

INFORMATION BRIEF



Improving inclusive education for girls: what works in DRC?

Summary

Between 2021-2022, ACCELERE!2 ran a pilot programme on girls' education in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to understand effective ways to break through barriers to inclusive learning.

The pilot was carried out in two educational sub-divisions and ten public schools in Kinshasa, ranging across urban and peri-urban areas. After a preparatory analysis and consultations with stakeholders, we co-designed the pilot's approach with a range of school, administration, and community actors.

Our approach

To ensure the sustainability of the proposed actions, our approach was tailored to the existing education system:

1. Work with governance at all levels (national, provincial, local, community) to:

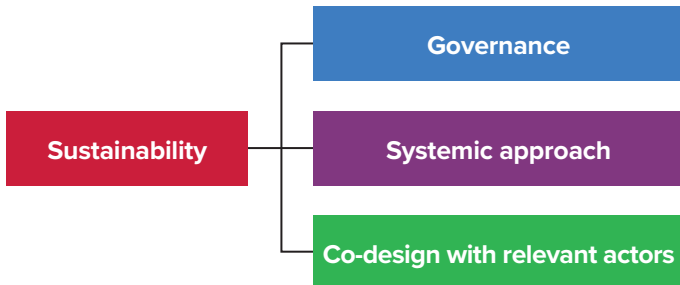
- strengthen governance across the system
- strengthen demand for accountability of all actors
- improve stakeholder participation and transparency.

To empower women and girls, the pilot paid attention to how accountability and transparency mechanisms were operating. By supporting positive feedback loops, networking and coalitions that represented female stakeholders, it aimed to amplify their power to challenge and change systems.

2. Use a systemic approach that ensured alignment with existing and supportive structures. This meant improving or reactivating national and local groups, networks or mechanisms to act on both the demand and supply sides to improve girls' school experience. Ownership and involvement by central governance are essential for the sustainability of the proposed changes, while local action leads to immediate change.

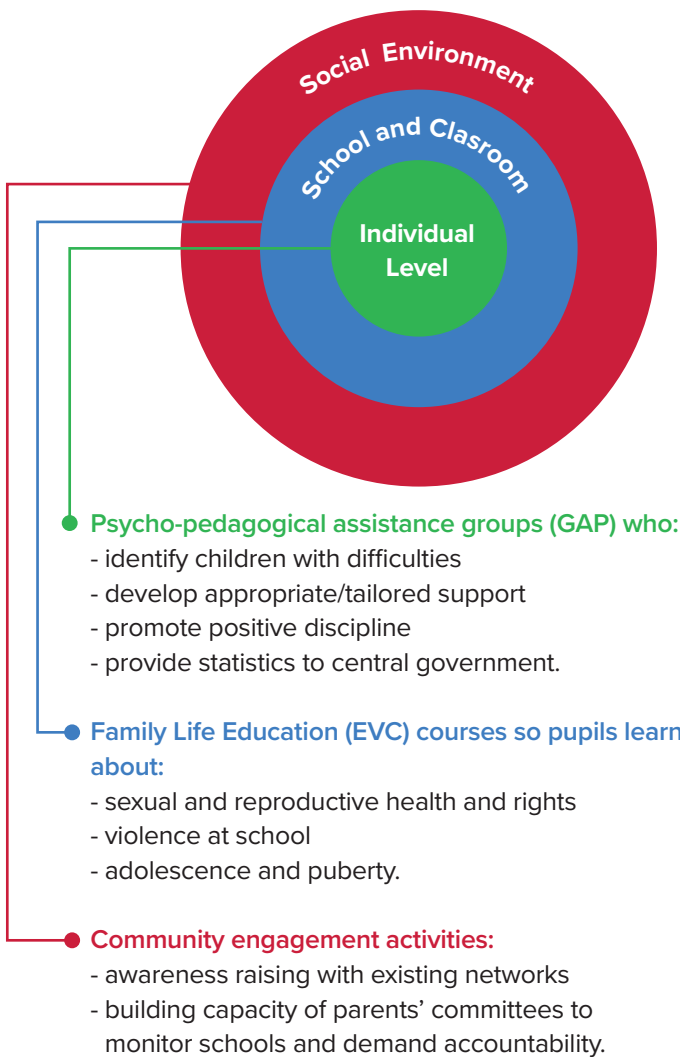
3. Develop activities in a process of co-design with local and central actors. To ensure ownership and accountability, stakeholders needed to be at the heart of the pilot's design and any re-design as it developed. This meant involving them in discussion to express their needs and make recommendations. Though this takes time, it ensured ownership in the long run and allowed the identification of champions who could drive and accelerate change (as well as any key detractors who could block change). Accountability was considered as a route towards relevant, locally owned and more effective interventions.

To ensure our approach closely met the needs of stakeholders, it was important to maintain constant consultation channels throughout the pilot. During pilot design and implementation, interviews, questionnaires, and group discussion allowed the approach to alter in response to feedback from pupils, school staff, communities and administration structures.



Designing the pilot

Three systemic entry points were identified to enable a holistic approach that would target pupil inclusion in the social, school, and individual/family environment. The pilot developed activities across these levels, focusing on procedures, norms and standards as well as behaviour change.



Our activities

Providing support to children with difficulty in school

Ten targeted schools and two targeted sub-divisions were supported to create or reactivate a psycho-pedagogical assistance group, which had previously been set up as per a ministerial decree. The pilot trained school staff and coached them on how to better identify children experiencing difficulties, to understand the source of these difficulties (external, family, school or individual) and find tailored, realistic solutions.

The types of difficulties experienced by pupils ranged from learning difficulties or behaviour issues, to repeated absenteeism and dropout, with a range of possible explanations.

What did we find?

- The groups created space for discussion where teaching and administrative staff had not previously discussed pupil wellbeing or learning. This allowed staff to share experiences and develop collaborative and coherent responses to challenges. Since they started, several school leaders reported a drop in the absenteeism rate and aligned this with all school staff now understanding potential causes of absenteeism and an ability to raise issues with affected children.
- Clear attitude changes were noted amongst group members: from thinking pupils are either intelligent or stupid, to considering support for those experiencing difficulty. Where pupils are obtaining very bad grades, teachers are identified and supported by school leadership to understand underlying causes. Some schools have recognised common challenges faced by pupils (e.g. lack of French) and swiftly developed mitigation strategies (e.g. catch-up classes).
- The groups opened an opportunity to discuss positive discipline and positive education as groups started to understand why pupils exhibit challenging behaviour.
- There are barriers to setting up assistance groups. In particular, school counsellors are almost never paid by the State, despite being recruited by the Ministry, meaning that they don't regularly attend school and may have lower status than other school staff. This means they struggled to take a leadership role. Paying these civil servants would ensure this national initiative is more sustainable and efficient.

For all these activities, we work on procedures, norms and standards but also behaviour change.

Supporting teachers to deliver family education classes

Family Life Education (EVF) is part of the official curriculum for primary and secondary education with a focus on developing pupils' emotional, relational, sexual and family life skills. However, there is a lack of uniformity in the teaching of this subject in schools, and a lack of teaching materials. When mistakes are made in the delivery of this subject, due to poor teacher understanding and knowledge, pupils may receive information that is misleading or even harmful.

The pilot distributed the national EVF curricula throughout schools and created opportunities for teachers to observe experts delivering EVF classes. Following these sessions, pupils and teachers were encouraged to discuss their experiences and identify any gaps or need for improvement.

What did we find?

- The EVF topic does not appear in the school report card and is not taken as seriously by schools.
- There is a need for a greater focus on positive discipline to discourage bullying from peers and teachers, which mainly targets girls and children with disability.
- Teachers need to be trained on participatory pedagogical approaches so pupils are more engaged in lessons, e.g. in small group discussions, role play, etc.
- Teachers should receive improved support to teach EVF properly through training, lesson scripts and lesson plans while they acquire the necessary content knowledge, to avoid them passing wrong or harmful information to children.
- Current school manuals and teachers guides need to be updated. They contain wrong and sometimes harmful content for such a sensitive topic as sexual and reproductive health, for example, and cannot be used in their current state. ACCELERE!2 has joined other education partners to discuss ways to improve the EVF manuals.

Engaging communities in education

Community engagement is vital for programme sustainability. For ACCELERE!2, this means engaging families to shift social norms, support all children to attend school and advocate to remove the economic barriers to education.

Among existing community representatives, in urban and peri-urban settings, the pilot identified Réseau Communautaire (RECO) as the most sustainable choice of partner for community engagement, as they are deeply rooted in the Health Ministry's work. Though they are unpaid volunteers, they are effective at raising community awareness and can support the identification of the most vulnerable families. Other structures like the Child Protection Networks or the Community Cells are less autonomous and rely on funding.

Existing community networks were used to contact community and family members in the same neighbourhoods as our target schools. We ensured representation of urban and peri-urban populations to explore different challenges, e.g. those with and without community ties, those in poverty and those with more stable income.

Community discussion was facilitated around nine themes with a focus on topics often not covered in school, e.g. violence and corporal punishment, gender stereotypes for children and family members, discrimination, and sexual and reproductive health.

What did we find?

- In urban and peri-urban Kinshasa, communities' main sources of information are members of the local neighbourhood, the church and those in their immediate network (e.g. friends). However, around 25% reported that they did not know where to get information on topics such as sexual and reproductive health or violence.
- Group discussions opened conversations on taboo topics and rapidly led to attitude change. For example, family members would begin defending corporal punishment, but quickly move on to exploring the benefits of positive discipline, exchanging tips and good experiences.
- Interestingly, members also reported being motivated by the conversations to discuss issues and topics with other community and family members – potentially creating a ripple effect of attitude and behaviour change.

Conclusion

The pilot has enabled us to better understand the barriers to inclusion faced by many pupils in DRC, especially girls and children experiencing difficulties. It has shown the challenges faced by those in the system – schools, communities and pupils – as they attempt to overcome those barriers and ensure every child can access quality education, but has also provided good learning for ways to overcome those obstacles. Learning from those involved in the pilot and adapting to their feedback has been vital for finding ways forward and has shown the importance of stakeholder involvement in developing solutions to inclusion challenges.

Summary of findings



ACTIVITIES CREATED SPACE
for discussion that otherwise wouldn't happen



URBAN AND PERI-URBAN AREAS
presented different inclusion challenges



COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP
led to better engagement in activities



RAPID ATTITUDE CHANGES
happened through group consensus



CHANGE EXTENDED BEYOND GROUPS
as members replicated discussion with others



CHALLENGING NORMS IN GROUP DISCUSSION
led to changed attitudes towards discipline



SCHOOL GROUPS IDENTIFIED INCLUSION CHALLENGES
that led to teaching improvements



ACTIVITIES FILLED A KNOWLEDGE GAP
on sexual and reproductive health and rights

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For more information, contact: Virginie.briand@mottmac.com; mathilde.nicolai@camb-ed.com.