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USAID ECCN Policy Issues Brief: Accelerated Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth in the DRC



THE NEED FOR ACCELERATED EDUCATION

This policy brief draws from the findings of USAID ECCN's recent study on alternative education¹ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in order to raise vital policy issues linked to achieving national and global goals for education.² That study, after a careful review of relevant literature, involved fieldwork in North Kivu as well as interviews in Kinshasa with key informants from government ministries, UN agencies, the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), bilateral donor agencies, and international NGOs. This brief is intended to serve as a catalyst for government, donor, and NGO dialogue on policy issues related to increasing the provision and quality of accelerated education programs (AEPs), which provide a strategy for reaching the large number of children and youth who have missed out on basic education, particularly in regions affected by crisis and conflict.

Today, approximately five million school-age children and youth in the DRC have no opportunity to acquire the competencies or certification provided by basic education. The country has recently made remarkable progress in both expanding enrollments in formal schooling and increasing the public funding to support this growth. Yet the numbers of children and youth who never get to primary school, or who drop out before completion, is still very high, reaching almost 50% among the poor and those in provinces that have been affected by conflict. In the DRC, children who have not entered school by the age of 8 or who drop out of primary school for more than one year—often due to family relocation or inability to pay fees—are unable to access formal education.³ Those most affected are usually the most vulnerable and marginalized: displaced children and young people, ex-combatants, girls, the very poor, and those with disabilities.

For children and young people who have missed some or all requisite formal schooling, accelerated education programs (AEPs) offer an alternative pathway to primary-level certification, thus enabling students either to return to formal education at appropriate grades, or to transition into work or skills training. AEPs provide vital basic skills and competencies, promote stability and security, and contribute to economic well-being.

FINDINGS FROM THE USAID ECCN DRC ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION STUDY

The USAID ECCN study of alternative education in the DRC focused on youth experience and perceptions of education, and specifically of AEPs, in North Kivu, a province that, following recurrent episodes of crisis and conflict, has the country's highest number of out-of-school young people. After surveying teachers, NGO staff, and more than 200 youth through focus groups, life mapping, and interviews, the study reported the following findings.

Voices of Youth: High Value for Education

The demand for education is high, and AEPs are seen as a valuable second chance. Overall, the young research participants, both female and male, placed a high value on education. They generally recognized the importance of knowledge and the capacity to read, write, and calculate. Education was additionally considered to offer less tangible social benefits, including self-respect and social worth, and the capacity to express oneself and to be independent. Education was said to “help us to know and speak like good, complete people” (female previously in AEP Kiwanja), and many said it was the means by which to be “valued in society.”

Despite the high and pervasive unemployment rates throughout the DRC, both male and female young people remained committed to the idea that schooling is essential to securing a job: young women in Rutshuru/Kiwanja who were in an AEP said that in “preparing for tomorrow,” education was imperative if one wanted to “get work.” A young trader believed that “The little money I earn, if I had studied, I would know how to use it effectively, how to manage it for my small projects; but not having studied, I have great difficulty trying to do my small projects.”

1 In the DRC, the term alternative education covers what is known as nonformal education, which includes adult literacy and vocational training. This brief focuses on a subset of alternative education, accelerated learning programs (AEPs).

2 In its own national planning documents and as signatory to such international declarations as *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Education 2030: Framework for Action*, the DRC has committed to “ensur[ing] inclusive and equitable quality education and promot[ing] lifelong education for all.”

3 Only those who are able to complete primary-level examinations by the age of 15 are permitted to enroll in secondary schools.

A young woman in Goma said, “We really like AEPs because we lost many years, and today we can catch ourselves up; this helps us to study in one year; it helps us to study without problems, it helps those of us who are poor and brings us up to secondary level.” Young men in Rubaya discussed how “nonformal education gives us the opportunity to study again to catch up with those with whom we studied in regular schools and who have already obtained their certificates.” A young woman in an AEP in Kitshanga said that the program “helps those of us who have missed out on education because of war and poverty; we are able to study again, and the education really helps those of us who missed many years because two grades are completed in one year.”

Formal Education Fees Impede the Poor

Almost three-quarters of all primary and secondary schools in the DRC are managed by religious networks, the great majority being Catholic; another eleven percent are non-sectarian private, and only seven percent are government-run schools. Given the lack of government financing for education, the policy declaration of free primary education has remained an aspiration, not a reality. Most schools charge students fees that cover teacher's salaries, administration, infrastructure, and virtually all operational costs. This burden falls heavily on poorer households; only half of the children in families earning less than \$50 per month are enrolled in school.

Accelerated Education Is an Orphan

AEPs are managed not by the DRC's Ministry of Education but by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Humanitarian Action, and National Solidarity (MINAS). The General Directorate for Nonformal Education (DGENF), guided by the subsectoral strategy document on literacy and nonformal education, lists as its target population those who are considered most vulnerable, including those in poverty, street and working children, orphans, and the illiterate.

The actual administration of AEPs is decentralized to each of the provinces, with the provincial representative of MINAS in charge of running literacy, accelerated learning, and vocational training programs. The ministry and its provincial offices are grossly underfunded, as attested in a 2015 planning document:

The budget for the 2016–2020 national education strategy provides a clear breakdown per education subsector. All alternative education represents less than 1% of the national education budget over the next five years. In 2016 alone, only 6.2 million USD has been allocated to alternative education, of the total 2016 education budget of 965 million USD. Monitoring of the actual percentage actually financed of these budgeted amounts would most likely show even bleaker prospects for government financing of the alternative education sector.⁴

Thus, although the DRC has an official framework on alternative education and national plans in place, it is overwhelmingly underfunded, leaving the government mandated yet unable to respond to the vast needs of the millions of young Congolese who are out of school.⁵

A consequence of the insufficient financing is the inability of the MINAS provincial offices to financially support or adequately supervise the proliferation of NGO-run AEPs. The sector lacks qualified teachers and administrators to run the programs; training and support of AEP teachers, supervisors, and program managers is likewise severely limited. Government-run AEPs often do without pedagogical materials, and although the accelerated learning syllabus is comprehensive and aligned with the national formal education syllabus, it could benefit from additional support and upgrading to reflect best practices in learning pedagogy. Those materials that do exist in AEPs are typically insufficient to meet the needs of the students.⁶

⁴ From MEPSINC (2015). *Strategie sectorielle de l'education de la formation 2016–2023*. Kinshasa: MEPSINC.

⁵ This is not to imply that the formal system has adequate public financing; it too is underfunded. However, recent significant increases in both donor and government support to the formal education system are noteworthy, and reflect a greater national priority on education.

⁶ At the beginning of 2016, there were plans to revise the national accelerated learning curriculum to mainstream learning on peacebuilding, gender, and life skills. At the time of this research, a national consultant to review the existing curriculum was being recruited. This revision is funded by DFID within the *Vas-y Filles* project, which is due to end in 2016 (multiple interviews, Kinshasa, February 2016).

It is noteworthy that, in recent education support projects negotiated with the national government and the Ministry of Education by the World Bank and the Global Partnership for Education, there is no mention of financing for accelerated education programs.

NGOs and Donors Step In

In response to the country's massive need and weak capacity, international and national NGOs and other private actors have set up alternative education programs, particularly in conflict-affected zones such as North Kivu. However, since the MINAS provincial offices do not have the resources to supervise and coordinate these efforts, fragmented, short-term AEP initiatives proliferate. The absence of coordination among international donors and NGOs within the national alternative education sector framework, and the lack of efforts to harmonize programs with the existing national strategy, contributes to further weakening of an already fragile, underresourced system.

It is difficult to assess the nature and coverage of AEP programs since they open and close so quickly, dependent for the most part on international donors and local NGOs. But by any measure, they touch only a fraction of the out-of-school youth in need. And youth are eager to participate, if the learning center is not too distant, provides adequately trained teachers and appropriate learning materials, and does not charge high fees. National figures indicate that there were 138,000 students in 2,624 centers during 2013–2014. This figure represents less than three percent of DRC's five million out-of-school children and youth.

North Kivu is the province with the highest number of out-of-school children and youth in the DRC. The DRC's Out-of-School Survey (OOSC-DRC 2012) indicated that 994,366 or 43.9%, of all those in North Kivu age 5 to 17 years were out of school in 2012, of whom 536,388 are between the ages of 12-17 years.⁷ Data gathered during the USAID ECCN study indicated that there were 35,417 AEP learners in 191 centers within the province,⁸ or approximately 6.5 percent of all out-of-school children and youth between 12 and 17 years in North Kivu who have access to accelerated education programs.

Summary of Findings

Forty-three percent of the school-age population in North Kivu are not currently enrolled in school, and those AEPs that do exist are severely under-resourced and lack oversight and coordination. Although a well-articulated government framework on accelerated education is in place, its lack of funding means that the policies to reach vast numbers of out-of-school children and youth with accelerated education are not implemented. Short-term donor-run AEPs proliferate, initiated independently of coordination on standards, financing, and sustainability. This disconnect between international donors and NGO actors within a framework of national policies, and institutions charged with implementing AEPs contributes to further weakening an already undermanaged system.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Establish a consultative process with government entities (e.g., ministries of education, social services, and youth), donors, churches, and NGOs to examine the policy priority of reaching out-of-school children and youth with accelerated education.

- **Consider a set of good practices or minimum standards for AEPs** related to their establishment, management, financing, instruction, staff training, materials, community engagement, and assessments.
- **Assess strategies for sector financing** including a plan for expanding access and improving the quality and reach of AEPs, particularly for the most vulnerable youth populations and for reducing or eliminating student fees.
- **Examine means of coordinating donor/NGO AEP initiatives** within existing government policies, institutions, and plans, and examine means of strengthening government institutional capacity to coordinate, oversee, and support AEPs within the provinces.

7 ISSP/UO (Higher Institute for Population Studies of the University of Ouagadougou). 213. National Survey of out-of-school children and adolescents in the Democratic Republic of Congo. MEPS, UNESCO, and UNICEF. Annex TABLE A5, p.120 and TABLE A14, p.129.

8 This number does not include the 7,066 students in vocational training or the 5,627 enrolled in basic literacy classes, since these programs, although under DIVAS, do not offer an opportunity to take the primary school examination and obtain the primary certificate.