

## Secondary Publication



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Date of secondary publication: 01.01.2022

Version of Record (Published Version), Bookpart

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-115136x

#### **Primary publication**

Timm, Susanne; Ress, Susanne u. a. (2025): Coping with protracted crises in education systems and the role of school providers: Empirical findings from studies in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Kurdistan Region, in: Tanja Sturm, Anja Tervooren, Melanie Schmidt, u. a. (Hrsg.), Krisen und Transformationen: Anschlüsse an den 29. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft, 1. Aufl., Opladen: Barbabara Budrich

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# Coping with protracted crises in education systems and the role of school providers: Empirical findings from studies in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Kurdistan Region

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**KURZFASSUNG:** In diesen Beitrag sind Studien zu unterschiedlichen Aspekten des Krisenmanagements in Bildungssystemen eingeflossen. Die empirischen Studien wurden in wirtschaftlich und politisch instabilen Kontexten in Subsahara-Afrika und Asien durchgeführt. Daten wurden durch Interviews mit Stakeholdern auf verschiedener Ebenen des Bildungssektors, durch Lehrkräftefragebögen und die Einbeziehung von Hintergrundpapieren erhoben. Der Fokus liegt auf der Weise darauf, in der Staaten, Schulen und Bürgerinnen und Bürgern bei der Bewältigung akuter Krisen interagieren, einschließlich potenzieller krisenbedingter Übergänge zu alternativen Regierungsformen. Angesichts der Unterschiedlichkeit und Mehrgliedrigkeit von Systemen ist es für uns von Interesse, ob die Pluralität von Schulanbietern die Widerstandsfähigkeit oder die Anfälligkeit erhöht, und wie die Anbieter in ihrer Diversität als Bewältigungsmechanismus gestärkt werden können.

*Schlagerworte:* Subsahara-Afrika, Krise, Bildungssystem, Resilienz, Steuerung

**ABSTRACT:** This contribution reflects studies on different aspects of crisis management in education systems. The empirical studies were conducted in economically and politically unstable contexts in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Data were collected through interviews with stakeholders at different levels of the education sector, through teacher questionnaires and policy papers. We develop a conceptualisation of how states, schools, and citizens interact in managing acute crises, including potential crisis-induced transitions to alternative modes of governance. Given the plurality of systems, our common interest is whether the plurality of school providers enhances resilience, or rather vulnerability, and how the role of a plurality of providers can be strengthened as coping mechanism.

*Keywords:* Sub-sahara Africa, crisis, education system, resilience, governance

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## 1 Introduction

This article examines the management and impact of crises within and through education systems in regions affected by multiple and overlapping crises, namely

Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI). Drawing on different contexts, the article aims to reveal the complex intra-systemic relations that enable or constrain decision-makers and stakeholders' responses to multiple crises.

Four of the projects are the result of a larger project, called "Education Systems and COVID-19 Management in Central Africa (EduCOV)"<sup>1</sup>. The research focused on the effects of the COVID-pandemic on schooling, teaching and learning, and school systems in systems which had been already challenged by ongoing crises such as civil wars, armed conflicts and natural disasters. Thematically, even though not geographically neighbored to this research, the fifth project was conducted in the Kurdish region in Iraq.

The article is organized as follows: Part 1 compares teacher wellbeing in Rwanda and the DRC during school closures to argue that individual and system-level factors should be considered in crisis contexts (Frederick Njobati/Susanne Ress). Part 2 identifies leading ideas about schooling underlying crisis responses and shows a need for more advocacy for education (Louise Ohlig/Susanne Timm). Part 3 looks at communication and cooperation between different levels of educational governance in Rwanda (Lea Markus). Part 4 provides insights from the KRI analyzing parental choices for private education (Hishyar Hassun). Part 5 emphasizes the need for bottom-up communication and evidence-based educational policy-making to better care for children in crisis contexts (Semerita Kavira Kamundu, Jean Kasereka, & Julia Seibert). In part 6 an overarching summary is combined with starting points for strengthening actors in education systems that are threatened by ongoing crises.

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1 The project has been funded by the German Research Foundation DFG (no. 468151860). This project has been developed and conducted collaboratively with colleagues from partner universities in Rwanda and the DRC, namely the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences in Butare/Rwanda and the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma/Democratic Republic of Congo. The Research permission for Rwanda was given by the National Council for Science and Technology (no. NCST/482/292/2022). We would like to thank all those involved from the Otto-Friedrich-University Bamberg, the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences in Butare (Rwanda) and the université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma (Democratic Republic of Congo): Charles Gahutu, Annette Scheunpflug, Kakule Molo, Samuel Mutabazi, Ernest Claude Njoya, Edouard Ntakirutimana, Emmanuel Nyibizi, Christine Nyiramana, Julienne Tuyishime, Meschac Vunanga Karhakabire, Mark Wenz, Siqi Zhang.

## 2 Individual and system-level factors of teacher wellbeing during crises in Rwanda and the DRC

Research on education in crises often focuses on students (Burde et al. 2017). Less attention is paid to teachers (Tikly et al. 2022). While teachers are relatively well off compared to other social strata, they are nonetheless affected by the repercussions of protracted crises. This part gives an overview of findings from a quantitative study with teachers in North and South Kivu in the DRC, and Rwanda (RW). Rwanda and the DRC share a common border and an intertwined history of conflict. Yet, their social and educational systems are very different. As is stated in the literature on teacher wellbeing, to better understand the situation of teachers in crisis contexts requires an approach that accounts for individual- and system-level factors (Brandt/Lopez Cardozo 2023). This study examines differences in negative affect and situational loneliness as dimensions of teacher wellbeing (Jelińska/Paradowski 2021) between Rwandan and Congolese teachers during school closures induced by COVID-19. In Rwanda, COVID-19 caused severe restrictions and extended school closures. In the DRC, it was perceived as yet another crisis in an already fragile education system.

The study analyzes quantitative data from the teacher questionnaire included in the EduCOV-project. Data collection took place in 2022. Data were analyzed using descriptive methods (Pearson coefficient for correlations and chi-square ( $X^2$ ) or t-test (t) for comparisons). Reported results are statistically significant unless noted otherwise. The teacher sample is a convenient sample, collected by the project's collaborators. The sample includes 299 teachers (RW: N=150, 52.0 %; DRC: N=149, 49.8 %). Most respondents are in the age of either 25–35 years (40.5 %) or 36–45 years (37.5 %) old with teachers in the DRC being significantly older than in Rwanda. Congolese teachers have a higher level of education, more years of teaching experience), a higher number of persons depending on their salary, and better materials used for the roofing of their houses as a proxy for their economic situation. Considering these individual factors, it seems that Congolese teachers are better off than Rwandan teachers.

Teachers in protracted crisis contexts perform their duties under constant conditions of chronic uncertainty due to hardly predictable circumstances and daily confrontations with students' (Falk et al. 2019). Thus, they seek to stabilize themselves and their families emotionally and economically over the course of their lifetime. Meanwhile, their personal responsibilities increase alongside their professional obligations as they age. DRC teachers had been harder hit by crisis such as COVID-19 than their Rwandan colleagues, because the education system provides less stability. This study's findings on teacher wellbeing support this conclusion. Individually, Congolese teachers experienced statistically significant higher levels of negative affect ( $M_{RW}=27.16$ ;  $M_{DRC}=31.22$ ) and situational anxiety ( $M_{RW}=10.68$ ;  $M_{DRC}=12.87$ ) than their Rwandan colleagues.

Teachers' wellbeing in the DRC was further impacted by system-level factors that are rooted in the overall instability of the education system. Congolese teachers were less likely to teach remotely, and their salaries were less stable. Rwandan teachers were more likely to teach than Congolese teachers (RW: yes=47.6 %; DRC: yes=12.9 %). More Congolese teachers experienced a stop or reduction in salary (RW: stopped=24.7 %, reduced=11.0 %, full=64.4 %; DRC: stopped=30.1 %, reduced=25.3 %, full=44.5 %). Subsequently, more of them worked for additional income (RW: yes=65.2 %; DRC: yes=85.7 %). In the overall sample, changes in salary are negatively associated with negative affect ( $r = -.18$ ) and situational anxiety ( $r = -.18$ ). Teaching remotely (yes or no) is negatively and significantly correlated with situational anxiety ( $r_s = -.12$ ) but not with negative affect ( $r_s = -.12$ , n. s.). Changes in salary and whether teachers were able to teach increased their levels of stress during school closures. The study demonstrates that individual and system-level aspects shape teacher wellbeing.

### 3 Education in the DR Congo – Factors of vulnerability and robustness in times of crisis

In the following part a qualitative study is presented, which focuses on crisis management in the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic in the provinces of North and South Kivu in the DRC.<sup>2</sup> Special emphasis was placed on factors that limited or strengthened actors' agency after the central decision of school closures was made.

This research was prompted by the fact that the Congolese government decreed comprehensive school closures immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak (WHO 2020), which were followed without discussion, even though the negative impact of school closures was already discussed. The closures were extensive and lasted 31 to 40 weeks. They affected 27 million students (UNICEF/CASS 2020). Accounting for specificities of the Congolese context (accumulation of crises, a large proportion of schools run by non-state actors resulting in complex administrative and decision-making structures within the education sector, limited state capacities), the main research interest was to better understand how the central decision to close schools was put into practice by diverse actors in the education system.

Data collection took place in 2022, and included 18 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from different levels and sections of the education system (Meuser/Nagel 2009). The data analysis followed the method of an inductive qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2010) to identify the ideas and understandings that guided diverse actors' crisis management. Thereby, a code system

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2 For more details see Ohlig & Timm 2024.

was generated, which includes three main thematic lines of their retrospection (= codes) – *school and education in society*, *(self-)positioning and acting*, and *points of reference* – as well as subordinate dimensions thereof (=sub-codes). Following the core interest of this study, we specifically examined these regarding resilience and vulnerability factors within the Congolese education system at the time of the crisis.

From the interviewees' perspective, schools serve as multifunctional institutions beyond merely imparting education. They often function as vital communication channels within communities, especially during the crisis when school closures were used to communicate to everyone the alleged seriousness about the situation.

For example, a health actor pointed out: “[...] and we had to start with schools because most of the population, at least in every family, has a child at school, of course that's why we had to start there.” (Interview 7)

Moreover, in the cross-sectoral coordination, the prioritization of health over education became evident, as even stakeholders from the education sector did not bring educational considerations to the front. In addition, the provision of education seemed to be at risk given the fact that the *responsibility for the provision of education* even in times of crises predominantly falls outside one's own field of responsibility. Many rather allocated the responsibility to external entities such as actors of different levels than their own one. Self-accountability was limited and was more prevalent among non-state actors. Across all interviews stakeholder within the education system show an extremely slight expression of *advocacy for education* which we see as a factor of vulnerability on its own. In contrast, local actors' adaptations and solutions seemed to benefit vastly from their networks of different ranges, which thus represents an important resilience factor. Local and global (faith-based) networks stimulated a sense of solidarity, and provided resources, expertise, and thus room for action. A coordinator of a non-state provider of schools expresses for example: “Yes, with the other educational partners that we had, we had held consultations and at that time, we said to the parents [...] what should be done during this period to ensure the continuity of the activities [...]” (Interview 13). Local networks also allowed for the integration of different forms and sources of knowledge, including local knowledge, which ultimately proved to be an important factor of resilience.

Given the central role of non-state actors in local cross-level networks the question arises as to whether the stability they have provided through their engagement in education, even during the crisis, has not only prevented a complete implosion, but may also have hindered transformative change towards inclusive, higher quality education.

## 4 Educational Governance and COVID-19 in Rwanda. A System Analysis of Reactions to the COVID-19-Pandemic

This research aims to gain insight into the situation during COVID-19 in Rwanda through a government paper analysis and interviews to identify governance mechanisms behind school closures. Between March and September 2022, 15 guideline-based interviews were conducted (Helfferich 2019) with educational decision-makers. From the qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2010) the following main themes emerged from these interviews: (1) realisation and decision-making, (2) communication and cooperation, (3) educational management, and finally (4) evaluation.

Looking at the decision timeline regarding education, Rwanda showed a very quick response to the first COVID case on March 16, 2020. Within 24 hours, all students were sent home as a result of a nationwide school closure to prevent further spread of the virus (Republic of Rwanda 2020a). This closure lasted until September 2020 for all, before schools gradually reopened according to local conditions (Republic of Rwanda 2020b). In total, children did not have access to education for between 6.5 and 11 months.

*Realisation and decision-making:* All decisions to contain COVID, including the decision to close schools, were monopolized within the cabinet, and led by statements and respective actions from the Ministry of Health. Educational governance in Rwanda involves several actors, including government representatives, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Niyibizi/Gahutu 2021). In the context of decentralization, education governance is divided into two levels. The top level is the central government. It is responsible for the organization of the school system based on guidelines. The lower level consists of actors from FBOs and NGOs. It ensures the functioning of the school system in accordance with the guidelines (ibid.; World Bank 2011: 35). Schools in Rwanda are run by three different school providers: state, state-funded, and private (Niyibizi/Gahutu 2021: 16). The decisions on COVID were made at the cabinet level and were binding for all educational institutions, however, the government was only responsible for public schools and to a limited extent for state-funded schools. Private schools were responsible for their own operation.

*Communication and cooperation:* Looking at the communication during the crisis, as well as the cooperation between different education stakeholders, it became clear that the main communication tools were TV, radio, and messenger groups, such as WhatsApp. Communication and cooperation between education actors focused on implementing hygienic measures, building new classrooms, and coordinating financial and material support.

*Education management:* Radios, laptops, tablets, and smartphones were distributed to a few families to ensure that students continued to learn. Frequent teacher trainings on ICT knowledge were organized, so teachers could prepare lessons. In the process of reopening schools, the education system faced the chal-

lenge of getting students back to school and teachers who had changed their jobs or been recruited by other school providers. Looking at the differences between school providers, we could see that private schools faced major financial challenges. While teachers at state schools received their salaries continuously, the payment of private school teachers' salaries stopped after 1 or 2 months (all interviews).

*Evaluation:* One of the major themes of the interviews concerning the lessons learnt during the COVID-19-pandemic was the lack of access to internet and even electricity. This highlighted the need to continue the digitalization process. In terms of cooperation and communication, it was mentioned that this should be improved between school providers and between the actors of education governance. This could potentially ensure the continued functioning of the entire education system, rather than just state and state-funded schools in the event of a crisis. Rwanda's educational governance demonstrated strong resilience through networking between different functional systems (e.g., the health system) and using TV, radio, and social media for effective communication with students and parents.

## **5 Language Change and School Choice in the Time of Crises: Kurdistan Region as a Case**

The following example of the KRI shows another aspect of protracted challenges that is not visible in unexpected events such as COVID: Ongoing crises, in this case the language of instruction from Arabic to Kurdish and English, influence parents' school choice. However, this has a considerable influence on the structure of education systems by directing the flow of students. This contribution focuses on parents' perspectives: What is the main factor influencing private school choice in the KRI, and how can it be characterized?

Over the years, the Kurds in Iraq have faced persistent challenges in language instruction within their education system, constituting a protracted crisis. Initially, Arabic was the dominant language of instruction, followed by periods of partial Kurdish Sorani instruction. The formation of the KRI in 1992 marked a pivotal shift to Kurdish instruction but with the use of two different dialects due to the lack of a standard language. Yet, the day the Kurds started to have an education system in Kurdish language after 1992, private schools gradually began to provide education mostly in English (Sheyholislami et al. 2012; Haig/Mustafa 2019; Hassun 2022). The number of private schools in the KRI has steadily risen since 1994 from one school to 144 schools with 33,613 students in 2018. Globally private schools do not have a common consensual definition (Scheunpflug/Wenz 2015). In the case of KRI, private schools operate for profit. Research indicates that English as the language of instruction is one of the factors influencing parents' choice of private schools (Zeitlyn et al. 2015).

A quantitative survey was conducted with 223 parents whose children attended private primary schools in Duhok city, employing closed-ended questions. The content of the survey was based on 15 studies from 2007 to 2015 and consists of 23 items covering six domains. The data show that English is the leading factor for choosing private schools ( $M=3.52$ ) compared to the school environment ( $M=3.00$ ), academic quality ( $M=2.96$ ), physical resources ( $M=2.44$ ), values and beliefs ( $M=2.06$ ), and logistics ( $M=1.81$ ). This result is a contradiction to the Kurds' longstanding desire to have an education system in the Kurdish language. However, the absence of a standard Kurdish language posed a significant challenge. Choosing English private schools can be seen as an alternative solution to the standard language problem and the perceived shortcomings of the Kurdish language as a scientific and academic language compared to English. In addition, private schools offer stability in language teaching compared to public schools.

The findings show that quick transformations, such as changing the language of instruction or involving the private sector in education, in times of crises in regions with very different dialects can be problematized as it pushes parents out of public schools and into alternative forms of education, which potentially could weaken the public education system. Private schools serve diverse functions in conflict-affected regions, responding to evolving language policies amidst crises. This case confirms – although the crisis requirement is different from the other cases – the special role that non-governmental schools can play in responding productively to crises.

## **6 Education under pressure: East Congo in the times of school closures since 2019 and its consequences on the provision of mass education**

Since 2019, the intensification of multiple and overlapping crises in the Eastern DRC has devastated the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri. Millions of people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance due to conflict, displacement, natural disasters, health emergencies, and food insecurity. More than 14 million children are affected including 3.6 million children who are displaced. At the beginning of the year 2024, over 1.3 million children are out of school, and an estimated 900 schools are closed. The already fragile education infrastructure is on the verge of collapse. In addition, there are two million refugees resulting from the conflict between the Congolese army and the rebel military group, called M23, who are arriving in Goma and are not being cared for. Schools are increasingly being used to house refugees (UNICEF 2023, 2024). As a result, the school system in Eastern Congo is under enormous pressure, and this situation is exacerbated by the lack of political support for teachers and school management with repercussions on teaching and learning (Falisse et al. 2022; Brandt et al. 2022). Education stakeholders (parents, teachers, learners)

and political decision-makers are all victims of the crises in one way or another. Decision-makers at the school-level are mostly ignored despite their key role in asserting children's rights to education and maintaining schools as safe spaces for children. This study shows that the pressure on schools has increased since 2019 due to the introduction of free primary education for all and COVID-19. It further shows that despite a worsening education crisis and massive school closures in East Congo, the idea of mass education is being upheld by politicians, educational leadership, teachers, and parents.

This study analyses 18 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders across levels and sectors and open-ended questions from the teacher questionnaire described above. The data was analyzed through inductive content analysis (Kuckartz 2010).

In the case of COVID-19, the decision to close schools in the DRC was taken by government authorities without consulting the communities concerned. It was therefore a top-down decision. A decision-maker in education at the sub-division level in the province described the situation as follows: "The crisis of COVID took education officials by surprise. The decision to close schools came from the national government. The provincial decision-making bodies used the government letter to communicate to lower-level bodies. This measure was taken to combat the spread of the global pandemic COVID-19" (Interview 8). The lack of clear communication also influences the insufficient support for learners and teachers during the crisis. During COVID-19, teacher salaries were not consistent, thus some had taken on other economic activities, such as farming (interview 11 and 12; in the questionnaire, 48.7 % of teachers did not get salaries and referred to farming).

The study confirms findings from previous research that reported poor education during COVID-19 in the DRC (Corcoran et al. 2022). While the state has shown its responsibility for education by providing free primary education for every child, education is not prioritized in the moment of crisis. Furthermore, education stakeholders such as school management, teachers, and parents are not consulted. This lack of communication shows that education stakeholders are marginalized in the decision-making process. However, they must find a way to deal with the consequences of the continuous disruption of mass education.

## 7 Conclusion and Follow-up research

For all the contexts elaborated in the different sections, one fact challenges the education systems: Government decisions on education are frequently top-down (Bozzini 2013), or define the framework for further decisions in a problematic way as seen in the case of Kurdistan. A lack of communication hinders the commitment at the level of daily action and adaption strategies to crises, not only but especially to COVID-19. This is even more dramatic as crises such as the

school closures caused by COVID affect the most vulnerable populations the most (Falisse et al. 2022; Wodon 2020). Resulting vulnerabilities and instabilities are even more severe in cases such as the DRC, where the state is gradually withdrawing from the provision of education, leaving the responsibility to faith-based organizations, local communities, teachers, and parents. Thus, on the one hand, they provide schooling, and, on the other, they maintain weak states by covering social services that would otherwise fall within the responsibility of the state. In addition, our results show that, on the one hand, the diversity of school boards absorbs crisis-related developments, but on the other hand, the teachers at these schools are often personally affected by the crisis to a particular degree.

Our findings suggest that supporting educational actors, who uphold teaching and learning in contexts of protracted crisis and within fragile education systems, requires:

- a nuanced, context-specific understanding of the histories and interlinkages between different education providers (e.g., private versus state-funded education),
- a deeper understanding of the individual and system-level factors that shape teachers' ability to provide teaching,
- improved communication between authorities and stakeholders at different levels before and during policy decisions that have a direct impact on education systems,
- sustained networking between actors at different levels of educational governance and between school providers to ensure the functioning of all types of schools,
- stronger advocacy for education of high quality within education systems themselves, and
- data-driven and evidence-based educational policy making.

To develop strategies that enhances educational resilience in the face of crises we suggest for further research:

- Research on networks as a source of resilience in crisis contexts (e.g., emergence of networks, functions, mechanisms, and outcomes),
  - Experimental and action research to find strategies that can help educational agents develop resilience in the face of crises.
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