

1st March 2018

Bridge Open Letter: Response to Global Initiative for ESCR

To All Concerned

We agree with the signatories of this letter on the need to improve learning for children around the world, especially those in poverty. We are pleased that they acknowledge investors support Bridge because of the need to explore new models and expand access to education. Globally, the primary level 'out of school children' rate has been flat since 2008, and many communities continue to be in desperate need of schools where their children can really learn.

We believe that the Chair of the Education Commission was correct and that this is indeed the 'civil rights movement of our time'. We stand alongside the UN, [the Education Commission](#), The Global Partnership for Education, [DFID](#), [WEF](#) and the [World Bank](#) reports all of which have firmly advocated the use of private sector help in tackling the learning crisis. We remain committed to supporting the achievement of SDG4 in a sustainable and scalable way.

We understand that the work we do disrupts the education status quo in many areas. But as the UK DFID Secretary of State recently said, "business as usual will not deliver the transformational change that is needed." We recognize that Bridge has become a lightning rod in the debate about global education reform.

We are proud that our investors have independently recognized the current and future contribution of Bridge. We think, as do our investors, that effectiveness should be measured on outcomes for children and in the case of education, learning gains. Bridge's learning gains across multiple years and countries have demonstrated what is possible.

It should be noted that most of the reports and evidence collated for this letter (of March 1st 2018) have been [previously rebutted](#). We also note that the 88 signatories are greatly reduced in number from those that previously signed a similar letter last autumn – a reduction of about 50%. We can only conclude the plethora of learning gains released in the last 6 months have gone some way to persuading them of the efficacy of the model.

It is also noteworthy that only one signatory is a Uganda based organisation and only three are Kenya based. This means there are hundreds of Ugandan and Kenyan civil society groups, interested in education, who do not support this letter. Many signatories are from developed economies or areas of the world that Bridge has yet to serve. Nearly all signatories have never stepped foot inside a Bridge school.

The letter coalesces around organisations who openly campaign against education reform and offer ideological objections to reform without offering solutions to a crisis affecting hundreds of millions of children. Their solution appears to be to close schools so there are less places to learn rather than more. The reliability of their assertions are undermined by these starting premises.

To address the issues raised in the letter I am pleased to set the record straight:

The Education Landscape

Bridge was designed to complement the education provision of national governments. We use the local curriculum(s), local teachers and local staff. Much criticism is focused on our basic school structures, similar to many other community structures and indeed public schools, which are designed to keep costs low for parents. They are safe, sturdy and within their walls children are learning to read and write.

They serve communities that are living on under \$2 a day, many parents are casual laborers. They want more for their children than the poverty into which they were born. Bridge gives them an option that they can afford, that is local and that gives them hope. It is true that not every single child living in poverty can go to a Bridge school, even with the multitude of sponsorship opportunities available. However, it is a weak argument that says that if not all children can go, no child should go.

It is also true many of the local public schools are failing. There are not enough of them; children are not learning within them; teachers are not turning up and when they do they are sometimes not literate. Buildings are often in a state of disarray, and there are simply not enough learning materials.

In addition, there are hundreds of millions of children who do not have a place in school at all. There are over a million children in Kenya alone who do not go to school, often because there is no school for them to go to. But, if they do, then they are faced with the barriers to learning outlined above.

Reform is a slow and iterative process. Reform of the public system will take decades unless encouraged by innovative partnerships and examples. We believe, as do our investors, that innovative models which create the opportunity for parents to choose a school and create social change is a good way to achieve overall system reform. In light of all this, any campaign or lobbying that seeks to close down providers; and delights in its success, is unfathomable. Particularly when providers are offering quality scalable solutions here and now.

Bridge understands that there are ideological politics at play focused on the protection of labor and resistance to performance contracts. Politics about whether the private sector has any role at all in the provision of education. Politics about whether parents should have choice. These are big theoretical debates and whilst they rage on it is children in rural communities and urban slums who are being neglected.

These are the children not in schools. These are the children not learning and condemned to the cycle of poverty. The saddest thing of all is that there are providers making good schools available and that there are innovators offering solutions but they are being pushed away by those that would rather debate than take action.

Bridge Schools in Uganda

Bridge started in Uganda in 2015 and runs 63 schools. The recent outcry in Uganda affects 1,300 schools many of whom are in - but have not finished - the licensing process. Bridge only accounts for 63 of these schools. Against this backdrop there are over 700,000 children who do not have a school in Uganda. Many public schools are ram shackled and dilapidated, without literate or present teachers.

The Ugandan Minister for Education has outlined that *'Bridge schools have submitted 42 health inspection reports fully endorsed by districts.. {and} have 42 architectural blueprints and corresponding occupation permits issued by district physical planning committees'*. She acknowledges Bridge Schools have *'licensing applications whose fate has not been communicated to them'*. The Minister has also publicly acknowledged that Bridge was operating in Uganda with Government approval: *"given a provisional license on May 29th 2015 for two years by UIA and following a conversation in Jan 2017 we 'by implication allowed Bridge to operate for 2017'*. Throughout this three-year period, it has been working on the licensing process.

The Minister acknowledges that the testimony against Bridge largely rests on allegations compiled by campaigners who unashamedly refer to global education reform as a GERM which in the case of Bridge, *'must be stamped out'*. Combined with unsolicited submissions and unproven allegations of *'gruesome procedures and unethical practices'*. These testimonies only emphasize that the campaign against Bridge is based on rumor, hearsay and unorthodox testimony. Campaigners, namely identified by the Minister, as Education International (EI) and UNATU (The Ugandan Teachers Union), are putting their interests and those of their membership above the fragile future of Ugandan children.

The Minister acknowledges that the education system requires schools to *'adapt to the specific teaching and learning context rather than be enslaved'*. A context which according to UWEZO has high rates of teacher absenteeism and illiteracy; poor exam results; a shortage of schools and an absence of learner materials. This must be compared alongside recent PLE results released by the Ministry which saw over 93% of Bridge pupils score in Division 1 and 2 compared to 56% nationally and only 44% in the Eastern region, where Bridge sat the exams.

The Minister has made clear that decisions at the Ministry are guided by *'policies, facts and for the good of the children.'* Considering this, decisions should not in good faith be based on the testimony of anti-reform campaigners; or nameless allegations.

Prior to the Minister for Education's intervention the conversation about the future of the 1,300 unlicensed schools was being lead by the Permanent Secretary for Education at the Ministry of Education. The reasons that he gave for not licensing Bridge largely rested on the fact that the schools did not qualify for 'international' status. Bridge schools are community schools so this would not seem to be relevant. The Permanent Secretary also rowed back on public promises to the 1,3000 schools that 'those in the middle of the licensing process would not be closed'.

Uganda, benefits hugely from international investment and support. It is necessary that those coming into the country as partners adhere to the guidelines, rules and processes as laid out in Ugandan law. However, if those processes, guidelines and laws are subverted by well-funded campaigning that prioritizes unsubstantiated hearsay and rumor it will ultimately be Uganda and its children who suffer.

Bridge Academies in Kenya

A ruling was delivered on an injunction for defamation being sought by Bridge against the Kenyan National Union of Teachers (KNUT) former Secretary General and nominated NASA Member of Parliament (MP), Wilson Sossion.

Following the application, Wilson Sossion was deregistered as TSC teacher which nullified him as a KNUT member or official. He was asked to resign as General Secretary of KNUT.

As in Uganda, campaigners against education reform are active and effective. EI and their campaign against the GERM is in full flow. Wilson Sossion is employed by EI as their African Chapter Head.

Bridge is a strong advocate of free speech and the children in its classrooms are learning to be opinionated, confident individuals. Bridge is happy to engage in robust debate about education, SDG4, and the model of provision it offers. But, firmly believes that those debates should be based on facts and evidence and not on ideological arguments. No schools have been closed in Kenya and Bridge continues to work closely with the Ministry on all aspects of the licensing process.

There are two million children in so called 'informal schools' in Kenya that are unlicensed. The Kenyan Government began creating guidelines - APBET - to provide these schools with a path to licensing in 2009 and they were finally published in 2016. Many of these schools are in the process but due to a disconnect

between local and national Government, the implementation of APBET has yet to be effective. Even with APBET there are still over a million Kenyan children without schools.

Despite all this Bridge is delivering significant learning gains. In Kenya, where Bridge began, almost 10,000 children have now graduated from our primary schools having sat the national exams over three consecutive years. Each year, their performance far exceeds that of the Kenyan national average; in 2017 by 10 percentage points. It's not just in Kenya that the approach is delivering academic success. In Uganda, our first cohort of children have just sat the national primary leaving exam (PLE), 100 percent passed. Over 93 percent achieved scores in Division 1 or 2 compared to 56 percent nationally, a statistic that drops to just 44 percent in the Eastern district of the country, where Bridge pupils sat the exam. In Liberia, Partnerships Schools for Liberia (PSL), where Bridge is a partner, an independent RCT published last autumn revealed a 60 percent increase in learning in the program overall. In Bridge PSL student learning was doubled, in just nine months. In Liberia all teachers in Bridge schools are employed by the government. The suggestion that these consistent learning gains - across multiple years and countries - are the result of anything other than an effective and innovative model of education is absurd.

Bridge takes great pride in the work that it undertakes to support and empower teachers. We know that our learning gains are the result of their hard work and commitment. Each country has different regulations and guidelines around the employment of teachers. Bridge adheres to those guidelines in each and every country. Teachers do not have to work at Bridge, they choose to work at Bridge because of the support; technological innovation and consistent paychecks. We understand that the positive and supportive relationship that Bridge has with its teachers is challenging for those that seek to protect labour and resist performance contracts.

Bridge takes the safety of the children in its schools very seriously and has policies in place to ensure their safety. As with all schools, Bridge reports un-identified strangers found on school premises.

We look forward to a future when all public schools are truly great and truly free, and there are enough of them for every child to attend. We will strive to help achieve that shared vision. We will do so by offering pragmatic and practical solutions.

Bridge is committed to an ethics of responsibility – to act given the circumstances of countries and their education systems today; given the constraints of families today, and with a steadfast belief in the dignity and possibility of every human being. To act with an ethics of responsibility requires us to be pragmatic, design-driven, empathetic to others' conditions and committed to working together to find solutions. To advocate only for what "should" be in an ideal world does not help us get there. We believe that by offering real solutions that are delivering meaningful change, we can help make the ideal possible.

We believe, with many others, that the solutions to SDG4 lies in partnership and collaboration. We look forward to the continuing work with partners, social impact investors and others who are striving towards ensuring that every child has the potential to transform the circumstances into which they are born.

Dr. Shannon May

Co-Founder Bridge International Academies