

POLICY BRIEF



Delivering change in a fragile state

In fragile states, government often struggles to provide services, such as education, to the poor. Violence, endemic corruption, skewed budget allocations, and the exclusion of women and minorities can further increase social insecurity and undermine the foundations of just and equitable service delivery systems.

Yet, while fragility negatively impacts on public services, there is evidence that improvements in governance contribute to improved service delivery which in turn reduce fragility. This has implications for how donors engage in fragile contexts. It both requires well-designed, inclusive, and contextually adapted approaches, and careful attention to ensure enhancing service delivery in the short term contributes to state building in the long term.

ACCELERE!2 (A!2) is a seven-year programme supporting improved governance across the education sector in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Implemented by Cambridge Education, the programme is funded by UK Aid from the British Government and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

A!2 has supported national, provincial, and local government to improve education delivery through stronger governance. It has sought to bring together stakeholders from across the sector including pupils, families, and communities with four core aims:

- 1 Ensure better use of resources for greater efficiency
- 2 Build capacity of key actors to ensure long-term change
- 3 Improve access to education by removing barriers
- 4 Develop gender equality and social inclusion in schools

As the programme ends, A!2 has been able to reflect on what has been achieved and the impact that it has had on the specific challenges presented by working in the education sector of a nation classed as 'fragile state'.

Defining a ‘Fragile State’

Fragile states suffer deficits in governance, reflecting the internal dynamics of a society, or exogenous factors such as natural disasters and regional conflict. Definitions of fragility used by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and several aid agencies emphasise lack of capacity and inability of government to perform key state functions for the benefit of all. The effects of fragility stretch beyond poor services to include conflict, state collapse, loss of territorial control, extreme political instability, and repression or denial of resources to subgroups of the population.

The World Bank CPIA (Country Policy and Institutional Assessment)¹ which assesses the quality of a country’s policies and institutions includes 16 indicators grouped into four clusters covering economic management; structural policies; policies for social inclusion and equity; and public sector management and institutions. Aligned to these indicators, donors’ definitions of fragile states are focused on four corresponding areas:

Weak institutional capacities and poor governance.

A low level of government performance, weak institutions, low institutional capacities to provide basic social needs

Impaired economic performance and impaired delivery of basic social services and inadequate efficacy of donor assistance. This is due to inadequate quality of policies, administration and limited administrative capacity

Failure to perform core roles or performing them inadequately. Administrations lack functional authority and cannot deliver core functions with incapacity or unwillingness to deliver core functions

Economic and/or social disruption, and insecurity and persistent social tensions.

Delivering change in DRC

Fragile states are characterised by a range of specific dynamics which operate beyond the immediate challenges they face, and at macro, meso and micro levels. There is uncertainty, an overwhelming focus on managing the ongoing crisis and consequently a lack of vision and leadership on other issues, and a lack of data, monitoring and steering policies.

The following reflects on the way in which these, and other, characteristics of fragile states impacted on A!2’s work in DRC and considers the programme team’s response to these challenges and the general lessons learned in the process:

Short termism

Government and agencies working in fragile states are inevitably focused on addressing urgent needs and this presents a fundamental challenge for reform programmes such as A!2. This focus on immediate concerns means that DRC ministries struggle to make time or identify resources for reform or to conduct the necessary technical preparation to underpin decision-making processes.

A!2 has worked to reverse this situation by generating strong technical documents, for example norms and standards or job descriptions for the administrative offices of the education sector or robust data and population projections for free education, to provide an evidence basis and analysis to support effective decision-making. A!2 has also encouraged government to take longer term perspectives into account during decision making, for example using population projections.

Layers of accountability

In DRC, officials wanting to get results often bypass the legal framework in place for the education sector and use informal networks instead. A!2 used networks established by the minister but also worked with civil society. This has been an additional and effective means of strengthening ministerial accountability. This initiative has been part of a more fundamental approach taken by A!2 to shift lines of accountability and to create space for other actors to influence reform.

At the same time, A!2 has worked to reduce the number and role of informal mechanisms by formalising key procedures. For example, the project team worked with the Ministry to strengthen the mechanism by which teachers and schools are added to the State payroll, to ensure more transparency, and managed to get all the school creation decrees published online, so that anyone could check if a school is official or not.

Overcoming the ‘chief culture’

DRC is dominated by a ‘chief’ culture in which people are used to deferring to the chief and waiting for the chief to act. The problem is that, in a fragile state, one can be left waiting an exceptionally long time for actions to be taken. People create their own dynamic and that is how they manage but passivity and dependence remain a big issue.

The challenge for programmes such as A!2 is two-fold, and the response involves taking both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. Firstly, programmes must convince the chiefs of the need to act. Demonstrating that the action involves minimum pain or cost makes the process of persuasion easier. Secondly, challenging the chief culture mentality is about supporting actors at grass roots level to understand they can push for the change and developing mechanisms for them to do so. It is about supporting empowerment and showing that they have means by which to challenge the centre. This is exemplified in A!2’s success in abolishing school fees for

girls in Equateur by providing information to empower civil society actors and provincial parliamentarians to mobilise and apply pressure where it could have most effect.

A2 also managed to start a reform process for the administrative offices system from the bottom up, by capacitating and coaching provincial and sub-provincial offices, and supporting them in designing a reform they thought was needed; to rationalise the system. A2 then communicated on this reform with the central level, backed-up by local testimonies and proposals, and managed to get it approved by the Minister.

Legalistic approach to change

Ministries in DRC often employ lawyers who inevitably take a legalistic approach to change. The consequence of this is that they have little understanding of what drives reforms and think that a text from the minister is enough to make things happen. What follows can often be a legally framed policy initiative that has minimal relevance to the education sectors operating reality or its application in practice. This situation typifies the lack of change management expectation.

A!2 has sought to bring actors together, to develop and promote evidence for analysis and to encourage careful consideration of real-world circumstances in which decisions are taken and pledge for a change management approach. Whilst this is a long term and ongoing endeavour, programme and donor responses in such contexts must always seek to encourage realistic, inclusive, and evidence-based approaches to change.

Lack of independence of civil society organisations

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) often lack impartiality and are frequently linked to the state or are politicised in one way or another. On the one hand, CSOs push for state accountability and, on the other, they seek greater visibility and power of their own. These dynamics within the civil society sector can make it challenging to identify appropriate civil society partners with whom to work because it is not always easy to know when CSOs are acting in self-interest.

A!2 has recognised these challenges and has invested in developing relationships and taking time to get to know CSOs through political economy and stakeholders' analysis. In doing so, A!2 has been careful to avoid the pitfalls of simply building a relationship with a single individual, especially in partner organisations overly dominated by one personality.

Programme Management Units (PMUs)

Donors working in fragile states establish Programme Management Units (PMUs) within ministries to ensure funds are effectively managed. However, this effectively creates a parallel administration which, in turn, generates more work for projects and places more demands on their time. Working with PMUs presents further challenges

because they are very much interested in their own survival and very often do not contribute to strengthening the administration as they tend to work in silos.

There are no simple answers to overcoming these challenges because PMUs cannot be avoided, and it is important to establish effective working relationships with them. In doing so, it is important to exercise political judgement to recognise the extent to which PMUs can support – or block – the progress that a programme needs to make.

Working with institutionalised civil servants

Many officials working in government in DRC come from the older generation. The institutionalised attitudes of these civil servants have sometimes been an impediment to progress because most have not been trained in use of new tools and contemporary management styles. Further, beyond their natural resistance to changes which many believe could cost them their jobs, these well-established civil servants often have outmoded perspectives which were not conducive to the required reforms and the need to think differently.

Wherever possible, A!2 has actively identified new and enthusiastic officers in government units, focusing particularly on those who have been eager to learn and help drive change. A!2 has trained and coached them so they had improved technical capacities. A!2 went further to ask MoE directors to appoint eager focal points for the team to work with.

Perceptions of a strong state

In DRC, a strong state is frequently regarded as one which employs large numbers of staff and where government is the 'first employer' (and where civil service jobs are used to buy political influence). This definition of a strong state impacts on the efficiency of reform programmes by generating extra bureaucracy. More particularly, it acts as a counter pressure to programmes such as A!2 which seeks to improve State efficiency in key areas such as the administrative offices, highlighted when analysing the way the system currently works .

Tackling the 'strong state' mindset, and many of the other challenges faced by reform programmes operating in a fragile state, means working politically and understanding where to push and where to step back or identifying different ways to make progress.

It is possible to bypass or manage resistance by empowering a broad range of actors, coaching them so that they know their role and are able to make more difficult decisions in terms of downsizing the size of their team when it will result in increased efficiency for example. Knowledge management skills play an important part in this process, equipping CSOs with the information they need engage and apply pressure to government.

Lack of donor coordination

Donors bring their own agendas to development contexts. They often have different technical interests and budgets which vary hugely, from the World Bank's \$800m to small NGOs' budgets of just a few million Euros.

In general, there is little coordination between them on the ground and they contribute to the general challenges of short termism that characterise fragile states because, as projects close, donors move on or determine new priorities.

Efforts to develop coordination mechanisms in failed states struggle to work effectively because they are often applied retrospectively to an already entrenched situation and, whilst the solution may look good in theory, it can be too ambitious.

A!2's response has been to attempt to provide a coordination function by explaining the programme's focus on governance of education, the importance of public finance and accountability and the consequent need to understand other projects' priorities and activities – whilst recognising that donors tend not to 'do' coordination. It also sought to provide a coordination function by technically liaising as much as possible with other projects working in the same technical areas of work and creating space for technical coordination when needed.

Implications for working in fragile states

Tailoring interventions to context

Donors require contextual analyses and to map existing service realities. Contextual analysis requires effective methods to understand the fragility features in each service sector and to develop intelligent indicators to monitor change and programme results, both in the short term (i.e., output, delivery) and longer term (i.e., systems, capacities, behaviour change).

Long-term focus on governance

A challenge in fragile situations involves balancing short-term versus long-term objectives. Donor programming for service delivery, state capacity and governance therefore needs to be integrated. This means working with the national government, and efforts at the level of national government need to be balanced with programmes linked to local authorities, CSOs and communities. In the long term, multi-layered strategies should be used to create a mixture of state and non-state provision.

Managing transition

Fragile states are in flux, more so than other situations. In stabilising contexts, partner country government ministries should be active participants in planning and programme development. Donors can promote engagement in decision making by local community actors and CSOs and engagement by a much wider group of actors, always mindful that there may also be issues of exclusion or self-interest among non-state actors. However, in situations that are not deteriorating, the role of donors must be to strengthen accountability, decision making and governance within and between actors, with the state as the legitimate provider of services to the people.

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/cpia>

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