

**Bridge International Academies: An Expanding Business and an Expanding Controversy**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

According to the company's mission statement, Bridge International Academies seeks to enable every child worldwide with the opportunity to receive high-quality education at the primary school level, regardless of family income. This aspiration is summarized through the company's motto "knowledge for all."<sup>1</sup> Citing statistics from their expanding network of schools, Bridge International Academies labels itself as a "scalable solution" that utilizes "world-class pedagogy and school management" yet manages to deliver results at a per-student cost well below that of other private providers.<sup>2</sup> So if this is indeed the case, why is that in November the Ugandan government, seemingly the perfect recipient of this so-called educational solution given the nation's struggle to achieve public basic education for all, required Bridge International Academies to shut down all of its operations within the country, leading to the closure of more than 60 primary schools and affecting more than 12,000 students?<sup>3</sup> And further, if Bridge International Academies is such a groundbreaking and praiseworthy company, why is it that Curtis Riep, a Canadian researcher studying education privatization in Uganda, found himself

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<sup>1</sup> *Bridge International Academies* "Mission". Available at:

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Low-cost private schools ordered to close in Uganda" *BBC News: Africa Live*. Available at: [http://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-37855269?ns\\_mchannel=social&ns\\_source=facebook&ns\\_campaign=bbc\\_live&ns\\_linkname=581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09%26Low-cost+private+schools+ordered+to+close+in+Uganda%26&ns\\_fee=0#post\\_581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09](http://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-37855269?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=facebook&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09%26Low-cost+private+schools+ordered+to+close+in+Uganda%26&ns_fee=0#post_581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09)

arrested and thrown in jail this past May following false allegations, in the form of a ‘wanted ad’ published nationally in a Ugandan newspaper, by Bridge International Academies?<sup>4</sup>

This warrants the much larger question: what is Bridge International Academies and why is it stirring up so much controversy and concern? Is it simply a well-intentioned organization using innovative approaches to education and therefore faces unfair and unjustified criticism? Or is Bridge International Academies something more sinister, an exploitative, profit-seeking enterprise that sees poverty and economic vulnerability as vehicles through which the company can reap profits? While the answer to the first part of this question may not yet be clear, the second half of the question yields a more definitive answer. One thing is for certain surrounding Bridge International Academies; the organization has attracted widespread controversy in recent months due to a myriad of concerns surrounding human rights violations and the right to quality education.

## **COMMERCIALIZATION IN EDUCATION: A GROWING CONCERN**

In recent years, the world has seen a significant increase in the establishment and marketing of low-fee private schools in the developing world. Aimed at providing quality education to the poorest communities while still operating at a profit margin, these schools are viewed by many as the innovative, market-oriented approach necessary to resolve the growing global education crisis. A 2007 journal article published in the *Institute of Economic Affairs* illustrates this point, pointing to an educational revolution that is being driven by low-cost private schools and leading many families in the developing world to abandon the government-

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<sup>4</sup> “The Education Bridge to Nowhere” *Education International*. Available at: [https://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news\\_details/3988](https://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/3988)

sponsored schools that are traditionally associated with inadequate infrastructure, widespread teacher absenteeism, and poor overall performance.<sup>5</sup> Further, the article celebrates the fact that the vast majority of these low-fee private schools are businesses rather than charities, meaning that they rely on little outside funding and are able to sustain themselves—and often make a profit—simply through school fees.<sup>6</sup> This is the underlying premise behind the explosion of low-cost, for-profit private schools in the developing world. To many people in both the development and business worlds, they are seen as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century solution to education. They are seen as the future of education.

But for all the publicity and accolades that low-cost, for-profit private schools have received, they've also become the subject of intense academic research and scrutiny—and more recently—criticism. With the rapid expansion throughout much of the developing world of unfettered commercial chains such as Bridge International Academies and Omega Schools (enrolling more than 20,000 students across 38 schools in West Africa and looking to double enrollment within one year),<sup>7</sup> many questions have been raised about the practices and priorities of these commercial schools. Are they delivering the high quality education that they are promising to clients? Or do the strategies and methods implemented by these chains to ensure low-cost education delivery actually compromise the quality of schooling? And most importantly, what is the true priority of these commercial chains: the provision of affordable education to the poorest communities or the pursuit—through whatever means necessary—of the

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<sup>5</sup> Tooley, J. (2007). *Educating Amartech: Private Schools for the Poor and the New Frontier for Investors*. *Institute of Economic Affairs*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. Available at: [http://mercatus.org/uploadedFiles/Mercatus/Publications/Amaretech\\_Tooley.pdf](http://mercatus.org/uploadedFiles/Mercatus/Publications/Amaretech_Tooley.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>7</sup> *Omega Schools*. Available at: <http://www.omega-schools.com/>

highest possible profit margin. Curtis Riep analyzes these questions in his research on Omega Schools in Ghana, concluding that:

“Omega Schools’ fee-paying for-profit venture aimed at serving the “poorest of the poor” represents a case of for-profitteering. Profiteering exists when disproportionately large or grossly unfair profit is generated from the sale of essential goods or services by exploiting situations of vulnerability. And whilst Ken Donkoh proclaims that “education is the first bridge out of poverty,” the ironic and harmful failure is that the Omega bridge levies a high toll for all those who wish to pass, which is more likely to reproduce poverty, than it can be expected to alleviate it.”<sup>8</sup>

This is just one example of the concerns that have been increasingly raised about commercial education chains like Omega Schools. While each of these low-cost, for-profit education providers may possess unique aspects in terms of their specific methods of implementation and overall pedagogy, what’s clear is that there remain common elements that are of concern due to both the profit-driven nature of these companies as well as the rapid, seemingly unfettered expansion of these companies. In this manner, Bridge International Academies is certainly not unique.

## **BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIES: ITS MODEL AND APPROACH**

The premise of Bridge International Academies is simple and not at all dissimilar from that of other low-fee, for-profit private education providers. Recognizing the gaps in education access, quality, and affordability, the company sought to create an efficient model of education

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<sup>8</sup> Riep, Curtis B. (2015). Omega Schools Franchise in Ghana: A case of “low-fee” private education for the poor or for-profitteering?. *Privatisation in Education Research Initiative*. 2015 No. 63 (24). Available at: [http://www.ei-ie-al.org/mercantilizacion/Mercantilización%20educativa-%20art%C3%ADculos,%20publicaciones/Inglés/Low-fee%20for%20profit%20schools%E8%A8/Riep%20C.%20\(2014\)%20Omega%20Schools%20Franchise%20in%20Ghana.pdf](http://www.ei-ie-al.org/mercantilizacion/Mercantilización%20educativa-%20art%C3%ADculos,%20publicaciones/Inglés/Low-fee%20for%20profit%20schools%E8%A8/Riep%20C.%20(2014)%20Omega%20Schools%20Franchise%20in%20Ghana.pdf)

that could be scaled up to the point that it became both a sustainable—and therefore profitable—financial operation as well as an expansive provider of affordable primary education. Specifically, Bridge International Academies recognized the 800 million school-aged children around the world living in poverty and lacking access to basic education as a massive untapped economic market for low-cost schooling—possibly as large as USD64 billion.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the company aligned its trajectory in order to best capture this undiscovered market, setting its vision to become “the global leader in providing education to families who live on USD2 a day per person or less”.<sup>10</sup> In order to school so many children effectively, the company would need a unique business model—one that would be scalable in order to maximize both cost-effectiveness and profitability.

Technology became the key to this model. In the field of education service delivery, Bridge International Academies developed an innovative approach in its education model by placing technology and the use of data as central pillars in its pedagogy. Specifically, technology and data are utilized by Bridge International Academies for two main purposes: mitigating overhead costs—which in turn drives down overall costs and allows for rapid service scale-up—and improving the overall quality of education provided.<sup>11</sup> This is done through the use of tablets and smartphones that run programs set to automate and centralize almost every aspect of the operation, from scripted lesson plans and classroom monitoring to payroll processing, attendance recording, and assessment tracking.<sup>12</sup> In the classroom, the curriculum is standardized and scripted by external experts and then delivered verbatim by trained instructors whose primary

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<sup>9</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Philosophy”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/academics/philosophy/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Model”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/approach/model/>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

role is to follow the “step-by-step instructions explaining what [they] should do and say during any given moment of class.”<sup>13</sup>

Putting this model into practice, the company has witnessed tremendous growth in its first decade. This is where Bridge International Academies truly distinguishes itself as beyond that of other low-fee, for-profit private education providers. As of 2015, the company had put into operation almost 500 schools across three countries: Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> In addition to this, the company in recent months has both commissioned a team to explore expansion into India as well as joined *Partnership Schools for Liberia*, a program through which the company will implement its educational model in more than 50 Liberian primary schools.<sup>15</sup> Looking further down the line, Bridge International Academies has ambitiously proclaimed, citing its ‘knowledge for all’ motto as the driving motivation, that the company plans to educate 10,000,000 children across a wide range of countries by 2025.<sup>16</sup> As a result of its model and expansion, Bridge International Academies—along with its two founders—has received numerous accolades and international awards for both innovation and education.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the company now receives support and funding from a number of notable international sources including the World Bank, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, The Clinton Global Initiative, and

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<sup>13</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Philosophy”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/academics/philosophy/>

<sup>14</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “History”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/company/history/>

<sup>15</sup> Bridge International Academies joins *Partnership Schools for Liberia* to radically improve primary and nursery education in Liberia. *Bridge International Academies*. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Fact-sheet-Partnership-Schools-for-Liberia-and-Bridge.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Philosophy”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/academics/philosophy/>

<sup>17</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Awards”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/acclaim/awards/>

Pearson PLC.<sup>1819</sup> Further, Bridge International Academies has received financial and technical assistance from both OPIC (the US Government's development finance institution) as well as the British counterpart DFID.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Bridge International Academies has witnessed extreme growth and financial success during the company's first decade. However, the question remains: why would the High Court in Uganda (again, a country in desperate need of educational support due to inadequate policy efforts in recent decades) force the closure of every one of the 63 Bridge International Academies schools operating in the country? And why would company officials fabricate false allegations in order to arrest and imprison a researcher seeking to investigate their schools?

### **BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIES: REALITIES ON THE GROUND**

Despite the technological innovations for which the company has received widespread praise and admiration, the reality on the ground at many Bridge International Academies schools is quite different. In fact, the physical structures themselves are often in stark contrast to this innovative, tech-driven approach. In a recent report depicting the physical reality of many Bridge International Academies schools, the author describes interviews with several school managers at schools operated by the company. Referred to by several officials as “chicken coops for kids”, the school structures are often simplistic and very cheap—usually constructed primarily from

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<sup>18</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Investors”. Available at:

<http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/company/investors/>

<sup>19</sup> Machacek, Mark and Riep, Curtis. “Schooling the Poor Profitably: The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda” *Education International*. 2.

Available at: [https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC\\_Final\\_28sept.pdf](https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC_Final_28sept.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 13-14.

iron sheets and wire mesh, with minimal use of bricks for the foundation.<sup>21</sup> Obviously this is done as part of a larger strategy aimed at cutting costs, but the question still remains as to whom these cost-cutting measures actually serve to help. Do they benefit the families seeking education enrollment by further lowering the fees—and therefore barriers—to educational attainment, or do they simply benefit Bridge International Academies and its many investors by widening profit margins and making the service delivery process more easily scalable? The answer to this question is certainly up for debate, but one thing is immediately clear: the poor physical infrastructure at many Bridge International Academies schools has actually been quite detrimental to the company. According to several academy managers in Uganda, the shoddy infrastructure has resulted in both the loss of many potential students as well as widespread concerns and allegations that the schools’ infrastructure fails to meet the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards as established by the Ministry of Education.<sup>22</sup> If these allegations are indeed accurate and applicable to many company schools, then certainly questions can—and should—be raised surrounding the company’s commitment to delivering widely accessibly quality education and ‘knowledge for all’.<sup>23</sup>

Returning again to the Bridge International Academies model and the company’s renowned and celebrated emphasis on innovative yet effective uses of technology, it becomes clear that here too Bridge International Academies schools actually fall far short of the claims the company asserts. Despite aiming “to bring some of the world’s greatest instruction and pedagogical thinking into every classroom in every village and slum in the world”, Bridge International Academies’ curriculum development and implementation illustrate a much

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “About”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/company/about/>



different reality.<sup>24</sup> For one, the company’s so-called “world-class education” that is constructed in order to satisfy government standards both in terms of “scope and sequence” is actually developed at the company’s office in Boston—therefore in a vastly different context and environment from that of where the curriculum is put into practice.<sup>25</sup> In his most recent report on Bridge International Academies, researcher Curtis Riep recognizes this as a potential source of ineffective—and possibly unlawful—curriculum development:

“[Curriculum] is standardized and converted into scripted lessons that are sent electronically to computer devices, across social and political borders into the [Kenyan, Nigerian, and] Ugandan context, where it is readout to the class using tablet e-readers, or teacher-computers. Bridge, therefore, defines ‘world-class’ education as scripted instructions designed in Boston and recited word-for-word to children across sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>26</sup>

Apart from this clear lack of contextual adaptation and socio-political sensitivity, Bridge International Academies’ school curriculum has also been documented in Uganda as lacking accreditation and approval from the National Curriculum Development Centre.<sup>27</sup> In failing to meet national curriculum standards for the countries in which the company operates, Bridge International Academies jeopardizes the future of the thousands of pupils enrolled in schools operated by the company. Because the company prioritizes standardization and cost-efficiency in curriculum development instead of national standard alignment, students are left without standard preparation for national exams that often dictate whether or not students can pursue secondary education. The Primary Leaving Exam (PLE) in Uganda is an example of this type of

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<sup>24</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Philosophy”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/academics/philosophy/>

<sup>25</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Model”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/approach/model/>

<sup>26</sup> Machacek, Mark and Riep, Curtis. “Schooling the Poor Profitably: The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda” *Education International*. 26. Available at: [https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC\\_Final\\_28sept.pdf](https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC_Final_28sept.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

exam, and several Bridge International Academies school managers—in interviews with Curtis Riep—corroborated this reality, acknowledging personal frustrations that students in Uganda would find themselves hopelessly unprepared when they eventually sat for PLE exams following their final year of primary school.<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, while Bridge International Academies repeatedly prides itself on providing “world class instruction” through the implementation of “comprehensive teacher guidelines and training programs”, the reality on the ground is again much different.<sup>29</sup> In Uganda, several independent reports conducted during the past year recently confirmed what has long been suspected: Bridge International Academies hires “unlicensed and unregistered teachers—a clear violation of the Education Act in Uganda—[and pays its teaching] employees severely low wages.”<sup>30</sup> The company justifies its hiring practices by arguing that the facilitators/instructors—the company is careful not to refer to its employees as teachers—do not need to be professionally trained and certified teachers because of the technology that Bridge International Academies utilizes in the classroom.<sup>31</sup> Is this an honest and well-intentioned justification, or does the company simply see this defense as a convenient excuse through which to drive down costs and increase profits? Regardless of the company’s true intentions, the teacher hiring practices carried out by Bridge International Academies are clearly suspect. Not only are they in violation of national law in the countries that they operate, but it can be argued also that the practices exploit both teachers and students alike in Bridge International Academies schools.

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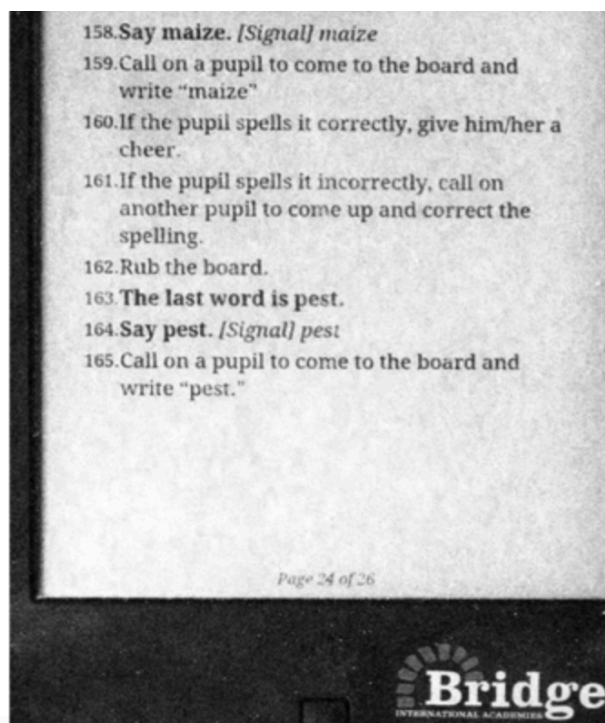
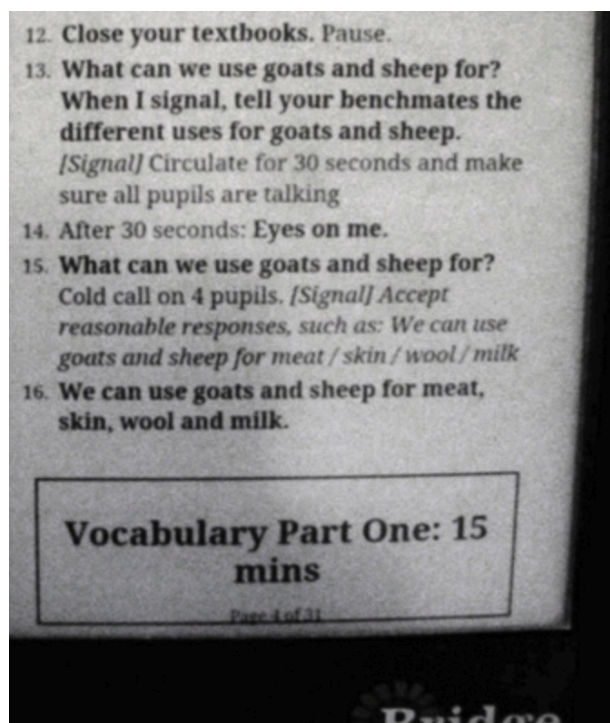
<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Model”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/approach/model/>

<sup>30</sup> Machacek, Mark and Riep, Curtis. “Schooling the Poor Profitably: The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda” *Education International*. 19. Available at: [https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC\\_Final\\_28sept.pdf](https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC_Final_28sept.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 18.

Clearly, the reality on the ground in Bridge International Academies schools is vastly different from how the company portrays itself and its operations. In terms of physical infrastructure, curriculum development, and teacher recruitment, questions abound as to the extent to which the company's practices actually bring it closer to its stated mission of enabling 'knowledge for all.' Apart from this, there are widespread concerns regarding the extent to which the company's innovative, technology and data based approach to primary education is actually effective. Using a teacher-computer model that employs tablet computers as read-along scripts for classroom instruction, Bridge International Academies prides itself on being able to deliver high-quality, standardized curriculum. The counter-argument, of course, is that this method creates a formulaic approach to teaching in which the students essentially learn from robots.<sup>32</sup> A partial lesson plan that would be delivered verbatim by a Bridge International Academies teacher is included below:<sup>33</sup>



<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 27.

As is made evident above, the tablets provide even the most basic instructions, including what to say, when to pause, when to look up, when to ask for student input, as well as how many students to call on for responses. Not being the focus of this particular paper, however, this question of classroom instruction and the effectiveness of the Bridge International Academies pedagogy will not be expounded upon further here. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this teaching style has become the subject of intense scrutiny in the past few months as well as the driving force behind many appeals to ban Bridge International Academies from operation.

Having detailed much of the controversy surrounding Bridge International Academies, the remaining sections of this paper will now turn to the broader question of responsibility for education provision, ultimately seeking to ask the question of who is responsible for the current controversy surrounding Bridge International Academies and the reality on the ground in the countries where the company operates schools. By examining one-by-one each of the three key stakeholders that have played a role in the implementation and proliferation of Bridge International Academies—namely, the national government in each country of operation, the international funders and investors supporting the company, and Bridge International Academies itself—the remainder of this paper aims to investigate how the situation with Bridge International Academies came to be and how the different players might be held responsible for the current controversy surrounding the company and its so-called solution to education in the developing world.

## **CONCERN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE**

Clearly, there are many concerns surrounding the education system provided by Bridge International Academies. Even with all the rapid growth, high profile investors, and numerous accolades, this much is clear. Now while it is easy to look at Bridge International Academies—and other commercial education chains like it—and express grievances about the low quality of education provision due to a number of factors that ultimately stem from the company being a profit-oriented enterprise, it is much more crucial to look at it in normative terms. To do so, requires a certain language. It requires the language of laws and violations, both in the national and international sphere. Through this legal framework, critiques of Bridge International Academies become rooted in more concrete and measurable terms: duties, entitlements, and violations. At the same time, it becomes easier to examine which actors may or may not be at fault, which actors are fulfilling their obligations, and which actors may or may not be denied rights to which they are entitled. Ultimately, this approach seeks to answer the question of responsibility, namely, which stakeholders are culpable for the controversy surrounding Bridge International Academies, as well as more generally the primary education crisis that is common across much of the developing world. Through this process, three actors emerge as potentially responsible—and those to be held accountable for the controversy that has erupted surrounding Bridge International Academies: the company itself, its external funders and investors, as well as the national governments in countries where Bridge International Academies operates schools.

### **BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIES: VIOLATING LAWS & CONVENTIONS?**

The first to be explored as a potential rights violator will be the company itself, Bridge International Academies. Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states the following:

“In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”<sup>34</sup>

With this in mind, a strong argument can be made that Bridge International Academies does not have the best interests of children as a primary focus or consideration. First and foremost, the company, being profit-driven, seeks to optimize its enterprise in such a way as to maximize financial returns. Even the Bridge International Academies website accepts this point, stating explicitly that the company “was founded from day one on the premise of [a] massive market opportunity.”<sup>35</sup> Apart from this obvious failure to place paramount emphasis on the best interest of children—instead, prioritizing monetary returns—, Bridge International Academies also makes use of unproven teaching methods as part of their heralded innovative and cost-effective approach to education delivery. By implementing their model in the absence of rigorous external research trials, the company essentially employs vulnerable and impoverished children as test cases, simultaneously ensuring strong profit margins while also confirming the efficacy of their model through research and assessment that is both internally conducted and insufficiently robust.<sup>36</sup> However, one need not look only at research methodology to confirm that Bridge International Academies may not have the best interest of the child in mind. Ben Phillips, a researcher and policy director with Action Aid International, visited a Bridge International

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<sup>34</sup> “Convention on the Rights of the Child” *United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights*. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

<sup>35</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Model”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/approach/model/>

<sup>36</sup> *Bridge International Academies* “Academic Results”. Available at: <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/results/academic/>

Academies school in Liberia during a research trip this past September. In his report, he describes the disturbing realities he witnessed there. According to Phillips, in order to keep class sizes down, countless students were forcibly kicked out of the school, causing the neighboring schools to overflow even further.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the promise of free books, uniforms, and equipment (a pledge that makes Bridge International Academies increasingly attractive) had not yet been fulfilled.<sup>38</sup> To make matters worse, the principal of the school had no timetable for when these materials would arrive.<sup>39</sup> Lastly, Phillips discovered that the principal of the school had received less than three weeks of total training before assuming his position.<sup>40</sup> To any observer witnessing what Phillips—along with several others in recent weeks—saw firsthand in Liberia, this would clearly constitute neglect. Phillips’ account only serves to corroborate and strengthen the concern that many others have already suspected: Bridge International Academies’ profit-driven nature may in fact impede the company’s ability to hold the best interest of the child as a primary consideration in each of the company’s actions.

In addition to questions of compliance with international obligations, there is strong documentation of Bridge International Academies violating national laws in the countries where the company operates. For one, as was mentioned prior, the Bridge International Academies curriculum has been implemented in Ugandan primary schools without ever receiving accreditation by the National Curriculum Development Centre.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the teacher hiring

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<sup>37</sup> Phillips, Ben (2016). What Happens when you take up Bridge on their call to visit their schools?. *Global Dashboard: Notes from the Future*. Available at:

<http://www.globaldashboard.org/2016/09/19/happens-take-bridge-call-visit-schools/>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Machacek, Mark and Riep, Curtis. “Schooling the Poor Profitably: The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda” *Education International*. 30. Available at: [https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC\\_Final\\_28sept.pdf](https://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/DOC_Final_28sept.pdf)

practices, namely the hiring of unlicensed, unregistered, and unqualified instructors and providing compensation rates far below the national minimum, violate national law as well, specifically the Uganda Education Act.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, a range of other allegations against the company have been made in recent months for the organization's alleged failure to meet the Uganda Ministry of Education's Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards as they pertain to physical infrastructure in schools.<sup>43</sup> Salima Namusobya, director of the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights in Uganda, sums up the potential violations by Bridge International Academies in Uganda:

“Bridge International Academies is not serious about respecting the law. [The company's] schools [do] not respect the Government Guidelines on Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards for Schools for example regarding infrastructure, purposefully [using] unqualified teachers in order to reduce costs, in violation of Ugandan laws, and [are] running a for-profit business without the agreement and proper oversight of the authorities.”<sup>44</sup>

Clearly, there are widespread concerns—and documentation—of the company both ignoring and purposefully violating national laws and regulations in Uganda. This much has become clear, particularly in recent months as Bridge International Academies has come under increased scrutiny in the country.

Unfortunately, the story in Uganda is not unique. That is to say, Uganda is not the only country in which the company has been accused of violating national law. In fact, many of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Uganda Judgment on the Closure of Bridge International Academies Must Signal a Move Towards Fulfilling the Right to Education in Uganda and Other Countries.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-eser.org/uganda-judgement-on-the-closure-of-bridge-international-academies-must-signal-a-move-towards-fulfilling-the-right-to-education-in-uganda-and-other-countries/>



same concerns are currently being raised in Kenya as well<sup>45</sup>, and several steps have been taken by the government in the past months in attempts to rectify the situation. For example, the Kenyan Ministry of Education—in order to demand compliance with national regulations—has held several meetings with officials from Bridge International Academies as well as written to the company on multiple instances to set deadlines for compliance.<sup>46</sup> These measures have had little success thus far, as an official from the Kenyan organization the East African Centre for Human Rights notes below:

“It seems that Bridge International Academies continues to flout national regulations despite repeated calls to comply. No education provider is above the law, and we hope that the process in Kenya will [ultimately lead] to Bridge schools either respecting national standards or closing.”<sup>47</sup>

Again, the situation in Uganda is not unique. With recent reports and documentation coming out of Kenya as well as concerns arising in other countries where the company has initiated operations, it is clear that Bridge International Academies as a whole faces serious allegations of violating a range of national laws.

These alleged violations make it evident that there exists a strong platform on which to pursue punitive action against Bridge International Academies. One need only return to the situation in Uganda to see how this can be done. In August of 2016, the Uganda Ministry of Education—citing non-respect of basic education standards—ordered the complete shutdown of

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<sup>45</sup> “Bridge vs. Reality: A study of Bridge International Academies’ for-profit schooling in Kenya” *Education International. Kenya National Union of Teachers*. Dec. 2016. Available at: [http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Bridge%20vs%20Reality\\_GR%20Report.pdf](http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Bridge%20vs%20Reality_GR%20Report.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> “Uganda Judgment on the Closure of Bridge International Academies Must Signal a Move Towards Fulfilling the Right to Education in Uganda and Other Countries.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/uganda-judgement-on-the-closure-of-bridge-international-academies-must-signal-a-move-towards-fulfilling-the-right-to-education-in-uganda-and-other-countries/>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

all 63 Bridge International Academies schools operating in the country.<sup>48</sup> Following a filed appeal by the company, the High Court of Uganda upheld the ruling on November 4<sup>th</sup>, effectively terminating all company operations in the country.<sup>49</sup> In a joint statement from civil society organizations in Uganda following the ruling by the High Court, the culpability of Bridge International Academies is described as follows:

“Contrary to what the company has claimed, [Bridge International Academies] had been duly informed by the Ugandan government of the legal requirements it had to follow, but had not taken appropriate action to meet those requirements. This confirms the concerns that although [Bridge International Academies], a multi-million dollar company, has the means and resources to comply with regulations, it appears to have ignored multiple requests to meet the educational standards of the countries in which it operates.”<sup>50</sup>

With similar documentation now available in other countries where Bridge International Academies operates, it is becoming increasingly possible for countries like Kenya and Nigeria to pursue similar actions as Uganda has undertaken in the past six months.

Largely, this is how Bridge International Academies can—and should—be held accountable. While the company’s business model, academic approach, and profit-oriented nature are all certainly controversial—and arguably forms of profiteering and exploitation of vulnerable communities—this questionable business structure is difficult to pin down as immoral or incorrect without clear and concrete violations—at either the national or international level. Although it is much easier to discuss this controversy using terms such as immoral behavior, fraudulent enterprise, and profit-oriented intent, these terms have little impact because they lack

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<sup>48</sup> “Commercial Schools and the Right to Education.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/advocacy/privatization-in-education-research-initiative/commercial-schools-and-the-right-to-education/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> “Uganda Judgment on the Closure of Bridge International Academies Must Signal a Move Towards Fulfilling the Right to Education in Uganda and Other Countries.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/uganda-judgement-on-the-closure-of-bridge-international-academies-must-signal-a-move-towards-fulfilling-the-right-to-education-in-uganda-and-other-countries/>

concrete, legal grounding. As the above discussion outlines, if Bridge International Academies is to be held accountable for the controversy and crisis surrounding education in the countries where they operate, it must be done through the legal realm—that is to say, documenting national and international violations and pursuing resolutions through court.

### **INTERNATIONAL FUNDERS: SUPPORTING THE WRONG SOLUTION?**

It is important to now turn to those organizations, institutions, and individuals that have served as the primary external investors and funders of Bridge International Academies. While the company's primary supporters certainly encompass a broad and diverse group, ranging from prominent philanthropists such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg to more traditional investment groups such as US OPIC, UK DFID, and Pearson PLC, this section will focus primarily on one investor: the World Bank. In a 2015 speech aimed at highlighting strategies to end extreme poverty, Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank, spoke gushingly about Bridge International Academies and the company's use of "new technology [to] transform educational outcomes...[for] just \$6 dollars a month."<sup>51</sup> It comes as no surprise that Jim Yong Kim and the World Bank celebrate and praise Bridge International Academies as a private sector solution to the primary education crisis that many emerging nations face. Remember, the World Bank's private sector investment branch, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), is a primary funder in the company, having invested \$10 million in 2014 specifically to support

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<sup>51</sup> "Speech by World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim: Ending Extreme Poverty by 2030: The Final Push." *The World Bank*. April 7, 2015. Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2015/04/07/speech-by-world-bank-group-president-jim-yong-kim-ending-extreme-poverty-final-push>

further expansion within Kenya as well as introduction into Uganda, Nigeria, and India.<sup>52</sup> In addition to this investment, the IFC also recently approved a \$4.1 million loan to a private, fee-charging secondary school in Entebbe, Uganda.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, this illustrates a pattern that reveals the World Bank's theory of change when it comes to improving education and eradicating extreme poverty. Through the aforementioned investments in Bridge International Academies and other private, for-profit schools as well as the fact that the World Bank, since 2010, has provided zero financial support to the public basic education systems in both Kenya and Uganda, it becomes clear that the World Bank sees private providers as the solution to a public basic education sector that the World Bank views as failing.<sup>54</sup>

This is very alarming. In addition, this may be a juncture at which the World Bank may hold significant responsibility for the current situation in countries where Bridge International Academies operates. In a joint response to President Jim Yong Kim's 2015 speech, civil society organizations articulate why this is so dangerous. First, they point out that President Kim's figure of \$6 per month is not only inaccurate—ignoring the many other fees that families are charged for books, uniforms, materials, lunch, etc. that drive the total monthly cost much closer to \$20<sup>55</sup>—but also illustrates a broader lack of understanding on the part of the World Bank. According to the report:

“When President Kim argues that schooling at [Bridge International Academies] costs ‘just’ \$6, the underlying message is that \$6 a month is a small amount of money worth

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<sup>52</sup> “Just \$6 a month?: The World Bank will not end poverty by promoting fee-charging, for-profit schools in Kenya and Uganda” *Response to President Jim Kim's speech from concerned communities and organizations in Kenya and Uganda*. Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. 6. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/May-2015-Join-statement-reaction-to-WB-statement-on-Bridge-14.05.2015.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

paying for schooling, even in contexts of great poverty. Such a statement is ill-informed and dangerous, especially coming from a world leader with the power to influence directions in global development. It is alarming that charging poor people school fees—something that the global community has worked particularly hard to abolish over the last two decades due to their negative impact on the poor—is being promoted as a means of ending poverty. [It is appalling] that an organization whose mandate is supposed to be to lift people out of poverty shows such a profound misunderstanding and disconnect from the lives and rights of poor people in [East Africa]. [In Kenya and Uganda], \$6 per month is much more money than most families, friends, and community members can afford without making huge sacrifices.”<sup>56</sup>

The joint response makes it very clear that supporting a fee-charging solution to basic education provision is not only ineffective but also severely detrimental to those families living in extreme poverty that may then find themselves suddenly risking other essential expenses in order to pay for schooling.<sup>57</sup> Using income data from Kenya and Uganda, the joint response further highlights this point, describing how low income households in the region would realistically have to spend close to 75% of their income in order to send two children to Bridge International Academies schools.<sup>58</sup> Even assuming the \$6 tuition to be comprehensive—which it clearly is not—, households would still find themselves sacrificing other essential rights like food or health in order to dedicate almost 40% of their income to enrolling children in Bridge International Academies schools.<sup>59</sup>

Acknowledging this reality that many households simply cannot afford to send their children to Bridge International Academies schools, the joint response provides an alternative to President Jim Yong Kim that is quite simple and clear. One participating organization provides its recommendations below:

“If the World Bank is serious about improving education in Kenya and Uganda, it should support our governments to expand and improve our public education systems, provide

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 3-4.

quality education to all children free-of-charge, and address other financial barriers to access.”<sup>60</sup>

A similar perspective, this time from a resident of Kibera informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, is presented below:

“My honest view is this; if the World Bank was genuinely keen in promoting access to basic education for every child, especially those in vulnerable areas, then they would focus more on supporting and enhancing access to free public primary schools rather than supporting private schools which only operate to make profits out of our poor pockets.”<sup>61</sup>

Yet despite this widespread criticism, the World Bank continues to neglect the public basic education sector, choosing instead to support private, fee-charging schools as a potential panacea solution for all issues pertaining to the provision of accessible, quality basic education. Indeed, this is very alarming.

Apart from the simple fact that the World Bank is taking an investment approach that seeks to eradicate poverty by charging impoverished families unaffordable school fees, the World Bank Group also may find itself violating its obligations and responsibilities of human rights due diligence. As outlined in the United Nation’s publication *The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights*, human rights due diligence requires any business enterprise to assess the potential “adverse human rights impacts that the business enterprise may cause or contribute to through its own activities, or which may be directly linked to its operations, products, or services by its business relationships.”<sup>62</sup> In this sense, the World Bank, through its extensive investment in—and business relationship with—Bridge International Academies, may very well be in violation of its obligation to human rights due diligence. There are three reasons to support this. The first, and most obvious, is that Bridge International

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>62</sup> “The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights.” *United Nations*. Available at: [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2\\_En.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2_En.pdf)

Academies is itself a very controversial company that has been widely accused of exacerbating extreme poverty through exploitative, fee-charging schools. This, of course, has been discussed at length in previous sections and will be discussed no further here.

The second reason is that the World Bank, in its attempt to conduct due diligence and assess the potential human rights impact of its business relationships (i.e. investments), has largely ignored the human rights concerns raised before it. According to the joint response to the World Bank, civil society leaders in Uganda and Kenya had met with senior education officials one month prior to President Jim Yong Kim's speech to discuss—and warn against—the growth of fee-charging, private primary schools, and more specifically Bridge International Academies.<sup>63</sup> In addition to this meeting, there have been several widespread appeals made towards governments, various development banks, as well as United Nations agencies to stop education profiteers.<sup>64</sup> Fully warned of the potential consequences of its investment, the World Bank has nonetheless continued to support and applaud Bridge International Academies, thus putting itself possibly in violation of its responsibility to human rights due diligence.

The third and final reason suggesting that the World Bank may be in violation of its due diligence obligations is that the World Bank defends its investment and relationship with Bridge International Academies using evidence gathered from unsound research methods. As was alluded to in a previous section, the only academic research supporting the effectiveness of Bridge International Academies' methods was conducted internally by the company and

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<sup>63</sup> “Just \$6 a month?: The World Bank will not end poverty by promoting fee-charging, for-profit schools in Kenya and Uganda” *Response to President Jim Kim's speech from concerned communities and organizations in Kenya and Uganda*. Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. 7. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/May-2015-Join-statement-reaction-to-WB-statement-on-Bridge-14.05.2015.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

possesses serious insufficiencies in terms of methodology and robustness. According to one civil society coalition in East Africa:

“A study in which the researcher is itself the focus of the research question is clearly non-objective, invalidating its conclusions. [This] study conducted by [Bridge International Academies] appears on the outset to be problematic as it compares two (anonymous) public schools to 26 [Bridge International Academies] schools. It is inconceivable that a leading development institution such as the World Bank (one that further prides itself as a rigorous ‘knowledge bank’) would use such biased data not only to inform its own strategies but also to promote [the education company] on a global platform.”<sup>65</sup>

Because the World Bank cites these flawed findings as confirmation of Bridge International Academies’ effectiveness and success, the World Bank finds itself again in danger of neglecting its responsibility to human rights due diligence. Through its negligent treatment of research methodology and inability to obtain credible research (as well as through the other two previously stated reasons), the World Bank may in fact be contributing to the very ‘adverse human rights impacts’ that due diligence aims to prevent.<sup>66</sup>

While this section primarily focuses on the World Bank’s contribution as an external funder of Bridge International Academies, it is important to keep in mind that many of these same concerns can be raised for every one of the company’s financial investors. For example, both the Committee on the Rights of the Child as well as the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights have expressed concerns in recent months about UK DFID’s funding of Bridge International Academies—as well as other low-fee, for-profit, private schools—suggesting that the country “refrain from funding for-profit private schools and prioritize free and quality primary education in public schools.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, following a report from the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>66</sup> “The Corporate Responsibility to Respect Human Rights.” *United Nations*. Available at: [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2\\_En.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/HR.PUB.12.2_En.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> “Addressing International Support to Privatization in Education.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative->



African Development Bank calling for increased support to the private education sector in Africa, a joint response statement was produced and signed by more than 70 African and international organizations.<sup>68</sup> Similar to the response statement sent to the World Bank, this joint civil society statement criticizes the African Development Bank and others for their support of commercial chains like Bridge International Academies, arguing that “profit making in education, especially where taking advantage of the aspirations of the poorest parents for a better life, is unacceptable.”<sup>69</sup> Again, the above examples make it clear that it is more than just the World Bank that is beginning to be held responsible—and accountable—for allowing the current education crisis in countries where Bridge International Academies operates.

What is unique about the World Bank, however, is that this institution yields significant influence in the realm of international development. As a result, any significant investment on the part of the World Bank is likely to influence future trends in foreign investment. This has certainly been true for the World Bank’s investment in Bridge International Academies as the initial \$10 million from the IFC led many other banks, institutions, and individuals to follow suit, such that combined investments in the company now total more than \$100 million.<sup>70</sup> This is why the World Bank’s choice to prioritize private education over public education—along with the aforementioned negligence with regards to both civil society input as well as research methodology—is so alarming. This is also why it is so crucial to hold these types of external

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[escr.org/advocacy/privatization-in-education-research-initiative/addressing-international-support-to-privatisation-in-education/](http://escr.org/advocacy/privatization-in-education-research-initiative/addressing-international-support-to-privatisation-in-education/)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Just \$6 a month?: The World Bank will not end poverty by promoting fee-charging, for-profit schools in Kenya and Uganda” *Response to President Jim Kim’s speech from concerned communities and organizations in Kenya and Uganda*. Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. 6. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/May-2015-Join-statement-reaction-to-WB-statement-on-Bridge-14.05.2015.pdf>

fundes and investors accountable, not just in the current case of Bridge International Academies but also in all cases moving forward. Due diligence must be practiced by these investors in order to ensure sound investments that do not endanger or infringe upon basic human rights.

### **STATE GOVERNMENTS: PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE?**

Finally, it is important to analyze the responsibility of the national governments in countries where Bridge International Academies operates schools. First and foremost, under international law, States are responsible and obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education. This much is clear and is widely acknowledged by all. Things become complicated, however, when States no longer become the sole provider of education, that is to say, privatization occurs. When examining the current situation with Bridge International Academies and the extent to which States might be held responsible for allowing this controversial company to proliferate so rapidly, this question of privatization becomes important. In particular, there are two aspects to analyze: the ways in which States contract out the responsibility to education to private actors and the ways in which governments monitor those same private actors in order to ensure accountability.

It is important to first examine this question of outsourcing education responsibility through the introduction and allowance of private providers. This can be done in many ways, but with regards to Bridge International Academies, this is primarily done through Public-Private Partnerships between the State and the private provider. Taking Uganda as an example, this type of partnership was enacted across the country through a recent arrangement in which the

government provides financial support to low-fee private schools on a per student basis.<sup>71</sup> The idea is that, through these partnerships, the government can then extend accessibility to education in both regions where the total number of schools does not meet the needs of the population as well as areas where the government itself does not operate schools.<sup>72</sup> The overall results of these partnerships in Uganda have thus far been mixed, and the government has received widespread criticism from education advocates claiming that the government is employing the partnerships as a means of relinquishing its own responsibility as the primary education provider in the country.<sup>73</sup> Commenting on this shift towards privatization in the developing world, Kishore Singh, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, states in a 2014 report to the UN General Assembly:

“The State is both guarantor and regulator of education which is a fundamental human right and a noble cause. Provision of basic education free of costs is not only a core obligation of States, it is also a moral imperative...[As a result], governments must make every effort to strengthen their public education systems, rather than allowing or supporting private providers; for-profit education should not be allowed in order to safeguard the noble cause of education.”<sup>74</sup>

According to Mr. Singh, States must focus on strengthening their own means of education provision, rather than embracing privatization and Public-Private Partnerships as avenues through which to achieve the widely held goal of basic education for all. Unfortunately, in the countries where Bridge International Academies operates schools, the current state of education financing makes it very difficult for governments to simply strengthen their public basic

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<sup>71</sup> “A Threat or Opportunity? Public-Private Partnerships in Education in Uganda.” *Initiative for Social and Economic Rights*. Available at: [http://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/Threat\\_or\\_Opportunity\\_Public\\_Private\\_Partnership\\_in\\_Education\\_in\\_Uganda.pdf](http://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/Threat_or_Opportunity_Public_Private_Partnership_in_Education_in_Uganda.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Singh, Kishore. Report to the UN General Assembly. October 27, 2014. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15221>

education systems to the extent that quality education becomes available to everyone in the country. Ultimately, this is the true driving force behind the widespread privatization of basic education in these countries. Additionally, this is ultimately why commercial chains such as Bridge International Academies have been able to proliferate and expand so rapidly. These companies and schools fill a niche by doing what the government itself is unable to carry out—either due to financial constraints, lack of political willpower in government, or some combination of the two. In theory, in establishing partnerships with private providers, States still maintain their international obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education. They simply contract out the delivery of education, but not the responsibility to ensure the right to education. However, as has become clear with Bridge International Academies, outsourcing education delivery also often results in the outsourcing of responsibility, and with it, the right to education.

It is now crucial to turn to the question of monitoring private providers. This is the fundamental key to the effective introduction and integration of private providers in the education sector. Even Mr. Singh, who strongly opposes education privatization for its potential risks to ensuring the right to education, admits this much.<sup>75</sup> In particular, Mr. Singh acknowledges in his report the precarious situation that governments such as Uganda and Kenya find themselves facing, asserting that:

“Governments must [still] meet their international obligations through careful regulation of private schools, with diligent monitoring and enforcement, in developing countries where the public system is overwhelmed and unable to cope with rapidly rising demand.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Mr. Singh recognizes that many States simply cannot fund basic public education for all children at this time. That being said, he makes it very clear what is expected of governments if they are to allow for private actors to fill niches typically assumed by government provision. This point has been echoed in recent years as both UN human rights monitoring bodies as well as the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights have called upon Kenya and Uganda to adhere to their individual obligations to adequately regulate private schools.<sup>77</sup> A large aspect of these obligations is the responsibility of governments to establish and enforce minimum educational standards for all schools.<sup>78</sup> As has been discussed at length previously, Bridge International Academies faces widespread allegations of having violated these same minimum standards.

This is where governments must be held responsible. If they are to allow for privatization as a means of achieving basic education for all, they must fully commit themselves to holding private providers like Bridge International Academies accountable through the establishment of these minimum standards, and more importantly the monitoring and enforcement of these same standards. Mr. Singh, in his 2014 report to the UN General Assembly, paints an all too familiar picture of what the consequences are for failing to establish, monitor, and enforce these minimum standards effectively:

“Not doing so has resulted in for-profit low-cost schools taking money from parents, but failing to deliver a quality education to their children. This perversely traps poor students into a further life of poverty, despite the best efforts of their parents.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Uganda Judgment on the Closure of Bridge International Academies Must Signal a Move Towards Fulfilling the Right to Education in Uganda and Other Countries.” *The Global Initiative for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. Available at: <http://globalinitiative-escr.org/uganda-judgement-on-the-closure-of-bridge-international-academies-must-signal-a-move-towards-fulfilling-the-right-to-education-in-uganda-and-other-countries/>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Singh, Kishore. Report to the UN General Assembly. October 27, 2014. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15221>

Ultimately, Mr. Singh places primary responsibility on the States for the controversy surrounding commercial chains like Bridge International Academies, urging governments to put an end to these market-driven reforms and Public-Private Partnerships that ultimately endanger the right to education.<sup>80</sup> Mr. Singh concludes his report to the UN General Assembly by stating “education is not a privilege of the rich and well to do; it is an inalienable right of every child.”<sup>81</sup> This is ultimately what States are responsible for ensuring. Until governments can provide this inalienable right entirely through public means, they will likely continue to find themselves relying on arrangements with private providers. However, this does not—and should not—relinquish the States of their responsibility to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education. That obligation forever belongs to the state. Thus, in the current situation with Bridge International Academies, the national governments in countries where the company operates still hold primary responsibility for ensuring the right to education. So, if Bridge International Academies is undermining education for all, then by extension, so are the States.

## **IN CONCLUSION: WHAT NEXT?**

So what happens next? The above discussion makes it clear that there is certainly issue to be had with Bridge International Academies and its establishment of commercial schools across much of the developing world. Additionally, it is clear that various actors—the company itself, its external funders and investors, as well as the national governments where the company operates—all are responsible in different ways for the current controversy surrounding Bridge

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

International Academies. But what can actually be done? And more importantly, what should actually be done? In Uganda, much has already occurred as the government recently shut down all Bridge International Academies operations within the country. With allegations also being raised against the company in Kenya, Bridge International Academies could very well meet a similar fate there as well. It is important to note, however, that the work does not stop with the closing of Bridge International Academies. As was mentioned earlier, the company's closing in Uganda has resulted in more than 12,000 students suddenly left without schools to attend.<sup>82</sup> The government of Uganda must do something to address this. Similarly, in Kenya, with more than 400 Bridge International Academies schools currently in operation, any potential shut down of the company would have severe consequences. Again, something would have to be done in order to address this immediate reduction of schools. However, what is most important to keep in mind is that a ruling against Bridge International Academies is not a cure-all for the basic education sector. A shutdown does not change the fact that governments initially partnered with private providers and commercial chains like Bridge International Academies because they struggled themselves to provide quality basic education to all. Yes, shutting down Bridge International Academies in instances where the company has failed to meet minimum national standards is indeed progress. However, that alone will not be sufficient—especially when keeping in mind the government's primary obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education.

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<sup>82</sup> “Low-cost private schools ordered to close in Uganda” *BBC News: Africa Live*. Available at: [http://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-37855269?ns\\_mchannel=social&ns\\_source=facebook&ns\\_campaign=bbc\\_live&ns\\_linkname=581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09%26Low-cost+private+schools+ordered+to+close+in+Uganda%26&ns\\_fee=0#post\\_581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09](http://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-37855269?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=facebook&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09%26Low-cost+private+schools+ordered+to+close+in+Uganda%26&ns_fee=0#post_581c48d1e4b05d511bb30c09)

In order to best work towards a solution that enables access to basic education for all, recommendations are provided below for both external investors as well as national governments. These recommendations are broad and apply in all circumstances, regardless of whether or not Bridge International Academies is allowed to continue operating and expanding in each country where it currently has schools in operation. It is important to note that recommendations for the company itself are deliberately left out. If Bridge International Academies truly seeks to provide 'knowledge for all,' then the company will halt all operations and further expansion until it can both prove the effectiveness of its model and pedagogy through robust external research as well as meet minimum national standards in each country with regards to curriculum, infrastructure and teacher development. Until then, no further recommendations can be given to the company. With that in mind, the action points for investors and national governments are as follows:

- External funders and investors that seek to promote poverty eradication through increased accessibility to basic education in the developing world should cease all investments in for-profit, fee-charging basic education providers.
- These investors should turn instead to the public basic education sector in order to support and strengthen the efforts of national governments to provide free basic education to all.
- In all investments moving forward, external funders should listen to and consider seriously the input of civil society as well as base future investment plans in rigorous, independent research that assesses how funding efforts will impact the right to education in its totality.



- National governments should undertake serious efforts to establish strong legal frameworks that enable the effective establishment, monitoring, and enforcement of minimum standards for compliance by all schools.
- In doing so, States should ensure that, in any arrangement or partnership that allows for the private provision of basic education, national governments themselves maintain primary responsibility in upholding the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education. They may contract out education delivery if necessary, but the responsibility to educate should be retained in the hands of the national governments themselves.

While the future of Bridge International Academies is very much unsure—and evolving rapidly—, the recommendations presented above and developed through the preceding analysis and discussion are important nonetheless. If ‘knowledge for all’ truly is the shared objective, then national governments and external funders alike would be wise to follow these recommendations. In all efforts to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education, these recommendations will be critical.

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