USAID/DFID ACCELERE!
Working Together for Educational Success in the Democratic Republic of Congo
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What is the general context in which the story takes place?

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the poorest countries in the world and, in 2014, it was ranked 176 out of 188 countries on the Human Development Index education index. Although there has been progress, the education system is under-resourced and quality at the primary school level is still a serious issue, as reflected in extremely poor student learning outcomes. A 2015-2016 study showed that the majority of the surveyed third graders in all targeted provinces could not read at all, and fewer than 5 percent of pupils across the provinces demonstrated an ability to read with some level of comprehension.¹

Access to education also remains low. It is estimated that 4 million of 15 million (27 percent) primary school-age children are out of school. National data indicate that, on average, only 57 percent of the children who enter Grade 1 complete Grade 6. Poverty and vulnerability remain the major causes of children dropping out of school.

¹ RTI International. (June 2016). Education Evaluation Services in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): The DRC 2015 Early Grade Reading Assessment and Snapshot of School Management Effectiveness Grade 5 Report of Findings.
In response, there are signs that the Government of the DRC is committed to improving education: an increasing education budget, a new 10-year Education and Training Sector Strategy, $100 million in government funding for school construction, and engagement with the Global Partnership for Education that has led to major additional investments in the sector. The high level of need and the central role of education in the DRC’s development have led both the government and donors to scale up interventions in this sector. However, education remains significantly underfunded and poorly coordinated.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

As education interventions scale up, it is increasingly important to avoid duplication of activities and stretching the already limited government capacity. According to an analysis by the U.K. Department of International Development (DFID), “weak national policy formulation capacity means donor interventions are fragmented and in the most part unsustainable.” As in most countries, donors in the Government of the DRC participate in a donor coordination group for education, though this group is generally more effective at a strategic level than on programmatic or technical issues. Nonetheless, donors such as USAID and DFID clearly recognized that by working more closely and aligning activities and approaches to support government plans and priorities, they could contribute to transforming the aid landscape for the education sector in DRC. Through a consultative process, USAID and DFID determined that both were developing programs with similar results, timelines, and target populations.

In support of their own programming goals and in response to the government’s request for support of its Education and Training Sector Strategy, USAID and DFID signed a partnership agreement to fund approximately $180 million in programmatic support to the newly endorsed 2016-2025 Educational and Training Sector Strategy. In collaboration with stakeholders at the central, provincial, and local levels, the program aims to contribute to improving reading and learning outcomes of girls and boys in all public primary schools in 25 targeted educational sub-provinces. This joint education program is known as “USAID/UKAID ACCELERE!” from the French Accès (access), Lecture (instruction), and Rétention et Redevabilité (retention and accountability).

As the name implies, ACCELERE! was designed to address several different aspects of education sector development, but is especially focused on access, quality, and governance. In many countries where the focus has remained primarily on access, USAID has been helping to change the development agenda to include quality and learning outcomes, to complement the necessary push for increased access. USAID/DRC’s education programming not only integrates access and quality, but in support of the Mission’s broader strategy, it sought to target capacity building and improved governance to sustain USAID’s investments.

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3 Ibid. p 9.
Working together, USAID and DFID articulated a robust theory of change, agreed on a joint results framework, and developed a joint program comprising four implementing mechanisms to achieve the objective and results identified in that framework. Three mechanisms are focused on the components (access, quality, and governance), while the fourth provides CLA-related services, including coordination, monitoring, evaluation, analytic, and research. USAID and DFID also recognized that these mechanisms would require cooperative activity management and are developing opportunities and processes for ACCELERE! partners to collaborate and share all products, evidence, data, and reports across mechanisms and with the wider community of practice in the DRC.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

**Programmatic Collaboration**: As the Overview of Activities graphic below suggests, there are areas of programmatic overlap between the three implementing mechanisms focused on access, quality, and governance, which requires strong collaboration between ACCELERE! partners. To facilitate this, USAID and DFID hold bi-weekly and bi-monthly program meetings, joint site visits, and steering committee meetings. These joint activities aim to ensure that ACCELERE! is streamlined to avoid duplication of interventions and that challenges or opportunities emerging from implementation are shared across partners to inform implementation. During the meetings, work plans are shared to seek collaboration on crosscutting activities such as back-to-school and on-time enrollment campaigns to boost enrollment, and the joint risk management matrix is revisited.
Management Collaboration: Because one of the stated objectives of the partnership between USAID and DFID is to improve donor coordination, the two organizations have put a great deal of thought into how they will work together to manage ACCELERÉ! From the outset of program design, they articulated a set of seven operational principles for program management, covering strategy and decision-making; procurement processes; financing/disbursements; review, monitoring, and evaluation; managing coordination with the government and other actors; approach to women and girls; and program risks and mitigating actions. Critical to the management collaboration is the ACCELERÉ! Steering Committee, which includes the government ministers of education and social affairs and their relevant technical offices from these structures, key personnel from implementing partners, USAID and DFID heads of offices, and education technical offices. The committee meets each semester and at an Annual Performance Review Workshop.

Learning: ACCELERÉ! has a strong foundation for its learning activities through the work already done by USAID and DFID to articulate a theory of change and explore and document the evidence.
base for the underlying assumptions. The program also has a joint logical framework (log frame) and a robust risk management matrix, complete with identified warning signs and plans for monitoring them. These documents are revisited annually.

The monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) activity of ACCELERE! (Activity 3 in the Overview of Activities diagram) is explicitly focused on programmatic learning, and is being led by USAID/DRC’s Monitoring, Evaluation, and Coordination Contract in order to take advantage of its Mission-wide efforts. As stated in its contract, it will provide “coordination, monitoring, evaluation, research, organizational learning, [and] knowledge management … and will foster learning across USAID, DFID, the [government], and other key stakeholders through improved coordination, collaboration, knowledge generation, and sharing of lessons learned.”

This learning will be shared via learning and sharing events and through a bi-annual “collaboration and learning e-newsletter” that will be distributed in French and English and highlight updates on major ACCELERE! milestones, impact statements that use data to demonstrate concrete results, and stories from partners of the innovative work being done under the program.

In addition to performance evaluations, ACCELERE! includes two impact evaluations as part of the MEL activity. Program donors and partners are currently working to refine the evaluation questions to target the most critical knowledge gaps. The access and learning activity (Activity 1 in the Overview of Activities diagram) also has an operational research plan that seeks to learn from what intervention is influencing the best results and what factors influence results.

**Adapting:** The Annual Performance Review Workshop is expected to be a key forum to discuss progress and possible course corrections. The MEL activity is also explicitly tasked with developing products that “should inform management decisions related to [ACCELERE!’s other three activities] and support adaptive management over the life of the 5-year program.” One such product will be strategic cost analyses of selected sub-activities and interventions to inform possible programmatic shifts that may be required, to which the access and learning activity will also contribute.

**Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?**

As mentioned earlier, an important consideration for the development of ACCELERE! was the increased attention and commitment by the Government of the DRC to the national education system that spurred USAID’s and DFID’s increased interest in this sector and allowed both donors to feel more confident about making such a large investment in a coordinated manner aligned with the new government strategy.

That said, there have been operational challenges with the donors’ coordination, largely due to the differences in their procurement processes. The difference in the length of procurement between USAID and DFID processes resulted in significant additional time investment from officers. Also, although it has ensured the donors have an equal voice, their equal participation in all procurements has further contributed to the considerable investment of staff time and resources. In addition, because USAID and DFID have different rules about sharing procurement-sensitive materials, there
were some initial difficulties with documents being shared by one donor in violation of the other’s regulations; however, these issues have been addressed with some awareness-raising communication.

There is also some concern about how results will be attributed to each donor, but it is too soon to tell if this will be a substantial problem.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

ACCELERE! will have robust programmatic MEL, not only through the MEL activity, but through each partner’s M&E systems and processes. The program log frame will be used to jointly monitor progress for ACCELERE! USAID and DFID have worked together to develop a scoring system that will score progress against the log frame during the annual review process. The annual review will also be used to monitor the program’s key assumptions, identify and prioritize operational research needs, and review the risk management matrix.

As an education program, ACCELERE! will also rely on some standard assessment methodologies, such as baseline Early Grade Reading Assessment. USAID/DRC has contracted with another implementing partner to conduct a baseline Early Grade Reading Assessment, Early Grade Mathematics Assessment, and a Snapshot for School Management Effectiveness in October 2015, at the beginning of the 2015/2016 school year. ACCELERE! and the MEL activity in particular will build off of this work and the tools and methodologies already in use.

Beyond the programmatic results, USAID is interested in tracking how the donor partnership is working. USAID/DRC has started to document its observations in a journal that captures the following:

- What is working well?
- What is not clear?
- Lessons learned/recommendations for future joint programming
- USAID staff time spent on donor coordination this quarter

The journal also is a place for staff to record management and coordination challenges and how they have or plan to resolve them. USAID staff anticipates updating this record on a quarterly basis, but can enter observations at any time. At this point, the tracker is intended to be internal to USAID, but the USAID/DRC and DFID/DRC management teams have a very open relationship and line of communication, and the issues captured will largely surface during conversation or at the quarterly and annual meetings.

What were the most important lessons learned?

The obvious challenge with joint programming between two donors is usually less about conflicting philosophy or objectives and more about the minutiae of different bureaucratic processes that cause headaches. For example, USAID’s and DFID’s structures do not match and their staff do not have the same level of responsibility (e.g., who can sign contracts or authorize funding). Because this cannot be changed, it is critically important to discuss it during the inception period for a joint program and to continue educating each other on rules and regulations. This affects donor relations,
but also relations between the donors and implementing partners. Because partners are bound by their contracts and the regulations that govern their relationships with their respective donors, clarity on regulations is essential to productive coordination.

As both donors will maintain individual relationships with the Government of the DRC, it is important that they speak with one voice when discussing the joint program, reinforcing each other’s key messages.

One possible way to avoid some of the bureaucratic headaches faced by ACCELERE! would be to design a joint program with a common log frame (or results framework) that does not have mixed funding from different donors within individual activities. Another suggestion takes this a step further: develop a strong partnership protocol to leverage interventions and coordinate activities, but maintain separate programs governed by each donor’s procurement processes and administrative rules and regulations.

Last, due to procurement issues, it is unlikely that all of the activities under a joint program will be able to start at the same time, although that would be ideal so everyone could start on the same page. In the case of ACCELERE!, it would have been especially helpful to have the MEL activity, which started several months after start-up, awarded early enough to participate in establishing MEL processes from inception rather than struggling to come up to speed with the other partners whose work was already underway.