

UK support for private schools in developing countries criticised by UN Committee

Geneva, 24 May 2016

The United Kingdom (UK)'s controversial support for commercial, low-cost private schools in developing countries has been questioned by a [UN Committee](#) on children's rights.(1) The UK Department for International Development's support for the for-profit primary and pre-primary school chain, Bridge International Academies (BIA) was singled out as a particular concern.

Concerns were also expressed yesterday during the periodic review of the UK's implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that commercial private schools in developing countries, with the backing of the UK government, are resisting efforts by governments, such as Kenya's, to regulate the sector and put in place minimum standards.

The questioning took place during a review of the UK's implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 23rd and 24th May in Geneva.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which monitors children's rights, including the right to education, also asked for clarification on the UK's plan to academise all schools in England.

The 23-strong UK delegation was unable to comment on the UK's support for private schools abroad, or how it was monitoring

the impact that 'millions of pounds' of UK aid to developing countries is having on children's right to education. It has promised to provide a written response within 48 hours.

Commercial low-cost private school chains, such as BIA, are [coming under greater scrutiny](#) for a number of issues, including: concerns on their quality, which is based on standardised teaching and poor labour conditions; the segregation effect of their fees; and, profit-making from poor families, all in contravention with human rights treaties.(2)

The UK has channelled development aid to low-fee private schools in countries such as Kenya and Nigeria. In an earlier question on increased development aid directed to private actors in education and health, the CRC questioned whether the UK will introduce a legal framework to oblige business to respect children's rights.

Delphine Dorsi, Executive Coordinator of the Right to Education Project (3), reacted: *"The questions from the CRC and the lack of the response from the UK confirm our worry that the UK could be acting in violation of its human rights obligations by harming children's right to education in poor countries."*

Abraham Ochieng, from the East African Centre for Human Rights based in Nairobi, Kenya, added: *"The rapid expansion of commercial schools with development funding is undermining the right to education and government's efforts to improve education delivery in Kenya. It is essential for Kenyan civil society, in dialogue with the government, to address the situation, and for partner countries such as the UK to refocus their support to free, quality public schools, rather than undermining it in the name of business interests."*

Christine Blower, General Secretary of National Union of Teachers, reacting to a related question put to the UK delegation by the CRC on the government's intention to turn

all schools into academies: *“The CRC is right to question the UK Government about its privatisation agenda both at home and abroad. We know that the Government’s intention to fully academise the education system in England will lead to the privatisation of our education system. Education is a human right and a public good, for the good of learners and society not private profit.”*

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Notes:

1. Ms Amal Aldoseri, an expert member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child asked the UK delegation the following question during the periodic review of the UK’s implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “My last question in this cluster is on private education. More specifically on the development aid donated by UK government to Bridge International Academies, operating in Kenya and other countries which is a commercial, low-cost private schools funded by, the UK government, among others. We brought this forward to the Kenyan government during our dialogue with them

earlier this year, and the Kenyan government is struggling to regulate these schools, but with the support of UK government, Bridge is resisting all forms of regulation aiming to maintain acceptable and professional standards. What are your efforts to monitor the utilization of the millions of pounds donated by the UK to developing countries in order to ensure that these funds do not lead to children's rights violations? Is there any mechanism for this purpose to assess the impact of such funds, for example, on deepening the segregation between socio-economic groups in fund-recipient countries? And on a related matter, can you please inform the committee on the proposal to academise all primary and secondary schools in England by 2022. It has been postponed, but we would like to hear more clarifications."

2. For more information, see the Joint statement in response to the World Bank on Bridge International Academies (May 2015): <http://bit.ly/1JgKrrM>
3. The Right to Education Project submitted a report to the CRC: *The UK's support of the growth of private education through its development aid*: Full report (October 2015): <http://bit.ly/1suPlQ1> Report summary (April 2016): <http://bit.ly/1qwqslR> Additional information annexed to report (April 2016): <http://bit.ly/1Thfmi4>