

Building peace through education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Costruire la pace attraverso l'educazione nella Repubblica Democratica del Congo

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Abstract

The education system of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is facing multiple challenges that are related to the situation of severe poverty affecting the population, the lack of public funding, the low quality of learning, class overcrowding and high illiteracy rates. The situation is worsened and at the same time caused by the situation of ongoing armed conflict and violence which have been affecting the country since its independence. While the connections between education and conflict are often difficult to disentangle, education can play a key role in creating a more equitable system where peace and inclusion are favoured, thus protecting the most vulnerable. According to latest available estimates, however, the promotion of peace and citizenship education programmes and manuals remains still a challenge in the DRC. The paper presents the *Maison de paix* experience – a project of international cooperation in the field of education promoted by an Italian association in Kikwit, in the western region of the DRC. It underlines the important role of participatory educational governance and teacher training, as a way to promote justice, solidarity and inclusion which are fundamental values in peace education.

Keywords: education in emergencies, conflict, peace education, teacher training, community involvement.

Sommario

Il sistema educativo della Repubblica Democratica del Congo (RDC) deve affrontare molteplici sfide legate alla situazione di grave povertà della popolazione, alla mancanza di investimenti pubblici, alla bassa qualità dell'apprendimento, al sovraffollamento delle classi e all'alto tasso di analfabetismo. La situazione è aggravata e allo stesso tempo causata dalla situazione di conflitto armato in corso e dalla violenza che hanno colpito il Paese fin dalla sua indipendenza. Sebbene le connessioni tra educazione e conflitto siano spesso difficili da chiarire, l'educazione può svolgere un ruolo chiave nella creazione di un sistema più equo in cui vengano favorite la pace e l'inclusione, proteggendo così le persone più vulnerabili. Secondo le ultime stime disponibili, tuttavia, la promozione di programmi e manuali di educazione alla pace e alla cittadinanza rimane una sfida nella RDC. L'articolo presenta l'esperienza di *Maison de paix*, un progetto di cooperazione internazionale nel campo dell'educazione promosso da un'associazione italiana a Kikwit, nella regione occidentale della RDC; sottolinea l'importante ruolo della *governance* educativa partecipativa e della formazione degli insegnanti quali strumenti per promuovere la giustizia, la solidarietà e l'inclusione, valori fondamentali per l'educazione alla pace.

Parole chiave: educazione nelle situazioni di emergenza, conflitto, educazione alla pace, formazione degli insegnanti, coinvolgimento della comunità.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been afflicted by a series of conflicts since it achieved independence in 1960 and has continued to experience extended national and regional armed conflicts (Khan *et al.*, 2020). The highly instable political climate has repercussions on the national education and schooling system. According to the latest report of the *Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack*, between 2020 and 2021 the DRC was among the countries with the highest incidences of attacks on schools (GCPEA, 2022). As a result, despite considerable progress in

completion rate at primary level, the DRC is still one of the countries with the largest number of out-of-school children worldwide. It is estimated that 3.5 million or 26.7% of primary age children are out-of-school, of which 2.75 million live in rural areas. Furthermore, the education sector is facing a wide range of challenges with regard to quality, governance and disparities (GPE, 2022). Research has shown that the role of education, and especially of schooling in conflict and crisis situations, may be ambivalent. On the one hand, it may sow the seeds that contribute to the outbreak of violence and conflict, on the other it may assist in coping with and recovering from crises and contribute to the resolution and prevention of such conflicts. However, despite growing concerns for education in emergencies, the attention paid to education in conflict/crisis situations has traditionally focused on the re-establishment of the normative process in view of fostering stability and the return to normality. This, however, involves more than the rehabilitation of education services and requires a critical re-examination of the role and purpose of education in peace building and conflict resolution (Tawil, 1997).

This paper explores the contribution of *Maison de paix* (House of Peace) – a project of international cooperation in the field of education promoted by an Italian association in Kikwit, in the western region of the DRC – for the promotion of inclusion and social cohesion through the development of education initiatives at pre-primary, primary and lower secondary levels. It examines the important role of participatory educational governance and teacher training in this project, as a way to promote justice, solidarity and inclusion which are fundamental values in peace education. Indeed, according to the latest *State of the Education System Report* (RESEN) released by the Ministry of Education of the DRC, few Congolese teachers are equipped to promote peace through education, and civic and moral education programmes are not fully developed (MEPST, 2014). The paper presents the experience developed in *Maison de paix*, as an opportunity to create the conditions conducive to peace, by focusing in particular on the fundamental elements of education governance and teacher training. It ultimately indicates the need for further research aiming at assessing the impact of these initiatives for the promotion of a form of education which is really at the service of peace and of human development.

1. Conflict and education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the poorest countries in the world. According to recent estimates of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 64.5 percent of the population (59,907 thousand people in 2020) is multidimensionally poor while an additional 17.4 percent is classified as vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (UNDP, 2022). Moreover, the continual conflict the country has undergone, taking place especially in the eastern North Kivu province, has cost approximately six million lives during the last twenty-five years, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in world history (Parens, 2022). Attacks by armed groups mainly target civilians whose protection is still an urgent matter. The fighting has created massive displacement with 1.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in North Kivu and around 5.7 million IDPs in the whole country.

The condition of Congolese children and adolescents remains extremely critical considering the numerous civil wars that have affected the country in recent decades and that have unfortunately seen young people and children become the victims and protagonists of these conflicts. Schools are often a target for military armed groups, constituting grave violations of child rights in conflict, although DRC is a signatory to the *Safe Schools Declaration*, which aims to protect students, teachers and schools from the worst effects of armed conflict (GCPEA, 2022). Children become indirect victims of

this conflict as their place of education is destroyed. In such context, access to education is also threatened because parents are unwilling to send their children to school. Moreover, protracted armed conflict leads to different forms of economic, political, social and civil marginalisation with direct and indirect effects on the quality of and access to education.

The combination of poverty and violence are intertwined and make the development of the education system more difficult. It is estimated that, despite the fact that there have been significant improvements in access to basic education during the last two decades, late entry and high repetitions rates still result in a primary net enrolment ratio of only 69% (GEMR, 2022). This figure is an indicator that there is a high number of children who either repeat or enter the school system late, as it is revealed by the primary gross enrolment rate which is currently exceeding 100%. Research conducted in 2020 has revealed that almost 44% of Grade 1 enrolments are over the official age (6 years) and 11% are repeaters (Mwenzi, 2020). The low net enrolment ratio also suggests that financial barriers are still a significant factor limiting access to education, despite the fact that the DRC has committed to ambitious reforms, especially with the introduction of the *gratuité* policy in 2019. However, «it remains to be seen whether the policy will be fully implemented across the Congolese territory» (Marchais *et al.*, 2021, p. 24).

Determining the extent to which educational policy choices and the nature of educational management systems explain or reflect the climate of political tension leading up to conflict is not an easy endeavour. It has been suggested that there is a need to distinguish between education as contributing to the process of social and political disruption that can result in violence and in the outbreak of armed conflict, and education as a victim of violence and destruction when the origin of conflict lies elsewhere (Tawil, 1997). Hence the importance of fostering education that is conducive to development and peace rather than to conflict and destruction, as reflected in target 4.7 of the Education 2030 Agenda which states that by 2030:

all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015, p. 21).

At the regional level, the African Union has set out a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the continent over the next 50 years, called *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want*, which contains seven *Aspirations for Africa in the Future*. The fourth of these *Aspirations* concerns the promotion of a *peaceful and secure* Africa (African Union, 2015). The global target 4.7 is also fully integrated in the *Africa's Agenda for Children 2040*, whose goal is to elaborate on aspects of Agenda 2063 relating to children and accelerate efforts towards the implementation of the *African Children's Charter* (African Union, 2016). The lack of concrete curricular programmes aiming at the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence is however common to many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. A report that assesses the progress made in the implementation of *Africa's Agenda for Children 2040* has shown that despite the promotion of global citizenship education and education for sustainable development in national education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment, there is a lack of understanding and of awareness of the conceptual knowledge of these notions, lack of funding, of clear policy frameworks, and poor implementation hindering the realization of target 4.7 (ACERWC, 2021).

In line with these goals and aspirations, the latest *State of the Education System Report* (RESEN) released by the Ministry of Education of the DRC in 2014 emphasized the need to foster an education system which actively contributes to the resolution of conflicts, social cohesion, and national resilience. Having said this, the Report shows that the education system is still poorly equipped to facilitate conflict resolution: few teachers have the competences and knowledge to promote peace through education (MEPST, 2014). Moreover, although a civic and moral education programme exists – and a civic manual has been developed for levels 5 and 6 – it has not yet been printed and distributed and is still to be written for the other levels (MEPST, 2007, 2017). The Ministry of the DRC recommends continuing the training of administrative and educational authorities on education in emergencies, crisis risk reduction, and education for peacebuilding; integrating modules on conflict management and peace education into initial and in-service teacher training; fostering the integration of peace-related themes in curricula (MEPST, 2014).

As well as teacher training, programmes that allow social relationships and networks to develop play a key role in reinforcing protection in the context of conflicts and emergency (Marchais *et al.*, 2021). The importance of community and parental engagement has been identified by the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR) as a key factor in the promotion of Universal Basic Education (UBE). In its *Spotlight series analytical framework*, the GEMR outlines seven key factors affecting UBE and foundational learning according to various levels and domains. Community and parental engagement is seen as the basis and the milestone of this analytical framework and research guide (GEMR, 2022). This framework also emphasizes the leading role that teachers play in promoting universal basic education and foundational learning. Both teacher training and community engagement policies may therefore play a critical role in the promotion of peace and civic education programmes, especially in countries affected by protracted armed or internal conflicts.

2. The *Maison de paix* experience: Fostering teacher training and community engagement to promote peace in a region of the DRC

The promotion of peace education programmes in the context of the DRC should take into account the complex organization and challenges that the Congolese education system is still facing. The engagement of teachers should not be taken for granted considering the many challenges that their profession is facing. As well as not receiving regular salaries, class overcrowding which result from the high demographic pressure and from the effects of the *Gratuité* policy, has made their work even more difficult (Mwenzu, 2020). In this context, the role of numerous non-state actors, especially faith-based organizations running public schools, should be considered as an important component of the education system in view of fostering better teacher training and a higher level of community participation, two key factors for promoting peace and citizenship education programmes. Indeed, faith-based organisations are among the most active players in the Congolese education system. Faith-based schools are called *écoles conventionnées*, while government schools are known as *écoles non conventionnées*. The country has around 100 faith-based networks, most of them Protestant. According to the 2019/20 school year statistical yearbook (MEPST/CTSE, 2021), religious denominations run around 63% of the country's primary schools and 59% of its secondary schools.

While it is important that the government reinforces its role and investment in education, considering the current situation of the Congolese education system, it is necessary that continuous engagement of *écoles conventionnées* is guaranteed. *Maison de*

paix is a project funded by a catholic organisation in the framework of a project of international cooperation between Italy and the DRC in Kikwit, in the province of Kwilu in the south-west region of the DRC which aims at fostering education as a potential equalizer for the development and emancipation of the local community, involving young people and their parents, trainers, and local actors. The *Maison de paix* project, launched in 2009, was proposed by the S.F.E.R.A. Association of Brescia, which aims at promoting Development, Fraternity, Education, Responsibility and Welcoming, hence the Italian acronym S.F.E.R.A.. Through this project, the Association intends to foster education as a tool to combat inequalities and promote inclusion, in order to encourage the development of everyone's potential for the realisation of a fairer and more peaceful society (Simeone and Zani, 2021).

The project has established teacher training as a priority. Indeed, investing in education means not only expanding access to schools, but also ensuring adequate preparation of trainers in order to guarantee the quality of teaching. Thanks to the collaboration with national and international partners, *Maison de paix* organizes training courses for teachers with the aim of strengthening their skills and knowledge in the field of peace and citizenship education. While teachers are recruited on the basis of the criteria set out in the national plan of the Congolese education system, it is ensured that their training is continuously updated by means of refresher courses. In addition to the support of quality teacher training, this experience represents a true cooperation project due to the specific attention paid to the participation of the various actors involved. *Maison de paix* has the precise aim of fostering free participation and empowerment of the local reality, allowing the community to play an active role in the education endeavour. The recent constitution of the *Maison de paix Association* under Congolese law, which will own and manage the centre, is fully in line with this perspective. This project represents a concrete laboratory of community participation in the field of education, inspired by the principles of solidarity and co-responsibility.

Conclusions

The education system of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is facing multiple challenges that are related to the situation of severe poverty affecting the population, the lack of public funding, the low quality of learning, class overcrowding and high illiteracy rates. The situation is aggravated and at the same time caused by the situation of ongoing armed conflict and violence, which have been affecting the country since its independence. It has been argued that connections between education and conflict are often difficult to disentangle. However, education can play an important role in creating a more equitable system where peace and inclusion are favoured, thus protecting the most marginalised. According to latest estimates available, the promotion of peace and citizenship programmes and manuals remains still a challenge in the DRC. Few teachers are equipped with the necessary knowledge and competence to foster teaching that is in line with the ambitious global and regional targets set out with reference to the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to promote a culture of peace and non-violence (target 4.7, *Education 2030 Agenda*). This paper has not aimed at analysing the many facets influencing the promotion of peace through education in conflict or emergency situations, but it has underlined the importance of two factors that relate to teacher training and to the equitable and participatory governance at the community level.

While the government is still facing a number of challenges in the funding of the education system, also in relation to the payment of teachers' salaries, the Congolese system is characterised by a high participation of faith-based organizations which fund

and manage *conventionnées* schools. This paper has presented the experience of the *Maison de paix* project as a means of fostering peaceful communities through education in a specific region of the DRC. This experience appears relevant with regard to the reflection on the importance of preparing teachers for peace and citizenship education programmes, an aspect which is not adequately developed within the Congolese education system. Moreover, the way this project is structured favours the participation of the community in the education process, thus enabling democratization and inclusion which are fundamental for responding to violence and conflict.

More research is, however, necessary to assess the long-term effects of these initiatives in the context where *Maison de paix* is present. The development of teacher training programmes on peace education should be confronted with the critical situation which sees the Government particularly challenged by the many difficulties that the education system is facing. Moreover, the effects of people-centred or community-based activities should also be evaluated in the long term. In order to make these activities more structural, and not only limited to a particular province of the DRC, it is necessary for proper assessment and monitoring to take place in order to identify the factors that may facilitate the realization of these initiatives for the promotion of justice, solidarity and inclusion which are fundamental values in peace education.

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