

INFORMATION BRIEF



Working politically for school fee reform in the DRC

Summary

This Information Brief outlines the narrative of change around school fees in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) over recent years and shares Accelere!2 (A!2) experience of working politically to reform the system, in order to reduce the financial burden on parents and improve the quality of public education.

In particular, it discusses the importance of tools such as Political Economy Analysis (PEA) to identify main actors in the system and the use of roadmaps to define the vision and technical approach. The document also provides some lessons learnt, a list of key principles of working politically and implications for future programming.

In a fragile state like DRC, information is power. Without access to information, most people cannot become actors of change. Working politically is about making sure all different stakeholders are informed of the stakes of a situation. The aim is to sow the seeds of long-term change by empowering actors through raising awareness.

Background

A!2 started in 2015 to support the Government of DRC's efforts to improve governance and accountability in the education sector. Launching a governance reform project was always ambitious in the DRC, and the context became even more challenging given political unrest and the postponement of elections.

A key area of our work related to the sensitive issue of free education (Gratuité). When we began, school fees were traditionally collected at the school level and funnelled up the system to the national ministry level. This started as a short-term fix to a crisis decades ago as parents were asked temporarily to fund teachers' salaries, but it evolved into an institutionalised system. In addition, approximately 70% of state schools are managed by religious networks that levy their own fees from schools, but often contribute little to their running costs or improvement.

It was – and still is - a politically sensitive subject due to the complicity of actors at all levels in collecting and using fees, not always for the benefit of the education system. A pervasive 'blame culture' has developed wherein no individuals are accountable. Those who stood to gain the most from change had no voice in the conversation; whereas those who could bring about would lose out financially by doing so.

The A!2 approach was to tackle several levels of stakeholders in parallel to build enough critical mass to push for change and reform. In parallel, we increased the research base on school fees and the cost of the education system, to provide the Ministry and other key actors with an evidence base that illustrated the reality of the impact of fees. The programme took advantage of key political moments to build awareness and increase momentum, such as new measures for free education introduced by a new President in 2019.

Though there are still immense challenges with Gratuité and its future remains unsure given upcoming elections and uncertainty in DRC's political situation, change is emerging. Through research, communication and technical assistance, A!2 helped to take school fees from a taboo topic to one that is openly addressed by the ministry and system actors, which was key when Gratuité was officially announced. Parents became aware of free education options and moved their children from fee-paying private schools into free public schools. There is more to be done, but we see opportunity and possibility where once there seemed to be very little.

Seven principles of working politically

1	Classify the power dynamics between different structures and individuals with strong stakeholder analysis.
2	Identify who has the power to drive reform forward, and target those actors in a tailored way.
3	Build a critical mass to maintain pressure on decision makers to implement changes.
4	Target several actors in parallel, and together, to move them towards each other and to build consensus and improve coordination.
5	Know when to step back – while project visibility is always a focus, it is important to understand when it is not our place to be at the forefront of pushing for change and to let events unfold without being at the centre of it, or to enable others to be the ones who push for change.
6	Recognise and accept where and when it is time for pushing, holding or creating space for change and closely monitor momentum for action, support and lead.
7	Use the formal and informal power structures to enhance reform implementation.

How to work politically in a complex context

Working politically is about how change can be influenced amongst stakeholders so technical work can be progressed and sustained beyond the programme. This brief outlines the ways in which A!2 combined work to empower stakeholders to become active participants in change as well as technical tools to progress the programme.

Empowering people to become agents of change

Working politically ensures that all agents of change in the sector can participate actively through support and by keeping them informed.

An important component of the A!2 daily approach was ensuring that the technical teams were able to negotiate the complex web of actors and the various power plays in any given scenario. We developed a variety of principles to achieve this:

Information is key

In a fragile state like DRC, information is power. Without it, many are not fully aware of their rights and duties. Working politically means making sure all different stakeholders are informed of the stakes of a situation and that they are sensitised on the need to play their part if they want to see change happen. We can start to create change by empowering actors through awareness raising. Data, evidence and statistics to inform conversations are therefore prerequisites to change.

Motivate stakeholders to become actors

Implementers need to go beyond a focus on the top political level and also target civil servants at different levels, religious networks and civil society. A!2's approach has focused on motivating individuals within the system to change their behaviour and attitudes, particularly in the face of political limbo and stasis. This has helped to build critical mass and drive change, even with the most sensitive subjects.

Change is technically simple, but socially complex. A commitment is easy to make, but hard to see through. That's why working politically is so important. It allows you to move forward when no clear path is available.

Treat everybody as an individual

Political analysis is vital for understanding how the system works. Several one-on-one meetings with key actors were held to raise issues and sensitise them to the need for accountability. Certainly, every actor needs to be approached accordingly. One does not engage in the same way with a Secrétaire General and a Catholic Church coordinator.

Maintain a consistent message

To create awareness, the message needs to be coherent across all channels and to all stakeholders. AI2 repeatedly insisted on the need to address the school fees issue was constantly repeated, highlighting the burden on parents and the consequences on numbers of out of school children. During each meeting, programme staff highlighted contradictions with the law, the risks of the current approach and weaknesses in the system.

Find an entry point

It is helpful to identify the best moment and method for involving stakeholders. Some will be more influenced by statistics and others by stories – discover how best to start and continue effective discussion. For instance, AI2 invited members of the Ministry Cabinet and the Catholic Church to join a field mission to two provinces. In the community, they quickly realised the extent of the challenge presented by school fees and the severe burden on parents by seeing the human picture.

Create safety in jointly decisions

Developing groups and task forces enables actors to advocate in safety while enabling collaborative problem-solving. Collective power also allows greater transparency and accountability. At the central level, a national school fees taskforce was founded with the Minister of Education’s support to represent religious networks, parent associations, Ministry Cabinet, inspectorate and civil society. Decisions were made by the group without the need for individuals to risk their careers.

Encourage provinces to advocate for themselves

Enabling provinces to become advocates for local needs enlarges the circle of stakeholders involved in education discussions and strategic planning. Although the education system is centralised in the DRC, the vast distances offer opportunities to build autonomy among decentralised actors. By building strong relationships in the provinces, actors were supported to respond to central-level arguments for fees with locally-based evidence.

Spread the word

Building momentum and communicating to broader audiences builds wider awareness of potential for change and can create public pressure. A communications campaign used radio debates and public speeches to raise awareness of free education laws, while also creating more demand for change. Building on this momentum, local NGOs were supported to continue with communication efforts and to monitor the impact of the communication activities.

Be ready to act

The right moment to take action may be unpredictable. For school fees, that moment came with the election of the new President Félix Tshisekedi. Shortly after his election in 2019, he expressed his will to implement Gratuité for all basic education grades and urged the government to prepare for an application of new measures for the school year 2019-2020. This increased momentum allowed us to maximise the relationships built at central and local level and showcase the evidence based on research.

Using Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and Roadmaps

The technical work carried out by AI2 used two tools to deliver sustainable results. Political Economy Analysis (PEA) identified the systems, structures and people who were vital to behaviour change and long term reform. Once the PEA studies provided a deeper understanding of power dynamics in the targeted regions, an approach was needed to state clear goals while accounting for unpredictability. Roadmaps allowed us to identify a way to reach our destination despite facing many challenges outside our control.

Our approach

Phases
In an unpredictable context, avoid creating unrealistic timelines with defined time periods for certain changes or achievements. Instead, identify the main changes expected to happen in order to achieve the overall vision.
Vision
Clarify the situation envisaged after successfully passing through the main phases and what is aimed at overall.
Levels
Identify the main stakeholders and levels in the system that need to be targeted to achieve the vision.
Actions
Determine actions to take to achieve the main phases and the vision, separated out by each level targeted.

Step 1: Using Political Economy Analysis (PEA)

In an unstable and complex context, nuanced analysis of the situation and the main stakeholders allows the identification of the best entry points, which is instrumental for ensuring progress.

Initiating and supporting governance reform, in any sector, is as much about the people and individuals as it is about structures and systems. This takes time and daily interactions to build rapport and understand differing points of view.

The political landscape is complicated and dynamic. Failure to keep pace with how relationships between actors change can result in wasted time and missed opportunities.

Gathering political intelligence is particularly important in fragile states, where the state may hold authority in theory, but in practice it is much more nuanced due to its weak capacity to enforce that authority. A programme that is only designed on a theoretical understanding of power dynamics and the system will have superficial results at best, but no real sustainable change will take hold.

PEA studies can provide a much deeper understanding of who really holds power, which varies from province to province, town to town, village to village, and ministry department to ministry department.

Case study: Equateur

PEA showed that if the programme was to get anything done in this province, it had to be through the Catholic Church and their provincial educational management offices. While on paper the main counterpart would still be the devolved actors of the Ministry of Education, we adapted the approach to focus on the Catholic Church representative. Without this analysis, months could have been wasted only targeting ministry officials, not understanding the power dynamics of the province.

Step 2: Using Roadmaps

Despite clear programme goals and objectives, a number of scenarios and challenges may be beyond the control of staff and stakeholders. For example, the following questions may arise:

- How to define success when there is uncertainty around whether the same government and actors will be in place in six months' time?
- How to set up realistic goals when key central stakeholders refuse to face their own responsibilities?
- How to build in measurable goals in a volatile situation that can change from month to month, or week to week?
- How to tackle an issue when the main stakeholder is creating blockages?

AI2 developed a roadmap approach with ambitious visions for the main technical areas of reform, but with the possibility of taking a flexible route to reach those goals. By setting a variety of 'staging posts' – or interim goals – the itinerary could be adapted. If one route closed, then another could be started. These roadmaps accompanied more traditional programme management tools, such as the logical framework (logframe) and work plans, but allowed more flexibility.

While setting the programme's visions for the end of the implementation period and its main route, each roadmap provided wider analysis on the context and stakeholders, including the likelihood of them engaging with the proposed reform agenda. Additionally, it identified potential blockages and 'crisis points' that might arise, with potential alternative routes if those roadblocks were met.

How to get the most out of Roadmaps

1

Be realistic: Ensure that each roadmap is contextualised and based on the PEA of the sector and the actors involved. Aspirational but unrealistic goals only set programmes up to fail, especially in fragile states.

2

Be ambitious: Even in unpredictable contexts, it pays to be ambitious. This helps to avoid excuses that it is hard to move things forward in difficult contexts. Even in very challenging environments, there is usually a way to keep things moving, or to at least hold space for change.

3

Be as precise as possible: While roadmaps are a useful tool when it is difficult to accurately workplan every detail out, it is important to be explicit when setting out your goals and how you expect to achieve them.

4

Treat Roadmaps as living documents: On A!2, they were reviewed on a quarterly basis, updating assumptions on the main risks and blockages as well as adjusting specific actions along the way. This allowed the programme to remain adaptive and respond to the volatile context, but in a structured way.

5

Use a participative approach: Roadmaps can be powerful tools for ensuring there is a common goal and shared vision amongst the technical teams – particularly important if working across several regions. It is also a very useful tool to discuss and ensure joint vision with core stakeholders.

6

Leave room for adaptation: On one hand, objectives need to be as precise as possible in order to develop a clear vision, on the other the path to go there will probably not be the one initially planned. Freedom for change is needed to think out of the box and adjust to uncertainty and unexpected roadblocks.

Implications for future programming

The ability to work politically is important in every development setting, but especially so in complex contexts such as the DRC. A technocratic approach that fails to take account of the evolving external environment, with multiple actors with their own priorities, will fail to bring about social change.

- Programmes need enough time to build trust, particularly in more sensitive topic areas. Reform takes time and requires significant behaviour and attitude change. Getting results out of a working politically approach is a long-term investment.
- While remaining ambitious is important, it is also that practitioners understand the donor’s risk appetite and take time to review it regularly during the course of the programme.
- Trust needs to be built between donors, implementers and political counterparts to ensure that everyone has enough space to work in the context. Governance reform can be sensitive, and the roles and responsibilities between the donor and the implementer need to be clearly defined to ensure there is trust on both sides.
- Allowing space for implementing partners to have informal political engagement is important. However, it is critical that everybody understands their role for political engagement and defines clear boundaries.
- Donors, implementers and main stakeholders need to recognise the different levels of ‘success’ in the context. This may mean holding space for change and not letting things slip backwards, rather than taking tangible steps forward. Ensure that everyone shares a common understanding of success and prioritise quality results over quantity.

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