

An open letter to the World Bank and its donors

We, the undersigned, urge you to **ensure that development aid for education is used to support the *public provision of free, quality education that benefits all*** without discrimination of any kind, such as discrimination based on socio-economic disadvantage, caste, gender identity, race or disability.

Education is a human right and an essential part of the global effort to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals. When education is free, public and good quality, it eradicates poverty, decreases economic and gender inequality, builds active citizens, protects communities and the environment, and forges inclusive and stable societies. Remarkable progress in education has been made over the last twenty years in large part due to the expansion of free public education. However, many countries have struggled to mobilize sufficient financing for inclusive public education systems of good quality. Unacceptable gaps therefore remain: children in conflict and post-conflict areas, girls, children with disabilities, minorities, refugees, LGBTI+ individuals, and the poorest still lag far behind the most privileged in access to and completion of education, and in learning achievement.

Instead of responding with greater investments in public education through progressive taxation, some countries have been experimenting with allowing commercial or other private education providers to expand, believing that this is a faster, cheaper route to providing quality education. However low-fee private schools are not equally accessed by girls or the poorest children.ⁱ They risk excluding learners with special needs including previously out-of-school children. Studies find that the public funding of private schooling deepens inequalities in education while failing to consistently produce better learning outcomes.ⁱⁱ In particular, for-profit and commercial schools often rely on poorly qualified and poorly-paid teachers to save costs; have poor transparency and accountability, and side-step important education laws and regulations, undermining a country's ability to ensure that its educational standards apply equally for all.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some donors are now actively using public aid money to drive the commercialisation of education in lower income countries, including the World Bank Group. While most of its funding goes to support public education provision, the World Bank is also funding some market-oriented public private partnerships (PPPs) through its International Development Association (IDA), and actively advising countries to pursue PPPs and adopt reforms that reduce regulations and incentivise the growth of private 'education markets'.^{iv} It has also increased its direct support to commercial private education providers through the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – including fee-charging, for-profit school chains,^v which clearly undermine state obligations as defined in international human rights law.

Meanwhile, the European Parliament and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the biggest multilateral fund for education, have both taken strong positions against directing their own aid funding to support commercial or for-profit education provision. The UN Human Rights Council, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and various UN Treaty Bodies have recognised the obligation to progressively secure free, public – not commercialised – education in fulfilling the right to education.^{vi} These positions uphold the principle that education is a right, not a market commodity. Investing in free and inclusive public education of good quality is the best way to ensure fulfilment of SDG 4.

Donors have an important voice in how financial contributions to the World Bank Group are spent, during the ongoing IDA19 replenishment process, as well as in other education financing spaces. **We call on all donors and the World Bank Group itself to take a clear and principled position in support of free, publicly provided education and against the use of development aid to fund for-profit or commercial education.**

When you fund education with public aid money, make sure it supports free, quality public education!