

BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIES MUST RESPECT THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND COMPLY WITH UGANDAN GOVERNMENT ORDER TO CLOSE ITS SCHOOLS

JOINT STATEMENT - 7 February 2018

(Kampala, Nairobi, Dakar) Following the decision of the Government of Uganda to close Bridge International Academies in the country, after 18 months of investigation and court battles, civil society organizations call on the US-based company to comply with the Government decision and stop undermining the right to education.

In a press release dated 6 February 2018, the Government of Uganda reiterated that Bridge schools “will not be permitted to open/operate this school year (2018). Bridge International Academies, a for-profit company which operates 63 schools in Uganda, had reopened on Monday, at the beginning of the academic year in the country. This was despite a letter of 29th January from the Government of Uganda warning the company that its schools would not be allowed to operate, and a November 2016 court order authorizing the closure of the schools and that Bridge did not appeal.

The schools are being closed for failing to meet the standards regarding the “safety and security of pupils”, to meet the requirements for licensing and failing to submit full documentation for licensing. This Government decision confirms the long-standing independent analysis of researchers, journalists, UN bodies, the African Union, and civil society organisations that has shown that Bridge Academies operate in violation of fundamental laws protecting children and the right to education in Uganda, as well as in Kenya.

Contrary to Bridge International Academies’ claims, the Government statement makes clear that the company has repeatedly been informed in writing of its lack of compliance in the last months. This includes an April 2017 Parliamentary report and a 1st February 2018 Parliamentary ruling. It also appears that Bridge Academies would have only submitted licensing requests for 42 of its 63 schools, and that these files were in any case incomplete. The situation was clearly enough that in its letter of 29th January, the Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda regretted that Bridge Academies was feeding “false hopes” to parents by not indicating that the Academies would not be allowed to open.

“Access to quality education is a fundamental human right that must be protected by the State. A key part of the core responsibility of the State is the regulation of non-state actors, preventing them from doing harm. In order to protect the right to education, there must be consequences for actors that are not compliant with reasonable regulations. Private companies operating in Africa must be accountable, whether they are local or American,” reacted Teopista Birungi Mayanja, Regional Coordinator of ANCEFA.

“The company has to be accountable to the authorities, the Parliament, and the public they claim to serve,” added Harriet Robina Gimbo, from ActionAid Uganda.

“There is now a large body of independent evidence about the problematic corporate practices of Bridge, related amongst other things to the lack of transparency, the poor labor conditions, and the low educational standards followed by the company in the countries it operates. With the situation in Uganda, Bridge demonstrates a striking lack of accountability and respect for the regulations and standards put in place to protect children,” said Sylvain Aubry of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

The undersigned organizations also firmly denounce the aggressive approach taken by Bridge Academies and its supporters, who make personal attacks using social media against human rights and transparency organizations. They are particularly appalled at Bridge Academies’ use of children to defend the company through protests, even where the company is clearly acting in defiance of the law.

Furthermore, the undersigned organizations call on the Ugandan authorities to continue implementing their obligation to monitor and regulate private schools, including Bridge Academies, in application of UN statements and resolutions. Given the grave and systemic pattern of violation of the law by the company, they also call on all investors in Bridge Academies to immediately discharge their due diligence obligations and responsibilities by making no further financing commitments to Bridge and by using any suspension or termination rights to withhold any planned disbursements and withdraw existing investments in Bridge International Academies where contractually possible. In addition, the organizations call on investors to expand their public sector investments in education in the countries where BIA operates to help them achieve universal, free and high-quality public education.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION, ANCEFA, REACHRIGHTS, THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE for ECONOMIC INITIATIVE AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, ACTIONAID, GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION, ASIA SOUTH PACIFIC ASSOCIATION for BASIC and ADULT EDUCATION



The Global Initiative
for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights



Asia South Pacific Association
for Basic and Adult Education
Learning Beyond Boundaries