

Launch of the report on the UK's support of the growth of private actors in education through its development aid: Questioning its responsibilities as regards its human rights extra-territorial obligations

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REPORT SUMMARY

Stop privatising education

The spread of private education in the Global South is undermining the right to education by increasing discrimination and inequality. Yet the British government is leading the world in using aid money to privatise education across Africa and Asia.

Aid-funded private schools do not provide a solution for the millions of children, especially girls, who are out-of-school. These children aren't able to afford the fees charged. Instead private education undermines the public education system, and provides education with unqualified teachers and enormous class sizes.

We know how to improve public education: well-financed public education employing well-trained teachers working with manageable class sizes in democratically accountable schools. The British government needs to stop undermining this solution in the name of the 'free market'.

Private schools on the rise

There has been a growth in the number of private companies in education. For big corporations, including those funded by the UK government, hedge funds and billionaires, education is the next big frontier for privatisation, with vast amounts of public money up for grabs. This undermines the right to education in many countries including Kenya and Uganda:

- In Kenya, the growth of private schools has created a two-tier, segregated education system where children from high-income families attend expensive schools, whilst children from poorer families receive a poor education in underfunded public schools.
- In Uganda, private schools have not helped increase school intake and may actually have caused increased drop-out rates because of fees. Around 81% of households surveyed stated that a lack of money was the reason why their children dropped-out of school, whilst 58% claimed financial constraint was the reason their children never enrolled in school in the first place.

Whilst the involvement of private actors in education is growing, government financing for public education is decreasing. In 2003, Kibera, the largest informal settlement in Kenya, recorded a total of 76 private primary and secondary schools compared to only 5 government schools, all of which are

located on the peripheries of the slum. Four years later the number of private schools had grown to 116, an increase of 53%. During the same period, no new public schools were built.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education has stated: “soon, it may not be an exaggeration to say that privatisation is supplanting public education instead of supplementing it” and “*States should put an end to market-driven education reforms that provide subsidies to private education... instead of giving subsidies to private providers, Governments should provide the maximum possible resources to public education.*”

‘Low cost’ is too expensive and poor quality

School fees are one of the main barriers to universal access to education. Just fifteen years ago there was a sustained campaign for the abolition of user fees in primary education. Research at that time showed that under the influence of the World Bank over 92 countries were charging children to go to primary school – often just a few dollars a month, but enough to make schools inaccessible to the poorest. Successful national campaigns led to the abolition in fees in countries such as Kenya, Burundi, Malawi and Ghana. In Kenya alone, over 2 million children enrolled in school the following year – children who could not afford to go to school before.

However, the British government is particularly keen on supporting so-called ‘low-fee’ private schools that target low-income households and that claim to offer ‘quality’ education. Contrary to government claims, these schools are *not* universally accessible. They are still unaffordable for extremely poor families. These same schools often demand numerous additional fees for school development, materials, school uniforms, and examinations, which can amount to double the tuition fees.

The introduction of ‘low fee’ schools also impacts the access to education of marginalised groups, such as children with special needs, as for-profit private schools have little interest in enrolling them because of the extra support required. ‘Low-fee’ schools have led to proportionally less girls in education as girls often get deprioritised when families can’t afford to send all their children to school.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education has raised concerns about the growth of private schools in education, pointing out: “privatisation cripples the notion of education as a universal human right and – by aggravating marginalisation and exclusion – runs counter to the fundamental principles of human rights law”. Instead he recommends that governments abolish for-profit education institutions, regulate schools fees charged by private providers and strengthen the humanistic vision of education through laws and policies. ‘Low cost’ private schools do not only fail on inclusion, they also compromise the quality of education to low-income families. Research supported by the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) has found that: “*low-cost private schools tend to deprioritise teaching quality*”, which is “*too often seen as a poor investment.*” In Kenya, it was found that private schools deliver the national education curriculum to students using untrained teachers who are neither registered nor accredited. In Uganda, there are poorly qualified or unqualified teachers in many private schools.

In the pocket of education corporations?

DfID is one of the most important and influential aid donors, especially in education. In 2013, DfID spent £905 million in aid on education, 13.5% of its total aid budget. In recent years, DfID has been increasing its funding of the private sector. In 2012 DfID stated: *“private enterprise is not just a generator of wealth but also a provider of critical basic services”*. In 2013, DfID’s Education Position Paper called for *“developing new partnerships across the public-private spectrum”*.

DfID is currently funding initiatives promoting private schooling in countries including: Pakistan, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, India, and Burma. In Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda, the UK supports or has supported the development of ‘low-fee’, for-profit, private schools such as those operated by Bridge International Academy and Omega Schools.

- **Bridge International Academies (BIA)** is a chain of for-profit ‘low-fee’ private schools describing themselves as *“the world’s largest chain of primary and pre-primary schools bringing world-class education to the poorest of the poor”*. However, it has been suggested that the effective minimum amount may be closer to \$17 and research shows that this ‘low-fee’ represents between 18-30% of the monthly income for very poor families.

BIA uses the ‘school in a box’ method, delivered by poorly trained teachers (often with only a few weeks of training) who teach a standardised curriculum, often directly from a tablet. This closes off any personal development facilitated by the teacher and changes the classroom into a laboratory for achieving test results. After starting in Kenya, BIA expanded into Uganda and recently announced plans for expansion in Nigeria and India.

DfID has invested in BIA via an equity fund as well as its subsidiary, the CDC Group, an aid fund aimed at the private sector, through which it will help BIA expand to more countries in Africa and reach its goal of educating 10 million children over the next decade. Other investors include Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates.

- **Omega Schools** is *“a social enterprise on a mission to deliver quality education at the lowest cost on a grand scale”* with *“38 schools educating over 20,000 students and seeking to double that number in a year”*. They collect ‘low’ tuition fees on a daily basis, which constitute approximately 25-40% of household income for some families. Teachers are paid very low wages and class sizes are significantly larger than in public school (50 children compared to 25-35).

DfID’s own research has found: *“private school teachers are often less formally qualified, have low salaries and weak job security”* and that it is *“ambiguous about whether private schools geographically reach the poor”* and *“whether the poor are able to pay private school fees”*. This research confirms that *“girls are less likely to access private schools than boys”*. In another document assessing barriers to investment in the education market in India, DfID notes: *“all funds...expect a minimum return on investment of 15% or so. This cannot be realised below a certain fee level. To generate adequate returns schools will need to raise fees.”*

What's the report?

The report has been submitted to two United Nations human rights Committees (the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on Economic, social and Cultural Rights), which are currently reviewing the UK's human rights record. The report was drafted by the Right to Education Project with the support of: ActionAid International, ActionAid UK, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Center for Public Interest Law, Child Rights International Network, the East African Centre for Human Rights, the Eastern Africa Collaboration on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Economic and Social Rights Centre-Hakijamii, Education International, the Federation of Education NGO's in Uganda, the Ghana National Education Campaign Coalition, the Global Campaign for Education, the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Global Justice Now, the Human Rights Advocacy Centre, the Human Rights Network for Journalists, the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights in Uganda, the International Commission of Jurists – Kenyan Section, the Kenya National Union of Teachers, the Kenya Youth Foundation, the Mathare Association, the National Union of Teachers, the Privatisation in Education Research Initiative, the Soweto Forum, the Uganda National Teachers' Union, the University and College Union and Women Uganda.