ACCELERE!2

Accès Lecture Rétention Redevabilité

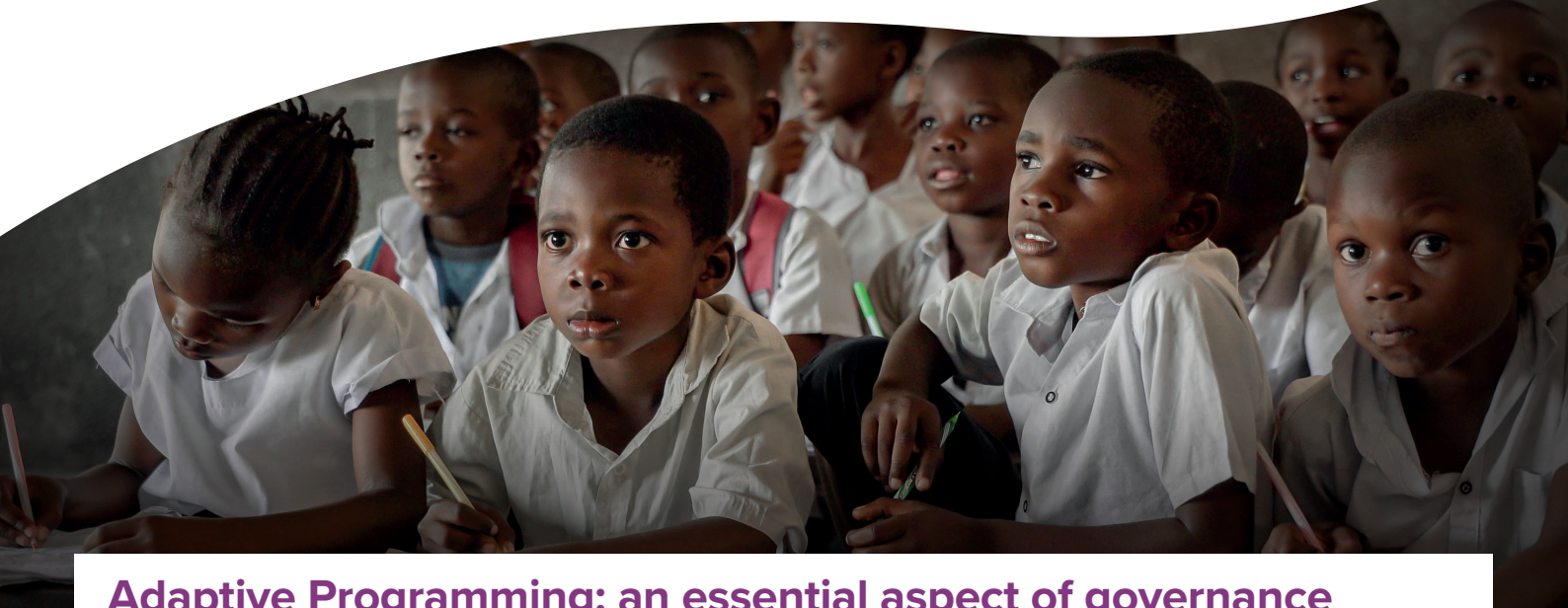Programme d'appui à la réforme du secteur de l'education en RDC

POLICY BRIEF

Adaptive Programming: an essential aspect of governance reform in a fragile state

Taking an adaptive approach

Cambridge Education implemented a seven-year governance reform project, ACCELERE!2, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), focusing on the education sector. In 2021, DRC was the 5th most fragile country[1] in the world and ranked 169th out of 180 countries in the 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index[2].

In a context of uncertainty and weakness of national institutions, taking an adaptive approach appeared to be the only way of making progress. This Information Brief draws on the experience of ACCELERE!2 and identifies findings, case studies and conclusions that have informed or supported the programme's adaptive approach to delivering governance reform in DRC's education sector.

[1] Fragile States Index published by the Fund for Peace organization
[2] https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/cod

Key findings

1. Adjusting strategy to changing contexts and realities maximises chances of success

Politics, geopolitical or natural crises, and social pressure influence contexts more prominently in a fragile state such as DRC. Priorities and entry points change frequently, as do the key partners who might be willing to push for change and change their position according to their interests and changing political environment. A solid Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) system used for decision making, combined with stakeholders' engagement analysis and other adaptive programming tools such as road maps enabled the ACCELERE!2 team to adapt approaches depending on context.

In practice, this means:

- Hiring and training an expert M&E team to capture quantitative and qualitative progress.

- Close communication with local teams to reflect on insights and adjust ways of working.

- Reviewing strategy and stakeholders' analysis regularly (at least monthly).

- Challenging roadmaps regularly through collective discussion.

Building capacity

2. It is important to keep the "bigger picture" in mind when evaluating the trajectory of change and accept when it is necessary to delay acting

There is no simple, linear relationship between the provision of technical inputs and improved responsiveness to governance reform, or measures to increase accountability. In the complex area of accountability and system strengthening in DRC, positive steps forward can be followed by a hardening of resistance that sets progress back. When evaluating the trajectory of change, not only should teams to be guided by a clear understanding of nuanced power dynamics and political economy analysis but also keep in mind the "bigger picture" and a long-term perspective to fully appreciate progress and adjust approaches. Taking into account this bigger picture is useful to identify the right time to 'hold space for change', press for incremental change and/or opportunities for transformational change.

In practice, this means:

- Recognising the need to stop working on areas that encounter too much resistance, but to find different entry points to achieve the same long-term vision.

- Setting ambitious goals for the long-term vision in roadmaps, and accepting that progress can be achieved through different routes.

3. Developing a sound understanding of local context and dynamics of power underpins successful adaptation

To adapt and prepare to adapt, it is important to fully understand the context for change. This means not only understanding the rationale behind change, but being prepared to adapt when potential shifts or blockages might happen. Gathering information helps this preparation and may ensure blockages do not come as a surprise.

In practice, this means:

- Developing a political economy analysis as part of the programme baseline and enriching this analysis as implementation continues.

- Organising the programme team and internal communications to allow insights to be communicated from the bottom up and from the top down.

- Training and supporting teams to develop adaptive ways of thinking and operating.

4. Being wrong and failing is acceptable in finding sustainable routes to reform

Change management is not an exact science. Being wrong and failing is part of the process of identifying positive pathways forward. Strengthening systems and supporting governance reform is not about being right about how to reach objectives. It is about identifying opportunities and creating the space for change with stakeholders.

In practice, this means:

- Being prepared to drop some previously planned activities or approaches if they are not working.

- Being as transparent as possible with donors and partners to explain the rationale behind what is dropped or changed within the programme.

5. Empowering actors to own change is essential for long term sustainability

ACCELERE!2's adaptive approach allowed the team to maintain ongoing consultations with local actors who were seen as partners rather than beneficiaries, and who contributed to reorient our approaches by providing regular feedback. This in turn empowered them, building their ownership of governance reform approaches. In fact, ACCELERE!2's experience shows that a project can only contribute to significant and tangible improvements in the governance of education when it helps to shift the balance of power between state decision-makers, the government and the most vulnerable.

In practice, this means:

- Providing training and coaching to a broad range of actors including Parliament, church representatives, parents' associations, community leaders, etc.

- Improving access to data and information for all these actors, so they have better contextual knowledge and can act upon it.

6. Instilling the right balance between innovation and planning within the team ensures adaptive approaches can succeed

Rather than selecting an approach and sticking to it, adaptive programming is about remaining strategically and technically agile in order to remain open to new opportunities. There is therefore a need within the team to be able to access insights, step back and strike the right balance between rigour in maintaining objectives but not rigidness. It is important to encourage a mindset at all levels of team that sees technical assistance as a way of creating space for innovation rather than a prescriptive logic, remaining open without being undisciplined. This approach requires a good understanding of how the system works in order to contribute to strengthening existing systems instead of creating new additions to the system which are unsustainable.

In practice, this means:

- Training the programme team in working politically.

- Ensuring operations and finance teams understand the approach and find the right balance between procedures and planning and the need for flexibility and short-term adjustment.

- Reviewing procedures to maximise flexibility.

7. Partnering with a wide range of stakeholders, especially those not involved in the day-to-day functioning of the system, broadens and strengthens routes to reform

To be effective and efficient, a system requires the involvement of a wide range of actors both at local, provincial and national levels. Because they may not feel legitimate, powerful enough and/or because they do not have the proper information about their rights, these actors do not fully play their role in the education system, leaving the space for central and deconcentrated actors. An adaptative approach requires partnering with many actors to empower them in order to change the dynamic of power, and in doing so create alternative routes to reform which were not evident at the outset.

In practice, this means:

- Working with non-state actors, community actors, churches, etc, to build a critical mass and put pressure on state actors.

- Building the capacity of actors who are not traditionally involved in education but whom may have power to make changes, such as national or regional parliament, deconcentrated administrative actors, etc.

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Adaptative management: at the intersection of technical flexibility, adaptative programming and working politically: case studies.

CASE STUDY N°1:
From a deeply rooted school fees system to Free primary Education

ACCELERE!2 began in a context in which legal and illegal school fees were collected in an extremely opaque manner by a broad range of actors. Most national actors benefited from the ongoing system, and discussing school fees was highly taboo. ACCELERE!2's approach therefore involved collecting data and evidence on school fees through research. The programme used political economy analysis and regular stakeholder analysis to identify who had formal and informal decision-making power to drive a school fee reform, and used this analysis to build a critical mass to advocate for change. ACCELERE!2 facilitated collaborative discussions to enable local actors to advocate in safety through in a group setting, which encouraged greater transparency and accountability. ACCELERE!2's roadmaps enabled the navigation of political uncertainty, as well as a degree of flexibility while setting an ambitious long-term vision regarding education financing.

As focusing solely on the Ministry of Education for reform would achieve limited results, ACCELERE!2 adapted its approach to raise awareness among communities, civil society and the churches on the school fees system. The programme was instrumental in building political will for school fee reform, by increasing internal and external pressure on the MoE.

CASE STUDY N°2:
A reform of the administrative offices first designed by provincial actors

The education system in DRC is managed through a complex overlapping structure of administrative offices, which is both expensive and inefficient. ACCELERE!2 started by defining the norms and standards for the operation of administrative offices, and job descriptions to define staff roles and responsibilities. ACCELERE!2 then coached the administrative offices at provincial and sub provincial levels, assisting them in self-assessing performance. This triggered provincial actors to consider what was not working in the existing system, leading to the development of proposals for reform. These proposals were channelled to central level using a bottom-up approach.

ACCELERE!2 strengthened the capacities of central level actors, who were initially firmly opposed to the reform of such a politically sensitive matter. Importantly, the programme empowered central level actors to push for this reform based on increased efficiency of the whole system. This led to the Minister approving the proposed reform, after six years of working with actors at all levels of the system, building political will and appetite for reform, and increasing pressure on MoE with support from civil society and the churches. During these six years, there have been periods appropriate to create space for the reform, hold space (while fighting strong oppositions at central level) and push for change, with varied approaches that required flexibility from our team.

Administrative offices georeferencing, highligting gaps. 2016

Coaching 2019

Advocacy through churches and CSOs 2021

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6

Norms & standards 2018

Reform proposal 2020

Reform approved 2022

CASE STUDY N°4: Pivoting our support to the teachers' payroll system

At the start of our programme, ACCECLERE!2 was providing support to SECOPE, the MoE structure in charge of the teachers' payroll, to improve the efficiency and security of their database, and to expand the proportion teachers paid through bank accounts. However, while doing this, a large number of fake decrees were identified in the database that indicated fake teachers or schools were being paid every month by the state. ACCELERE!2 thus reoriented to conduct a national check of all school creation decrees and found out that around 30% schools had no decree to prove their existence, while 11% had a fake one. This provided justification to cease work on the SECOPE database, as the whole system was too corrupt and not open to change. ACCELERE!2 focused its efforts in raising awareness on the SECOPE's gaps and problems and called for a major reform to improve transparency and accountability. Flexibility was vital in this piece of work, as continuing to work only on the database would have entrenched irregularities in the existing system rather than strengthened it.

CASE STUDY N°5: Rethinking how to support the Sexual and Reproductive Health teaching in DRC

Under ACCELERE!2's Girls' Education focus, strengthening sexual and reproductive health (SRH) teaching at school level was an important systemic entry point, as it was part of the national curricula and already benefitted from significant project and MoE support. However, qualitative research soon showed that 1) the SRH national manuals contained harmful and misleading content and could not be used, and 2) that teachers were not trained on SRH content nor on participative pedagogical practices, and therefore did not deliver any quality content during classes – even spreading harmful information by ignorance or due to their conservative values.

This revelation prompted a rapid adaption in approach, with ACCELERE!2 supporting community discussions on sexual and reproductive health, and training on participative pedagogy for teachers, while providing precise recommendations at central level on the current gaps and how to reform SRH teaching. ACCELERE!2 succeeded in securing agreement from MoE and current partners on the need to review existing manuals. This example illustrates the need for projects and development partners to remain flexible and open to changing solutions and ways forward as they go, with the overall objective to strengthen existing systems.

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Eight steps for adaptive programming in a fragile state

1   **Always take a change management approach:** Whilst a change management approach is harder to measure, it inspires deeper and more sustainable transformation. This means seeking to understand and acknowledge the assumptions, power dynamics and structures that are the root causes of poor governance, as opposed to the behaviours of individuals or the symptoms of poor governance. Whilst it is easier to measure "event level" changes and harder to track transformative change, change management requires a deeper analysis of how change is taking place. It also allows teams to focus on where they might gain the most traction. Identify the change agents, their interests, their opportunities for leverage and the incentives that would make them change. A continuous change management approach means identifying the long-term vision and strategy, but also the quick wins that could help to get there. It also involves developing the appropriate mindset and skills in the programme team and adopting that approach as a routine, through training and close mentoring from the leadership team.

2   **Design the vision taking into account the "insiders" analysis:** Accept that complexity requires multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholders' approach in order both to identify the binding constraints and leverage strengths, and work in parallel in unblocking the problems and creating a new dynamic.

3   **Design a solid MEAL system and actively use it to inform decision-making and lessons learnt:** Design and implementation must be informed by solid research and evidence. Data should be used for decision-making during the project life, to make changes based on feedback received, and evidence generated.

4   **Promote ownership of approaches through co-design with local actors:** Development needs to be done by people for themselves and not imposed by external actors. This means 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. It also means going 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.

5   **Remain flexible and adaptative no matter what:** Flexibility is vital to address changing contexts and volatile politics. It is important to use roadmaps to set a long-term vision but remain open to achieving core objective through different pathways, adapting the approach when blockages are encountered along the way.

6   **Work politically to achieve behaviour change:** A structured and analytical approach to working with main partners will help the programme focus on key beneficiaries. Mechanisms such as quarterly stakeholder analysis updates and targeted technical assistance plans can help develop a wider view. It is useful to regularly review whether there is a need to expand stakeholder engagement depending on the circumstances and identify key champions able to act as levers and build pressure for change by engaging with a range of actors and system levels.

7   **Build political will and creating momentum:** Building political will demands a mix of technical skills, strategic vision, and political capacity building. Application of constant political pressure is key, especially for politically sensitive topics.

8   **Be realistic.** Some things will be achieved, some things will not, and new opportunities will arise – be alert, open and flexible!