

# **Barriers to Accessing Education in Conflict-Affected Fragile States**

**CASE STUDY:  
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

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# 1. Introduction

Lack of access to education stands in the way of human rights and development promises. It is a stumbling block to reaching the global Education for All (EFA) targets and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. In recent years, there has been remarkable progress in many countries toward these targets. Yet 77 million children are still out-of-school globally (UNESCO, 2008, p. 60). Over half of these children (53 percent) live in conflict-affected fragile states (CAFS) (Save the Children, 2009a).<sup>1</sup>

A country particularly affected is Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where estimates suggest that more than five million children are out-of-school (UNICEF, 2005). It is one of the five countries in the world with the largest number of out-of-school children (World Bank, 2005, p. xiii). While data are limited, the gross enrollment ratio (GER)<sup>2</sup> in primary school is approximately 64 percent (World Bank, 2005, p. 16), with only 49 percent of those beginning primary school completing the primary cycle (UNICEF, 2005). DRC is one of the countries least likely to meet EFA and MDG targets. This case study explores the barriers to accessing primary education, primarily from the perspective of in-school and out-of-school children in the Nord Kivu province of eastern DRC. Their experiences are set in the context of government policies and school practices to reveal an education system that has been decimated by on-going conflict and the collapse of state financing and that is massively failing the nation's children. The report concludes by offering recommendations to government, donors, and NGOs on actions that could be taken to improve access to quality primary education in DRC.

The case study of DRC is part of a larger Save the Children Alliance research project on barriers to accessing primary education in conflict-affected fragile states.<sup>3</sup> The overall project includes a comprehensive literature review, two field-based case studies,<sup>4</sup> and a synthesis report. The project aims to identify evidence for the types of barriers to accessing education that exist in CAFS, how they function, and the kinds of policies and programs that might prove useful in promoting increased access to primary education. Findings from the literature indicate that these barriers fall into three broad categories: under-investment in education; exclusion related to individual- and group-level characteristics; and systemic discrimination in policies

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<sup>1</sup> There is no agreement on a list of countries classified as “conflict-affected fragile states.” The following list, on which this number is based, includes the countries identified as CAFS by Save the Children in the *Last in Line, Last in School* reports (2007, 2008, 2009). As specified in these reports, countries are classified as “conflict-affected” if they are included on the Project Ploughshare list of states that experienced at least one armed conflict between 1995 and 2004, or if they are classed as “critical” on the *Foreign Policy* 2006 Failed States Index. Countries are categorized as “fragile” if they are classified as either “Core” or “Severe” on the World Bank 2006 Low Income Countries Under Stress list. In this way, countries on this list may be conflict-affected or fragile but not necessarily both. The countries include: Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Iraq, Liberia, Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia/Somaliland, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Timor Leste, Uganda, Zimbabwe (Guatemala, Indonesia, and South East Europe are also part of Save the Children’s Rewrite the Future Campaign, focused on CAFS).

<sup>2</sup> Recent net enrollment ratios (NER) are not available.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Save the Children’s work in conflict-affected fragile states, please see (Save the Children, 2008a).

<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan and Democratic Republic of Congo.

and practices. These categories have guided the design of the case study of DRC and the presentation of findings in this report.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Education and Conflict in DRC<sup>5</sup>**

On-going conflicts in DRC since the early 1990s have resulted in more than 5.4 million deaths (IRC, 2008). Civilians have borne the brunt of this violence, with most deaths the result of infectious diseases and malnutrition. As rebel groups fight to control territory, there has been wide-spread looting, plundering of crops, rape, and abduction; millions of people have been displaced. At the end of July 2009, 2 million people in eastern DRC lived in displacement, with 800,000 of them having been displaced in the previous six months (IDMC, 2009b, p. 5).

These conflicts and resulting displacement have been particular impediments to school enrollment and attendance. The majority of displaced children have had no access to formal or informal education since 1998 (IDMC, 2009a, p. 108). At the same time, economic failure has impacted all spheres of life including investment in education. The GDP per capita dropped from US\$380 (in constant dollars) in 1960 to US\$224 in 1990, and to US\$139 in 2006, making it one of the lowest in the world (World Bank, 2008). Life expectancy is 43 years, and under-five mortality is more than 200 per thousand (World Bank, 2008). The Human Development Index ranks DRC 177 out of 179 countries (UNDP, 2008).

Donors' efforts have been on short-term projects and infrastructure rather than systems development (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009, p. 7). Further, delivery of this aid has been limited by the extent of violence and the targeting of humanitarian workers as well as the geographic dispersal of people and the absence of roads in eastern DRC (OCHA, 2009). It has indeed been local communities that have been the front-line in responding to the humanitarian crisis; seventy-five percent of those displaced have found refuge with local communities or are hiding in remote forest areas (IDMC, 2009b, p. 5). In Nord Kivu, where this study was conducted, 1.1 million people were displaced as of July 2009 (IDMC, 2009b, p. 5). In this setting, estimates suggest that only 34 percent of children have access to basic education, much lower than national enrollment ratios (Refugees International, 2009).

### **2.2 Methodology**

This study was designed as a qualitative investigation seeking to understand children's perspectives and experiences of the barriers to accessing primary education in DRC. A participatory and child-friendly approach guided the development of six research instruments to collect data from in-school and out-of-

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<sup>5</sup> A thorough review of the background to the conflict in DRC and its effects on education is beyond the scope of this case study. For more on this topic, see, for example: (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009; Balegamire, 1999; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2009a; World Bank, 2005).

school children and to triangulate it with a limited amount of data from parents, schools, education officials, and NGO staff.<sup>6</sup> The instruments included:

- Focus group guide for in-school and out-of-school children, which involved photos of in-school and out-of-school children and objects used at school (notebook and pencil) to act as prompts for conversation about barriers to access.
- Interview guide for individual interviews with in-school and out-of-school children, which involved engaging the child in constructing a timeline of his/her life using local materials and marking the times where school has been important to promote conversation about barriers to access.
- Questionnaire for in-school and out-of-school children, which gathered basic demographic data such as gender, age, location of residence, and parents' educational levels as well as educational data such as school fees paid, experience in school (eg. years, grade levels, type of school), reasons for attendance/non-attendance, and perceptions of quality and benefits of schooling.
- Focus group guide for parents, which involved photos of in-school and out-of-school children to act as prompts for conversation about barriers to access for their children.
- Observation guide for participant observation in classrooms, aimed at understanding the educational experiences of children with respect to discrimination, inequalities, curriculum, quality, and pedagogy.
- Interview guide for individual interviews with education officials and NGO staff, which involved open-ended questions and prompts to generate broad thinking on possible access barriers and to elicit their personal experiences with promoting access.

Seven Save the Children staff members from the Lubero office participated in a four-day workshop designed to build capacity in qualitative and quantitative research theory and practice as well as in the implementation of the particular instruments for this research.

During the training, all instruments were piloted in a school outside Lubero town and with parents and out-of-school children receiving support from Save the Children in Lubero town. The instruments were reviewed and adapted based on this piloting and translated into Kiswahili. The decision was made to use Kiswahili as the language of research given the familiarity with this language by most research participants; in situations where children or parents were not comfortable in Kiswahili, researchers used the mother tongue where possible.

Data was collected in three areas of Lubero district, Nord Kivu: Kipese, Lukanga, and Butembo (see Figure 1). Kipese and Lukanga are rural areas with families making their living primarily through subsistence agriculture; Butembo is a large town with a more varied economic base. These areas were chosen to represent the diversity of educational experiences in Lubero as well as places with large numbers of out-of-school children. Research was initially planned in Beni district as well but

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<sup>6</sup> The same research instruments were used in Afghanistan and DRC in order to facilitate comparison across the cases in the final synthesis report.

was omitted for security reasons. In each of the three communities, one primary school (grades 1ère through 6ème) was selected as the focus of the investigation. Schools were chosen to be representative of the community in terms of size, school fees charged, and quality; they were schools in which Save the Children had not previously worked. The schools differed along several dimensions, as can be seen in Table 1. All were public schools but included one *école non-conventionnée* (managed by the government) and two *écoles conventionnées* (managed through church organizations).<sup>7</sup> Participants in the research were selected from the school (in-school children) and from the school's catchment area (out-of-school children and parents) to vary by gender, ethnicity, language spoken, disability status, and poverty level. Data collection included five focus groups with in-school children (n=25 children) and 5 focus groups with out-of-school children (n=31 children); five focus groups with parents (n= 46 parents); individual interviews with in-school children (n=6); surveys with in-school children (n=17); lesson observations (n=15); and interviews with education officials and NGO staff (n=5). In total, the research involved 79 children, 46 parents, and 5 key informants.

Analysis of the data involved the development of a coding system of *emic* codes that emerged inductively from the research participants and *etic* codes that derive from the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the software program maxqda, all of the interviews, focus groups, and observations were coded line-by-line, using classical, free, and in-vivo coding processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The analysis is descriptive in seeking to explain *what* is happening regarding barriers to accessing education; it is also explanatory in seeking to explain *how* these experiences of barriers to access come about.<sup>8</sup> The findings from this case study are not representative but instead aim to build understanding of barriers that exist in these areas of DRC and that might be applicable to other locales.

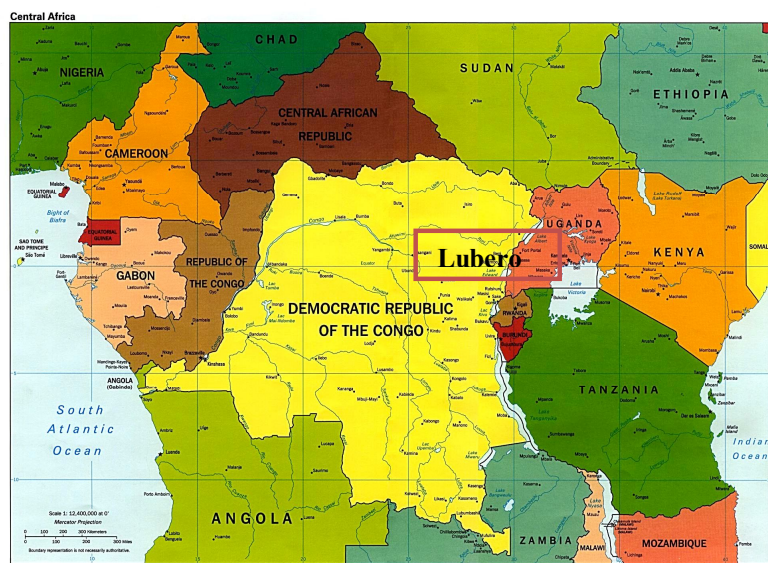
Further, there are several limitations to this study. We aimed to collect substantially more data than was possible; our intention was to involve 272 children in the focus groups, interviews, and surveys and 80 parents in the focus groups. Due to both security concerns in Nord Kivu province and to budget constraints, only one district was included in the study rather than two, and time spent in data collection was truncated. With lack of time, it was especially difficult to involve out-of-school children in the research, meaning that no out-of-school children participated in individual interviews or in surveys, making comparisons between in-school and out-of-school children difficult. Further, capacity issues with data entry rendered some of the data un-useable. The primary data collected for this study is insufficient to draw detailed conclusions; the analysis presented in this report is therefore exploratory and cannot be used to make claims about the relative importance of various barriers. The analysis presented in the case study draws heavily on secondary sources to corroborate the initial findings of this primary research.

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<sup>7</sup> Approximately 80 percent of schools in DRC are *conventionnée*, managed by churches (Ombaka, 2007, p. 1).

<sup>8</sup> The final report further compares across the cases of Afghanistan and DRC and identifies patterns, in the context of the literature review, to examine possible explanations for *why* certain barriers exist and are understood in particular ways.

Figure 1: Map of Research Site



Map of DRC, from www.thepublicist.org

Table 1: Characteristics of School Research Sites

	Kipese	Lukanga	Butembo
Type of school	Conventionée (Protestante)	Conventionée (Catholique)	Publique
School fees required for attendance	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enrollment	1317	662	1533
Displaced children	6.5%	None reported	3.7%
Children with disabilities	1.7%	None reported	0.07%
Qualified teachers (at D6 level)	80%	83.3%	63.6%
Paid by government	76%	66.7% <sup>a</sup>	100%
Paid by parents	24%	16%	100%
Permanent classrooms <sup>d</sup>	86%	100%	100%
Average class size (in observed classes)	64	58	58
Average no. pupils sharing a bench (in observed classes)	3	3	3
Pupil: Latrine Ratio	50: 1	62: 1	48: 1
Boys: Latrine			
Girls: Latrine	52: 1 <sup>c</sup>	62: 1	48: 1
Children repeating	11.6%	7.7%	15.7%
Pass rate, 6ème			
Math	34%	97.9%	94.9%
Language	56%	75.4%	94.9%
Corporal punishment practiced	Yes <sup>d</sup>	Yes <sup>d, e</sup>	Yes <sup>d</sup>



Frequency of School Management Committee Meetings	2 times/year	1 time/year	2 times/year
Frequency of Parent-Teacher Association Meetings	5 times/year	1 time/year	2 times/year

<sup>a</sup> Paid by both government and parents.

<sup>b</sup> Roof made of iron sheets.

<sup>c</sup> None dedicated for girls.

<sup>d</sup> As reported by children in focus groups and interviews.

<sup>e</sup> As observed by researchers at the school.

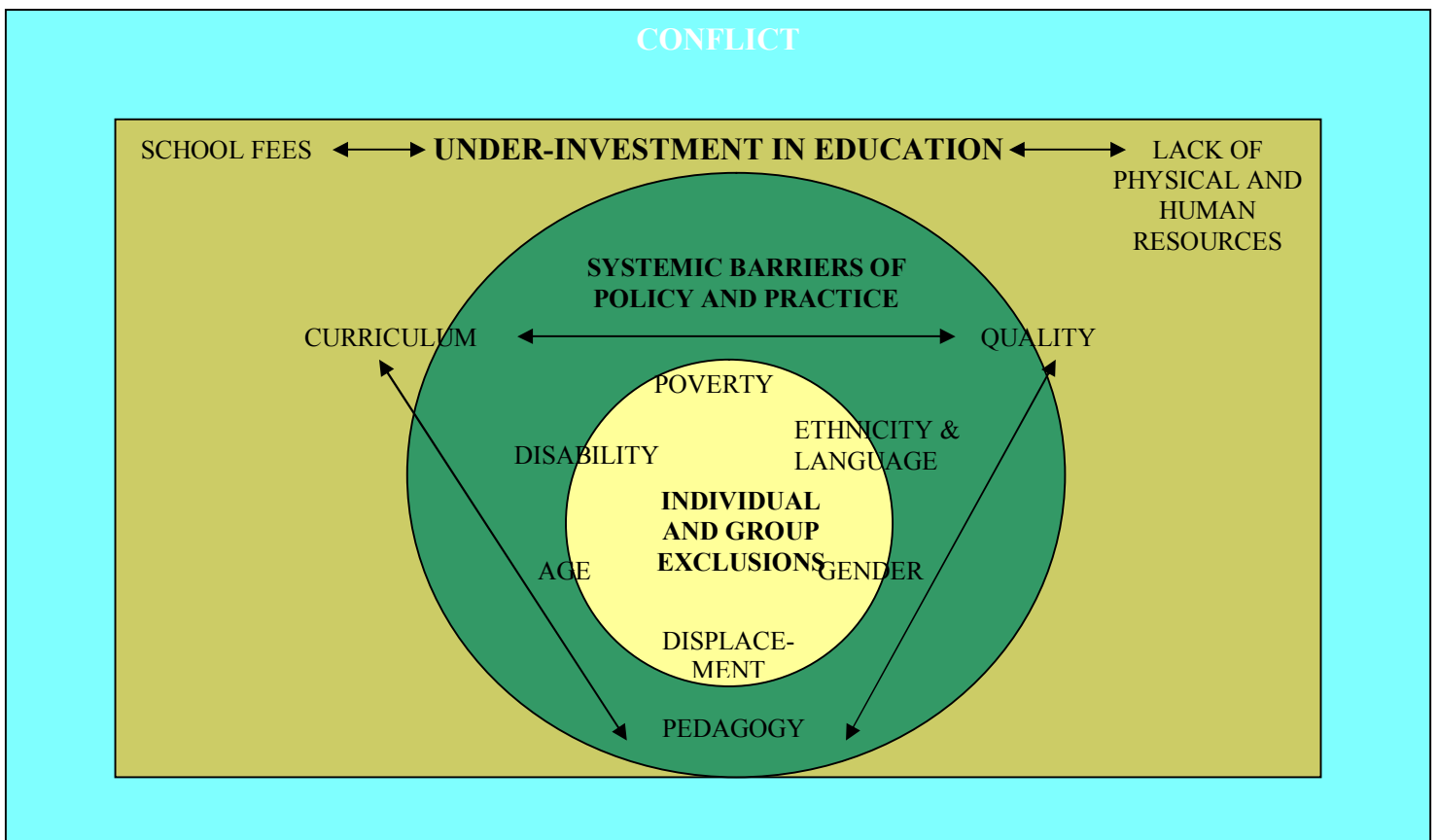
### 3. Accessing Education in DRC: Findings

Both in-school and out-of-school children attribute immense potential to education. All of the children who participated in this research wanted to be in school, whether or not they were able to be. They described how school would help them to acquire concrete skills of reading and writing and assist them to realize their plans to help care for their families. They saw school as the one pathway to making money. Education, three in-school children said in sequence, will help us to become “teachers,” “priests,” “presidents.” In-school children also expressed ideas about the less tangible benefits of education, including the acquisition of “new knowledge” and the way it helps one to “live a good life,” meaning “living without too much suffering.”

Parents, too, universally described the value of education. Education, they said, will help children “become useful to themselves and to society,” to raise the standard of living of their families, to support parents in their old age, to become “important people,” to develop the abilities to “reason profoundly,” to help “change the image of our community,” to become “role models,” to become “judges who will fairly rule on land conflicts,” and to become politicians “to save this country.”

Out-of-school children described not being able to share in this dream of what education can help to achieve. Over and over again, out-of-school children recounted their distress as they are looked down upon when they walk in the community, how “people do not love us.” Despite widespread belief in the value of education for both the present and the future, children in Lubero face significant barriers to accessing school. These barriers are summarized in Figure 2 and described in detail below.

Figure 2: Multiple and intersecting barriers to accessing education in DRC.



### **3.1 Under-investment: “The population is abandoned”**

An education official in Lubero told the story of how former Zaire President Mobutu Sésé Seko conceptualized education as the “fifth wheel or replacement tire” of the country, downplaying its importance and the state role in sustaining it. Over the past several decades, there has been massive under-investment in the education system to the point of its near collapse. The World Bank notes that a key feature of the education system in DRC is the “almost complete lack of government provision and financing of all levels of education, including the primary level” (2005, p. xiv). While spending on education represented 7 percent of GDP and 25 percent of the national budget in the 1960s, it represented only 1 percent of GDP and 5 percent of the national budget in the early 2000s. Spending per pupil per year fell 96 percent, from US\$109 in 1980 to US\$4 in 2002 (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009, p. 2). Spending has increased somewhat in recent years such that in 2008, 8.36 percent of the national budget was spent on education, and 2009 allocations are for 7.1 percent (Ministère de Plan, n.d.). This allocation, however, does not come close to the 16.7 percent of the national budget projected for education by 2008 in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) (IMF, 2007, p. 106).

Aid flows to education in DRC have increased in recent years, despite on-going hesitation about investment given the scope of state fragility and institutional instability. Preliminary analysis by Save the Children indeed indicates that more than half (53.41%) of the 2010 national budget will come from foreign aid (La Référence Plus, 2009; Le Phare, 2009). Yet the country remains a donor “orphan,” receiving relatively little aid given its size and level of poverty (Greeley, 2007). Education officials and NGO staff in Lubero and Beni universally state that there is the capacity to absorb a great deal more aid, but that funding is simply not available and urgent proposals go unfunded, often for years. Further, in published reports and policy document as well as on the ground, there is widespread criticism of the focus of education aid on systemic issues rather than immediate provision of services (Boyle, 2009; IMF, 2007; World Bank, 2005). In particular, there is little trust in the central government to deliver on reform and calls for a shift toward the decentralization of educational provision (Greeley, 2007; Kaplan, 2007, 2008). Critical to meeting educational needs is not only substantial budget increases through both national expenditures and foreign aid allocation but a concurrent focus on how the money is spent (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009).

On the side of the government and donors, there is clear rhetorical commitment to increasing access to education in DRC, with explicit objectives to increase the primary GER to 80 percent in 2008 and 100 in 2015 (IMF, 2007, p. 81; République Démocratique du Congo Ministère de l’Enseignement Primaire, 2005). Despite these goals, there has been under-investment of actual resources; this under-investment has served to limit access through three particular mechanisms: limited and poor quality infrastructure; lack of investment in teachers; and the persistence of prohibitive school fees. The evidence for these mechanisms is evident both in the literature and in the findings from interviews, focus groups, and observations with children and families in Lubero.

First, there has been a lack of investment in infrastructure, particularly in the building and maintaining of schools. Over the past several decades, most schools have been built by parents (Tshiala, 1995 in Balegamire, 1999, p. 244). Mumpasi and Pitshandenge cite data from a national household survey that nine percent of children provide the reason of “no local schools” as explanation for why they are out-of-school; in Nord Kivu, it is almost seven percent that face this barrier (2003). In this study, on the other hand, none of the in-school children surveyed lives more than a thirty minute walk from a school. Even when schools are proximate, however, the literature suggests that their poor condition serves as a major barrier to access. In the early 1990s, there were two major episodes of school looting by army forces when building and furniture were destroyed on a large scale (World Bank, 2005, p. 14). This destruction continues daily in eastern DRC with children and parents in focus groups for this study describing in detail the use for firewood of school furniture, doors, and other building materials by fighting forces. What infrastructure does exist is stretched thin. Estimates of average child to teacher ratios range from 46:1 to 60: 1 (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009, p. 8; Smith & Motivans, 2007, p. 367), with some classes observed at over 70:1 (Semali, 2007, p. 407). In the classes observed in three schools in Lubero, the average class size was 60. In these schools, children sat, on average three to each bench and shared latrines at ratios between 48:1 and 62:1 (see Table 1).

Second, there has been a lack of investment in teachers. In DRC as a whole, only 57 percent of the teaching force is trained (Wolhuter, 2007, p. 352), and Ministry of Education (EPSP) officials in Lubero described how those teachers who are trained prefer to take up posts in cities, leaving rural areas neglected. In the three schools in this study, most teachers have six years of secondary school education, with the rest having only four years, but there is “no good” pedagogical training in secondary school according to NGO staff members in Beni. Further, in-service support is severely limited; the EPSP in Lubero does not have a vehicle with which to even visit the schools under its supervision. Difficulties in providing for teacher compensation is a further barrier to access related to under-investment in teachers. Despite the fact that 86 percent of the national education budget goes to pay teachers’ salaries (World Bank, 2005, p. 19), most teachers are supported by school fees, with estimates that between half and 90 percent of teachers’ salaries are supported by parents (AfriMAP & Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa, 2009, p. 7; UNICEF & World Bank, 2006, p. 17; World Bank, 2005, p. 16).

This issue of teacher compensation is intricately connected to the third access barrier exacerbated by under-investment: school fees. The World Bank reports that parents pay fees of between US\$9 and \$14 per year at the primary level (World Bank, 2005, p. 19), yet Save the Children found that in South Kivu in 2005 parents were paying almost \$16 per child per year in rural schools in addition to \$10 for uniform and \$6 for school supplies (Ombaka, 2007, p. 3). Children and parents in this study described these fees being prohibitive for most families. Based on a national household survey, Mumpasi and Pitshandenge report that 62.5 percent of out-of-school children cite the reason for non-enrollment as “can’t afford fees” (61 percent in Nord Kivu) (2003). All children surveyed as part of this study reported that families are solely responsible for school fees, uniforms, school supplies, and meals, and that they often are not able to pay, an issue discussed further under poverty, below. UN staff in Beni and Lubero described how children sometimes pay teachers

in bananas and that children who cannot pay, even in bananas, are a “burden” and are chased away (see also, PAGE, 2007). Key informants interviewed for this study further confirm that the salaries and supplements that teachers do receive are not consistent and often so low that teachers need to cultivate gardens or teach in more than one school in order to make ends meet (see also, Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2009; World Bank, 2005, p. 19). An EPSP official in Beni explained:

The basic problem is that the central piece of the education system is abandoned by the Congolese state. I mean by that the teacher is not in a condition that enables him to work easily and to look after children. Therefore the quality of education is threatened because the teacher is not motivated. He works in bad conditions. Some have no proper housing. Some don't have a table to work. They sleep with difficulty, eat with difficulty. How do you want a teacher in those conditions to do proper work? That's the first difficulty. This difficulty then impacts the rest of the work

The literature also describes a perverse incentive to enroll more children, since teachers in schools with more children make more money (Ombaka, 2007, p. 2).

Parents in Lubero universally expressed the wish that “the government would do its work to make sure to pay the teachers” as “we are tired of paying the teachers.” The group Justice et Libération in Kisangani expressed how the lack of investment in teachers combines with other factors to be a critical and persistent barrier to access: “the current system of bonuses paid by the parents to the teachers is fundamentally bad; it absolves the State of its responsibilities, makes the teachers dependent on the parents, imposes an undue burden on the parents, condemns the pupils and students to a mediocre education, and closes school to those who cannot pay, thus perpetuating social inequality” (as quoted in Balegamire, 1999, p. 244). Ultimately, as an OCHA official in Beni expressed, “the children are the victims of the lack of involvement of the state in infrastructure and payment and supervision of teachers.”

In this environment of under-investment by the state, where families need to take primary responsibility for education of their children, there is pervasive blaming of parents for not taking the necessary initiative to ensure that their children go to school. In Lubero, in-school children in interviews and in focus groups described parents of out-of-school children as “negligent” and outlined what they wish these parents would do: they need to buy school supplies, they need to take their children to enroll them, they must encourage them with their studies, they need to pay school fees, they need to not ask them to work in the fields or to take care of young children. Parents, on the other hand, described in focus groups an expanded role for the state and call for both greater investment in education by government and the development of ways in which parents and schools can collaborate to work “hand in hand” to find ways to increase access for all children.

## 3.2 Exclusion from Education Related to Individual- and Group Level Characteristics

As described above, there are many barriers to accessing primary education that result at the intersections of the socio-political context and macro-level policy and practice. There are other barriers that act at individual- and school- level, affecting different people in different ways. The mechanisms behind these forms of exclusion, as explained by children and families in Nord Kivu, are explored below.

### 3.2.1 Barriers of Poverty

The new Constitution of DRC declares elementary education to be free and compulsory. The existing National Education Law (the *Loi Cadre d'Enseignement National*), however, authorizes parental contributions for the financing of schools (PAGE Project Education Policy Team, 2007). The costs associated with school mean that access to education is highly unequal, with GER for the poorest 20 percent of households only about two-thirds that of GER for the richest 20 percent of households (World Bank, 2005, p. 16).<sup>9</sup> The PAGE projects estimated that, in Equateur province, school fees for one child equaled 60 percent of per capita GDP and, in Sud Kivu, they equaled 19 percent (2007, pp. 36, 42). School fees are, in this way, unsustainable for families and constitute a regressive tax on poor families.

All three schools in this study charge school fees (see Table 1), and every child and every parent in interviews, focus groups, and surveys discussed school fees, and the associated costs of school attendance, as a major barrier to accessing primary education. The overwhelming hope for education, as expressed by children and parents, was that it would be “free.” In the data collected for this study, the fact that parents were not rich was the dominant explanation for why children are out-of-school. Indeed, several out-of-school children expressed the sentiment that they would be at school “from the moment they found money for school fees.” Both in-school and out-of-school children described little flexibility in terms of fee payment. “I knew moments of joy until I was chased away to find school fees, over and over again,” a 13-year old girl in Lukanga explained in an interview. A 14-year old boy in Kipese said in an interview that “the fact of being sent home often affected the quality of my school performance.” This continued disruption of school also led to abandonment of education completely, as one out-of-school girl in Kipese described how “I left school because every day I was sent home for not having school fees.” One mother in Kipese even found that her daughter was continually sent home when the school did not have enough money, even though her family had already paid school fees.<sup>10</sup>

A central difficulty in paying school fees is lack of access to money. Most of the parents in this study live on subsistence agriculture. One mother described how “the

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<sup>9</sup> The World Bank report states that it is also likely that the GER for poor households is over-estimated due to problems with the survey data.

<sup>10</sup> The PAGE project found the same to be true as parents who had already paid were asked to pay again in order to fulfill the “law of enrollments” whereby “inspectors require principals to pay to the provincial and central education institutions the full amount of fees not as a function of the rhythm of the payment of the fees but as a function of the enrollment numbers declared at the beginning of the school year” (PAGE, 2007, p. ix).

fields don't produce regularly enough; we plant only once a year and we harvest only once a year. It is therefore difficult to have money for the whole [school] year." When there is surplus harvest, agricultural products are sold at low prices, insufficient to meet school costs. The lack of access to money is heightened in rural areas such as those under study, and the literature provides evidence that rural residence also acts as a barrier to access, with school admission rates at 71.6 percent in urban areas and 43.6 percent in rural areas (IMF, 2007, p. 38).<sup>11</sup> Staff of OCHA in Beni further explained how even parents who have jobs in the civil service cannot afford school fees as they are often not paid or not paid regularly. War exacerbates this poverty, as one out-of-school girl in Kipese explained in an interview:

We fled the war and, as a result, I failed my 2ème class. When we came back, Papa found our fields destroyed, pillaged, and even our livestock killed. He said it was difficult to pay school fees for everyone, and he asked us to abandon our studies. Only my oldest sister stayed in school.

In a national household survey, only 0.9 percent of out-of-school children cited the need to work as a reason for non-enrollment (1.1 percent in Nord Kivu) (Mumpasi & Pitshandenge, 2003), however the children in this study described the need to work as a critical barrier. In the conflict setting of Lubero, parents described struggling to feed and clothe their families let alone pay school fees, and children explained that they need to work to support their families. Girls, in particular, are asked to work in the fields or to stay home and take care of the younger children. Boys often keep the goats or work odd jobs in the city. Single mothers in particular, who number many in this region due to war deaths, ask their children to work rather than attend school. Several parents also commented that boys, in particular, "like money better than school." This study provides evidence that not only the direct costs but also the opportunity costs of school are high.

One father in Butembo expressed a sentiment common among parents and children alike: "The community should unite with poor parents and help them with the education of their children: school should be free." The PAGE project demonstrated the possibilities for reducing the burden of school fees on families through the creation of alternative financing mechanisms such as school-level income-generating activities (IGAs), school-based businesses, and savings and investment groups for parents (Boyle, 2009). Yet larger structural issues of school financing policy at national levels are slow to change. Despite the centrality of school fee abolition in the PRSP (IMF, 2007), the creation of a National Commission for the Abolition of School Fees, and advocacy by churches, teachers unions, and parents in favor of eradicating school fees (PAGE, 2007), there has been little movement in that direction, and parents and children who participated in this study were universally explicit that the cost of school remains one of the most salient access barriers in DRC.

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<sup>11</sup> Region and Rural/Urban Residence is not explored separately as an access barrier in this case study due to the scope of data collection, limited to one region, and the focus on predominantly rural areas.

### **3.2.2 Barriers of Gender**

There are large inequalities in access to primary education by gender in DRC. In the 2001-2002 school year, the GER for girls was 56 and for boys was 72 (World Bank, 2005, p. 16). Children, parents, and NGO staff described a culture of prioritizing boys over girls when making a decision about which child to send to school. Especially due to early marriages, NGO staff explained that girls are less valuable to the household as they will leave once they are married. No parents, however, cited this reasoning. They did describe, however, the need for girls in particular to stay at home and take care of younger children. In a national household survey, very few girls cited pregnancy as a reason for dropping out of school, with 0.1 percent listing this reason overall in DRC and 0.0 percent in Nord Kivu (Mumpasi & Pitshandenge, 2003). In none of the schools in this study, however, are girls allowed to attend school while pregnant; one of the three schools allows girls to return to school after the baby is born; and none of the schools permit either boys or girls who are married to attend school. Several children described how their sisters were forced to drop out of school when they became pregnant. An EPSP official in Lubero stated that it is policy that girls not attend school once they are pregnant or have a child, as it is “a morality question.” Several children, both in-school and out-of-school, also mentioned the prevalence of girls being recruited as military wives and drawn into lucrative prostitution as explanation for the lower enrollment of girls in school.

While boys are enrolled in school at greater rates, children and parents were quick to point out that there are several barriers that boys uniquely face in accessing education. In particular, several children said that “boys are recruited into armed groups” and that “boys love money” and “boys do not like school.” Many described the draw of street life for boys, including the ability to make money and the lure of alcohol, cigarettes, and the cinema. Several mothers also explained that schools were not set up for boys, as their sons were shamed by being beaten by teachers and would not put up with being sent home over and over again for lack of school fees.

### **3.2.3 Barriers of Disability**

The education and training of disabled children is specified as a goal in the PRSP (IMF, 2007, p. 87). Despite this policy-level focus, disabled children face significant barriers to accessing school in Lubero. Only one child, an in-school girl in Kipese, described a physically disabled child in her class. Education officials explained that disabled children are, by law, admitted to schools, however, data from this study suggests that they face several barriers in gaining access. Given the distance that many children must walk to school, physically disabled children “have trouble moving [to school],” explained one in-school girl. If they do make it to school, an OCHA staff member in Beni explained, “[disability] is a cause of being teased and, from there, the child is marginalized and he will not go to school. They are usually alone at recess. He doesn’t have the support of the community.”

Children with mental disabilities often face even greater barriers. One mother in Kipese said that “children with mental disabilities who come to school are often sent home because the teachers have trouble making them understand the material.” Moreover, OCHA staff in Beni explained that mental disability, in particular, is a



cause of shame for the family as it “does not come from nowhere, there’s always someone behind it.” For this reason, parents described how families themselves can be hesitant to enroll disabled children in school. A further source of disability, parents explained, is conflict itself, as some children have been traumatized and they cannot focus in school causing a “negative impact on learning.” The overall attitude toward disability was expressed clearly by one father who said, “how would you wish for a disabled child to go to school when, ever since we were born, we have never seen a disabled person among church leaders, political administrators, teachers. Where would disabled people work? It is therefore useless to have them study.”

### **3.2.4 Barriers of Ethnicity and Language**

Despite the wide diversity of ethnicities and languages in DRC broadly and in Lubero specifically, research participants did not think that these factors were salient barriers to accessing education. And none of the schools in which research was conducted noted the enrollment of ethnic and linguistic minority children. One father described how the all-encompassing conflict that people in this region have lived and are living through means that it is only war they can think of as a barrier. “There is no discrimination,” he said. Ministry officials and NGO staff echoed this description, but they also highlighted the “marginalization” of the Pygmy, or Batwa, population.

Other studies suggest that part of this marginalization of Batwa children vis-à-vis education relates to the type of nomadic movement the communities engage in to follow their livelihoods. An NGO staff member interviewed for this study explained that “when there is the harvest of honey, fruit, mushrooms, the children leave.” Several education officials advocated that Batwa “settle” and begin to “wear clothes,” and then they will be “doing well.” A Save the Children report, however, underscores how previous programs to increase educational access have failed for precisely this reason, for not taking into account the cultural and social characteristic of this ethnic group (2008b). The words of some educational officials and NGO staff belie the deep discrimination that Batwa face and that inhibit their access to education. One man, for example, stated that “[i]t’s a people, permit me the word, retarded compared with others.” As if trying to counter this pervasive stereotype, another felt the need to specify that “these children are by nature intelligent.” The issue, he explained, is that “they are not stable in school.” An NGO staff member explained that “they are not interested in school.” Similar glimpses into discriminatory sentiments were also evident against the Pere ethnic group. The Pere is a Bantu group, many of whom live near to mining areas in eastern DRC where children go to work at young ages. An educational official attributed the issue with access to education among the Pere to “culture,” and elaborated that “I hear there is a Pere priest that is intelligent and he has showed that it’s possible for Pere to be intellectual.” These issues of discrimination warrant much more extensive study, particularly including the perspectives of Pere and Batwa children, to understand the barriers to educational access that result.

### **3.2.5 Barriers of Age**

In DRC, on-going conflict, displacement, and recruitment into armed forces have interrupted schooling for many children, often for many years. In 2001, delayed or interrupted schooling affected more than 16 percent of boys and 12 percent of girls

(IMF, 2007, p. 38). By 2007, it was estimated that over 30,000 children had been attached to fighting forces (Amnesty International, 2006),<sup>12</sup> and estimates place between 3000 and 7000 children still in government forces and armed groups (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008, p. 106; MONUC in IDMC, 2009b, p. 7). Active recruitment continued in 2007 (and likely beyond), especially in Nord Kivu (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008, p. 107).

Once stability has returned or child soldiers have been demobilized, children often seek to enter school, often at advanced ages (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 50). While many parents in Lubero stated that there were no restrictions placed on older children attending school, children, especially out-of-school children, disagreed stating that “they cannot go [to school], they are not admitted.” In most cases, children 10 years and older are not permitted to enroll in the first year of primary school. Published reports confirm the strict nature of age policies within the DRC school system (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 53). In addition to these policy restrictions, there are also barriers to access that emerge in the interactions of older children with schools. One in-school boy in Lukanga commented that “some older children are afraid to go [to school] because they are ashamed to be in the same class with younger children.” An in-school boy in Butembo discussed how “they are already used to staying at home” and therefore do not have the motivation to attend. An in-school girl in Lukanga observed that “they are made fun of.” A father in Kipese noted that older children can “feel more intelligent than the teachers; it takes a special kind of teacher for that type of child.” Many children mentioned that older children, in particular, do not have access to money for school fees and that their parents do not support them in seeking an education. Many of them described the need to work, which prevented them from attending school. While accelerated learning program (ALP) have been particularly effective at addressing the access barrier of age (Lubamba-Panda, 2008; Save the Children UK, 2008a, pp. 6, 12-13, 2008b, pp. 4-5), none of the participants in this study commented on experiences with or the potential of this type of program.

### **3.2.6 Barriers of Displacement**

As explained above, there has been massive displacement in eastern DRC, with 1.1 million currently displaced in Nord Kivu, where this study was conducted (IDMC, 2009b, p. 5). Parents and children cited this displacement as a primary cause of non-enrollment in school. Often, they explained, they do not find schools in the areas to which they are displaced due to destroyed infrastructure or they find themselves in “forest” areas where there are no schools. Some children in this study explained that they have not been affected by displacement as the “troubles” did not reach their home areas. For those that have been affected, however, the displacement has often been constant. An education official in Lubero explained that “displacement is sometimes daily” such that children move around constantly and their schooling is disrupted. In this situation, he said, “people are losing their sense of schooling.”

Most importantly, children who are displaced described facing greater poverty than they did in their home communities. In displacement, their families’ livelihoods have

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<sup>12</sup> This was the figure accepted by the Government of DRC and the World Bank in their plans for child demobilization.

been taken away: they have left most possessions behind, they do not have access to their fields, and animals are frequently stolen. In this situation, there is no possibility of money for school fees. One out-of-school boy in Lukanga explained that “we fled the war with my family and, up to the present, my parents have no money to speak of. I cannot go to school.” A mother in Butembo described similar difficulties: “the war brings displacement of people and all activities are interrupted, including school. This has been my case: I left Kirumba in November [one year ago] and up to now I have difficulty in paying school fees for my children.”

### **3.3 Systemic Discrimination in Policies and Practice**

#### **3.3.1 Curriculum, Quality, and Pedagogy**

In a national survey, 76 percent of Congolese households were not satisfied with the education of their children (IMF, 2007, p. 20). The participants in this study similarly described the quality of education in DRC as “low.” Repetition rates nationally are very high: only 20 percent of children reach the end of primary school without repeating at least one year, and only 14 percent achieve their school-leaving certificate without repeating (World Bank, 2005, p. 17). In the schools in this study, an average of 11.7 percent of students repeated each class, and the 6ème pass rates in mathematics and the official language ranged from 34 to 97.9 percent (see Table 1). The World Bank concludes that even students who pass “do not acquire minimum competencies” (2005, pp. 17, 23). In comparison to other similar countries, the returns on schooling are low in DRC, especially in rural areas. The PRSP attributes this fact to the disappearance of the formal private sector and the decline of wages in the public sector (IMF, 2007, p. 28). Yet the decisions that children and parents make about education as a “waste of time” (Mumpasi & Pitshandenge, 2003) may also relate to quality.

Children and adults in this study commented only briefly on the quality of *what* they learn. An education official from Lubero stated that “we should not always receive things from the Capital,” describing the lack of relevance of the content of the curriculum, especially to the remote and mostly rural areas of the country. Almost all children (93 percent) surveyed for this study, all of whom were in-school children, felt that schools should not become more vocational in nature, as is sometimes suggested. In terms of the content of the curriculum as it is taught daily in schools, few conclusions can be drawn from this study; in the majority of the 15 lessons observed, researchers sensed that the material had been taught before and was being put on display for the observers.

Children are much more concrete about the quality of *how* they learn. They commented particularly on the importance of a good teacher. A 14 year-old in-school girl from Kipese said in an interview, “each time that I encounter a good teacher” is a moment of “joy.” In survey results from this study, children specified some characteristics of what makes a good teacher. All of the children, for example, agreed that if teachers posed more questions in class, education would be of better quality. In an interview, one in-school boy in Kipese was explicit that the reason he liked his teacher was that the teacher responded well to questions. In lessons, however, teachers were observed to interact with students in divergent ways. In several instances, observers described teachers as “mean,” with one teacher

incessantly crying “silence” in lieu of teaching. In another class, observers took the children’s silence as an indication that they were afraid of being “injured or chastised” if they behaved differently. In a different school, one teacher was observed to pay attention only to the students who sat in the front and who were strong academically. Another teacher referred to her students negatively, as “bandits” and continually berated them for disrupting her class. In many cases, teachers hurried their students to finish exercises even when the students were not given enough time to properly reflect on and process the material. In other classes in the same schools, teachers were “dynamic” and created a “jovial atmosphere.” Indeed, many classes were participatory with teachers making an effort to involve all students. In several classes, one student from each bench took a turn at the board presenting work. One observation noted that the lesson had been a remarkable success in that all students contributed to the learning of the class.

The issue of corporal punishment, practiced across the three study schools (see Table 1), emerged as a salient access barrier in interviews and focus groups. Several out-of-school children described how they decided not to go to school anymore because they could not predict their teachers’ behavior and felt as if teachers often acted on “whim” or with “bad behavior.” In particular, many children and parents mentioned their fear of the cane and listed it as a particular reason for non-attendance. A thirteen year-old girl who dropped out of school said, “[f]or the rest of the year, I saw others drop out because of the cane. I didn’t like this bad behavior of the teacher because it was the reason for many of my colleagues dropping out.” Another in-school boy said that “our teacher is good but he beats students on the head. If you make an error for the first time, he excuses you, but the second time he whips you.” In Lukanga, in-school children described how they are beaten if they disrupt the class, and they are made either to stand by the door or are sent home if they do not have school fees or are late. In a focus group, an in-school girl described another punishment for being late: “[the teacher] asks you to carry rocks on your head for a distance of about two kilometers. That makes children drop out, for sure.” The definition of a “good teacher” in children’s words usually included the idea that “they do not beat me.”

Parents felt quite helpless in terms of contributing to the improvement of quality in their children’s schools. In the survey of in-school children for this study, almost all children (88 percent) agreed that more parent involvement in education would also make education better. Although one of the schools has “communications books” in which parents and teachers converse with each other, School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations meet infrequently, leaving little opportunity for parents to participate (see Table 1). Parents stated that the only way for them to be involved was through paying the teachers, an issue that they felt should be the state’s responsibility, as described above. Of particular concern to the parents in Lubero, and echoed by two key informants, was that since teachers are paid so little (if at all), no one who is educated wants to be a teacher, which serves only to promote a continuous cycle of poor quality teaching.

### **3.3.2 Conflict and Violence**

An education official in Lubero described the situation in this part of DRC as “permanent insecurity.” Universally, participants in this research described war and

conflict as the over-riding barriers to educational access. “Without peace,” one father in Kipese said, “it is difficult for us to educate our children.” An in-school 14-year old boy outlined the impacts on his family: “I have come to understand how bad war is: it ruins families... two of my brothers have abandoned their studies, two of my sisters have become pregnant: everyone stays at home, idle.”

The access barrier of conflict is, on one level, about infrastructure. As described above, fighting forces often burn benches and other school furniture for firewood. They also occupy schools, which compels schools to close to children indefinitely. During the course of this research, the team heard news from an education official that five schools had been burned; and also learned from NGO staff of the positive development that a few schools had been returned to the communities through negotiations with armed leaders. As children described it, however, the situation is always volatile with uncertainty from one day to the next whether there will be a physical school to attend.

On another level, this access barrier is about the consequences of conflict on children’s and families’ lives. Children are often on the front lines of conflict, either fighting in armed forces or vulnerable to the possibility of recruitment. In this situation, they described being “afraid to go to school.” Even once at school, children sometimes described being afraid as in the case when a military camp was built on the hill just above a school and was, as the Principal described it, feeding off the school and community, sending children without paying fees and burning benches and doors when firewood was needed. In all cases, children discussed in depth the impacts of the environment of conflict on their lives. In particular, they described the deepening poverty that results, and the immense barriers this poverty imposes on access to education.

## **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This case study demonstrates that there are many reasons for which children in DRC are marginalized and experience limited access to primary school. These barriers include continued under-investment in infrastructure, teacher training, teacher compensation, and school fee abolition in a country in which state financing for education has all but collapsed; exclusion based on gender, language, disability, age and, most importantly, displacement and associated poverty; and systemic policies and practices related to the quality of education, particularly pedagogy, and the overall context of conflict.

These barriers are similar to the barriers identified in the literature as common to conflict-affected fragile states and, to some extent, to all low-income countries. They are amplified, however, by the pervasive and on-going nature of the conflict in DRC and the concomitant collapse of state financing for education. In particular, one of the central findings of this case study is that conflict and poverty act in synchrony to create insurmountable barriers to accessing primary education. The volatility of the situation is demonstrated by the similarity of experiences of both in- and out-of-school children: the line between being able to attend school and not is very thin and can shift daily depending on the conflict environment and its effects on family

livelihoods. Indeed, both in-school and out-of-school children and their parents acknowledge that conflict is the basis for the poverty they experience and the resulting economic problems that prevent and/or limit access to education. Yet it is not only an end to conflict they suggest, but a complete remaking of the system of education in DRC based on the abolition of school fees and the fair and timely compensation of teachers.

The findings of this study suggest the following actions in order to improve access to quality primary education in DRC, each of which require the collaboration of government, donors, and NGOs:

- Continue and strengthen collaborations between government, donors, and NGOs to support concurrent efforts at long-term systemic reform of the education sector as well as short-term educational provision, specifically in situations of on-going conflict such as Nord Kivu. This two-pronged approach to education in DRC will allow immediate action to facilitate the enrollment and attendance of the massive number of currently out-of-school children while also building a stronger and more self-sufficient system for the future.
- Develop policies, programs, and advocacy campaigns to address the environment of violence both inside and outside of classrooms. Action on this issue includes preventative measures to prevent direct attacks on schools that may involve parent, community, and police mobilization as well as international advocacy; on-going efforts on regional, national, and international levels to curb the generalized conflict in eastern DRC, in particular; and the fostering of schools as safe and child-friendly places that encourage and motivate both teaching and learning, including codes of conduct for teachers, parents, and children based in child rights.
- Promote national government- and aid-based mechanisms of financing for education that will allow for forward movement on the abolition of school fees and the related fair and timely payment of teachers' salaries by government. Action on this issue needs to include advocacy for increases in national budget investment in the education sector as well as encouragement of donors to follow through on their pledges of aid to education in CAFS (see Save the Children, 2009b). At the same time, NGOs can build on past successes of income-generating and livelihood enhancement programs that both increase parents' ability to pay school fees and increase resources available to schools through other sources in order to reduce the burden of school fees on families.
- Realize promises of decentralization of educational services so as to allow decision-making and supervision to occur in the provinces. Action on this issue may include implementation of local school management reforms to allow for relevant and democratic participation by the community, parents, and children, which can assist in fostering ownership and accountability.
- Invest in much-neglected school construction and rehabilitation. Much of the burden of this work has been borne by families in the past, and government, donors, and NGOs need to play a greater role in order that schools become

accessible to the most marginalized children in conflict-affected and remote regions of the country.

- Focus on the development and financing of teacher training institutes and programs, with a specific focus on participatory pedagogy and positive discipline. These initiatives may be most effective if decentralized in a way as to support local Ministry of Education officials, inspectors, and school directors to be able to carry out continuous monitoring, evaluation, and professional development for teachers.
- Engage in broad-based advocacy campaigns using a variety of media as well as local, community-based programming to foster the desire for education among children and to encourage parents to send children to school. The need for these campaigns is particularly strong among the hardest to reach and most marginalized populations, including in rural areas, the displaced, overage children, and ethnic and linguistic minorities.
- Encourage further research, built into on-going processes of the formal education system, through which schools and the Ministry of Education collect data on in-school and out-of-school populations, particularly excluded groups; international donors, implementing agencies, and NGOs undertake quality monitoring and evaluation and disseminate findings widely; and academics engage in in-depth and longitudinal studies to untangle the pernicious barriers to education that continue to prove elusive. All of these forms of research require collaboration and the involvement of communities, particularly children, in documenting barriers.

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