International campaigners say

British aid to private schools could violate human rights

Press release, London, 14th October 2015

International campaigners have expressed concern that the British government could be violating the right to education with its support for the growth of private schools across Africa and south Asia. International and British organisations as well as teachers’ unions have joined campaigners from countries including Kenya, Uganda and Ghana* to condemn the increased use of British aid money to support for-profit primary schools, in particular so-called ‘low-fee’ private schools, which are fuelling inequality, creating segregation and undermining the right to education.

These organisations have submitted reports to two United Nations human rights committees (the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) assessing the legality under human rights law of the UK’s support to for-profit private schools in developing countries. Both Committees are currently reviewing the UK’s human rights record, including the reports submitted. The pre-session reviews took place on 5th October and 14th October 2015 and will serve to prepare for next year’s formal review.

The report, the first of its kind, finds that the UK when supporting for-profit, fee-charging private schools could violate its human rights obligations. Indeed, research has shown that such schools:

- Besides charging fees, which is in contravention of States’ obligation to provide free primary education, are actually unaffordable for the poorest families.
- Create and entrench inequalities in countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, and discriminate against marginalised groups, such as girls.
- Don’t deliver on the quality of education. For example, in low-fee private schools teachers are generally unqualified and poorly trained.

The British government has increasingly funded private sector initiatives across the board but in education it is particularly pronounced. In 2012 the Department for International Development (DFID) stated: “private enterprise is not just a generator of wealth but also a provider of critical basic services” while the 2013 Education Position Paper called for “developing new partnerships across the public-private spectrum”.

Campaigners worry this is ideologically driven, citing DFID’s own research which 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 also confirms that “girls are less likely to access private schools than boys”.

Delphine Dorsi of the Right to Education Project emphasised that:
“Education is a human right. States have the obligation to ensure its full realisation for all both nationally and abroad. This includes the obligation to support the implementation of free quality education, and certainly not to obstruct developing countries’ efforts to provide free education.”

On the growth of private actors in education in Uganda, Salima Namusobya of the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights in Uganda said:

“We conducted research on the impact of the growth of private actors in education showing that it was creating and deepening inequalities, while not improving quality. So much so the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern in last June at the ‘widening of the gap in access to quality education resulting from the increase in the provision of private education’. Yet, we do not understand why DfID supports private, for-profit, low quality schools, when Uganda is in crucial need of funds to address challenges in the public education system, which caters for the most marginalised people.”

David Archer of ActionAid said:

“Education today represents a new frontier for privatisation. Just like the water sector 30 years ago, multinational companies think there’s a quick buck to be made from taking over education provision. But we know already that this will undermine the right of children to education. It means that education will no longer be an equalising force in society - as the level of education children receive will depend on their parents’ ability to pay. Stratified education systems will lead to more unequal and unjust societies. We believe this is wrong, and people in those countries affected believe it’s wrong. That’s why we’re publishing this report today and asking for DfID and the International Development Select Committee to review their present investments in this area.”

Nick Dearden of Global Justice Now added:

“The British government is a world leader in using aid money to push privatised education on Africa and Asia. They treat these continents as guinea pigs for a model which is also being increasingly pushed here – running education for profit rather than need. It’s shocking that the aid budget is being used to fuel the profits of education multinationals.”

Lastly, Christine Blower of the National Union of Teachers said:

“Education is a human and civil right and a public good. Nothing in the UK’s aid policies should undermine this principle. Clearly DfID’s promotion of privatisation across Asia and Africa jeopardises the right to free, quality public education. Up until now we had anecdotal evidence but now we have research evidence, which shows the scale of the problem. This needs to stop.”

The report will be released publicly on Thursday, 15th October 2015 from 10.00-11.30 BST in the ActionAid Offices, 33-39 Bowling Green Lane, EC1R 0BJ.

Confirmed speakers include:

- Delphine Dorsi (Executive Coordinator, Right to Education Project)
- Polly Jones (Head of Campaigns, Global Justice Now)
- Christine Blower (General Secretary, National Union of Teachers)
- Salima Namusobya (Director, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, Uganda)
Sylvia Mbataru (Policy & Legislative Advocacy, The CRADLE, Kenya)

Resources

Report submitted to the CRC: [https://shar.es/1urh7q](https://shar.es/1urh7q)

Report submitted to the CESCR: [https://shar.es/1urhxX](https://shar.es/1urhxX)

Notes

* The reports have been submitted to the UN Committees on the Rights of the Child and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 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.