

June 21, 2017

Response to Min. Werner's Letter to International Academic Community on the Independent Qualitative Research of Partnership Schools for Liberia

In February 2016, the Ministry of Education (MoE) signed a memorandum of understanding with Bridge International Academies (BIA), a for-profit education chain, to operate public schools in a Public Private Partnerships - as an effort to address Liberia's declining education system. The need for a drastic reform has been a rallying call from advocates including ActionAid for the last decade. Consecutive failures of high school graduates for national University entrance exams and the continuous derelict state of the education system across the country repeatedly reinforced the need for Liberia to undertake a systematic reform. However, initial backlash to the partnership with BIA led to the expansion of the partnership to seven additional providers for the now Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL).

ActionAid welcomes the initiative to undertake a reform of the education system. Indeed, ActionAid has been a partner of the Liberian government since 1997, initially through humanitarian response for internally displaced persons and continuing on with technical assistance, resources and community development through a rights based approach. ActionAid has championed this rights based approach supporting women and young people, community based organizations, civil society, and both local authorities and national government. ActionAid Liberia works on promoting the full recognition and protection of the rights of women and girls, supporting people living in poverty to reduce their vulnerability to conflict, and advancing the inclusion of the poor and socially excluded in decision and policy-making processes. This includes the right to education, the right to just and democratic governance; and engaging duty-bearers especially the state to transform the dire situation of women, young people and marginalized communities. This is also all in alignment to the government's national development agenda and plans.

It is against this mission that ActionAid has repeatedly sought to highlight the challenges with the current PSL pilot especially the inconsistencies around Liberia's commitment to delivering and ensuring equality, equity and access. We have sought to reemphasize the government's pledge to delivering on this through the National Education Policy calling for "free and compulsory education" and commitments to both national and global mandates such as Agenda for Transformation, the previous MDGs and the new SDGs. We have also raised serious concerns over the lack of evidence of the impact of Public Private Partnerships on learning outcomes and around the sustainability of the PSL program. We fear there are significant risks posed by the aggressive support for this pilot, exposing the education system to potential privatization – which would have devastating impacts on equity given the current rates of poverty and additional developmental challenges the country faces already. Fundamental concerns about PPPs have been raised by UN, DFID, the Global Campaign for Education and even Ark in recent research and rigorous reviews of the evidence. There is a clear need for further intensive research and evaluation of PPPs before there is any significant scaling up or rolling out. Liberia's PSL could offer an opportunity to address the lack of evidence but only if the full findings of the present RCT are respected before a scale up is considered – and the PSL schools are open to independent research.

We have raised these concerns directly with the Ministry, through formal communications with the Minister, and public engagements and policy advocacy. We have also raised these concerns

directly with the Minister in face to face meetings, externally and more recently in November 2016. It was from this meeting (November 2016) with the ministry that we agreed to undertake an independent review and provide the Ministry and its partners with a complimentary qualitative PSL evaluation together with Education International – to fill projected or potential gaps in the present RCT evaluation. The call for proposal for the research was publicly available in early February 2017. The researchers appointed are highly experienced and credible researchers from the University of Wisconsin and the in country study was slated to occur in May 2017. The researchers have shared their tools and methodology with the Ministry and formally requested for access to the schools. The process thus far has been transparent and our leadership (both ActionAid and Education International) has been accessible to address any concerns. The research team only got notified a week prior to their departure for Liberia that the Ministry will not approve their access to the schools. We again engaged the Minister directly on this and got confirmation that access was now disallowed and there was no longer the need for an independent qualitative evaluation. However, we appreciate the Ministry's recent communication on concerns with the research and take this opportunity to respond and provide reassurance, specifically:

- **Purpose of research:** The planned study is a complementary in-depth qualitative research of PSL. It covers research on a selection of the PSL schools; tracking the impact of the PSL on enrollment, exclusion and out of schools children; class size cap (enrolment in another public or private school, continuing exclusion etc.) and conducting in-depth interviews with principals, local community leaders, parents, and teachers.
- **Ownership of Data** – AAL has conducted research and validation exercises for data in which state agencies and ministries have regularly participated. Our track record shows that we have no problem with sharing data. We do however will raise objections on selectivity of findings that may misrepresent the data. We are open in principle to the Ministry's evaluation staff participating - as we have always sought to ensure and emphasize the state's role as duty bearer in the commitment to rights holders, specifically to students and parents in communities – though the precise arrangements in this case would have to be agreed with the independent research team from the University of Wisconsin.
- **Access to the schools** – The research TOR outlines a qualitative focus that includes both desk review of enrollment data (available from the Ministry and county education authorities), tracking children out of school and those excluded owing to the class size cap and conducting in-depth interviews with principals, local community leaders, parents, teachers, and students. We and the research team are conscious of the need not to disrupt schools but it is worth noting that the week of the planned research, the World Bank's Social Impact team was also in country visiting schools without any of the obstacles presented by the Ministry. We publicly commit to working with the Ministry to follow the same modalities undertaken by the World Bank's team to ensure minimal disruption of school activities if permission for this research to go ahead is granted whether during the new school year. . We do not foresee much disruption as access will mainly focus on enrollment data and discussions with authorities and communities.
- **Ethical Approval** – Both Liberia and the US have in place an Independent Review Board that is mandated with the task to ensure that research is conducted within the full confines of ethical standards including data collection practices. Concerns over ethics can be successfully addressed in keeping with both IRB and ActionAid's own commitment to child protection and participatory methodologies. The study is being undertaken by the Education

Policy Institute at the University of Wisconsin who has its own very high standards.

- **Role of Liberians and Liberians capacity to lead:** ActionAid has been in Liberia since 1997 and is led by and managed by Liberian nationals. One of our concerns is that the PSL pilot however has prioritized foreign operators and there are serious risks of disruption should these providers pull out – given the capacity gap at the Ministry.

We recognize and applaud the political will and commitment to addressing and tackling our education system. We raise our concerns not in deterrence of reforming the education system but in support of a sustainable, inclusive and systematic reform that ensures that children all across Liberia will have access to quality education. Our concerns have been shared by the very RCT evaluation team in the April 14, 2017 open letter, *The Future of Partnership Schools for Liberia*, which reiterated the gap in MoE's capacity to manage PSL; financial sustainability especially securing funding commitments and the risk of operators pulling out and disrupting schools; adherence to good governance practices and ensuring equity. Most importantly, we draw attention to the Minister's current decision to scale up the pilot prior to the completion of the current RCT review. As stated in the open letter from the Evaluation Team, the scaling up is not supported by the current data from the evaluators. Specifically, the team stated: ***"We would encourage you to stick to your public commitment that any significant scale up of PSL will await the results of the randomized evaluation. Since those results will not be available until August 2017 at the earliest, this effectively rules out dramatic scale-up in year 2. The evaluation was designed to measure progress over three years, and we feel all stakeholders should be realistic about the learning gains that are possible to achieve in one year, and be patient with the expansion plans. To clarify some misunderstandings we have heard from stakeholders, we want to stress that the evaluation team has not provided any impact results from PSL that would justify expansion at this stage. Hence, we take this opportunity to reintegrate the need to support the Ministry with the evidence"***. Considering that the current pilot of 93 schools and lack of clarity on the cost-effectiveness of the current funding for the pilot, a scaling up to even 200 schools raises serious concerns, including relating to sustainability. It is reported that providers' budgets range from \$50 and \$1,100 per child, in addition to the \$50 per child spent by the government. This is even more critical given the transition with elections in October this year and the reports of declining national revenue to ensure government's ability to manage the PSL - raising again the serious risk of disruption of schools in 2018.

Lastly, it is disconcerting if we must continue on the current path that obliterates dissent and or criticisms simply because it is not in favor of a position the government has taken. It is not only a risk to the Ministry's own efforts at reform but also jeopardizes the current gains. The current PSL process including the selection of providers and dissemination of information has severely lacked the levels of transparency and accountability needed for good governance and sustainable reform. We need a much more inclusive, robust, objective and open dialogue and full participation of civil society. ActionAid's commitment to Liberia is clear as outlined in our current country strategy and in our work across the communities. Our role is to support and ensure that the right to education is protected and recognized - given the critical role education holds in moving Liberia's development forward. We hope this communication will encourage you to allow the independent research team access to schools to conduct their research with the support of the Ministry - in the full spirit of partnership and as an objective display of our mutual commitment to the citizens of Liberia.