the needs of the individuals in terms of education and address the related challenges to ensure qualitative improvements, ensuring that all children have access to universal, equitable and quality education.

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