

Country Profile: Democratic Republic of Congo

Equity in Education

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In recent years, the Democratic Republic of Congo has taken significant steps towards improving access to and provision of quality education following two decades of armed conflict and ongoing instability in the Eastern regions. Working in partnership with international donors and key civil society stakeholders, the government has developed its first national education strategy, the first phase of which is being implemented under the 2012 Interim Education Plan. DR Congo has also increased the proportion of the national budget earmarked for education from 6.5% to 13.8% in the past two years and secured additional funding from international donors, including the Global Partnership for Education, UK DfID and USAid.¹

There remain significant barriers to education for many school-aged children, however. The government has recently made the first five years of primary education free for all students, but many schools experience a funding gap that results in families paying indirect fees and other charges. With almost three quarters of the population living in poverty, more than two million children will never attend school and more than 40% of those that do enrol will not complete primary schooling. Learning outcomes also remain consistently low in reading, maths and French language. In Eastern regions, the recent upsurge in violence further exacerbates the situation for many school-aged children.²

The biggest challenge facing policy makers is thus to ensure equal access to quality education for the most marginalised children. Barriers to educational access include gender, poverty, disability, rural/urban divide, and regional conflict. Multiple disadvantage compounds the situation for many school-aged children.

Gender and Multiple Disadvantage

While attendance rates for both boys and girls at primary and secondary level have increased over the past decade, girls remain less likely to attend school than male peers.³ There are a number of socioeconomic factors to explain the persistence of the gender gap in access to education; these include cultural preference for educating boys rather than girls, a custom of child marriages and high number of school-aged girls heading orphaned households.⁴

Analysis of the impact of gender by itself provides only a partial picture, however. The least likely group to complete primary education are female students from poorest quintile living in rural areas (34%) followed by their male counterparts (47%), while the most likely group to complete primary education are girls and boys from the wealthiest quintile living in urban areas (91% and 92% respectively).⁵ A similar pattern emerges at both

¹ <http://www.globalpartnership.org/success-stories/democratic-republic-congo-partners-rebuild-education-system-together>

² <http://www.aworldatschool.org/country/drc>

³ From 2007 to 2013, female attendance rates have increased at primary level from 68% to 78% and at secondary level from 28% to 35% compared to an increase in male attendance rates at primary level from 71% to 81% and at secondary level from 37% to 45%. World Bank EduStats: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/education/>

⁴ <http://www.rescue.org/blog/congo-investing-in-girls-education>

⁵ <http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/dr-congo/#?dimension=all&group=all&year=latest>

lower and upper secondary levels, where girls from the poorest quintile living in rural areas remain the least likely group to complete their schooling.⁶

Gender inequity has an impact not only on access to education, but also on learning outcomes. Half of girls at school scored zero on four out of five early-grade reading tests⁷ and youth literacy rates suggest that learning outcomes for girls remain consistently low, especially for those from the poorest quintile living in rural areas.⁸ One reason that girls may not achieve basic literacy while at school is the common practice of distributing textbooks, pens and other limited resources to male students ahead of female students.⁹

The government of DR Congo has made improving equity and retention one of three key themes in the Interim Education Plan. Specific policies designed to tackle the root causes of inequity include improving school resources through provision of free textbooks, developing a national teacher training policy to improve learning outcomes and working towards curriculum reform.¹⁰

The government has also worked closely with development partners to reduce gender inequity for the most disadvantaged girls. The VAS-Y Fille programme - funded by international donors including DfID, Trust Merchant Bank and Airtel and delivered by the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and the Catholic Relief Fund - aims to reach 137,00 girls in five provinces where rates of female enrolment, completion and learning outcomes are the lowest (Bandundu, Equateur, Kasai Oriental, Katanga and Orientale).¹¹

The programme operates at a community level to

promote female education and increase skills across the community as a whole. Core components of the programme include further training for teachers, learning opportunities within the local community for out-of-school girls, reading clubs for wider community members and the Economic and Social Empowerment (EASE) savings and loans programme to strengthen parents' financial capacity.¹²

There are also important examples of change occurring at community level. For example, the Georges Malaika Foundation is a charitable foundation established to improve educational opportunities for girls. The GMF sponsors abandoned and orphaned young girls to attend school and is building its own school to educate girls from primary through to secondary levels. The GMF school opened in 2011 and currently has 150 female students enrolled. The GMF has also built two wells (one at the school and one in the nearby village of Kalebuka) in response to the need for adequate sanitation for the school itself, as well as within the local community, in order for girls to be able to attend the school.¹³

Conflict Zones

Since the end of the civil war in 2003, primary school enrolment at national level has increased from 32% to 75%.¹⁴ In Eastern regions, ongoing conflict and rebel violence continues to have a significant impact on access to education, however. In 2012, almost a third of school-aged children living in conflict zones (31%) have never attended school and more than 600 schools in North Kivu alone have been affected by renewed violence in the region. Save the Children estimates that

⁶ 21% of girls from the poorest quintile living in rural areas complete lower secondary compared to 48% of boys, and only 4% complete upper secondary compared to 10% of boys. The most likely group to complete lower and upper secondary remains girls and boys from the wealthiest quintile living in urban areas, although girls completion rates remain marginally lower than those for boys (85% compared to 90%, and 53% compared to 59%, respectively). <http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/dr-congo/?dimension=all&group=all&year=latest>

⁷ <http://www.rescue.org/blog/congo-investing-in-girls-education>

⁸ Youth literacy rates are 76% for girls and 96% for boys, although that drops to 46% for the poorest fifth of girls living in rural areas. <http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/dr-congo/?dimension=all&group=all&year=latest>

⁹ <http://www.rescue.org/blog/congo-investing-in-girls-education>

¹⁰ <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/03/01-education-reform-congo-winthrop>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/new-uk-project-in-drc-to-improve-girls-access-to-school>

¹² https://reliefinternational.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/gec_project_booklet.pdf

¹³ <http://www.gmfafrika.org/our-school/>

¹⁴ <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/03/01-education-reform-congo-winthrop>

200,000 children have had their education disrupted by the conflict, with girls and female teachers at additional risk of sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁵ There were also an estimated 7,000 child soldiers in 2011 despite reforms to make recruitment illegal.¹⁶

Programmes to improve educational opportunities for children in conflict zones are typically delivered by international development organisations. Since 2007, the International Rescue Committee has delivered emergency education to internally displaced children, including building temporary classrooms and providing basic school supplies and sanitation.¹⁷ UNICEF has also provided targeted support in conflict zones as part of their Back to School Campaign. The Back to School Campaign comprises both advocacy at local and national level, and resource provision including 'school-in-a-box' kits, specialised teacher training for conflict zones and developing strategies for the reconstruction of a sustainable education system.¹⁸

¹⁵ https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Attacks_on_Education_2.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/03/01-education-reform-congo-winthrop>

¹⁷ <http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/2010%20IRC%20DRC%20EDUCATION%20fact%20sheet%20-%20ENGLISH.pdf>

¹⁸ http://www.unicef.org/education/index_44908.html