

Roundtable discussion on the implementation of the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP) and lessons for the region

Concept Note

Background

International human rights law requires States to realise the right to education for all by providing inclusive, free, quality, public education. This obligation is grounded in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and is elaborated upon in a number of international and regional treaties (i.e. UNESCO CADE, ICESCR, UNCRC, ACHPR, IACHR, ECHR), as well as in many national constitutions and legislation. In addition to these legal obligations, governments have made political commitments towards providing education for all, such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which reinforces States' commitments to 'ensure inclusive and equitable education, including by requiring that all boys and girls complete 12 years of free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.'

The [Abidjan Principles](#) on the right to education clarify States' obligations in the context of private involvement in education. Accordingly, States have an obligation to prioritise the financing of public education (Overarching Principle 2 and Guiding Principle 34). The resources to support the development of quality public education can be sourced, to the 'maximum available' (Guiding Principle 15), through for instance fair and progressive taxation, elimination of illicit financial flows and corruption; proper debt management and restructuring; and international assistance and cooperation (Guiding Principle 16). Overarching Principle 5 emphasises that States must prioritise funding towards the provision of public education; there is no obligation to fund private institutions. States may fund private institutions but only those that comply with applicable human rights law and standards and strictly observe all substantive, procedural, and operational requirements set by the State for receiving such funding (Guiding Principle 64, 65-69). The Abidjan Principles are also clear on institutions that cannot receive any funding from the State. These include institutions that violate the rights to equality and non-discrimination, are commercial, do not meet minimum standards or those that charges fees that significantly undermine access to education (Guiding Principle 73).

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have increasingly been promoted by donor governments and financial institutions as the solution to the shortfall in financing needed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 on education, despite [concerns about their overwhelmingly negative impacts, raised repeatedly by civil society organisations](#). Such negative impacts include their high cost for the public purse and their failure to deliver for the public interest; higher risk for the state than for the non-state/private actors involved; lack of transparency and/or failure to consult with affected communities thus undermining democratic accountability; and higher negative impact on the marginalised, contributing to an increase in the divide between rich and poor, and undermining equality and fundamental rights.

In recent years, such large-scale PPPs have been introduced to the education sectors of Liberia, Ghana and most recently Sierra Leone, with the goal to improve the quality of education in these countries' low performing and under-funded public school systems.

In Liberia, starting from the 2016/2017 school year, the Partnership School for Liberia (PSL) program, later rebranded as the Liberia Educational Advancement Program (LEAP), was introduced by the Ministry of Education as an innovative approach to revive the education system through outsourcing the management of public primary schools. The introduction of the program received intense criticism from a diversity of stakeholders. Their concerns related to the poor human rights record of the prime provider of the program, Bridge International Academies (BIA); the lack of transparency regarding the decision-making around the introduction of the program; the overall sustainability of the program; as well as its implications on the right to education in the country.

These initial concerns were later validated in a [monitoring report](#) by the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE) and ActionAid in 2017, as well as highlighted in media reports and publications. The impacts of the program were also evaluated in its first and third year by an independent academic [study](#) published by the Centre for Global Development (CGD). However, since then, no detailed information has been provided on the labor, transparency, accountability, sustainability and other concerns related to the program. To address this gap, COTAE, with the support of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR), has conducted a new research piece on the implementation of LEAP covering the period between 2018 through early 2022. It reveals key findings and informed recommendations on the program's overall impact and implications for the right to education including on the transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness of LEAP-related decisions reached and implemented by the Ministry of Education and the Government of Liberia; Bridge International Academies' working relationship with stakeholders and compliance with labor standards and relevant Liberian laws; as well as the overall sustainability of the program.

In Ghana, the Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project ([GALOP](#)) was launched in 2020, under the Ghana Education Outcomes Funding Programme (EOF). It is a five-year project with the objective to improve the quality of low performing basic education schools and strengthen education sector accountability in Ghana. GALOP is focused on the 10,000 lowest performing Basic Schools (Kindergarten, Primary and Junior High Schools) and all 28 special schools. The project is jointly funded by the World Bank, the former Department for International Development (DFID) now Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Its operations involve social investors and service providers. The service providers implement activities to strengthen support for schools and out-of-school children through education outcomes funding. In this model, social investors provide the upfront capital for non-government delivery partners (service providers) to work with schools to achieve contractual outcomes. Once contractual outcomes are achieved and targets are met, the government pays the agreed amounts. The primary outcomes are learning gains in foundational literacy and numeracy, and placement and retention of out-of-school children in formal schools. [The project has been criticised](#) for its opaque management and lack of transparency, pointing out that there has been no published report on implementation progress, procurement, and access to information requests have been denied by the Ministry of Education, making it difficult for CSOs to demand accountability in its implementation.

In Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Education Innovation Challenge ([SLEIC](#)) was launched in September

2022, with the goal to improve learning outcomes and competency of about 134,000 children across 325 public schools across the country. It is a PPP that uses a results-based financing model and is introduced by the Education Outcomes Fund in partnership with the Government of Sierra Leone, non-state actors and social investors. The program will be delivered by five partners: EducAid, Street Child, Rising Academies, Save the Children UK and National Youth Awareness Forum. As an outcomes-based program, the five providers' interventions will be monitored and assessed for effectiveness, with payments made only for interventions that demonstrably improve the literacy and numeracy of children, providing the evidence-base for the Government's decisions on scaling up/expansion of the program. Even before the start of the program, concerns arise regarding its transparency as well as its financing being reliant on results-based donor-support, rather than holistic and complete public schooling, raising sustainability and accountability issues.

Objective

To foster dialogue on the impacts of PPP interventions in the education sector in the West African region, *the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR)* in partnership with *the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE)* proposes to organise an online discussion.

The objective of this roundtable discussion is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to explore the findings of the research conducted by COTAE with the support of GI-ESCR on the implementation of LEAP in Liberia and its impacts on the right to education and the public education system.* On the other hand, it aims to provide a platform for constructive dialogue on what the specific lessons learnt from LEAP entail regarding the design and implementation of other PPP programs in the West African region, including in Sierra Leone and Ghana.

Panel and speakers

The roundtable discussion will be held on **10 November 2022** and will be a 90-minute on-line event organised by GI-ESCR. It will include the following panel:

1. **Aya Douabou**, *West Africa Program Officer at GI-ESCR* and/or **Ashina Mtsumi**, *Program Officer on Public Services and Africa Representative at GI-ESCR (moderators)*: introducing the topic and the Abidjan Principles' requirements regarding PPPs to ensure they do not undermine the right to education (15 min)
2. **Anderson Miamen (panellist)**, *National Coordinator of the Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE), Liberia*: introducing the key findings and recommendation of COTAE's updated research on LEAP (15 min)
3. **Justin Sandefur (panellist)**, *Co-Director of Education Policy and Senior Fellow, Centre for Global Development (CGD), author of "Beyond Short-term Learning Gains: The Impact of Outsourcing Schools in Liberia after Three Years"*: providing remarks on the lessons learnt from the evaluation of LEAP (15 min)
4. **Veronica Dzeagu (panellist)**, *Education Policy Analyst, Former National Coordinator of Education Coalition of Ghana*, providing an overview of GALOP and the response to it from civil society (15 min)
5. **Q&A session** (25 min)
6. **Conclusion** by **Aya Douabou**, *West Africa Program Officer at GI-ESCR* and/or **Ashina Mtsumi**, *Program Officer on Public Services and Africa Representative at GI-ESCR* (5 min)

Timeline

- **September 2022:** send out invitations to proposed panellists and confirm their attendance
- **October 2022:** Set-up and prepare zoom link and invite for webinar; promote event
- **10 November 2022:** hold event at 2 pm GMT
- **End January 2023:** publish the report and disseminate it

**This roundtable is the occasion to discuss the findings of the research report done by COTAE, Liberia, with the support of GI-ESCR, which will be published and disseminated in January 2023.*