

REPORT SUMMARY: "At what cost? The untoward costs of children's schooling in Rwanda"

Overview

In 2012 an observation made by different members of the Rwanda Education NGO Coordination Platform¹: many school-age children continue to contend with a range of costs that continue to impact upon their educational experience - an observation that not only seemed to problematize the conventional understanding of Rwanda's fee-free education policy but also posed serious challenges for organizations seeking to effectively support the education-related requirements of young people.

It was through this observation that the idea first emerged for a research study that explores the user costs of children's schooling in Rwanda. Through the support of Plan Rwanda via the Canadian International Development Agency, a consultant was hired to carry out a research study to explore how school costs might continue to impact children's experiences.

A case study design was utilized that focused on schools located within Kiziguro Sector within Gatsibo District in Rwanda's Eastern Province. Reflecting the commitments of RENCP members, study methods placed a strong emphasis on hearing from the insights of children themselves. Between September and October 2012, approximately 65 interviews and focus groups were undertaken with a wide range of local education stakeholders including: local leaders, members of civil society, head teachers, parents, schoolchildren, as well as school-age children not regularly attending school.

Study findings painted a complex picture around children's experiences of school costs. While the 'usual suspects' of school-related costs were frequently raised (such as uniforms, books, and pens), a number of other school-related expenses also emerged such as parent-teacher association contributions, mock exams fees, purchasing reams of paper for the school, passport photos for exams, registration fees, and school reports, among others.

Many participants, particularly children and parents, described how their own understanding of MINEDUC's education policy conflicted with their experiences and observations. There were numerous accounts of children sent home from school for different costs, for example: failing to pay school-related costs such as PTA; arriving at school without materials such as a pen or notebook; or being unable to provide an examination-related expense. Being sent home was often characterized as an informal, temporary measure but one that ultimately impacted the educational lives, trajectories, and even

¹ The Rwanda NGO Coordination Platform (RENCP) is a gathering of international and local umbrella NGOs active in the education sector. This platform brings together international and local NGOs active in education to participate in regular information sharing, coordination, and representation. One major aim of the RENCP has been to seek meaningful involvement in national level education planning processes. The current co-chairs of the RENCP are the Wellspring Foundation and VSO. At the time of this study, Plan Rwanda was the chair.

aspirations of children. Parents spoke at length about how quickly school costs can multiply, especially for those large families without a consistent source of income.

This study provides evidence that costs continue to operate as a key determinant of children's overall educational experience, a particular finding that would seem to disproportionately impact the most economically disadvantaged families. Poverty served as an enduring challenge, making any school-related expense all-the-more pronounced. Most children (including those not currently in school) and other participants spoke of the high importance of receiving an education as a key to success in Rwanda today. Yet aspirations were often mediated by the economic realities of families who must calculate the cost of sending their children to school verses having them engage in other activities to support themselves or their families. This study found school costs continued to figure prominently into this decision-making process.

Summary of key findings

Despite a fee-free policy that would suggest otherwise, this case study found that children in Rwanda contend with a range of school-related costs that impact upon attendance, performance, and completion. School-related costs continued to operate, often overtly and sometimes clandestinely, within the lives of children. Financial and material inputs—such as uniforms, examination fees, and parent-teacher association contributions—functioned as a key and mediating determinant in the educational lives, experiences, and trajectories of young people, a finding that would seem to disproportionately impact the most economically vulnerable. Findings suggest a need to re-examine how structural constraints continue to impact upon children's educational experiences, even in the context of Rwanda's progressive education policy.

Timeline of study

- **Early 2012** the issue of school costs was raised by an RENCPC member at an education development partners meeting. It was later discussed at an education cluster meeting. Upon consultation with members of MINEDUC, it was agreed that this issue could further benefit from field research
- **14-August 2012** Study design discussed at RENCPC meeting
- **September-October 2012** fieldwork in Kiziguro Sector led by consultant and small research team
- **5-November 2012** initial draft of study findings presented to members of RENCPC at a validation workshop
- **12-March 2013** study findings presented at Comparative International Education Society (CIES) conference held in New Orleans (USA)
- **30-May 2013** final draft formally presented at the education cluster meeting at the Ministry of Education attended by the Honorable Minister of Education and Director General of the Rwanda Education Board, respectively
- **3-July 2013** study findings used in advocacy at the UN Committee on Experts on the Rights of the Child in Geneva