

DRC education: tears, despair in country at breaking point



By [lssa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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In a country where more than four million children of schooling age do not attend primary school, teachers go unpaid for 20 months, insecurity and fear of rape keep young girls out of school, and depleted schools lack everything from doors to windows, pens, desks, books, drinking water, electricity and computers, just talking about education brings tears to the eyes of many parents and educationalists.

"Our education system is at breaking point and unless we get a clean, hard-working and credible government that truly cares about its citizens, future generations are in a grave danger," 55-year-old school principal Alexis Longonya (not his real name), who recently arrived in South Africa, tells Bizcommunity.com.

"As a passionate educationalist that has more than 30 years in this field, I have seen worse and there were times when tears would flow in my eyes, just to see the awful learning and working conditions both pupils and teachers found themselves in.

"If schools in the capital Kinshasa are in such a mess and lack all the necessary stuff, I wonder how the situation looks like in the countryside, especially in the east where girls and women are being raped on a daily basis," Longonya says emotionally.

Not even a pen, book or piece of paper

According to an IRIN news report, some schools in the country's rural areas lack even a single pen, book or piece of paper, as teachers scribble French words with chalk on raw wooden boards that have been painted black, while children practise writing words in the sand.

"Parents are fed-up of constantly repairing the school, which is a collection of shacks made of sticks and mud, with roofs made of leaves... Students are crowded into four classrooms where the sun shines through gaping holes in the roof. They sit on logs, bare feet in the sand, wearing shabby clothes instead of uniforms. Still, the children are enthusiastic about learning," IRIN reports.

In 2007, the total public spending on education in DRC was estimated at around US\$280 million, which corresponds to 3.1% of the country's GDP, according to UNESCO.

But, Longonya claims that at least half of that amount disappears quickly into people's pockets, with the rest scattered all over the place in a very uncoordinated manner.

Corruption, financial mismanagement

"Corrupt governance and financial mismanagement have been the name of the game since the Mobutu era, and despite the current regime's infamous 'Tolerance Zero' policy, things are still the same," he claims fearlessly, but worried over his family's safety back home.

"Our education system itself needs a hell of a lot of reforms as it is modelled from the Belgian system of the 1960s. Contents must be overhauled to meet people's needs and include the latest technological and pedagogical trends."

The Christian Otchia Samen website reports that many reforms have been done since, but deplores the worst one that suggested that parents finance the education system by themselves without sharing funds with the government. "The consequence is the degradation of education quality and infrastructure," Samen points out.

"Another consequence of the funding reform is that since parents are forced to pay at the school gate for the education of their children, even for primary school, which the constitution provides should be free and compulsory, corruption became endemic.

"Including," Samen adds, "the exchange of good grades for sexual favours or for cash, the use of funds for purposes other than those they were allocated to, the straightforward theft of funds from the institutions concerned."

Gender disparity

According to UNESCO, DRC's literacy population is 65.5%, with a huge gender disparity (76.2% for male and 55.1% for female), while only 3% of children are enrolled in pre-primary school.

The 2011 EFA-GMR recently released by UNESCO paints a bleak picture of the state of education in many African countries, which most are at risk of missing the 2015's six broad goals for education set in Dakar in 2000.

The UNESCO report also highlights serious problems such as slow progress in improving child health and nutrition, high dropout rates (an estimated 10 million dropped out of school in 2007 in sub-Saharan Africa), adult literacy (a 'forgotten' goal in most of sub-Saharan Africa), and continued gender disparities in many parts of the world.

In addition, the report mentioned poor quality education (too many schoolchildren are learning far too little), and the failure to address inequality and marginalisation.

"I have seen the report yesterday and I must admit that our country has been besieged by all of these problems year after year for the past 30 years and there is no end in sight for this despair," Longonya says.

Education system remains in tatters

The government of Joseph Kabila Kabange, described by critics and opposition political parties as 'dysfunctional', 'useless and corrupt', and 'shaky' in the face of the Jasmine Revolution currently sweeping the Arab world and upcoming elections, has been unable to cure numerous 'ills' plaguing the education system.

"Regimes have come and gone, but our education system remains in tatters," Longonya says.

Furthermore, the 2011 EFA-GMR report says armed conflict both holds back overall progress in education and reinforces national inequalities. It also slams governments for diverting education's resources into military spending.

According to Jane's Sentinel Country Risk Assessments, defence expenditure in DRC was thought to be between 2-3% of GDP from 2003 to 2007, although it appears to have dipped below that in 2008.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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