ACCELERE!2
Accès Lecture Rétention Redevabilité
Programme d'appui à la réforme du secteur de l'education en RDC

POLICY BRIEF

How to improve inclusion and gender equality in schools: Lessons learned and recommendations

ACCELERE!2 wanted to develop a critical new understanding in order to inform future programming for the education of girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This policy brief sets out the approach, results, lessons learned and recommendations from a pilot project designed to support this objective.

Approach

The ACCELERE!2 pilot project involved three different types of research. Primary research was undertaken at a socio-anthropological level to develop insights into the socio-cultural context in order to inform the design and subsequent implementation of the pilot. Desk research was used to understand the extent and impact of previous girls' education projects and action research continued throughout the pilot to generate ongoing learning and inform an adaptive and flexible approach.

Key Research Questions

RQ1 - What matters for girls' learning and retention in the education system, both in this specific context, and more generally in DRC?

Before analysing what might work in each context to improve girls' education, we needed to define the main challenges for girls' successful inclusion in the education system and the reasons behind these challenges. We knew that the challenges faced in DRC would be different to those in other countries or regions and were keen to avoid drawing on ready-made solutions from elsewhere. The socio-anthropological research aimed to generate a more granular understanding of the barriers and blockages faced by girls and boys seeking to access quality education in low-income districts of urban Kinshasa.

RQ2 - What might work to improve girls' inclusion and learning?

We proposed and tested entry points and design activities based on the key barriers identified to analyse what might work well for future programming. Our ongoing research and adaptive programming allowed us to learn about the efficiency of these approaches as the project progressed and to further adapt as necessary.

Gender equality and social inclusion

Intervention areas

1 **Implementation and support to psycho-pedagogical support groups in school (Groupes d'Appui Psychopédagogiques in French - GAPs)**

The psycho-pedagogical support groups were institutionalised by the Government in the **Loi Cadre Education** (2014) and officially revitalised at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year (an official Ministry of Primary, Secondary, and Technical Education (MEPST) statement made it a requirement that all primary and secondary schools have a GAP).

The GAPs' role is to identify and support children facing difficulty in school. However, at the start of the project, only a few GAPs existed and these focused on providing statistics to the central level without providing solutions for children experiencing issues.

Under the pilot, we supported creation of a functioning GAP in each of the 10 targeted schools. We also trained school and divisional and subdivisional administrative staff on the GAP approach and coached them over the course of two school terms. We helped participants identify the range of difficulties that children face in school and the development of solutions to help them overcome these, both at individual and school level.

GAPs proved to be a promising entry point for improving greater collaboration and communication channels between school staff, and between school and parents. The establishment of the GAPs helped to create a more empathetic environment for addressing children's difficulties and brought awareness about difficulties that sometimes originate in the school itself, and that schools themselves can play a role in addressing these issues.

2 **Strengthening Family Life Education course (Education à la Vie Familiale – EVF) and positive pedagogy**

EVF is a national subject with an official curriculum and designated teachers. It is the only course tackling sexual and reproductive health, gender and discrimination. It was first initiated by the Catholic network in the 1970s to teach family and human values. Subsequently, the MEPST introduced sexual and reproductive health (SRH) teaching in schools through EVF in an attempt to fight early pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) among the youth. The curriculum, formally approved in 2012, openly targets life skills, acknowledging that school does not only pass on academic knowledge but also competencies and skills for life. However, to date, implementation in schools is weak; there are no school manuals, most teachers remain untrained and are unable to teach the course, and there is variable timetabling of EVF lessons across schools.

We worked with the Department for Family Life Education (DEVC in French), to provide professional development to teachers in the pilot schools. This focused on active pedagogy methods, using Ministry-approved training modules developed under a 2015 EU-funded project, and through EVF sessions conducted in class with teachers. We thoroughly reviewed the existing EVF manuals and teachers' guides and worked with DEVC to document the need to update these. We supported DEVC in planning for the reform of EVF to improve the effectiveness of this subject, and they requested the Ministry to include EVF in the students' bulletins to make sure it is taught systematically at the school level.

Our work in this intervention area required the review and revision of the approach and materials during implementation and revealed the weakness of the current approach to EVF. We also explored other routes for strengthening knowledge in SRH through community engagement.

3 **Community engagement**

We engaged communities and parents through two main routes: first, through the Parents' Committees (COPAs), which are local governance structures that should exist in every school, and second, through the community networks (Réseaux Communautaires - RECOs), which are existing networks of volunteers that primarily respond to the Ministry of Health and are recognised focal points and trusted by the communities in which they live.

We strengthened the capacity of parent and management committee members on their roles and responsibilities. We supported 10 schools and their committees in successfully managing school grants used to build school equipment, purchase pedagogical equipment such as benches, blackboards or sewing machines, and undertake minor infrastructure repairs, creating more transparency and accountability on the way in which funds are managed by the school and overseen by parents.

We trained community network representatives and they conducted their own group discussions with community members on key topics such as violence, gender discrimination, etc.

Community engagement is a pre-requisite for addressing the school environment in which children are educated. Our work with the RECOs has demonstrated that they can be a powerful tool for engaging with communities around education. COPAs are weaker for various reasons and would need to be strengthened to fulfil their roles within local governance structures, and to hold schools accountable.

Key principles of our approach

Our approach was based on a hypothesis that DRC had already received considerable support over recent years from many well-regarded girls' education projects but that there had been limited sustainability following the end of those projects.

We therefore chose to focus our pilot on governance as a route to promoting greater ownership of all actors and strengthening the sustainability of the interventions. We followed three key principles:

1 **Alignment with existing systemic structures** by using and improving existing and supportive national and local structures or mechanisms to increase ownership of local actors and the sustainability of the proposed changes.

2 **Work on governance at all levels** to strengthen the system, strengthen the demand for accountability of local actors to schools and the Ministry (at the central and decentralised level), and improve stakeholder participation and transparency.

3 **Co-design with the actors.** To ensure interventions are locally owned and more effective, stakeholders need to be at the heart of the pilot's design and any re-design. They have been engaged as key partners (rather than beneficiaries).

Our monitoring, evaluation and learning framework relied on both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with socio-anthropological research embedded throughout the pilot. The research had two clear objectives: to develop adaptive programming based on the data generated; and to generate learning and evidence in order to develop recommendations for the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and other actors.

What are the lessons learnt?

The following section presents lessons tailored to a specific context, in disadvantaged urban Kinshasa neighbourhood, but shows how, based on other research and our extensive desk review, findings are relevant to the rest of the country.

RQ1: What really matters for girls and boys to access quality education and learn?

Gender-specific ways of addressing the economic constraints of access to quality education: extreme poverty and increasing economic difficulties have brought changes in the way in which traditional households are managed. Parents are now often away from home and disengage from their children's education once they reach puberty. Many of the households targeted by the pilot are led by mothers, who are entirely responsible for the children's education and act as figures of paternal authority. Against this backdrop, many girls and boys invent their own ways of fighting poverty: once they reach puberty, and very often even before, they find different ways to earn money to cover their needs (these include school fees) and start to become autonomous from a very young age. Boys may take on various informal jobs and can also be attracted by petty theft or delinquency to earn a reputation and money. Girls may engage at a very early age in sex-related economic strategies that allow them to fund their studies in exchange for a relationship with wealthier men.

Access to basic education is not an economic problem in urban Kinshasa. However, parents start to disengage, usually when their children are in the 7th or 8th grade, entering puberty, and are considered as adults and able to fend for themselves. This forces girls and boys to swiftly find strategies to pay for their school fees, their uniforms, small equipment, etc.

Cultural dynamics impacting education: Within schools and communities targeted there is a belief that, by nature, there are two types of children -"intelligent children" and "stupid" children – with girls thought to generally fall into the latter group. This commonly held belief greatly impacts girls' sense of connectedness to school and their studies, as they are often mocked in class and perceived as shy and powerless. This contributes to them failing at school or dropping out early, especially when they reach puberty. PASEC results show that between the beginning and end of school, the gap between boys' and girls' results widens, to the detriment of girls. This is only observed in very few countries assessed and shows that schools increase inequality rather than reduce it. This issue needs to be addressed to improve teenage girls' retention and learning.

The disappearance of traditional practices like the transition to adulthood rituals for boys and girls means there is no mechanism through which adulthood learning on sexual and reproductive health and puberty can take place. Speaking about sexuality is taboo, related to a sacred space and only a few people (formerly those leading these rituals in the community) are recognised as having the authority to talk about it. Parents feel it is not their place to do so and do not introduce their children to key knowledge on SRH. School staff are also very reluctant to talk about this in EVF courses for the same reason, and the importance of religion and churches in the day-to-day lives of these communities makes these topics even more taboo. Teenagers are ignorant of key information related to their own sexuality, the risks associated, and are not in a position to take informed decisions. The ignorance of SRH and the risks associated with it results in unwanted pregnancies that might sooner or later lead young mothers to drop out of school. It also exacerbates the risk of young girls and boys to be victims of sexual violence without recognising it, as well as health risks related to STDs. This is also true in other provinces in DRC. Improving this knowledge would result in more informed decision-making by teenagers.

Free unions (by mutual agreement) are more common than early marriages and these are formed and ended far more easily than formal marriages with a dowry. Girls are consequently less protected and there are numerous single-parent families. Couples often form free unions as a strategy to fight poverty and/or provide reparation after early pregnancy. This is true in other provinces too, as highlighted in our research in Kasai. It can therefore be problematic to try to address the issue of forced or early marriage in projects, given this context where teenagers may often engage in these unions on their own free will as an answer to the deprived socio-economic contexts in which they live.

Physical violence is largely accepted by all actors. Sexual violence is normalised, and its definition varies widely between actors. However, psychological violence is not well understood and often minimised by actors, resulting in learning difficulties at school. This means that tackling violence in schools or in the community must be done with a very careful assessment of 1) the understanding of each concept in national languages and 2) the level of acceptance and recognition of each type of violence by actors, to avoid the risk of being misunderstood, or to impose a concept that is not accepted in this context.

The school 'micro-economy' impacts the quality of learning: unpaid teachers, an opaque school fees system and a very constrained education system all contribute to poor quality education. Ironically, the introduction of Free Education and the banning of school fees has left schools isolated from the communities around them as parents now believe that it is the role of the state to ensure that schools are funded, teachers are paid etc. On the other hand, recent illegal practices to collect school fees have further pushed parents away from school out of fear of being asked for more contributions.

Encouraging greater parental engagement in children's education would be beneficial both for children experiencing difficulties and for increasing accountability and transparency between schools, parents and communities. The GAPs could play a role in improving parents/school relationships and so would create a more transparent process around school fees. In that way, parents wouldn't be afraid to get involved with the school. This would need more work with MEPST on education financing and the development of control measures to fight illegal fees.

RQ2: What might work to improve girls' education and improve inclusion?

These findings are based on the approaches tested during the pilot.

The GAPs are a good entry point for increasing empathy within schools towards children and for fostering dialogue around how to improve inclusion and learning. The MEPST regards education as a holistic process of human development and it was useful to build on existing official guidance - even if implementation in schools needed to be much improved. Identifying the causes of children's difficulties in school (learning difficulties, behaviour, absenteeism, etc) is difficult for school staff due to their lack of expertise. However, working with GAPs has generated opportunities to identify and provide support to those children. We witnessed the GAPs creating new spaces for discussion in school, where teaching and administrative staff had not previously discussed pupil wellbeing or learning. GAPs allowed staff to share experiences and develop collaborative and coherent responses to challenges and question their own practice in terms of teaching, discipline, etc.

The GAPs are a promising way of working on improving children's wellbeing and implementing a positive education vision within the school, with school staff adequately supporting children so they can learn and thrive.

Our research evidenced that Family Life Education teaching in school is very weak. Teachers lack content knowledge and pedagogical skills and have no adequate teaching materials. Thus, no adequate content is passed on to children about sexual and reproductive health, despite them being eager to learn. Teachers, who are supposed to share this knowledge, are not comfortable with the content and are selective about what they share with children. It is worth noting that DEVC and EVF in general have benefitted from significant funding from past projects. However, these have not resulted in increased quality delivery in schools. To make EVF efficient and useful for SRH teaching, significant reform is required.

In this pilot, we focused on generating evidence on the current gaps of EVF and DEVC. We provided support to the central level Ministry to consider how reform might be implemented and identified the precise content from official manuals and teachers guides which required review. This allowed the DEVC to approach the Ministry and donors proposing a review of the EVF manuals and this is due to happen in the future. Lessons learned show this could be a good entry point for teaching SRH-R, if strengthened properly. Alternatively, engaging with communities on this content is also possible, and has previously produced very rapid results through community discussions with community networks (RECOs).

Community leadership led to better engagement in activities and to rapid attitude change. Change extended beyond groups as members replicated discussion with others and rapid attitude changes happened through group consensus. In addition, while sexuality is a sacred topic for most community members and school staff, some actors in the community, such as the RECOs, are able to discuss these issues and could be used – and capacitated - to do that.

Bringing communities into the conversation also ensured that the intersectionality of barriers and solutions for children with disability, pregnant young girls, boys enrolled in petty crime or addicted to drugs or alcohol, were considered and discussed together.

Recommendations for future programme design

Start with a socio-anthropological analysis to have a precise understanding of the context as well as the popular approach to key notions (violence, sex …) through linguistic representation. This will inform both design and the most important targeted context. It is a key step to make sure that we do no harm. Often, the studies conducted on barriers to education include focus-group discussions and interviews with actors at the beginning of the project, but do not include this highly relevant linguistic and anthropological approach. Without these aspects, key approaches to tackle child marriage or sexual violence, for example, might not be suitable in this context, or locally accepted.

Work with, and through, the system: in such a deprived context, any initiative that adds new layers or new structures, especially if they need a budget to be sustained, will not last after the end of a project. Past projects set up boys' and girls' clubs after school hours, for example, but these ceased to function the minute the project ended. We thus recommend identifying existing structures, approaches, initiatives, and strengthening the most promising ones, to improve the chances of these approaches being sustainable over time. If they are owned by local actors and part of the system already there will be greater sustainability. Our work on the GAPs was a good example of this approach as we built on a niche initiative promoted by a local provincial director of education but backed by an official ministry decree and strengthened it.

Promote ownership of approaches through co-design with local actors: past projects generally failed to build ownership of innovative pedagogical approaches (like gender-based pedagogy) at the local, provincial and national levels during the project period.

As a result, activities at the end of project support were not sustainable. Development needs to be delivered by people for themselves and not imposed by external actors. We recommend including all relevant actors from the community, school staff, and children themselves as partners (rather than beneficiaries) in co-designing and co-implementing future projects. We need to go beyond consultations to put in place actual co-creation mechanisms, with feedback loops from beneficiaries so that projects can adapt their approach along the way.

Take a gender-based approach: Interventions to improve the school experience for girls and boys are much better received than initiatives explicitly targeting girls. The community in DRC is openly in favour of girls' and boys' education and would not accept mechanisms that put girls in a 'privileged' position, for example by only providing cash transfers for girls. However, they also understand that girls face more barriers than boys growing up, that gender equality should be improved, and that sometimes girls need more support than boys, rather than a strict equity between genders. Intersectionality is key: the different factors of exclusion of girls and other vulnerable children, because of a disability, a socio-economic background, an ethnical background, language issues, etc, must all be dealt with together instead of separately, to achieve meaningful inclusion of all children. We recommend work to build gender equality in school through tackling all barriers to quality learning and children's wellbeing, including the many barriers which disproportionately affect girls.

Recommendations for programme implementation

- **Implement constant adaptive programming approach:** in such a changing context, adaptive programming is key. Projects need to be able to learn from ongoing research and feedback from actors to reorient their approach, in order to avoid roadblocks and find new entry points as needed. In the case of our pilot, this meant starting to work on the EVF course as a systemic entry point, with an official national curricula and paid teachers in school. However, we quickly realised that: 1) the EVF manuals that existed contained harmful content and could not be used, and 2) that teachers were not trained on EVF content or on participative pedagogical practices, and therefore did not deliver any quality content during EVF classes. This forced us to quickly readapt our approach, with community discussions on sexual and reproductive health on one side, and training on participative pedagogy for teachers on the other side, while providing recommendations at central level on how to reform EVF. Projects and development partners should remain flexible and open to changing solutions and ways forward as they go.

- **Develop interventions that properly reflect the time required for behaviour change:** if donors choose to get involved, they should be prepared to remain involved over the long term, as changing behaviours, attitudes and beliefs around girls' education and gender equality will not happen in a few months or years. We recommend a minimum five year commitment as it will take time to overcome deeply rooted social norms and shift the prevailing beliefs and attitudes of children, parents and school staff towards the place of girls and women in the education system and in society and . Trying to rush this process might do more harm than good, as illustrated by the current official EVF manuals, funded by a group of donors and projects, which did not go through the proper quality control mechanisms and include harmful content in their final version.

Recommendations for intervention areas

- **Strengthen sexual and reproductive health knowledge** to answer children's pressing need for information and mitigate risks related to unwanted pregnancy, STDs, coerced sexual activities, negating their rights, etc. Sexual and reproductive health knowledge could be disseminated in several ways, especially through community members who already have some authority in discussing these taboo topics in the community. This will need careful planning and understanding of the context.

- **Invest in positive education and positive discipline:** Focusing on establishing a positive environment fostering children's wellbeing in school would encourage learning and reduce early drop-out of children, like overaged children, adolescent girls, etc, who feel they do not belong in school anymore. Supporting children with difficulties through non-violent and participative pedagogical teaching methods would benefit all children and guarantee all equal chances of success in the same school.

- **Engage with the community and the school to achieve better results,** targeting the child at individual level, the school and their environment (parents, community, neighbourhood) instead of limiting interventions to only one ecosystem (eg the school itself). This is to make sure all children receive coherent messaging from the different ecosystems that they interact with (family, community, school, etc) and that each ecosystem reinforces the others in a virtuous circle. In the pilot, for example, community discussions led by RECOs allowed us to discuss corporal punishment with parents while the same issue was tackled at school level through the GAPs. We saw rapid behaviour change in both groups with examples of parents talking to school staff about reducing corporal punishment following group discussions.