

INFORMATION BRIEF



Supporting Girls' Education and Empowerment in DRC: Lessons Learnt

Summary

Robust and effective governance is key to deliver quality education that is accessible to all. In 2021, ACCELERE! 2 launched preparatory analysis for a Girls' Education Pilot of the barriers faced by girls to access quality education and complete their education. ACCELERE! 2's research found that the cost of education, physical and psychological violence inflicted on girls, as well as a lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health were key barriers to access and retention.

Analysis of previous projects have highlighted a range of other issues and lessons to consider when working to improve gender equality. In particular, they show the need to work towards gender equality across systems instead of focusing solely on girls; properly disseminate existing resources; and build real ownership of new approaches amongst local communities, rather than imposing them. There is also a need to develop activities that can be sustained within existing resource constraints and ensure that quality control mechanisms are applied at all stages.

ACCELERE! 2 is jointly funded by UK aid and USAID to support the Government of DRC to better deliver universal primary education and to drive the governance improvements which are vital to this achieving these transformations.

The rate of girls' enrolment in primary and secondary in urban Kinshasa is good.

The retention rate for boys is lower in a few places because boys are attracted by small jobs or delinquent bands.

However, girls report having a negative experience of school, with few functioning latrines and less classroom furniture for girls than boys (leaving them often sitting on the floor for lessons).

Psychological and sexual violence against girls are barriers too. Incidents of violence can happen on the way to school and also at schools in poorer urban settings.

There is a lack of knowledge around sexual and reproductive health.

Pregnant girls have to leave school because of socio-cultural norms.

The level of household income has a big effect on school retention levels, especially in secondary, because of school fees.

Opportunity choices for families.

Quality of learning: Overcrowding in classrooms is a bigger issue for girls than boys.

Teachers lack of gender-sensitive pedagogy and reinforce gendered social norms that give more space to boys.

What have we learnt from past projects?

Focusing more broadly on gender equality and not just girls

All projects explicitly targeting girls in their activities recognised that this was a mistake, partly because the gender distinction was not culturally accepted in DRC and could actually lead to increased danger for girls (getting too much attention, being exposed to robbery, bullying, etc). Interventions targeting gender equality and improvement of the school experience for boys and girls are well accepted by communities.

Under the Vas-y-Fille! Project, school grants were given to girls to pay their school fees and make sure that they would not drop out of school. While the approach made sense in provinces where girls' retention rate was much lower than boys, it quickly had to be reviewed because some girls were suffering from bullying and discrimination as a result of receiving the grants. Also, mothers complained that their daughters should not receive something that was not also given to their sons.

Proper use and dissemination of resources

Previous projects focusing on adolescence, gender and girls' education have produced good-quality tools (gender-based pedagogy, sexual and reproductive health, etc). However, these tools were often not centralised, fully 'owned' by the Ministry or effectively disseminated. This lack of coordination and leadership led to waste of resources. Further, potentially available tools were not disseminated to all schools in the DRC and were instead only available to schools targeted by each project.

There is a whole set of finalised and approved tools on gender-sensitive pedagogy (teacher training modules, teachers' guide and students' booklet). These were developed and approved in 2015 by the MoE with funding from an EU/UNICEF project. Nonetheless, they were not disseminated beyond schools in the programme's two targeted provinces.

Promoting ownership of new approaches instead of imposing them

In the field, school and administrative offices, actors demonstrate a good understanding of approaches promoted by the programme (such as those covering women's empowerment and positive discipline). However, they often felt that these had been imposed on them by donors from the Global North and lacked ownership of them. This is why these approaches that differed from DRC's rooted cultural and social norms, quickly disappeared at the end of the project.

Education partners often focus on increasing women's participation in decision-making processes to change behaviours and beliefs regarding the role of women in society.

It is clear that actors at a local level make sure there are enough women attending meetings and asking questions during workshops to satisfy education partners. However, there is little real attempt to let women have more voice in the public sphere. Whilst imposing ideas from 'outside' is likely to lead to short-term change, co-designing an approach with local actors, making sure they agree with it, and own what is being proposed, might lead to more sustainable changes.

Taking a sustainable approach to activities by only using existing resources for activities



In such a financially constrained environment, schools (especially primary schools, which do not collect fees) and communities have no capacity to bring any kind of financial contribution to keep activities going. Even more problematic, trying to sustain activities that require financial support might lead to the reappearance of illegal school fees. The only sustainable approach is to plan and deliver activities using existing resources only.

Past projects like Bien Grandir or EAGLE have created boys' and girls' clubs, focusing on sexual and reproductive health, life skills or girls' empowerment. Projects tried to encourage local actors to sustain these clubs after their closure. The resources needed were extremely modest, nothing more than some money for drinks or cookies during the meetings. However, in all the schools visited, staff said they could not dedicate even a few dollars to this, and the clubs had stopped right after the end of project support.

Following high-quality standards



Quality control mechanisms are necessary to make sure content produced with aid funding is ethically appropriate and of a good standard.

In 2020, the MoE developed and formally approved school manuals for all the grades in primary and secondary for the Education à la Vie subject – a subject that covers sexual and reproductive health, puberty, violence at school, and similar subjects. These manuals have been funded by several education partners, donors, and international NGOs. However, they contained false or problematic information that contradicts the values and commitments of the organisations who funded them and DRC laws and signed treaties on issues such as homosexuality and violence against women.

A strict quality control process should be put in place for any content created with the contribution of aid money to avoid this.

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