

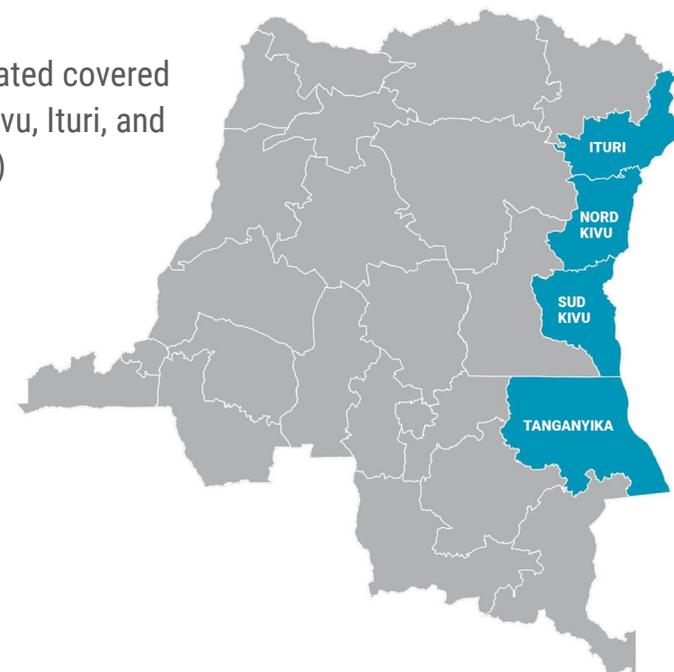
Impact of COVID-19, conflict and policy reform

Thematic series on education – October 2020

Overview

In 2020, education provision in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)'s eastern region was challenged in three notable ways, which are also closely linked to child protection needs. First, through the application of a new free primary education policy, which has overwhelmed resources; secondly, by persistent conflict in several provinces, provoking widespread displacement; and thirdly, by enforced closures of schools nation-wide as a COVID-19 containment measure. These factors have strained an education system that was already underfunded and stretched beyond capacity and have resulted in children struggling to access quality education across the country, and particularly in the eastern region. A review of recent rapid needs assessments undertaken in four of DRC's 26 provinces (the conflict-affected districts of North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika) alongside available national and provincial secondary information and baseline information provides a snapshot of the potential impacts of these factors on education and child protection in the DRC's Eastern region. Nonetheless, there are gaps and limitations in this recent research and some of the longer-term impacts of these factors remain uncertain.

Assessments evaluated covered North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika (in blue)



Key considerations



27 million

Children are potentially impacted by disrupted education



IDPs & refugees

Are particularly vulnerable both to further education disruptions and also to the negative impacts of school closures



Serious protection risks

Are present for children who are out of school, including forced labour, marriage, abuse, and recruitment

About this report

This report was produced in collaboration with partners in DRC's DRC Education Cluster and Child Protection Sub-Cluster to support analysis contributions to the 2021 DRC Humanitarian Needs Overview. Its primary sources are a selected number of rapid needs assessments undertaken across four provinces in Eastern DRC. It is underpinned by existing information on those drivers of education disruptions identified in the assessments. Nonetheless gaps are significant, and the wider literature on impacts of missed education was also consulted.

Contextual information

Investment in education

Primary and secondary school enrolment has remained a serious issue in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the nation gained its independence in 1960, largely because public education has not been free. Until September 2019, DRC was one of the few countries in the world where primary schools still officially charged fees. As a result, many children attended school sporadically depending on their parents' ability to pay and fell significantly behind in their learning. Schooling is also challenged by other factors, including conflict and most recently a nation-wide school shutdown. In addition to the barriers to universal access to education, the Congolese education system has struggled with the low quality of education (World Bank 16/06/2020).

The education system in DRC is comprised of pre-primary (ages 3-5), primary (ages 6-11), secondary (ages 12-17) and tertiary (18-22) education. Only six years of schooling are compulsory (ages 6 to 11) (UNESCO). It is governed by three ministries: the Ministère de l'Enseignement Primaire, Secondaire et Professionnel (MEPSP), the Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et Universitaire (MESU) and the Ministère des Affaires Sociales (MAS) (Legalaidboard last accessed 09/09/2020). In 2009, the Government developed a policy under the "Stratégie nationale d'utilisation des langues nationales" initiative that determined each of the four national languages, Lingala, Kiswahili, Chiluba, Kikongo, will be used in the geographic area where it is most commonly spoken for grades 1 through 4 (Global Partnership 21/02/2020). The language policy initiative aligns with research done on early years of learning that suggests learning in a child's native language is critical for improved learning outcomes (UNESCO 2011).

Enrolment: DRC's under-14 population accounts for 46% of the country's total demographic (World Bank 01/2019). As many as 87% of primary-school aged children are believed to have enrolled prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the majority of unenrolled children based in rural areas (GPE 2018). 3.5 million children of primary school age were out of school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% of those who do attend school started after age six, the country's mandatory age of entry for children joining school (USAID 05/09/2019). However, it should be noted that the system for tracking education (the Education Management Information System (EMIS)) is not updated regularly and thus does not include children affected by conflict and COVID-19.

The primary to secondary transition rate averages 72% (UNESCO 2012). Only 34.5% (adjusted net rate) of lower secondary-school age children attended school (UNICEF

01/01/2014). As children faced disrupted education over the last four months during school shut-downs, average transition rates are likely to fall.

Two percent of children in DRC were covered by some kind of school nutritional program; although a very low percentage, disruptions may have prevented these children from accessing food (FAO 2018).

Learning quality: Although enrolment was relatively high prior to its disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic, education quality was problematic. Repetition and drop-out rates were, on average, high across the country, which could be understood as indicators of poor quality (USAID last accessed 08/08/2020, De Herdt and Titeca 2016). School infrastructure is often dilapidated (De Herdt and Titeca 2016), and teachers may suffer from low morale due to high frequency of non-payment of salaries. Average public finance for education has fallen over several decades, from \$150 per pupil in 1982 to \$10 in 2006, which may indicate severe lack of infrastructure and curriculum investment in public schools (De Herdt and Titeca 2016). Over the same period, the number of primary and secondary teachers on the government payroll was cut by half and salaries reduced by 25% (De Herdt and Titeca 2016). This lack of financing was partially alleviated by schools' introduction of an initially temporary system of school fees in the 1980s, which continued under different names after they were outlawed in 2004 (De Herdt and Titeca 2016).

Since 2006 government spending on education has increased from 6.7% of the budget to 14.8% in 2016 (GPE 12/2018). Nevertheless, significant funding gaps remain, and parents have borne most of the direct and indirect costs of schooling (up to 75% of the national education budget, according to government estimates) (ODI Khan et al. 2020). These fees average \$43 per year (GPE 2018), significant for a country where 72% of people fall below the international poverty line, meaning they survive on less than \$1.90 per day, or \$57 per month (World Bank 04/05/2020). This predominantly burdens poorer households, who are likely to benefit most from education. The Government has sought to permanently abolish fees by ensuring nation-wide free and compulsory primary education with a policy rolled out in September 2019.

Refugee education: Some populations in particular face persistent education barriers. Education provision to refugees was limited prior to the current crises in DRC, often mirroring their host's contexts. 46% of Rwandan refugee children of school age were not enrolled in school, and 30% of Central African refugee children living in camps are unenrolled, while 62% of those living outside of camps are unenrolled. Similarly, 40% of South Sudanese refugee children are not enrolled in school. This may be driven by children's varying levels of education and their different language skills, as well as the

fact that existing schools in camps are unable to accommodate new refugee children due to overcrowding and a lack of resources (ODI Khan et al. 2020).

Conflict in DRC

DRC has one of the world's most complex and long-standing humanitarian crises, centered particularly in eastern DRC. The current insecurity and violence have their origins in the massive refugee crisis and spill over of violence from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Although the conflict officially ended in 2003, armed groups and national security forces are still fighting each other over control of natural resource rich territories in the eastern DRC. As a result of the conflict from 1994 to 2003 over 5.2 million children did not receive any education (U.S Department of Labor 2006).

A new conflict began in the Greater Kasai region in April 2016 spreading to North and South Kivu and Tanganyika provinces. Conflict disrupted access to education in affected regions, and placed an estimated 1.8 million children in urgent need of education according to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO 2019). In Tanganyika province a resurgence of violence resulted in the destruction of more than 300 schools while in Kasai region damaged infrastructure forced 150,000 children out of school (Save the Children). Attacks on education appeared to decline from 2013 to 2015, before rising significantly in 2016 and 2017 (Refworld 11/05/2018). In 2020, attacks have become increasingly discriminate and are repeatedly displacing communities across Tanganyika (ICG 2020). Furthermore, the DRC has the largest IDP population in Africa, and hosts 538,000 refugees from other countries which increases the need for reliable and accessible education for these vulnerable communities (HNO 2019).

Current crises

Intensification of conflict

In Ituri the security situation has deteriorated further since the end of 2019. Factions of the Lendu-led armed group Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO) orchestrated multiple attacks on villages in the province, most notably in the territories of Djugu and Mahagi, between December 2019 and May 2020 (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020). These attacks included massacres, pillaging of goods and cattle, targeted killings, and the burning of houses and basic infrastructure (Unknown/OCHA 23/04/2020). Subsequent retaliations by the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) have also affected local communities, with reports of abuses including extrajudicial executions (HRW 2020, Amnesty International 02/10/2020). The presence of other armed groups and

intercommunal violence further exacerbate the volatile security conditions in Ituri (NRC, Solidarités, ACTED, Reflex 05/05/2020). These waves of violence have led to the forced displacement of thousands of people from affected areas (Unknown/OCHA 23/04/2020). Host communities are under increasing stress as the numbers of IDPs continue to grow with little prospect of return in the short to medium term (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020). In the province's capital, Bunia, most IDPs are hosted in camps within or around the city. Others stay with host families (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020). In other areas, IDPs rely on host families or rented accommodation. As capacity is overwhelmed, increasing numbers sleep in improvised centres such as schools and churches (Unknown/OCHA 23/04/2020).

North and South Kivu provinces have devolved into areas controlled by several armed groups; 70 armed groups are present within the territories, although most fighting is between the armed forces (FARDC) and the group Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) (ARC GIS last accessed 09/09/2020). Conflict in South Kivu recently resurged in February 2019 (OCHA 30/06/2020) driven by a number of factors, including conflict over mineral resource control. Conflict results in frequent civilian harm and atrocities have been committed in the area, including against children; populations are also subject to recurrent forced displacement. Conflict episodes were reported in a number of assessments in North Kivu and South Kivu.

In 2018 to 2019, there were 30 attacks on schools and hospitals mostly attributed to armed groups while two attacks were attributed to the armed forces. Most schools were deliberately burned and/or looted (UN GA UN SC 15/06/2020).

Attacks against education facilities

According to incidents recorded in multi-sectoral evaluations conducted by humanitarian partners in South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika in the first half of 2020, attacks targeting schools are common and have resulted in the destruction of infrastructure and, in some cases, human casualties (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020; COOPI 22/06/2020 Unknown/OCHA 23/04/2020; Unknown/OCHA 06/2020). On 31 August unidentified armed men attacked and raped female students at an examination centre hosting 35 final year students, 16 boys and 16 girls in Isiro town in Haut-Uélé province the night before exams (The Defense Post 31/08/2020). The students went on to take their exams the next day (BBC 01/09/2020). Also on 31 August in South Kivu province, about 700 students and their teachers fled after fighting near an exam centre. On 27 August, at least two students and one teacher were reported to have been killed in Masisi area of North Kivu province following a confrontation between security forces and an armed group near an exam

centre. The students were killed while sitting the second day of the National Primary End-of-Studies Test in Ngoyi Primary School (UNICEF 28/8/2020). In June 2020, 13 children were killed by arrows during armed attacks in the town of Ngombe Mwana (Unknown/OCHA 06/2020). It is not clear whether the students were targets of the fighting or caught in the crossfire.

COVID-19 school closures

The Government instituted a nation-wide lockdown on 19 March, forcing the closure of schools and universities across the country as a means of controlling the spread of COVID-19 (Jambo RDC 03/2020). On 10 August, schools temporarily reopened for final year students in order to take national exams. The remaining years will wait for the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year to take their exams, which is likely to start in early October (Radio Okapi 11/08/2020). On 10 August schools partially reopened for students in their last year of primary and secondary school, as well as students in their fifth year of university studies, in an effort to complete the 2019-2020 academic year (Africa News 10/08/2020).

School closures are likely to cause students to miss out on learning and future opportunities, in part because households may not be able to adequately adapt to distance learning tools. While only 8% of households in DRC have internet access (UNICEF last accessed 08/09/2020), 77% of people over the age of 15 are literate, which indicates that children may have had access to some support from literate family members. 22 of 26 provinces were covered by some form of distance learning programmes, with 327 daily radio programmes and 25 television channels used for these purposes (UNICEF 12/08/2020). In Ituri province, Education Cluster partners distributed exercise books to children in displacement camps, provided training for teachers and COVID-19 prevention awareness for students. However, these interventions were limited to the province's capital (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020). In Kasai province the education minister organised television courses, but some areas, such as Kananga city, are not extensively covered by the electric grid, leading to students being unable to follow courses (Human Rights Watch 26/08/2020). To bridge this gap, cluster partners distributed 225,424 workbooks in 11 provinces, and 6,708 solar-powered radios to children of vulnerable households in 17 provinces (UNICEF 12/08/2020) however, it is unclear what support children in other provinces received.

Strained resources and overcrowding due to new education policy

Felix Tshisekedi took office as the new President of DRC in January 2018, promising to allocate \$2.6 billion, approximately 40% of DRC's annual budget, to primary education (Africa News 08/09/2019). To tackle access issues and ensure all children benefit from learning opportunities in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education for all), DRC launched a sweeping education reform, introducing free primary education throughout the country as of September 2019. The aim was to reduce school expenses for the poorest households and increase children's access to primary education across the country (World Bank 16/06/2020). The World Bank has also approved US\$8 million in grants and loans to promote free primary education in DRC's poorest provinces in the east and centre of the country (World Bank 15/06/2020).

The introduction of free primary education has provided the chance for children from all backgrounds to go to school, but it has also stretched resources and led to overcrowding in classrooms. The number of teachers was not increased to deal with the surge in enrolment, despite an existing national average ratio of 33 students per teacher (most recent data from UNESCO 2015).

Since September 2019 the government has taken responsibility for paying all teachers, including those previously paid by students' families; however, teachers across the country have complained that they have yet to receive their wages. This led to a teachers march in Bukavu, South Kivu on 3 August (Garda 02/08/2020, Election net 08/2020); in Kalemie in Tanganyika province some teachers have abandoned their jobs or are frequently absent from schools to withdraw their salaries from sites organized by the DRC commercial bank Trust Merchant Bank (TMB), leaving children without supervision (ARMEE DU SALUT, AIDES, ADSSE, APEF, ADPF, ASOV 07/02/2020). In addition, parents are still obliged to pay for their children's school uniforms or decent clothes, and other learning materials in Kalemie territory and other parts of the country (HNO 2020, UNICEF, AVSI, OCHA, AIDES, LIPEDEM, LIZADEEL, ACP, AFEDI, ARMEE DU SALUT 09/2019).

Crisis impacts

Education outcomes

Immediate impacts of COVID-19 related school closures include disruptions to 27 million children's learning (figures from 07/07); as there is currently little research or assessment of impacts, these are primarily projected risks (UNICEF 07/07/2020). Schools closures will further hamper education, including in conflict-affected areas and areas where education resources are already limited. They are also likely to impact future earning potential and have health, nutritional, and WASH consequences, as well as consequences for children's psychosocial wellbeing (World Bank 2018, CMI 2020). Children may abandon their longer-term studies if they are out of school, exacerbating longer term inequality as poorer children may not have other opportunities to increase future income and improve job prospects (ZOOM ECO 11/07/2020). The broader impact of the pandemic may also compromise teaching quality, as teachers may be affected by COVID-19 itself or face financial pressures due to the pandemic and divert their attention to other issues.

There is some consensus in secondary sources (primarily academic literature) about the short- and long-term impacts of hampered education, even temporary short-term shocks like the COVID-19 school closures or sporadic conflict episodes that destroy school property (Justino UNESCO 2010) (ZOOM ECO 11/07/2020). Children who do not have easy access to secondary education are less likely to continue their studies, and girls who do not have easy access to secondary education are more likely than their counterparts to give birth earlier and get married at a younger age (Duflo et al. 2019). Education is also strongly linked to health benefits and determinants of health, such as occupying risky contexts, self-care behaviour, and preventative service use (Feinstein et al. OECD 2006). School closures represent the loss of a crucial safe space for many children, the curtailment of normal social interaction and a reduction in access to essential services and support networks (CMI 05/01/2020). This has an impact on the physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing of children who may be at increased risk of abuse, exploitation and neglect whilst out-of-school, from their caregivers or other adults (HRW 09/04/2020; Neetu et al. 04/08/2020; Save the Children 10/09/2020). Resulting stress and trauma may affect their development and ability to learn (Lee, 2020; Fisher et al., 2018; World Bank 05/2020).

Studies identifying education benefits in high, middle, and lower income countries, not specifically addressing possible outcomes in the DRC, found that secondary education was positively correlated with health benefits, notably amongst girls (Viner et al 2017). Children who have had their education disrupted, for instance due to conflict or even exposure to landmines, may see their education restricted and potentially miss out on

the better health outcomes and wage gains correlated with education (Justino UNESCO 2010). A World Bank report from 2015 estimated that one year of additional schooling in the DRC equalled, on average a 9.1% increase in monthly salary (World Bank 2015), additional years of schooling are also correlated with being employed in a sector with higher returns, alongside having access to formal employment contracts that afford stability; if students miss out on school, they could miss out on these long-term opportunities.

Children who no longer access school feeding may also face micronutrient deficiencies, low energy levels, and may have difficulty continuing their education; although not a nation-wide policy, school feeding may still be implemented in some schools (Jomaa et al. 2011, CMI 2020, ZOOM ECO 11/07/2020). In some parts of DRC after the Ebola epidemic, health care provision and sanitary infrastructure were reinforced in schools; children may have lost access to this infrastructure when schools shut down, particularly impacting children from poorer households who are more likely to lack regular access to such resources (UNICEF last accessed 08/09/2020).

Conflict related disruptions contribute to significant gender differentials in education (Justino UNESCO 2010). Disrupted education is also likely to have inter-generational impacts, as education is positively correlated with one's fertility choices, eventual family's health, one's children's education outcomes, and one's own health (Duflo et al. 2019).

Education outcomes identified in assessments

The multi-sector assessments reviewed were conducted following the emergence of new crises, and thus did not cover crisis escalations or the totality of the country (only 4 of 26 provinces, and only some zones de santé and localities within those provinces). **Outcomes identified in assessments are limited to their respective areas and should be taken as indicative of the situation there.**

Assessments in Oicha Commune, Beni, North Kivu in June 2020 confirmed that schools had been closed since 20 March due to COVID-19 measures (ACOPE/ASBL 23/06/2020). An evaluation in Kalonge, South Kivu, noted that more than 55% of children in the area were not within the education system (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). It is unclear how many children accessed schools once school closures had been lifted. In conflict-affected regions, school closures due to the pandemic have prolonged an already extensive period of disrupted education for many children. In particular, IDP children in South Kivu were identified as not having access to schooling prior to the pandemic (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020).

In Ituri province, over 50,000 school age children were displaced by conflict after the school year began in September 2019 and had not gained access to schools in host

communities before closures in March 2020. Figures for all conflict-affected areas in the province are unavailable, meaning numbers are likely to be significantly higher. These students are at particular risk of not completing their education as a result of the amount of schooling lost, difficulties in accessing education in host communities, and precarious socioeconomic conditions (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 08/08/2020).

The socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 have increased the risk that families will be unable to pay secondary school fees and therefore return to education. This is a particular risk for displaced children and those from poor households who were already financially stressed and are most likely to have suffered income losses from these shocks (Save the Children 10/09/2020). Even where there is access to public schools, lack of resources to buy school kits and other learning materials impact students' ability to attend school and learn effectively. As public schools remain severely overcrowded, particularly in communities hosting IDPs, private schools are also inaccessible to an increasing number of students. This is especially concerning for students in their final year who should be returning to school to complete exams (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 08/08/2020).

Schools across the country noted an increase in class size since the introduction of the national free primary school policy, putting pressure on already strained resources and infrastructure, as well as on teachers' morale (GoDRC 2020, Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). This policy has compounded issues of overcrowding in schools hosting significant numbers of displaced students. Reports from Ituri province repeatedly highlight this issue, stating that student-teacher ratios are reaching highs of 92 to 1 and preventing the delivery of quality education (Samaritan's Purse, 05/2020; PPSSP, UNICEF 13/03/2020). In some areas, schools had no capacity to accommodate most displaced children prior to COVID-19 closures. As schools reopen, these students risk remaining cut off from education (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020).

In conflict affected areas of Kalonge and Nindja, South Kivu, and across Ituri province, **children did not have appropriate school kits** (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). Lack of sufficient school furniture, including desks and chairs, also limits the capacity to accommodate IDPs and provide a good standard of education (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 07/08/2020; Unknown/OCHA 06/2020). An evaluation in Kalonge and Nindja also noted that **teachers were not appropriately trained** due to frequent forced displacement (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). According to an assessment in February of 2020, the majority of primary school students attending school in Mutakuya, Kasubuyi, Mpele Mwavi, Katibili, Rutuku Mulembwe villages in the Kalemie territory of Tanganyika province are either returnees or displaced children. 95% of those schools have a higher attendance rate than classrooms can adequately accommodate due to the free primary

education policy that has encouraged more students to attend classes. In addition, the assessment evaluated that the schools lack adequate supplies for students, including desks and doors for latrines (ARMEE DU SALUT, AIDES, ADSSE, APEF, ADPF, ASOV 07/02/2020).

Evaluation also recorded schools being directly damaged by violence, including in 11 zones de santé in Kalonge, South Kivu (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). There are nine primary and secondary schools that require reconstruction of some kind in Nindja, South Kivu, an area with existing significant education gaps. Since 2013 **schools have been targeted by armed groups and abandoned due to conflict** across conflict-affected areas of DRC. Reports from March to August 2020 of targeted attacks against schools, including the **burning down of school buildings and the pillaging of teaching materials**, are widespread across Ituri and Tanganyika provinces (COOPI, CARITAS 05/06/2020, Unknown/OCHA 06/2020). January 2020 assessments noted a **surge in inter-ethnic conflicts** in the Nyunzu territory of Tanganyika province. These conflicts have negatively affected the education sector, causing considerable damage to infrastructure and human life. Evaluations carried out in Ngombe Mwana and Lengwe areas of Nyunzu found that **schools had been directly damaged by violence, and in many cases occupied by armed militia**. In Ngombe Mwana 43 of 91 schools had been damaged, with 12 remaining occupied by militants, affecting 9,907 students, of which 3,657 are girls and 6,250 are boys. In Lengwe 26 of 64 schools were damaged, with nine remaining occupied by militants, affecting 6,091 students of which 2,956 are girls and 3,135 are boys (Unknown/OCHA 06/2020).

IDPs fleeing violence and residing in schools was a phenomenon identified in several provinces, including North Kivu. An evaluation from Oicha Commune, Beni, North Kivu documented 795 IDP households occupying schools after fleeing violence – this has reportedly been ongoing since 2016, with IDP households frequently seeking safety in schools (ACOPE/ASBL 23/06/2020). This led to the further dilapidation of school infrastructure and loss of teaching material, impacting approximately 4,000 students who depend on it (AVSI 07/2020, UNHCR, CARITAS, AVSI 27/03/2020).

It is unknown if IDPs have left or remain since school closures have been lifted. The reopening of schools in August 2020 is likely to have increased both shelter and education needs where suitable alternative arrangements for IDPs residing in school buildings have not been made.

Assessments highlighted that heavy rains and flooding have also inflicted significant damages on school buildings in some areas. An evaluation on heavy rains in Beni city, North Kivu on 24 April 2020 indicated that six schools had been damaged (ACOPE/ASBL 26/04/2020), affecting 6,134 primary and secondary students, among which 138 are

orphans and reside in the schools. Repeated flooding in Djugu, Ituri has destroyed four schools and displaced over 10,000 people since November 2019 (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 08/07/2020). Floods also affected the towns of Moba and Kalemie in Tanganyika province. In Moba 1 subdivision 29 of 147 schools assessed, with a total school population of 8,928 students including 3,741 girls, were destroyed by floods. In Moba 2 subdivision 22 out of 84 schools, with a school with a total student population of 7,564, including 3,101 girls, were completely destroyed as a result of floods (UNICEF 05/2020)

Child protection outcomes

There was limited reliable information available from secondary sources on the impact of school closures on child protection; however, in general, children are likely to face protection concerns when they are out of school as this is often a protected space, where child marriage, early pregnancy, and other protection risks can be avoided. An initial review of available information indicates that child protection violations have been rising. In the first semester of 2020 1,566 child protection violations were recorded in the context of armed conflicts, a rise of 16% from last year at the same period (MRM CTF analysis, unreleased), although it is unclear if this has been driven in any way by school closures.

An understanding of the pre-school closure context can also provide an indication of the challenges children may face. An average of 82% of children in DRC will face psychological or physical abuse from a parent in their life, which may be exacerbated in times of confinement or when they have nowhere else to go (UNICEF last accessed 08/09/2020). An average of 27% of Congolese children undertake some form of work, including dangerous work like mining, and 27% of girls between 15-17 years are forced into marriage, while 13% face some form of sexual violence (UNICEF last accessed 08/09/2020). With children out of school, it is likely that these rates will increase. Children also risk being forcibly recruited into one of the DRC's 49 armed groups spread across at least ten provinces: from 2014-2017, 6,168 boys and girls are believed to have been recruited by armed groups (MONUSCO 2019). If children are not in school their risk of being exposed to forced or voluntary recruitment increases. This carries with it the enhanced risk of exposure to armed violence.

Child protection outcomes identified in assessments

Assessments reviewed did not cover the totality of the country (only four of 26 provinces, and only some zones de santé and localities within those provinces). **Outcomes identified in assessments are limited to their respective areas and should be taken as indicative of the situation there.**

A number of child protection issues emerged from reviewed assessments. In June 2020 in nine zones de santé out of 34 in South Kivu, populations reported that **children had been forced into marriage, arbitrarily detained, harassed, pillaged, forcibly enlisted, or exposed to sexual violence** (REACH South Kivu 06/2020). In Djugu, CODECO combatants **forcibly recruited 18 children** and kidnapped two young men (UNHCR, CARITAS, AVSI 27/03/2020). An evaluation in Kalonge and Nindja, South Kivu, noted that **children were present in armed groups, ex-child soldiers receive no support, child marriages were occurring, and 75% of the total population of child births were not officially registered** (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020). Sexual violence against children were also noted in Kalonge (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020).

An assessment in Nindja, South Kivu, also noted that a **significant number of school-age children were working in mines**, posing extreme danger to their lives (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020).

Assessments in several provinces, including South Kivu and North Kivu, noted that amongst IDP households, children had no play areas or psychosocial support which may be particularly harmful, considering the high likelihood of exposure to trauma (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 09/2020; AVSI 07/2020).

Orphaned children residing in schools were highlighted in evaluations across several provinces, as their wellbeing during the time of school closures is unknown (ACOPE/ASBL 26/04/2020).

In Ituri province, assessments noted **increased child protection risks for out of school children**, particularly IDPs. They highlighted the lack of assistance provided for children outside the school system and weak or non-existent protection structures for at risk children, including unaccompanied displaced minors and orphans. Without school, these children are left unsupervised, roaming the streets and sometimes engaging in harmful behaviour. In Bunia, reports noted increased risks of SGBV and child pregnancies or marriages, with displaced women and girls particularly vulnerable. Reports of displaced children engaging in sex work are also common in Bunia (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 05/08/2020). Parents forcing their children to work or beg in the streets is another concern (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 03/08/2020). Although data on school return rates is currently unavailable, child pregnancies, marriages and labour, all reduce the probability that children will return to schools once they reopen.

Travelling to and attending school also presents child protection concerns. In Mahagi and Mambasa, **children's journeys to school** are dangerous, with reports of attempted rapes and car accidents (NRC, Solidarités, ACTED, Reflex 05/05/2020). In Lolwa, Mambasa, schools reportedly **exploit students as a free workforce**, forcing them to engage in work in fields and sand extraction to help finance the schools (NRC, Solidarités, ACTED, Reflex 05/05/2020).

Many evaluations note the **lack of sufficient WASH facilities** and general infrastructure in schools to implement COVID-19 precautions such as frequent handwashing and socially distanced learning (Multisectoral Assessment under OCHA 08/08/2020). This may lead to increased cases of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases as children return to school. Displaced children are particularly vulnerable to health risks as they are more likely to be suffering from acute malnutrition (WHO, ADSPA, ADRA DRC, PPSSP, 29/05/2020).

Response capacity

As of July, 28 organisations operate education responses and in addition there are 269 operational actors in various sectors in DRC, of which 198 (74%) are local NGOs (OCHA 07/2020) and 181 organisations operate in protection.

UNICEF and Save the Children are Education Cluster Lead Agencies, alongside the Ministry of Education. UNICEF is actively engaged in COVID-19 response in schools in all 26 provinces (OCHA 07/2020). International NGOs (Mercy Corps, COOPI, NRC, AVSI, DRC, CARITAS, INTERSOS, etc) and UN organizations also operate in education and child protection responses (OCHA 07/2020).

Humanitarian and operational constraints

Violence hampers access in many areas; the conflict situation is often unstable because of the high number of militias and frequent intercommunal conflict. Challenging terrain and limited infrastructure, such as poor or limited road conditions, remain a logistical obstacle to reach populations in need, particularly in rural areas.

Restrictive measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect humanitarian activities and prevent humanitarian access. Social distancing measures and curfews imposed on 31 March slowed humanitarian operations although individuals who provide essential goods and services are exempt from the curfew (Garda 31/03/2020). On 15 August, after four months of closure the DRC authorities reopened their borders, ports and airports (Garda 16/08/2020, Newland Chase 12/10/2020).

Information gaps and needs

- Findings in this report were derived from a selected number of recent rapid needs assessments deemed “high quality” or “relevant” by partners in DRC, as well as from available secondary information and data sources. The findings do not cover the country systematically or comprehensively. A large portion of the assessments covered Ituri province, and findings may be skewed.

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- Some assessments did not provide sufficient context, such as dates of sudden-onset crisis start.
- Figures on direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 on educative and child protection outcomes are scarce.
- Many national statistics and contextual studies are outdated.
- There has been no assessment of correlations between COVID-19 spikes after school returns for terminal classes, focused primarily on attending national exams.
- There are no national statistics on the number of children returning to school.
- Many assessments did not cover the impact of the School Free Policy; some did reference overcrowding, but other impacts on curriculum, teachers, and resources were not specified.
- Assessment methodologies are often undetailed.
- Verification of data on school attacks is challenging as affected areas often remain inaccessible for long periods and partners undertaking assessments may rely on information from the national Ministry of Education.

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Assessments evaluated covered North Kivu, South Kivu, Ituri, and Tanganyika (in blue)

