Youth and Alternative Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo Plans for a Field Study

Discussion Document

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I.   Background: Education and Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Late in 1996, when Laurent-Désiré Kabila and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL) launched their armed rebellion against the government of Zaire (now called the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC), they were attacking a government on the precipice of collapse. The nation's autocrat, Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga,[1] was in declining health and much of the nation's infrastructure was in ruins. The ADFL's assault, with crucial support from Burundian, Rwandan and Ugandan government forces, exposed the weaknesses of the national government and its military. Mobutu's regime fell in a matter of months (Prunier 2009).

Nearly two decades later, conflict continues to pervade six of the huge nation's eleven provinces.[2] Eastern DRC remains a particular focus of conflict. This is partly a result of the bounty of mineral deposits in its soil (such as gold, wolframite, coltan and cassiterite) that fuel conflict and profit for an array of state and non-state actors (Vircoulon 2011). The mining areas also reportedly are sites where "debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery in the commercial sex trade, and child slavery" all thrive (Leslie et al. 2011: 5). In addition, the DRC has experienced a "scale of sexual violence" that "is unparalleled in any previous or current conflict" (Meger 2010: 119). In less than nine years of conflict (August 1998 to April 2007), a well-known study estimated that there were 5.4 million excess deaths in the DRC (Coghlan et al. 2007: ii).[3]

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[1] His self-appointed name was said to mean "The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake" (Deibert 2008: 64).

[2] The provinces are: Équateur, Katanga, Maniema, Nord-Kivu (North Kivu), Orientale, and Sud-Kivu (South Kivu). Detailed by an education practitioner working in DRC during a private interview.

[3] The authors arrived at the number of excess deaths by estimating "the number of deaths in excess of the sub-Saharan baseline occurring throughout DR Congo" (Coghlan et al. 2007: 1).

Although the number of Congolese who have perished due to conflict since April 2007 is unclear, it presumably is very substantial.

Writing about the DRC in 2010, four researchers collectively stated that "The institutions and infrastructure that sustain the society [in the DRC], such as rule of law, health care, and the educational system have been destroyed or are barely operative" (Pham et al. 2010: 313). Nearly two decades of punishing conflict would seem to support this assessment. The dire straits facing the DRC's health system, for example, is illustrated by the following commentary from the nation's Minister of Health in 2012. The minister stated that while infant mortality is exceptionally high (158 deaths per 1,000 births), nearly half of pregnant women in the DRC do not survive childbirth (449 deaths for every 1,000 births) (Mohamed 2013: 73).

In many ways, the state of education is similarly alarming. It is estimated that "one of five children of primary school age (6-11 years old) will never attend school." For those that do, a survey found that two-thirds of third and fourth graders could not read a single word. Ninety-one percent of those who managed to read a complete sentence could not understand it (Center for Universal Education 2013: 1, 5). The education status of older youth is poor as well. Nearly four in five of those aged 15-19 are not in school and ninety percent are functionally illiterate. The situation for youth aged 20-24 is just as distressing: 93 percent are not in school and three in four are functionally illiterate (Bashir 2009: 15).

One might think that the state of education in the DRC is completely in disrepair. Yet the system itself is remarkably resilient: it has not only survived but expanded its reach over time, including during years of conflict (Titeca and De Herdt 2011). The value that Congolese youth and parents place on education is exceptionally high (Seymour 2011). This is the case "in spite of [education's] relatively high cost and [its] lack of quality." One suggested reason for soaring demand is that educational accomplishment is a leading determinant of income in DRC. There also is speculation that education's value has increased as the attractiveness of farming has declined (De Herdt et al. 2012: 698, 688). In addition, since youth over age 15 cannot attend primary school,[4] the door has opened for alternative education programs, and accelerated learning programs in particular, to provide educational options for over-age, out-of-school Congolese youth. These factors collectively uphold the education system and its perceived value in the DRC. They also constitute the starting point for the proposed research that will be considered here.

II.   Purpose: Identifying Knowledge Gaps and Research Questions

This discussion paper marks the beginning of a process leading to field research and a published report. The purpose of this process is, first of all, to identify crucial gaps in knowledge that hamper the expansion of equitable access to education in conflict-affected contexts. The next step is to investigate these knowledge gaps in the field. The research will focus on alternative education programs (AEPs) for over-age, out-of-school youth in the Democratic Republic of

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[4] As reported by an international agency official based in DRC.

Congo (DRC).[5] There is a particular emphasis on accelerated learning programs (ALPs), which are especially prevalent in the DRC. For the purposes of this paper, AEPs will refer to all types of education programs that are not considered part of formal education systems. The ALP term will refer to programs that provide learners with the equivalent of a formal education on an accelerated timeframe. An accelerated learning program is one form of alternative education.

This paper sketches a preliminary set of central knowledge gaps and research questions that the practitioners and experts identified. It draws on a series of extended interviews with seven practitioners with significant experience in the DRC with youth and education, as well as four veteran experts on education in conflict and crisis contexts more generally. The interview questions invited assessments of alternative education for out-of-school youth. Then, with an eye to expanding equitable access to education for out-of-school youth, practitioners and experts were asked to identify what they saw as the most important knowledge gaps that should be researched in the field. An explicit purpose of each interview was to invite contributions of research questions that needed to be explored much more thoroughly.

This document will serve as the starting point for subsequent discussion about the primary knowledge gaps and research questions for field research in the DRC. A meeting will be convened to consider these two concerns at the Washington, DC offices of the Education Development Center on May 14, 2015. Subsequent suggestions will be welcomed following that meeting as well.

The field research phase is scheduled to take place in fall 2015. Field research methods largely will be qualitative. Among those who will be interviewed in the DRC are youth who participated in AEP/ALP programs, those who started but left programs, and others who never attended a program. A final research document will be published at the end of this activity.

III.   Themes and Questions

The issue that practitioners and experts mentioned most often was the need to know much more about out-of-school youth who are not in alternative education or accelerated learning programs. The nature of their concern divided into two related categories. One set raised questions about the profile of youth who are neither in formal school nor attending an alternative education program. The second set concerned the relevance of programs for youth who no longer attend formal school. Practitioners also raised concerns about how education is funded in the DRC. The main gaps and questions identified by practitioners and experts are described in this section.

Overwhelmingly, the frame of reference for nearly all commentary was specific to accelerated learning programs, not the broader alternative education program category. The reason is that they both are prevalent in some parts of the DRC and constitute a seminal type of alternative education in the field of education during and after wars. In addition, practitioners and experts

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[5] The target group will be youth over age 15 who are not in formal school. These youth are too old to attend primary school and are not attending secondary school. The complete age range will be determined in the DRC, following discussions with officials who are providing education programs for youth.

frequently contributed research questions that might seem, at first, rather general. Taken within the context of each interview, however, this was intentional. The broadly-framed questions underscored a desire to know significantly more about core concerns.

Understanding Out-of-School Youth

A predominant theme arising from interviews with practitioners and experts about youth and alternative programming in the DRC concerned a need to know much more about youth who are not in accelerated learning programs. This is notable because there already exist three studies that broadly address this subject. One was a major quantitative study on the situation of out-of-school children and adolescents across the DRC. The effort was organized by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education (the primary education ministry) in the DRC, in collaboration with UNICEF and UNESCO (Higher Institute for Population Sciences, University of Ouagadougou 2013). The second is a World Bank study reviewing education and training for youth in the DRC (Bashir 2009). The third addresses a key concern that practitioners and experts highlighted: barriers that prevent youth from receiving formal or non-formal education. This last publication addresses only youth in eastern DRC (Seymour 2011).

The three studies collectively point to the generally low quality of formal education and severely limited availability of accelerated or other alternative education programs for Congolese youth. Two pinpoint a central reason why youth are not in formal school: they cannot afford to attend. As the Higher Institute for Population Sciences report notes, "The financial obstacle is the main reason mentioned by households to justify the non-enrolment or dropping out of children" (2013: 10). Seymour highlights "the primordial role of school fees in preventing youth from accessing education needs" (2011: 37).

While some of the practitioners mentioned the two most recent studies in particular, it was apparent that the knowledge they provided shed useful but insufficient light on the many dimensions of out-of-school youth lives in the DRC. Practitioners and experts consistently referred to their need to know significantly more about those youth who are not in formal or accelerated learning programs, and what prevents many youth from attending either. The following comments and questions illustrate the significance of this broadly shared concern. "Why are youth not in school?" one expert asked. "We don't understand why. Some are excluded, but others exclude themselves." "If only 3 in 5 children complete primary school" in the DRC, a veteran education practitioner in the DRC wondered, "then what are the 2 in 5 out of school doing? What are the pathways of those who leave the formal education system?" Another practitioner underscored the paucity of information about out-of-school youth who do not attend accelerated learning programs even when they are available. "We are missing information about youth not in programs," the practitioner observed.

A related line of questions addressed the impact of large numbers of out-of-school youth on society and conflict dynamics. "What is the impact of having so many youth out of school?" a practitioner wondered. Two other questions arising from the interviews addressed important contextual issues. A practitioner in the DRC posed the following question: "What is the intersection between out-of-school youth and recruitment into armed forces?" An education in

conflict and post-conflict environments expert speculated about work options: "What is the labor market demand for out-of-school youth?"

The Relevance of Accelerated Learning Programs

The largest number of questions arising from the interview data concerned the relevance of accelerated learning programs for the out-of-school youth target group. The strongest undercurrent in the many questions raised about programs was a lack of understanding about what youth sought from an accelerated learning program. Some practitioners and experts supplied a reason why: the programs are designed long before they are implemented and without reference to local context or the stated priorities of the target population. As one expert asserted, "NGOs often have their own ALPs and they use them everywhere. They do this instead of asking, 'Who most needs the program?'"

A series of related questions from those who have implemented programs in the DRC suggested that this approach to program design and implementation was widespread. "What is it that youth really need?" one speculated. "What is the rationale of ALPs?" two others asked. "Do they address the needs of countries, or of youth?" A fourth longtime DRC program official listed a series of related questions:
  - What would young people say if we asked them to tell us what they wanted in an ALP?
  - What would make ALPs attractive to young people?
  - What would fuel their enthusiasm to learn?
  - What is missing from the current model?
  - What would make an ALP attractive to youth not in ALP programs?
The same DRC program official also highlighted the pre-set nature of accelerated learning programs and limited knowledge about the target group. "We prioritize gender parity and learning outcomes skewed toward early grade math and reading skills," the official explained. "But are other skills more important to youth, like market entrepreneurship and social skills?" The official was unsure.

Some questions concerning accelerated program relevance addressed specific issues. One question set expanded on the gender parity topic mentioned above. It also addressed a mystery for program practitioners in the DRC. "Why are ALPs so attractive to girls and female youth but are less attractive to boys and male youth?" A second DRC veteran also raised questions about the comparative popularity of ALPs for female youth. "Is there a reason why more girls attend ALPs than boys?" the official conjectured. "Are we reflecting real demand for ALP programs by promoting gender equity? Is the gender parity requirement limiting demand?"

A second set of questions addressed when ALP classes take place. Reportedly, they often are conducted in formal schools on weekday afternoons, after primary school classwork ends. Some experts and practitioners reported that the timetables often were inflexible, and were more attuned to the needs of teachers and program officials than out-of-school youth. There was a broad awareness that many in the target group are economically active. This very likely means that many youth cannot attend ALP classes because the classes are available only during work hours. As a result, some experts and practitioners sought more research on whether and

how rigid timeframes limit access to their programs. The concern is reflected in the following two general questions. "Do the times for ALP classes conflict with the work times of youth?" a DRC practitioner asked. "Are program class times flexible? Programs have to meet the needs of the client/target group, not the needs of the provider," added an expert.

While two other questions were only raised by, respectively, one of those interviewed, the subjects each raised are well worth noting. The first concerns retention: "What would make current ALP students remain in the program?" one wondered. The second focuses on the issue of program impact. "What happens to students who graduate from ALPs? Is there an advantage to attending an ALP?"

The Education System in the DRC

Because the high cost of education is a prominent reason why many young people do not attend formal school in the DRC, some information about the nature of the nation's complex education system is useful. The system is divided into five networks, including those separately organized and operated by Protestant, Muslim and Catholic organizations (about half of all students in the DRCs public education sector are in schools run by Catholics). When Zaire introduced its structural adjustment program in the 1980s, public expenditures for education subsequently collapsed, dropping from an average of USD $159 per student in 1982 to $23 in 1987. Despite this dramatic funding decline, the number of students doubled in subsequent two decades (1987-2007). Today, what is known as a distribution mechanism (or *ventilation*) characterizes how funds that school officials collect from parents cover education sector costs all the way up to the national level (Titeca and De Herdt 2011: 220, 221, 222). Two veteran education practitioners in the DRC related that "parents must cover 75 to 80 percent of education costs." Given how impoverished many Congolese families are and how costly education can be, they then raised an elemental question: "How do families pay for school?" The existing data on this subject remained, for them, insufficient.

Two issues relating to the financing of education arose during interviews with program practitioners in the DRC. Although there are an array of accelerated learning programs in the country, practitioners explained that international NGOs mainly operate their ALPs in conflict-affected areas, most particularly in the East. In many cases, these programs do not charge participants to attend. One practitioner explained how, effectively, "We are providing a golden ticket to education. There are no fees, there are free books and uniforms, and better-trained teachers than in the formal education system. Going to an ALP is a no-brainer." The presence of free ALPs and formal schools requiring payment to attend raises a pertinent set of broad and more specific questions, here raised by practitioners:
- Are we really expanding access?
- Are ALP program participants actually 'out-of-school youth'? Or are youth shopping for the best education?
- How can international organizations implement ALPs without pulling students from the formal education system?
- How does the government expand access to education with ALPs without creating a parallel system?

The possibility of a parallel education system comprised of ALPs summoned a concern shared by some of those interviewed. They collectively wondered how long ALPs should be offered to youth in a nation before the programs are phased out entirely.

IV.   A Look Ahead

Interviews about out-of-school youth and alternative education programs (and accelerated learning in particular) in the DRC collectively pinpointed three sets of gaps in knowledge and possible directions for field research:
   (1) Youth who are neither in formal school nor alternative education programs;
   (2) The relevance of accelerated learning programs; and
   (3) The implications of offering accelerated learning programs that charge little or no money to attend.

The next step in the research process is to gather on May 14 to identify specific questions that both address particularly vital knowledge gaps and can reasonably be addressed by field research in the DRC later in 2015.

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