UK Fails to Give a Clear Response to yet another UN Body Challenging its Support to Commercial Schools

Press statement

(Geneva, 16 June 2016) A week after the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concerns about the UK’s funding of commercial private schools in developing countries, today another UN body challenged the UK on the legality of how it spends its development aid, adding to mounting pressure on the UK to cease its controversial support of private schools abroad.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) questioned the UK’s support for low-cost private schools in Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, India and Pakistan. An example of how the UK supports these schools, highlighted by the CESCR, is the Department for International Development’s (DFID) funding of the commercial chain of low-cost schools, Bridge International Academies (BIA), a US-based for-profit chain of schools which sells standardised education to people in Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria. BIA has received consistent criticisms for its unsound pedagogical model and lack of transparency, calling into question the UK’s support of BIA to the detriment of the right to education of children in the Global South.

The UK delegation evaded the question of whether it would stop supporting for-profit education providers such as BIA, but defended its actions by saying they only support fee-charging private schools when allowed by government policies, and when public schools are unavailable, citing slums in Kenya as an example.

Abraham Ochieng of the East African Centre for Human Rights (EACHRights), an organisation based in Nairobi, Kenya contested: “It is absurd that the UK government states that they are supporting private actors to provide education in places where the Kenyan government schools are unavailable, yet most of these schools, including Bridge schools, are situated right next to public schools. It seems more like enabling competition than support.”

Further, the UK supports BIA in countries where the government has decided to stop its expansion, including Kenya and Uganda.

Salima Namusobya of the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) which is based in Kampala, Uganda, said: “The Government recently decided to stop the expansion of Bridge schools, a year after their entry in the country, to conduct further investigations into the operations of the schools especially regarding infrastructure, teacher qualifications and curriculum. I understand there’s a similar moratorium on Bridge’s expansion in Kenya, and the UK thus appears to clearly fund schools that the Government does not agree with, despite what they claim.”

The organisations endorsing this statement are now calling on the UK to put its commitments into practice by withdrawing aid to commercial schools in developing countries, and by supporting States in the Global South to improve their public education and regulatory systems, instead of undermining them.

They also call on the UK to evaluate the impact of their support for low-fee private schools on the right to education in developing countries and to conduct human rights impact assessments in the context of its international cooperation.

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Endorsements

- Right to Education Project
- Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- EACHRights
- ISER
- ActionAid