

24th April 2020

To: **The Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP**, Secretary of State for International Development
Baroness Sugg CBE, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Girls' Education

COVID-19 and Non-state Education

Dear Secretary of State, Minister

I hope you are both well in these difficult times. I am the Founding Director of a UK-based non-profit organisation called [Global Schools Forum](#) (GSF). GSF aims to strengthen the education sector by working with non-state organisations in developing countries who are serving children from low-income backgrounds. Our 49 members span 33 countries and are collectively running or supporting 17,000 schools which provide education to nearly 2.5 million children. Our members are mix of school operators and providers of support services such as teacher training and access to finance. They are a mix of for-profit and not-for-profit organisations; both fee-charging and non-fee-charging.

In recent years, non-state engagement in education — which includes a vibrant mix of non-profit, for-profit and faith-based organizations — has grown significantly around the world. According to government-reported data collected by UNESCO, the share of enrolment in private institutions rose between 1990 and 2018 from 23% to 42% in pre-primary education, 9% to 18% in primary education and 19% to 26% in secondary education. Survey data show even higher levels of enrolment.

In line with human rights law and international agreements, GSF believes that governments should be the guarantors, but not necessarily the sole providers, of education. We work on the basis not that private is better than public, but that the non-state sector can complement and support government provision of basic education — when invited to do so — and also bring new ideas, funding and energy to the sector. We believe governments should determine the best way to provide education — whether public, private or a combination of both — as long as this complies with human rights law and can be effectively regulated to deliver goals of learning and equity, with a particular focus on girls.

Some of our members are small, but many are involved in very large-scale responses to the learning crisis, including:

- a. debt and technical assistance providers working through banks and micro-finance institutions in Africa and Asia, to support informal single proprietor low fee private schools¹ with access to capital, basic business training and school improvement services;
- b. network operators such as BRAC in Bangladesh and The Citizen's Foundation (TCF) in Pakistan² – both DFID partners – serving hundreds of thousands of students;
- c. service providers operating within Public Private Partnerships, providing schooling free at the point of use with government subsidy to operators or through vouchers to parents.

I am writing to you today to highlight the specific risks faced by the non-state education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. GSF and our members have the following concerns:

- Education systems worldwide face a threat without historical precedent, with school closures affecting over 90% of the world's student population.
- Governments, national and international partners are right to prioritise government schools during this difficult time; this is where the majority of children are educated.
- But we should not forget that 20-30% of children globally are educated outside of government schools, and that this sector increasingly caters for low-income communities; in India, just under half

¹ Research by [Capital Plus Exchange](#) in seven Africa cities shows that more than 40% of private school owners are women, as are the vast majority of teachers, and that 50% of the student population are girls.

² TCF is also the largest private sector employer of women in Pakistan.

of children are educated in privately-managed schools, with one third coming from the poorest 40% of the population³.

- These schools and students face distinct threats during the COVID-19 pandemic, above and beyond those faced by government schools: (i) lost revenue from school fees, (ii) no subsidy from Ministries of Education (unlike government schools whose teachers will continue to be paid), (iii) probable ineligibility for small business subsidies such as tax exemptions made available by governments to small businesses in the broader economy, (iv) reduced access to capital from financial institutions squeezed by COVID-19 related economic shocks, (v) significantly weaker prospects of medium-term fee revenue given major contractions in household income.
- Without support, segments of the non-state education sector face collapse. The consequences of this collapse would be deep, broad and enduring; not only for the 20-30% of children educated in the non-state sector, but also for state systems having to absorb additional students.

The UK government has shown itself to be bold and innovative in recent years in supporting the non-state education sector in developing countries. We urge you at this time to consider the non-state education sector – almost no one else in the international community is – as DFID and HMG provides leadership to a global education response to COVID-19. We see a range of possible components to a UK-led response, including working through: bilateral country programmes; multilateral funding and shareholding; CDC investments; accountable grants to NGOs involved in service delivery.

In particular, we see the informal low fee private sector – that constitutes the majority of non-state provision – as the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are individually owned community schools, most of which are not established as businesses⁴. We particularly recommend that DFID and others expand access to debt financing for these schools via financial institutions, and to technical assistance in three areas: child protection; continuity of learning; business continuity. DFID and others have funding instruments⁵ and technical partners⁶ to do so immediately. We believe that with UK leadership, the US government and Foundation funders could provide additional coordinated support.

Finally, we have been inspired by the response of our members and the broader non-state education sector to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The non-state sector is working with governments and communities around the world to support national education and health responses. Whether it is creating and broadcasting lessons over the radio for public consumption, as operators like [Rising Academies](#) are doing as part of the government response in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Gambia; or making schools available as quarantine centres, as the [National Independent Schools Alliance](#) has done on behalf of its more than 55,000 ‘budget private school’ members in India.

I would of course be more than happy to discuss these issues at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

Aashti Zaidi Hai, Director, Global Schools Forum

³ Viewed as a single system, the Indian non-state education sector is the third largest education system in the world after the Chinese and Indian public systems.

⁴ Over 40% of 1,300 African school owners interviewed by [Capital Plus Exchange](#) did not have bank accounts.

⁵ E.g. the Regional Education Finance Fund for Africa (REFFA).

⁶ Including GSF members such as Opportunity Edufinance, Capital Plus Exchange, Kashf Foundation.