Evidence and Learning: Strengthening crisis and risk-related data and institutional education information systems

Case Study – Save the Children DRC
Research on school dropouts as part of the REALISE project

Brief description of practice and the key learning

From October 2018 to June 2021, the REALISE initiative launch a research project with the aim to identify and monitor girls at risk of dropping out of school as well as to put in place community-based mechanisms to retain a maximum number of girls in school. This study focused on girls (particularly vulnerable in a context of important GBV) in 22 primary schools (4th, 5th, 6th grades), secondary schools (7th and 8th grades) and learners in remedial education centers (level 1, 2 and 3), in the city of Mbuji-Mayi, East Kasai province, DR Congo. It had the following objectives :

1. to monitor children to identify those who are at risk of dropping out of school,

2. to inform the school and its management team as soon as possible so that they can take action, or involve others to take action

3. support the school management team to create a set of interventions that will help children return to and stay in school.

This research allowed to determine the best ways to identify students at risk of dropping out, the causes of dropping out, the causes of absenteeism, the period when we have the most dropouts etc, to come up with proposals for monitoring methods and channels to keep girls in school. Indeed, in addition to generating data and information to understand the particular needs of the target populations and to inform stakeholders (including by involving parents, teachers, and the local division of the Ministry of Education in the endeavor) about the in-school, out-of-school, and community-based factors that lead to girls dropping out of school, the research also identified efficient initiatives to address the specific needs identified to mitigate the main risk factors and to support at-risk or previously dropped out students in catching up and/or returning to school.

What challenges does the practice/initiative address and why was the change needed?

This practice has been developed and implemented in the DRC, a context of protracted crises and overlapping emergencies, with high dropout rates, notably among girls aged 8-10 in the eastern regions particularly affected by the crises. The EiE community in DRC is regularly working on the issue of school dropouts but is not yet collecting enough information to allow for a holistic understanding of the reasons/factors behind the rates and to tackle the root causes. For example, available gender-disaggregated data highlight that, girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys, but there is little or no information to identify why and the specific needs of girls to access education in these contexts. In addition, there are very few initiatives to support out-of-school children in this context.

With this initiative, Save the Children piloted a process for defining indicators that focus on identifying the specific needs of girls in these contexts to mitigate the different parameters that affect access to education. The research mainly addresses : what are the main causes of school dropouts, what are their

impacts and how can they be addressed? This responds to a need for data and information to understand how to explain and mitigate the dropouts. There are significant gaps in existing data and a need to identify the risks and barriers girls face in accessing education in these contexts, including understanding how the school-community-student system works and impacts on access to education.

What were you trying to achieve? How do the aims and objectives relate to improving the identification and monitoring of education needs and barriers in crisis-affected contexts and emergencies?

The objectives of the study were to monitor children to (1) identify those at risk of dropping out of school for the school team to take action and involve parents as soon as possible, and (2) to support the school management team, again with the participation of communities, in creating a set of interventions that will help children return to and remain in school.

This research initiative focused on improving the monitoring of students at risk of dropping out, better understanding the different parameters, risks and barriers that influence access to education and dropout, identifying the impact of school dropouts, understanding how to mitigate the risks of dropping out and help girls who have already dropped out to return to school.

For the first pilot of this research and methodology, the project selected schools in low-income and marginalized neighborhoods that could not provide optimal learning conditions for students. The selection of these 22 schools was made during a workshop with all the stakeholders mentioned below.

Did your practice meet the initial aims and objectives? What were the main results?

Yes, the research met the objectives set by the project. The project helped the schools targeted by the research to produce data to identify children at risk of dropping out of school using the attendance register provided by the MoE. Then the teachers and/or the management raised awareness among the parents/guardians to ensure that these children returned to school. This research **allowed to determine the best ways to identify students at risk of dropping out**, including the most relevant indicators to **come up with proposals for monitoring methods and channels to keep girls in school**. Indeed, in addition to generating information to understand the particular needs of the target populations and to inform stakeholders (from teachers and parents to the local division of the Ministry of Education) of the community-based factors that lead to girls dropping out of school, the research also achieved to identified efficient initiatives to address the specific needs identified to mitigate the main risk factors and to support at-risk or previously dropped out students in catching up and/or returning to school.

The monitoring system that the project put in place, which included selecting partner schools, training teachers and providing them with equipment (registers, supplies, telephones), reviewing the data provided by the registers, and contacting parents, is working, as it has helped to identify patterns of absences and prevent dropouts. In addition, the project has strengthened the capacity of management teams and teachers in training and support of students. This process enabled the educational teams to identify at-risk students quickly and effectively, reach out to parents/guardians to involve them in the identification of the causes of these absences or drop-outs, raise awareness so that children could resume regular schooling.

- Example 1: Thanks to the Save register system, a pupil (aged 12) in grade 4 at Mbanga Tuzinde primary school was able to resume her studies. She was absent because her father was ill and had to look after his younger brother. Her teacher's tally on the Save the Children register showed her

absences. Subsequently, the teacher met with the mother and was able to sensitize her. The girl returned to school and passed her final exam.

- Example 2: In April 2019, the headmaster of EP TSHIYA in Mbujimayi had noticed that 7 pupils were increasingly absent, the management had solicited them and had launched awareness raising sessions to talk about the importance of school insisting on the fact that "the more you are absent, the more you lose subjects and finally you fail at school". After these sessions, the management noticed an improvement in May 2019 and that the number of absences had decreased considerably by the end of the school year.

In addition, several data collection tools have been developed and/or made available to the actors involved in this research to achieve the objectives:

- Standardized paper-based registers distributed by STC to all teachers in the schools participating in the research (with markers, pencils, etc.) to identify dropouts/at-risk pupils as early as the first month after the start of school – collected monthly, scanned by STC teams, and PDF are sent to a specialist who analyses and processes the results using a software

- At the beginning of the school year: training of teachers in the use of the registers and the research methodology.

The study provided the authorities with all the useful data and information produced to addressing dropout (e.g., scale of the girls' dropout problem in the pilot town, the best ways to identify children at risk of dropping out of formal and informal education, the best interventions that can prevent and successfully avoid dropout and poor attendance….)

What stakeholders were involved? How did you ensure their involvement was participatory and collaborative?

The research approach is community-based, as one of the main objectives was to understand how/to what extent the community impacts on access to education.

Contact between teachers and the project team was weekly to ensure the engagement of actors and to be able to respond to any obstacles to the smooth running of the research (lack of investment, problems with the use of equipment, etc.). Training for school staff were also organized to improve understanding of the initiative and ensure a correct use of the tools. This strategy enabled teachers/management to identify at-risk students quickly and effectively, and thus to approach parents/guardians to look for the causes of these absences or drop-outs, raise awareness and bring some back to school.

To involve the parents and the community, several mechanisms were used : door to door (teacher or headmaster goes to the pupil's household to talk to the parents/guardians including the children concerned) and contact by phone (the teacher calls the parents/guardians to ask them to come to the office and talk). Students in schools, girls who dropped out of school in the community have also been involved through awareness-raising activities carried out by some schools or via the Save The Children "children clubs" based in communities.

A key collaborative effort between the different actors was the results presentation and sharing workshops with the authorities (local directorate of the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Technical Education, in particular through the inspectors of the sub-divisions concerned as well as the local division of the Ministry of Social Affairs), the school teams and the Save The Children project team. These meetings were an opportunity for the project team to present the processed data and share the synthesized results to validate the information and data, to monitor the processes and to create a feedback loop between

the different actors. The value and importance of this collaborative mechanism was also to be able to share information with the local authorities, especially for the monitoring of children at particular risk. Indeed, if the cause of the drop-out of one or more pupils is identified as being linked to a situation of violence in the community, the information is shared with the Ministry of Social Affairs to take care of the children and tackle the violence. The processed data and results were shared with the authorities and are openly accessible to all EiE partners on the MoESPT website.

How did the practice interact with and potentially strengthen the institutional education information systems in the context?

As mentioned above, the authorities were regularly associated with the research during quarterly results-sharing meetings. The findings of the study were shared with primary and secondary education authorities and the social affairs division during feedback workshops held in the province. The study provided the authorities with useful information for addressing dropout: the scale of the girls' dropout problem in the pilot town, the best ways to identify children at risk of dropping out of formal and informal education, the best interventions that can prevent and avoid dropout and poor attendance. However, Save the Children has encountered a lack of commitment from authorities to take ownership of the practice despite a strong interest in the approach, methodology and results.

What challenges and barriers did you face and how did you change your approach to overcome these?

The main challenges identified during the implementation of the practice were

- Lack of motivation of teachers, especially due to their low pay and heavy workload: adding a new responsibility without financial incentive was sometimes difficult to accept and volunteering was not at all effective in this context.

- Lack of budget to support teachers

- Lack of buy-in from teachers for this new approach due to the lack of motivation and involvement of all stakeholders at school level in the first instance.

- At the beginning of the implementation: low involvement of head teachers and the parents' committee in the process of returning pupils to school,

- Difficulties in accessing reliable information due to errors in marking and filling in attendance registers by teachers

- Reluctance of educational authorities to take ownership and responsibility for the initiative, preferring to rely on hum/dev partners to carry out this type of activity.

To address these challenges during project implementation, particularly regarding the lack of buy-in, understanding and commitment, the project team has :

- worked to ensure the full participation of all relevant stakeholders at school level in the implementation of the programme, especially the management teams who were not necessarily well integrated in the process at the beginning

- organized training and capacity-building workshops with the heads of schools and teachers concerned.

What was the key learning from your practice? If you did it again, what would you do differently? What pointers would you give to help someone from another organization facing similar challenges?

This initiative is a new approach that has produced results in the schools where it has been developed. The evaluation of this practice has demonstrated a number of encouraging successes, both in terms of results and methodology. At this stage, although the practice has not yet been institutionalized at the global level of the INGO, or its in-country partners such as the Education Cluster, at the internal level, the methodology developed, and the indicators identified to prevent and mitigate the risks of girls dropping out of school are now included in EiE projects implemented by Save The Children at the national level. Save the Children wants to continue to build on its expertise in the ongoing collection of data on the prevention of girls' dropout in EiE contexts, and to develop partnerships that will contribute to achieving this goal.

The organization has identified the need to further work in close collaboration with the MoE to develop together a more complete methodology for a next phase and/or the generalization of the practice in the country. This could be a way to encourage participation and ownership of the process by local authorities. There is a willingness on the part of Save The Children to support education authorities in taking ownership of the practice, but for the time being there is a lack of commitment despite a very strong interest in the approach, methodology and results. The MoE remains, more or less voluntarily, co-dependent on hum/dev actors for the production of data on education in crisis contexts (especially in the eastern regions).

At the level of the project team, one of the learnings from this practice and its results is the strong belief that data management on this issue could really evolve if the Education Cluster members systematically integrate the collection of indicators in the communities where they intervene, such as the gross enrolment rate of children of primary school age disaggregated by group and gender, the out-of-school rate with a focus on the most educationally deprived marginalized groups, drop-out rate during the year in community school settings. The project team has also initiated a reflection on the renewal of a similar research to assess the long-term impact on the dropout rate of the students followed in the initial research.

Submitted evidence

- Research operational guide including the rationale and a technical roadmap of the practice
- Processed data from the register collected in the 22 school during the dropout research
- "Project's lessons learned" booklet