

HOW BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL'S TECH-DRIVEN FOR-PROFIT SCHOOLS IN AFRICA MAY REINFORCE GLOBAL POWER INEQUALITIES

□ Aktualisiert am 19. Jun. 2018

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□ This article is part of our series [Congruence and Competition of Norms and Values in the Context of Global Digitalization](#).

by Maria Pawelec

Work of the author is supported by the Institutional Strategy of the University of Tübingen (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, ZUK 63)

Bridge International is a for-profit chain of private (pre-)primary schools employing technology to allegedly provide “[high-quality, affordable education](#)” in the Global South. Like many other actors, Bridge (c)aims to bridge the global digital divide and to use information and communication technologies to realize development (“ICT4D”), in particular in sub-Saharan Africa. But are such projects really allowing the region to “catch up” with the rest of the world and strengthen [its weak global standing](#)? Not necessarily. Many projects’ implementation mirrors existing global power inequalities and may even reinforce them.¹ Moreover, the technologies employed themselves augment these imbalances. The present contribution illustrates this, using Bridge as a case study. Bridge was chosen as a case study for two reasons: firstly, this ICT4D project’s scale and ambition are vast. It has rapidly expanded to [operate over \(pre-\)primary 520 schools](#) in Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, and India, making it the largest such chain in the world.² In Liberia, it is [partnering with the government](#) as one of several private organisations taking over public primary education. Bridge [plans to school 10 million children](#) by 2026.

Secondly, Bridge is backed with over US \$100m capital by a diverse and powerful network of international investors including the World Bank, the British and US-American governments, philanthropic foundations, and individuals such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Many of these actors are central to global development and ICT4D efforts, “blurring” the line between philanthropy and business³ and making Bridge a particularly relevant case to study.

A controversial model

Bridge uses technology and data to reduce costs, deliver standardized lessons and monitor schools' administration. Schools are run by an "Academy Manager" using an internet-enabled smartphone to conduct administrative tasks and download detailed lesson scripts from Bridge headquarters. Additionally, teacher tablets are used for lesson delivery and data-based monitoring (see below). They allow Bridge to employ unqualified teachers, thus reducing costs, to adapt lessons plans, increase administrative efficiency, and reduce teacher absenteeism.⁴

Bridge's model has been heralded as an innovative solution to the [crisis of education in Africa](#). However, it has also sparked great controversy worldwide.⁵ While many existing points of criticism warrant further investigation, this contribution will focus on the following question: How is Bridge an example of the way global power structures become manifest in ICT4D initiatives and are potentially even reinforced by them? The answer is three-fold: Bridge's approach and the technology employed threaten to a) violate state sovereignty, b) constrain individuals' autonomy and marginalize local culture, and c) infringe upon vulnerable populations' privacy.

Violating African States' Sovereignty

The ongoing controversy over Bridge's operations in Uganda⁶ illustrates the first point. [According to Bridge](#), it abided by all national regulations and laws when establishing its 63 Ugandan academies in 2015-2016. In contrast, Ugandan authorities claim Bridge opened its first academy and subsequently [expanded operations without official permission](#). Also, Bridge is [allegedly not adhering to the national curriculum or school infrastructure standards, is employing unqualified teachers, and has not applied for national licensing](#).⁷ Consequently, the Ugandan authorities have repeatedly ordered Bridge to close down its schools, most recently [in 2018](#) (after similar demands in [2016](#) and [2017](#)).⁸

Bridge protested the initial decision in 2016 and took the case to Uganda's High Court. However, the court ruled in favour of the Ugandan authorities and [found that Bridge was "operating its academies in contravention of the law"](#). Bridge has [challenged the ruling](#) and unsuccessfully [continues to make efforts towards licensing its schools](#). It also continues to operate in Uganda, ignoring the authorities' orders. Bridge is thus knowingly violating Uganda's national sovereignty.⁹

This infringement is not tech-specific. However, Bridge's tech-driven approach arguably granted it the financial and political backing of a large coalition of international development actors and philanthropists active in ICT4D, enabling it to defy an African state's sovereignty. This doubtlessly counteracts the intentions of well-meaning investors. However, the author is not aware of any investor withdrawing her support following the dispute – [not even the British government](#), which has been [criticized for supporting Bridge](#).

Constraining Autonomy and Marginalizing Local Culture

The *technology* employed by Bridge *itself* may also reinforce global inequalities and injustices. In particular, Bridge's teacher tablets are a major point of contention. These tablets display the lesson

scripts downloaded daily by the Academy Manager. The scripts are extremely detailed and even tell teachers when to wipe the blackboard or pause. Teachers are required to follow them **word-for-word**. Deviations are penalized and can even lead to dismissals.¹⁰ Teacher tablets also monitor the exact amount of time spent on each task, transferring this data to headquarters.¹¹

Bridge's scripted teaching approach has been criticized for reducing teacher-pupil interaction and **rendering learning and pedagogy automatized, mechanical and robotic**.¹² Also, some scripts may lack quality or be irrelevant.¹³ Focusing on global power relations, another aspect comes to the fore: Rigid scripts and control mechanisms implemented through technology constrain the autonomy of teachers and pupils in the Global South. Teachers are reduced to mere "facilitators" reading out lessons developed elsewhere.¹⁴ Their creativity is inhibited, which is in itself reprehensible, and may also impede learning.¹⁵ The actual "role of the teacher [is] performed through the operations of a calculative device".¹⁶ The technology "takes on new and concerning measures of social control" and power; technology determines "what is taught [and what not], how it is taught, and how it is learned".¹⁷

This also contradicts the need to adapt lessons and content to learners' diverse needs and cultural and social environments. In fact, many learners are not acculturated to the style of learning Bridge technology implements.¹⁸ Additionally, Bridge **claims to adapt its centrally developed lesson plans** to national curricula in cooperation with the respective education ministries, and there are indications that it has spent time and resources doing so, in particular **in Liberia**. Notwithstanding, most observers believe that Bridge's lesson content is culturally inappropriate and does not conform to national curricula (e.g. **UNESCO's Education For All initiative**, Education International, the Ugandan and Kenyan Education Ministries, and certain academic observers).¹⁹ This has been confirmed in court for Uganda (see above) and reinforces the impression that Bridge is defying African states' sovereignty. Moreover, it also indicates that it is disrespecting and marginalizing local cultures in the Global South – a critique commonly voiced against ICT4D projects.²⁰

Breaching Vulnerable Populations' Privacy

Bridge technology also endangers the privacy of poor people in the Global South. Through its smartphones and teacher tablets, Bridge "collects and mines an enormous amount of data in real time" which is then processed at Bridge headquarters.²¹ This includes information on teacher and pupil attendance and location, pupil comprehension, and families' fee payment track records. On its website, Bridge used to boast that it had "more information on people living on less than \$2 a day per person than any other organization in the world".²² As mentioned, Bridge regards this data as key to administrative streamlining, higher accountability, and improved learning.

However, data include highly sensitive personal and financial information which may not only be used to improve efficiency and learning. Even reports uncritical of Bridge disclose that they are used to survey and discipline teachers.²³ Even more worryingly, a **leaked Bridge investment prospectus**

advertises that Bridge stores data on the “payment history for every pupil [...] 3 million monthly transactions including timeliness and completeness, [i.e.] enough data and insight to create a credit-scoring system, [and] 50 million pupil attendance records”. It reveals that Bridge **plans to sell the data for commercial purposes** to companies creating new financial services and low-cost health insurances for the “bottom of the pyramid”.²⁴ As Bridge is not making this information public, most teachers, pupils and parents are in all likelihood unaware of it. This “rais[es] **fundamental concerns about data privacy, pupils and families’ consent**”. It is particularly worrying as Bridge is exploiting its position of power vis-à-vis poor citizens in the Global South to violate their privacy.

Reinforcing Global Power Inequalities

Bridge is thus a highly ambitious ICT4D project that may contribute to solving the education crisis in the Global South. At the same time, its operations and technologies reinforce existing global power inequalities and injustices. This is mirrored in Bridge’s discourse, which is “power-laden and Western-biased”: Bridge has repeatedly shown a low regard for national education initiatives and implied that its approach is qualitatively superior to any of them.²⁵ Its **leaked investment prospectus illustrates this**: Therein, Bridge depreciatingly calls local private schools “a giant cottage industry” consisting of thousands of small, sole-proprietorship “moms and pops”, and a few “localized” companies. It then goes on to imply that this market needs to be “attacked [...] with an aggressive, technology-leveraged, data-driven [...] approach”.

Bridge thus serves as an example of the ethical ambivalence of internationally backed digitalisation projects in the Global South. Thereby, the present case study indicates the need to focus more on the technologies employed themselves when assessing such projects in the future.



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1. This is a long-standing criticism of ICT4D projects, see e.g. Alden, C. 2003, "Let Them Eat Cyberspace: Africa, the G8 and the digital divide," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 32/3: pp. 457–476; Alzouma, G. 2005, "Myths of digital technology in Africa: Leapfrogging development?," *Global Media and Communication* 1/3: pp. 339–356; Leye, V. 2009, "Information and Communication Technologies for Development: A Critical Perspective," *Global Governance* 15: pp. 29–36; Wade, R.H. 2002, "Bridging the Digital Divide: New Route to Development or New Form of Dependency?," *Global Governance* 8: pp. 443–466.
2. Bridge 2016, *Response to: Bridge vs. Reality*, accessed February 27, 2018, p. 1.
3. Riep, C.B. and Machacek, M. 2016, *Schooling the Poor Profitably: The Innovations and Deprivations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda*, Education International, accessed February 27, 2018, p. 16.
4. Bridge 2016: p. 9; Kwauk, C. and Perlman Robinson, J. 2016, *Bridge International Academies: Delivering Quality Education at a Low Cost in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda*, Center for Universal Education at Brookings, accessed November 29, 2016, p. 22.
5. The long list of criticism includes doubts about **Bridge’s ability to improve learning outcomes**,

objections to it “experimenting on African schoolchildren”, and condemnations of its poor infrastructure, use of unqualified teachers and exploitative working conditions (Aubry, S. 2017, *The Bridge International Controversy: Bridge Schools ‘Undermine the Rule of Law, Transparency and Fundamental Rights’* Next Billion Blog, accessed February 27, 2018; EI/KNUT 2016, *Bridge vs. Reality: A study of Bridge International Academies’ for-profit schooling in Kenya*. A report by Education International and Kenya National Union of Teachers, pp. 26–32; Riep/Machacek 2016: p. 20; Riep, C.B. 2017, "Making Markets for Low-Cost Schooling: The Devices and Investments Behind Bridge International Academies," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 15/3: p. 352). Bridge has also been criticised for privatizing a core moral and political responsibility of the state, education (see e.g. the OHCHR), for exploiting the poor financially (Aubry 2017; Kwauk/Perlman Robinson 2016: p. 18), but also for being **commercially unsustainable**.

6. Bridge’s operations in Kenya are also controversial. Bridge has been criticized for disregarding local teacher training standards, the national curriculum, and school registration requirements (EI/KNUT 2016: pp. 18, 55).
7. See also Riep/Machacek 2016: p. 8.
8. In this context, it is worth noting that some observers doubt whether the government justifiably targeted Bridge. Many parents have **protested Bridge’s planned closure** and praise its allegedly low fees and high quality. Also, according to some observers, the conflict with the Ugandan Ministry of Education is not only based on the supposed state of Bridge’s schools, but also on **vested interests of the Ugandan National Teachers’ Union** and of Ministry officials who fear **competition to state schools** or **private schools they personally own**.
9. See also Riep/Machacek 2016: p. 8.
10. EI/KNUT 2016: p. 30.
11. Kwauk/Perlman Robinson 2016: p. 11.
12. See also Aubry 2017.
13. EI/KNUT 2016: pp. 35–36.
14. Kwauk/Perlman Robinson 2016: p. 21.
15. Riep/Machacek 2016: p. 28.
16. Riep 2017: p. 357.
17. Riep/Machacek 2016: pp. 27, 31.
18. Ibid.: p. 27.
19. See EI/KNUT 2016: p. 34; Riep/Machacek 2016: pp. 8, 29–31.
20. See e.g. Alzouma 2005: pp. 344–345.
21. Kwauk/Perlman Robinson 2016: p. 15.
22. In Riep 2017: p. 355.
23. Kwauk/Perlman Robinson 2016: p. 21.
24. See also Aubry 2017.
25. Riep/Machacek 2016: p. 30.

Tags: Bridge International Global South ICT4D schools

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