Faith-Inspired Schools in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Introduction to the Summer 2014 Issue
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At a time when many sub-Saharan African countries may not achieve the education targets set forth in the Millennium Development Goals, and discussions on the post-2015 agenda are the topic of the day in development circles, the contribution of private providers of education, including faith-inspired schools (FISs), is crucial. For these providers to work alongside the state in the delivery of services, and possibly benefit from state support, basic information is required on their market share, reach to the poor, cost for households, and satisfaction of users with the services received. Yet today little systematic evidence is available on the role of FISs, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, and how they compare to other (public and private secular) schools. This special issue of The Review of Faith & International Affairs aims to bridge this knowledge gap. The purpose of this introduction is to briefly summarize the articles’ main findings and suggest some areas for further research.

The first article considers the market share, reach to the poor, and cost for households of FISs in Africa. The authors rely on data from 16 nationally representative household surveys that identify in their questionnaire the type of schools attended by children in such a way that it is feasible to distinguish between public, private secular, and faith-inspired schools. While it is often stated that FISs may provide half of all education services in the region, the surveys suggest an average market share of about 15 percent, which is in line with administrative data from Ministries of Education collected by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics on private schools. The surveys also suggest that 16 percent of students in FISs come from households in the bottom quintile of the distribution of welfare, while 25 percent come from the top quintile (each quintile
accounts for 20 percent of the population). Thus, while FISs do reach the poor, they tend to serve the poor slightly less than the better off. This is not surprising because the cost of education is often high for the poor, resulting in lower demand among them than among the better-off, especially when private providers must rely on cost recovery as is often the case with FISs because they may not benefit from public funding. The data also show that while attending an FIS is on average cheaper for a child’s family than attending a private secular school, it is more expensive than attending a public school.

The second article provides a detailed account of Islamic private schools in Mali. These schools, called Medersas, were founded or have grown out of existing Qur’anic schools with the mission of offering Malian children instruction both in religious studies and in subjects such as French, mathematics, science, and social studies. The schools retain some of the characteristics of traditional religious schools and appeal to parental and community values while endeavoring to prepare children for further education, work, and economic advancement. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of Medersas in Mali grew annually by 13 to 15 percent, while the annual growth rate of public schools during that period was from four to six percent. In 2009, the Ministry of Education and National Languages documented that almost a quarter of a million students studied in Medersas at the primary level. The study on which the article is based was carried with support from USAID’s PHARE Program (Programme Harmonisé d’Appui au Renforcement de l’Education). It was national in scope and looked at a variety of aspects related to the schools, including pupil enrollment, curriculum, leadership, teaching practices, teacher beliefs, parental and community involvement, the role of the Ministry in supporting these schools, and the opinion of the Islamic intelligentsia relative to Medersa education. The data suggests that despite their limited resources, Medersas are serving relatively well a segment of
the population for whom religious education for their children is important. The cost of running the schools is lower than for public schools, and quality may be higher, at least in some areas. Medersas may also help in improving girls’ enrolment in rural areas. Overall, even though quality may not be stellar, these schools clearly provide a valuable service to their communities.

The third article considers the history of faith-inspired education in Ghana, as a case study to better understand the historical roots of the role of FISs in the education systems of sub-Saharan Africa. Formal faith-inspired education has a long tradition in the country dating back to early Islamic schools and, as of the 1500s, to missionary and colonial activities. The number of mission schools started to grow significantly in the 1800s and throughout the first part of the 19th century. As a result, by 1950 virtually all Ghanaian children attended missionary schools, while Islamic schools had a smaller footprint, mainly in the northern regions. With independence, most traditional missionary schools were incorporated into the new national education system. This assimilation together with a rapid expansion of the number of public schools aimed at providing universal access to primary education for all has meant that today, a much smaller proportion of students attend mission schools. The proportion of students attending Islamic schools is even smaller, albeit seemingly growing. Yet even if the market share of FISs is now smaller than before, the number of students served by these schools is still significant. The relationship between FISs—both missionary schools and Islamic schools—with the state has been through ups and downs over the last 30 years, as exemplified by the question of how religious education should be taught in publicly-funded schools. Today however, there is a renewed and growing recognition that FISs have an important role to play in the efforts undertaken by Ghana to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

The fourth article considers the issue of the gap in educational attainment between
Christians and Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as some of the reasons why Islamic schools have continued to play an important role in majority-Muslim countries. Religion has traditionally been a strong predictor of educational attainment, with the adult Muslim population having on average fewer years of schooling than the Christian population. This is likely due at least in part to the legacy of a predominantly Christian colonial education system. Schools founded by religious institutions—both Christian and Muslim—continue to comprise a substantial share of educational facilities in many countries. Using survey and census data, the article shows that the gap in education between Christians and Muslims has been reduced over time for younger generations, but that it does persist in some countries. Additional findings from a new survey in Uganda provide evidence that religious education and values continue to play an important role in the parents’ school choice even in the era of free primary public education.

The fifth article provides a comparative assessment of public, faith-inspired, and private schools in Ghana. The analysis is based on two nationally representative household surveys that identify FISs separately from public and private secular schools. The results suggest that FISs account for less than ten percent of all students in primary and secondary schools. While they do reach some among the poor, most students tend to come from higher quintiles of well-being. FISs are less expensive for households than private secular schools, but more expensive than public schools. They do enjoy higher satisfaction rates among parents than public schools, but private secular schools do even better, and when looking at subjective assessments of quality based on perceptions of literacy and numeracy, while FISs do slightly better than public schools (but less well than private secular schools), the differences between public schools and FISs tend to vanish once controls for school choice and family background are introduced. This result may be due to the fact that the faith-inspired education sector is heterogeneous: while some FISs are
recognized as high performing, others may not do as well. Still, FISs provide valuable services as well as a choice among schools for parents. This matters as evidenced by good satisfaction rates.

The sixth article considers the question of the substitution between public formal primary schools and Qur’anic schools in Senegal. Because public schools offer no or little religious education to children, and because until recently there were very few private Franco-Arab schools in the country, much of the religious instruction was left to Qur’anic schools. The question is whether the opening of new primary schools reduces enrollment and attainment in Qur’anic schools. The effect is not clear à priori. New primary schools reduce the relative price of formal primary education, and that may lead some children to shift from Qur’anic to primary schools. But they also reduce the time spent and the cost of going to primary school, which may free time to attend a part-time supplementary program in a Qur’anic school. It turns out that new primary schools increase education attainment overall in the areas where they are implemented, and reduce the number of years spent in Qur’anic school. These effects are not very large however and also not universal—they are stronger for boys and in urban areas. This suggests that there is some competition and substitution between both types of schools.

The last article considers the question of why some parents choose to send their children to FISs. It is based on qualitative and small sample survey data collected in Burkina Faso and Ghana. The analysis suggests that the motivations to choose Christian, Islamic, and public schools are different. In both countries, academics and the quality of the education received tend to be the main reasons for the decision by some parents (including some Muslim parents) to send their children to Christian schools. Values and faith also play a role, but a secondary one. For Islamic schools, the main factor leading to that choice of schools by parents is clearly the desire to provide a religious education (and in some cases the knowledge of Arabic) to the children.
apart from the more traditional secular curriculum. For the choice of public schools, location was a deciding factor for most parents, followed by academic quality and the lack of school fees. Overall, faith and values clearly matter for the choice of a faith-inspired school, and this appears to be especially the case for Islamic schools, even though this is also mentioned for Christian schools, but as a second motivation after academic quality. The analysis thus suggests again that FISs provide valuable services to communities.

In summary, despite the important role of FISs in Africa, limited systematic evidence was until recently available on their market share, reach to the poor, cost, satisfaction among students, and performance. Seven main findings emerge from the analysis provided in the articles provided in this special issue: (1) while historically a majority of schools in Africa were faith-inspired, the average market share for FISs today is probably on the order of 15 percent, but in some countries FISs appear to be growing at a faster rate than public schools; (2) FISs do not reach the poor more than other groups of households on average, but they do serve many children in poverty, and often make special efforts to do so; (3) the cost for households of FISs is on average higher than that of public schools and lower than that of private secular schools; (4) due at least in part to colonial history, gaps in education attainment between Christians and Muslims persist in many countries even if substantial progress has been made in the last few decades to reduce those gaps; (5) FISs enjoy on average higher satisfaction rates among parents than public schools; (6) parents using FISs often place a strong emphasis on religious education and moral values, especially in Islamic schools; (7) students in FISs may perform better than those in public schools, and FISs do provide important benefits to their communities.

What are some of the areas that could be emphasized in further research? A first priority could be to promote public-private partnerships between FISs and governments, which would
also help reduce duplication of efforts and improve harmonization between education providers. To minimize risks, detailed pictures of the service delivery landscape at both the local and national levels are needed. A second priority could be to better understand the constraints faced by FISs, especially those that serve the poor with a good education, the challenges they face, and the opportunities they have. How can FISs better serve the poor when the revenues available to them are limited, which increases cost recovery from households? How can these schools maintain their distinctive vision and culture while being progressively more integrated into national education systems? How can the capacity of the schools to evaluate the quality of the education they provide be strengthened? A third sets of questions relates to the impact of faith on behaviors, not only as it relates to the choice of school but also more generally. In the cases of practices such as child marriage, which has implications for education outcomes, faith and cultural traditions play a role. There is potential for engaging religious and traditional leaders as well as FISs in efforts to eradicate such practices. Questions related to faith and behaviors that affect education outcomes are often complex and also more difficult to influence through public policies than issues related to service delivery, but they are very important for researchers to explore going forward.

1 The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author only and need not represent those of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent.