



# The Political Economy of Primary Education: Lessons from Rwanda

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**Summary.** — When it comes to the state’s ability to deliver services to the poor, politics matter. This paper applies a political settlements framework to examine primary education quality in Rwanda. Formal education features prominently into the post-genocide government’s social and economic development project. Rwanda’s political elite have staked their claim in the development of the country, one which is relatively free from rent-seeking. But education quality remains surprisingly low. Enrollment has surged, but primary school dropout and repetition are high. Most children have not acquired age-appropriate literacy or numeracy skills. We sought to investigate why the education sector hasn’t done better in terms of improving quality than we might have expected. This paper draws from interviews and literature review to investigate how policy development and implementation shape the provision of quality education. Our study finds that education priorities were as much political as they were developmental. A lack of real opposition or pushback enabled the government to introduce profoundly transformative educational policies, such as switching the language of instruction from French to English. Often these decisions occurred outside the sector’s strategic planning processes. Performance-based incentives tended to focus on aspects of quality that are measurable, such as the construction of classrooms, rather than improving the capacity of the teaching workforce. We did not find evidence of an effective, sustained strategy to improve education quality. It is thus debatable to what extent Rwanda’s approach can be considered as inclusive development when quality for most children remains so low. This study makes an empirical contribution through evaluating how the education sector has been situated within Rwanda’s broader political settlement, what kinds of outcomes it has led to, and why. It also makes a theoretical contribution by understanding the nature of the relationship between the national political settlement and the education sector.  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the central aims of development is the ability of the state to deliver services that stand to improve the situation of the poor. When it comes to the effective delivery of those services, a growing body of research has strongly argued that politics matter—that incentives, individuals, and institutions are inextricably linked to the successes and/or failures of development efforts (Hickey, Sen, & Bukonya, 2015). This paper draws from this perspective to examine efforts to improve primary education quality in Rwanda.

The Republic of Rwanda is just two over decades removed from a civil war and genocide that decimated the country. The post-genocide government has since charted an audacious social and economic development project, one which seeks to distance itself from the past by transforming from a subsistence-based agricultural economy to a knowledge-based, market-oriented society (MINECOFIN, 2000). Formal education features prominently into its broader aims.

Thanks in part to a fee-free basic education policy, primary and secondary school enrollment in Rwanda have surged. Children from poor families now have access to more years with the public education system (NISR, 2012b). At the same time, learning outcomes are low. Most children in primary school have not acquired age-appropriate literacy or numeracy skills (EDC, 2017). In recent years, primary school dropout and repetition have risen while completion and transition rates have stagnated or declined (MINEDUC, 2015a).

Expanding access and improving quality are two dimensions to education policymaking and planning that are both contradictory and complementary (Tikly & Barrett, 2013). On one hand, efforts to expand and extend access use resources that might have otherwise been invested in the training of teachers

or the provision of textbooks (Pritchett, 2013). Yet access is also an obvious precondition to quality. As one high-ranking member in Rwanda’s Ministry of Education (MINE-DUC) put it, “There can be no quality without access.” In other words, the opportunity to go to school can be interpreted as a qualitative improvement for those who might have otherwise been unable to attend (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). From the government’s perspective, getting children into a classroom is the important first step, with improvements to the classroom experience to follow. One way to analyze this tension is by looking at Rwanda’s political settlement.

### (a) Political settlement framework

“Political settlement” refers to “the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based” (Di John & Putzel, 2009, p. 4). In other words, it is how the elite hold and exercise power. The political settlement literature introduces a conceptual architecture to demonstrate how politics matter when it comes to the reduction or reproduction of poverty (Hickey *et al.*, 2015). Such a perspective is salient in a post-conflict context such as Rwanda. It allows us to consider the social, political, and historical context through which current patterns of

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governance have emerged (Levy & Walton, 2013). A political settlement approach provides the ability to trace processes of decision-making and policy implementation. Doing so permits consideration for how meaningful and equitable change for the poor can be brought about and sustained (Khan, 2010).

A political settlement framework allows us to consider political elite commitment to “inclusive development,” i.e., to support sustainable interventions that benefit the poor. This often requires alliances and commitments of the non-poor, who, as Hickey *et al.* (2015, p. 6) contends, are “often more adept at attracting public goods provision and at maintaining a better quality of service delivery through [public] social accountability mechanisms.” Thus, an analysis of Rwanda’s approach to education cannot divorce a sector’s policies from the nation’s politics.

Levy and Walton (2013) outline different ways for describing the nature of a political settlement. Perhaps no country better exemplifies what they call a ‘dominant developmental’ political settlement than Rwanda. A dominant developmental political settlement is characterized by the political elite being aligned with one principal or leader. In the case of Rwanda, its ruling party is the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its leader is Paul Kagame. Such dominant party regimes are known for governing through absolute control and top-down discipline. The incentives of the RPF can be best described as developmental (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012). That is, the RPF’s stated approach to governance and claim to legitimacy focuses on lifting the country out of poverty in a way that attends to the precipitating factors that were thought to have led to conflict—namely ethnic divisionism, resource scarcity, and few opportunities for social mobility. Thus, the government’s claim to power and peaceful rule rests on being perceived as inclusive of all Rwandans (MINECOFIN, 2000). Ideas and ideologies are aligned to a long-term vision engendered by “dominance” and leadership. Dominant developmental political settlements are associated with accountability, technocratic effectiveness, and impersonal forms of service delivery, because national-level goals and incentives are aligned. The potential of growth and development rely on the stability of a regime that can engage in longer term planning (Hickey *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, it may also be the case that there is little political space for meaningful push-back to occur, allowing for transformative policies to be pushed through (Levy & Walton, 2013).

Knowledge of the national-level political settlement is crucial for understanding the key priorities, institutions, and individuals that have contributed to a country’s development. However, some scholars have also suggested that there is a need to understand how political and economic factors at the level of the sector, i.e., education, lead to sector-specific outcomes such as the acquisition of literacy, examination performance, or primary completion rates (McLoughlin, 2011). The present study was carried out to investigate the underlying political drivers of the education system and its relationship to quality primary education in Rwanda. We aim to make an empirical contribution through evaluating how the education sector has been situated within Rwanda’s broader political settlement, what kinds of outcomes it has led to, and why. We also aim to make a theoretical contribution by understanding the nature of the relationship between the national political settlement and the education sector.

This paper draws from existing literature and policy reports, interviews, and observations. Fieldwork took place between March and June 2015. Interviews were held with 65 members of government, civil society, bilateral partners, local education officers, teachers and head teachers, school-based mentors,

and members of parent–teacher committees.<sup>1</sup> We also attended education stakeholder meetings, such as the Ministry of Education’s biannual Joint Review of the Education Sector (MINEDUC, 2015b).

As we will see, the government’s national vision and strategy is clearly established. This vision informs poverty reduction strategies which, in turn, shape the goals of the education sector. The elite have placed its stake in good governance, accountability, and developmental outcomes. But given this commitment, we must ask ourselves: why hasn’t the education sector done better in terms of providing quality primary education for all? The remainder of this paper will shed light on this question. First, we locate Rwanda’s primary education system in historical context. Second, we explore what governance and schooling has looked like under the RPF since the end of the genocide until 2016. We then turn to explore some of the most influential actors and institutions that have informed the current priorities within the sector. Fourth, we describe the organization and administration of the education sector before then turning to indicators of access and quality. The next section examines education policy that have impacted education quality in three different areas, including (1) post-primary expansion and reform, (2) Rwanda’s switch from French to English as the language of instruction, and (3) the training of primary school teachers. The paper closes with a discussion, where we consider how the political settlement can help us better understand and explain outputs and outcomes to date.

## 2. PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### (a) *The colonial and post-colonial eras*

As the Rwandan administrative state grew in power during the colonial occupation (1898–1962), schooling went from being a Church-led activity to one in which the state played a more active role in the establishment of a national education system. Formal education was to become among the attributes necessary to secure business opportunities and employment during the latter half of the colonial era (Des Forges & Newbury, 2011). Toward the end of the colonial era, a system of national examinations was established and the standardization of textbooks was introduced (King, 2014). But unequal opportunities under the colonial authorities contributed to a collective sense of institutionalized oppression on the part of the rural majority (Newbury, 1988). Inequitable access to education was at the core of Hutu discontent and among the factors that fueled the revolutionary movement that preceded independence (Prunier, 1995).

Following independence in 1962, the new Hutu-led government enacted policies that reinforced their own grip on power. Census figures suggested Tutsis comprised about nine percent of the population, but they still occupied a higher proportion of key administrative positions (Prunier, 1995). Discontent on the part of Hutus led to a coup in 1973. President Gregoire Kayibanda was replaced by Juvenal Habyarimana. Habyarimana’s presidency was credited with initially bringing some stability and improvement to the country but at the price of restricting political freedom and deepening social control (Prunier, 1995).

During this time, the state took a prominent role in organizing schooling. Rwanda’s first constitution mandated primary education to be both free and compulsory. Initially, the emphasis was on expanding educational opportunities as a necessary corrective to the social and economic inequalities

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