

Fee-Free Basic Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Dream or Reality?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to show how political discourse has influenced the introduction of free-of-charge Basic Education (FFBE) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), during the 2019-2020 school year, following President Félix Tshisekedi's election promise. This article analyses the link between political utterances on free-of-charge decision and their implementation in the provision of public services. The paper is based on an assemblage framework to analyse stakeholders in FFBE implementation. Using press articles and secondary data from official reports, we found that the obstacles in implementing FFBE may be explained by the need for a properly concise public policy about free education, the mismanagement of different stakeholders, the lack of transparency and economic constraints. The population concerned is all the stakeholders in the education system in the DRC. To arrive at our conclusion, we used the assemblage method. In DRC, the promise of FFBE faces significant challenges, notably funding shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of trained teachers. The economic instability in the region hampers government investment in educational resources, often resulting in fees being imposed by schools despite official policies promoting free education. Future research could focus on innovative funding models, such as community-based initiatives or partnerships, to enhance educational delivery. Additionally, exploring the impact of digital learning tools could provide insights into bridging educational gaps, especially in remote areas where access to traditional schooling is limited.

INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has adopted the Fee-Free Basic Education (hereafter FFBE) decision since the beginning of the 2019/2020 school year. By the FFBE decision, the tuition is waived to increase the number of children attending school (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013). It is worth mentioning that, in general, only public schools are concerned about this decision. This decision, which only involves public schools, fails to meet the spirit of Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which states that primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all.

Yet, many queries have been raised regarding factors that can positively or negatively affect this policy, as DRC is still a fragile country. This article attempts to establish a link between theories of free education and the reality on the ground. It henceforth identifies the main problems that can affect the FFBE implementation in this country today. The paper tries to investigate the politics and underpinning philosophy surrounding the formulation of those FFBE policies, who opposes them, and why.

Indeed, the 2019/2020 school year was a historical turning point in DRC's primary education level as, to meet one of his political campaign promises, the newly elected president, Felix Tshisekedi announced the implementation of the FFBE decision. This undeniably was a big gamble for his political legitimacy. This policy was first initiated but not implemented during the 2010 school year by his predecessor, Joseph Kabila (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013). The measure proved to be a failure because some pre-conditions had not been met. Among those pre-conditions, we have what (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020) call the "reassembling"

of various stakeholders who were not involved in the lead-up to the decision, based on assemblage theory (Buchanan, 2015). Assemblage is another manner of saying something is so complicated.

Despite its strategic soundness, this development policy encountered resistance mainly in its implementation and its effectiveness. Nine years later (in 2019), the policy statement of FFBE resurfaces. Indeed, despite the massive adhesion to this presidential utterance, the latter still raises doubts and scepticism among stakeholders of the education sector. The pessimism is mainly due to the 2010 experience, which turned out to be a broken promise. Since “the same causes produce the same effects”, many feared that the promise would not successfully materialise even this time. Some even go as far as to consider this President’s position as a risky bet. Discourses on FFBE were tinged with either pre-electoral purposes in 2010 (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013) or political populism in 2019. Some African presidents had used the FFBE strategy before and after independence (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007), not because they had resources for that, but as propaganda of leadership.

The concept of FFBE comes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Bray, 1987). By suggesting tuition non-payment, it intends to make mandatory children’s school attendance all over the world. Despite the financial constraints encountered, some countries have understood the merits of FFBE and accordingly implemented it (Abuya et al., 2015; Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). The mandatory nature of elementary education means that the state or parents are prohibited from preventing children from receiving elementary education. However, contingent factors in each country can impede such a pretension. In fact, in many sub-Saharan African countries, parents considerably contribute to giving their children access to elementary education (Shapiro & Oleko Tamashe, 2001). Bray (1987) argued that, worldwide, many children do not attend school due to school fees.

As a reminder, in DRC households pay most of the costs of education (Poncelet et al., 2010). In the early 1990s, following the failure of various Structural Adjustment Programs due to fiscal indiscipline, the Breton Woods institutions decided to discontinue its support to DRC, Zaire at the time. The country faced an unprecedented economic, political, and social crisis. The state, which a decade earlier had spent more than \$150 per student (Titeca & de Herdt, 2011), could no longer pay teachers. After two years of repeated teacher strikes, the Parent Committees and teacher unions agreed in 1993 (Comhaire & Mrcic-Garac, 2007). In this compromise, parents agreed to pay a certain amount called “prime-de-motivation” to supplement teachers’ salaries (De Herdt et al., 2012; Titeca et al., 2013; Titeca & de Herdt, 2011).

Intervention in children’s education is not an invention from DRC. In classical Athens (Greece), Aristotle had already revealed that when the state is not able to provide an education for children, parents may intervene (Morgan, 1999). Thus, parents have an essential role to play in their children’s education. Parents have primary responsibility for their children. They are the ones who make the first decision about the child’s education.

The consequences of institutionalising this way of managing education are legion. For instance, thousands of children are excluded from the education system, education quality declines, clientelism in the recruitment of teachers, worsening of poverty and inequalities, a model of fuzzy co-governance, where it is not known who officially decides, corruption etc (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020; Comhaire & Mrcic-Garac, 2007; Titeca & de Herdt, 2011). The “prime de motivation” has condemned millions of children to illiteracy, on the one hand, and increased discrimination, on the other hand. With low household income, some children (especially girls), were condemned to remain illiterate (Shapiro & Oleko Tamashe, 2001). The failure of the state was exacerbated by the repeated wars the country faced. The country was then resented as ‘virtually bankrupt’ (De Herdt et al., 2012).

With the reunification of the country and the resumption of cooperation with international agencies, the education sector started benefitting again from external investment (Poncelet et al., 2010). In 2005, the state resumed intervention in the education sector, but this was also mainly for teachers’ payroll salaries which remain otherwise skinny (De Herdt et al., 2012). At this time, the new constitution, in its articles 43, 44 and 45, envisaged a free and compulsory elementary education, “(...) which renders the teacher bonus fees illegal” (Titeca et al., 2013). Also, the country signed many commitments at the international level, among which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Several states have introduced FFBE policy to achieve the 2015 MDGs, among which the “Education for All (E4A)” (Abuya et al., 2015; Oketch & Rolleston, 2007).

Although the constitution enshrines FFBE, without some pre-conditions such as building schools, raising substantial financial resources, or “reassembling” all stakeholders (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020), the FFBE initiative may fail. Thus, using an “assemblage framework” may help the FFBE’s success. Abuya et al. (2015) suggest combining three approaches when implementing a policy such as FFBE: a top-down, a bottom-up, and an interactive process between actors. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to assess how effective were the new government’s decision to implement FFBE.

Scholars specialising in education issues (Abuya et al., 2015; Brehony & Deem, 1990) show that the issue of FFBE has always raised an endless debate, the latter opposing the cons and the pro-FFBE (Bray, 1987). For Walton (2019), FFBE education has, among others, an advantage in reducing the costs borne by households and increasing the rate of school attendance. The notion of FFBE recreates the debate about education as public or private goods (Labaree, 1997), which is far from the reality of DRC, regarding the configuration of its education system (Poncelet et al., 2010).

This paper is based on press articles and secondary data from official reports. Some speeches of different stakeholders are also interpreted. The paper uses an “assemblage framework” to analyse the other stakeholders in FFBE implementation,

using a framework inspired by the book of [Clayton \(2014\)](#). The remainder is organised as follows. The second section presents how the basic education sector has evolved and governed in DRC; the relationship between public finance and FFBE in DRC is analysed in the third section through the assemblage method; the consequences of the FFBE implementation are presented in the fourth section. The fifth section concludes the paper.

Evolution and governance of the basic education sector in DRC

Like in many African countries, DRC's education system takes its roots from colonisation. Its structure is inspired by the Belgian model ([Bollag, 2015](#); [Poncelet et al., 2010](#)). After the DRC's independence, the country encountered many episodes of socio-political problems that affected the education system as well. This section gives a brief insight into the evolution of the education system and analyses its governance.

One Word on The Evolution of Elementary Education Education, a Consequence of the Gospel Spreading Project

The missionaries introduced schools with the motive of spreading the gospel in 1906, through the Independent State of Congo ([Bollag, 2015](#)). Since then, the country has experienced what is considered a State-Church partnership in the education sector like in all African countries. Since then, the education sector has been benefiting from the help of faith-based organisations under the watchful eye of (colonial) authorities. And, as the Catholic Church is the most important in DRC, ([Comhaire & Mrsic-Garac, 2007](#)) reckons its implication as a quasi-monopoly. Until today, the Catholic Church remains the main faith-based organisation in school management in DRC ([Titeca et al., 2013](#)). From the colonial period to independence, education was free of charge and overseen by churches. Some factors can be evoked as the FFBE's drivers at the time. Compared to the present setting, first, only a smaller and a limited number of learners were natives; second, the entree national population was smaller; finally, children's education was based on volunteerism ([Kiambu Di Tuema, 2018](#)). From 1906 until the early 1980s, education policies were almost the same. Schools were subsidized and the government utterly supported all teachers' salaries.

Zaireanization, and the Advent of the Student's Parents' National Platform

The education system has experienced a series of waves of uncertainties with the "madness" of Zaireanization. With this new policy, schools that were under the management of faith-based organisations were nationalised. A few years later, churches and the ruling elites signed an agreement about the school's management ([Titeca & de Herdt, 2011](#)), after the failure of the Zaireanization. The convention was made with four signatories representing the Catholic, and Protestant Churches, Kimbanguism and Islam ([Bollag, 2015](#)). In 1982, the education system plunged into a black hole. With the advent of the Structural Adjustment Program and the government's inability to meet some conditions formulated by the Bretton Wood institutions, the country fell into financial difficulties ([Titeca et al., 2013](#)). The education sector was substantially affected. This was the origin of the participation of parents in the functioning of schools through the "prime-de-motivation". The education sector witnessed the emergence of the "*Association Nationale des Parents d'Elèves du Zaïre*" (ANAPEZA), a faith-based organisation network ([Comhaire & Mrsic-Garac, 2007](#)) with the role of monitoring. Teachers were still taken care of by the State but have seen their salaries decrease significantly ([Titeca et al., 2013](#)).

The 90s Crisis and The "Prime-De-Motivation" as a Strategy for School Salvation?

Though the "prime de motivation" had been settled some years earlier, its role became critical in the 90s, following the important economic crisis the DRC encountered. In the early 1990s, after the sovereign national conference, the country no longer faced some expenses. Teachers started a series of strikes because of the non-payment of their salaries. To avoid the cancellation of the school years' "années blanches", which would occur due to the strikes of teachers around 1992 ([Comhaire & Mrsic-Garac, 2007](#)); the Episcopal National Conference and the ANAPEZA introduced a provisional measure of "prime-de-motivation". It is the beginning of an ordeal, which until today, is seen as charging for free education ([Brehony & Deem, 1990](#)) with negative impacts on the quality of teaching. With the prime-de-motivation, education ceases to be a public good and turns its status into a pure private good. Somehow, primary education is governed by market mechanisms, excluding children whose parents are unable to pay its price. And, as the household budget is limited, especially in rural areas, parents need to discriminate against children in favour of those whose education return is likely, mostly these are young boys and young girls being helpful essentially for domestic work. Indeed, this discrimination stems from the household maximizing behaviour. As by her marriage, a young girl should belong to another family, it seems rational to reduce the amount the household should invest through her. Seen this way, education is perceived as parents' insurance strategy, in a setting where the social security system has been almost absent for a long time. Henceforth, a strategy that was adopted for education system salvation failed to guarantee a fair education to all children; it appears to be a great fallacy.

Since then, the country experienced a series of endless negotiations between the State and different political as well as non-political actors intervening in the education sector. The intervention of non-political actors in providing public services is what [De Herdt and Titeca \(2016\)](#) called "[...] a collective process of bricolage" in the negotiating of statehood. The burden of

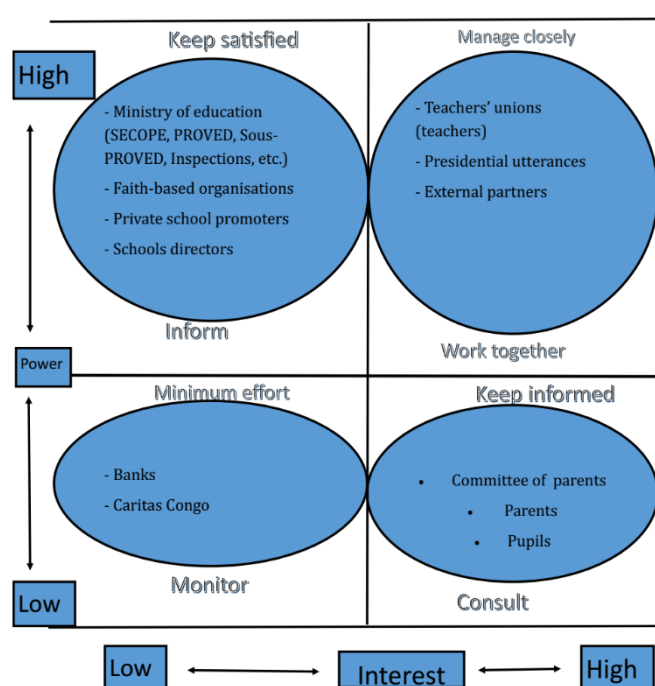
school fees on parents has taken many forms, and the number of stakeholders involved in providing this public service has increased. Over time, with the new reforms (FFBE policy and bancarization) in the education sector, some other stakeholders have come to graft on to other pre-existing ones. Two important reforms have been initiated since the 2010s. Bancarization is the first one, and this helps pay teachers through banks, to avoid fund embezzlement. The second one is the FFBE adopted in the second semester of 2019. Therefore, [Brandt and De Herdt \(2020\)](#) discuss the need for reassembling all actors.

The Assemblage Method

Originating from post-structuralist theory, the assemblage method is a qualitative research approach that emphasizes the interconnectedness of various elements—human and non-human—within a specific context. This method, influenced by the works of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, suggests that social phenomena can be understood as dynamic networks of relationships rather than fixed entities ([Buchanan, 2015](#)). For instance, in education, researchers might analyze the assemblage of community, infrastructure, policy, and technology to understand how they combine to shape experiences in an education system ([Brandt & De Herdt, 2020](#)). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of complex social realities, highlighting how different components influence one another. As assemblage thinking gains traction, scholars advocate for its use in exploring social practices, emphasizing flexibility and multiplicity in analysis.

Governance and obstacles in implementing FFBE

The Ministry of Education oversees the education sector. The sector is divided into two categories, public and private schools. Many public schools are run by faith-based organisations, commonly known as “écoles conventionnées” ([Bollag, 2015](#); [Brandt & De Herdt, 2020](#)). The networks of the contracted schools are overseen by the National Coordination of Convention Schools, headed by a national coordinator appointed by religious authorities and appointed by the government. The National Coordination disseminates the Ministry of Education's national guidance and instructions to its provincial and local offices. This reflects many parallel structures and makes the governance of the sector complex and opaque ([Comhaire & Mrcic-Garac, 2007](#); [De Herdt & Titeca, 2016](#)). The existence of several actors (as it is mentioned in Figure 1, which we adapted from Clayton's framework) in school management constrains the effectiveness of FFBE policy.



Source: The 'standard' stakeholder map adapted from the book of Clayton, 2014 p 79

Figure 1. Stakeholders' in FFBE implications using assemblage approach in DRC

Although the involvement of various non-state actors in public education management does have many positive impacts ([Titeca & de Herdt, 2011](#)), this section focuses mainly on the obstacles that emerge from multi-actor management. The assemblage framework above is another way to think about stakeholders' implications in FFBE as explained by Buchanan ([Buchanan, 2015](#)). “Examining practices of assemblage enables an expansion of the analytic of governmentality without loss of focus” ([Li, 2007](#)). Actors are positioned in this assemblage framework according to their level of power, their interests and

according to the role they play in the FFBE implementation. In 2010 as well as in 2019, the trigger of the idea of FFBE was the presidential utterances. With an authoritative power and a dose of willpower, presidential declarations occupy a special place in our framework.

Among the stakeholders, we have the committee of parents. The contribution of parents to the education system is crucial (Poncelet et al., 2010; Shapiro & Oleko Tambashe, 2001). Parents monitor the day-to-day management of schools even though they have less power in FFBE implementation. This follow-up is done through an established structure by all parents through an election, or by designation. The parents' committee participates in setting school fees. This committee, in certain circumstances, would impact the FFBE implementation negatively. Masic-Garac (Comhaire & Masic-Garac, 2007) already pointed out that parents, as partners of education, have not only improved its governance, but their involvement (through the committee of parents) could also have adverse effects. In some schools, the parents' committee goes so far as to receive a monthly salary, that can be approximated to corruption. With FFBE, parents who benefitted from this informal advantage, which can be qualified as hidden transcripts, may lose it. However, the presence of parents in school management balances the power of school managers in the regulation of school fees. Pupils remain passive stakeholders without any power.

Teacher unions also play an undeniable role in the education system. With Church-based school management, several teacher unions have emerged with the mission of claiming proper treatment for teachers. Each faith-based organisation has its teachers' union. However, only two teacher unions are more active; these are the Teachers' Union of Congo (SYECO) for non-convention public schools, and the Catholic Teachers' Union (SYNECAT) (Comhaire & Masic-Garac, 2007). SYECO is among the structures that actively advocate for the abolition of school fees. However, some teacher unions would be more listened to than others, and this discrimination is a source of conflict within teacher unions (Bollag, 2015), and often weakens their action.

Teachers through teacher unions, as it is mentioned in the framework, have not only power in claiming FFBE (through strikes) but also a high interest. Although teacher unions generally call for a strike to exert pressure on the state to improve teachers' living conditions, some actions fail due to the lack of unity among all teacher unions. In 2018 one responsible SYECO, Cécile Tshiyombo asked for the unity of action: *We can do nothing alone. We must come together if only to give each other moral support*. This lack of a common front of teacher unions may create frustration and a negative impact on an up-bottom decision such as free-of-charge schools. Indeed, before 2007, the country was divided into different salary zones (Kinshasa, Katanga and the rest of the provinces). The consequence was that the Ministry of EPSP has diminished teachers' salaries in two zones only (Bollag, 2015). In general, conflicts are due to wage inequality and identity problems.

Moreover, there are churches represented by an administrative body technical service so-called "coordination des écoles conventionnées". It is the technical department that oversees the schools. This department has played an important role in the education system since the church-state agreement (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016). Accredited faith-based management networks are currently estimated up to 19 (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020). Faith-based organisations are involved in setting school fees, the recruitment and revocation of teachers, etc. Although they play a positive role, these bottom-up services are cited in clientelism, corruption and confessional discrimination, during teacher recruitment (Comhaire & Masic-Garac, 2007). Such practices affect negatively both the implementation of FFBE policy and the quality of education. "Likewise, the religious networks can add certain fees by referring to the convention the churches signed with the state in 1977" (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016). Faith-based organisations, as it is observable in the assemblage framework, seem to have more power and strong influence both on other actors and on FFBE implementation. There are many advantages of the "prime-de-motivation" that conflict with FFBE. Among the school fees paid by households, a non-negligible share is affected by the "coordinations des écoles conventionnées".

Therefore, Titeca et al. (2013) suggested that human resources management and stakeholders' roles must be clarified. Most of the public schools are under the control of churches (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016; Titeca & de Herdt, 2011), as is also the case in New Guinea (Walton, 2019). Therefore, reforms such as FFBE must first be endorsed by the managers of different faith-based organisations. Furthermore, all public services overseen by the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Professional Education (MEPSP) can globally be considered as a particular stakeholder too. From top to bottom, this Ministry is characterised by a cumbersome administration, and multiple services such as the general secretariate, the provincial inspectorates, the SECOPE, educational advisors, pools, PORVED-Sous-PROVED etc. The Ministry of Education manages most of the civil servants (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020), and for this reason, it has a high power over other stakeholders. With this power, some services, such as SECOPE, are likely involved in clientelism and corruption and can be unfavourable to the FFBE's effectiveness. In the process of applying for approvals from new public schools and unregistered teachers, SECOPE receives some retributions (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016) which is nothing but corruption and mostly seen as hidden transcripts. This situation is a source of a lack of confidence in certain school managers who find SECOPE as a stopper between them and the Ministry of EPSP. Banks and Caritas Congo are also considered stakeholders, because of their involvement in the bancarization process and the payroll of teachers' salaries (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020).

International partners also play a remarkable role in the education system (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013). Although their absence is due to the mismanagement and repeated wars observed in the country, still external donors contribute to maintaining education in life. These partners are most visible in the construction and re-enacting of school buildings and in supporting operating costs through school supplies. However, households are asked to intervene in the construction of schools (Titeca &

de Herdt, 2011; World Bank, 2005) and classroom equipment. External partners have high interest and power (see the assemblage framework) over the ruling elites. In part, certain claims from other stakeholders are taken into consideration by political leaders through their presence and may contribute to FFBE's emergence.

Finally, we have private school promoters. In most cases, they consider themselves to be “kinglets in their kingdom”. Private schools are mostly visible in urban areas (Bollag, 2015). Indeed, the rural population does not have enough financial means to send children to private schools, where studying would cost a little more than in public schools. In fact, unlike public sector practices, private schools have the freedom to regulate school fees (Bollag, 2015). Without any form of subsidy from the state (Poncelet et al., 2010; Titeca & de Herdt, 2011), even when the ruling elite declares FFBE, contributions from parents must cover all the burdens faced by private schools. Low teachers' labour conditions in public schools have incited most of the “rich” parents to send their children to private schools where the quality of education seems to be higher. Therefore, a free-of-charge education would lead to a double-speed education in the country in disfavouring of low-income households. This situation is against the claim made by Labaree (1997) that schools must be an expression of a democratic political vision and a strategy for preparing children to play an essential role in a democratic society.

The diversity of partners, as mentioned earlier, creates a contradiction in the governing of the education sector regarding the FFBE. This cacophony has even gone so far as to regard the education sector as a business, which Poncelet (Poncelet et al., 2010) called the “[...] the commercialization of education”, that prevents millions of children from low-income families from accessing education. This situation reinforces economic inequalities among households (Kiambu Di Tuema, 2018; World Bank, 2005) and reproduces these inequalities in the long run. Instead of encouraging competition in delivering public services (Higham, 2014), education is managed as a commodity for which stakeholders must find a balanced price.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Public finances and fee-free elementary education

Primary education is managed between the central and provincial authorities (Bollag, 2015; World Bank, 2005). The government provides most of the funding at the national level through the MEPSP. The education budget plummeted between the 1980s and 2000s. Based on various official reports, this section analyses whether and how the Congolese public finances considered the issues raised by the FFBE. It underlines the link between the ruling elites' utterances about FFBE and reality through figures. The public intervention reaches the lowest level from 27% to 2% (Poncelet et al., 2010), a percentage which is less than the half average in sub-Saharan Africa (Bollag, 2015). Education is one of 17 Sustainable Development Goals that DRC has endorsed. In such a way, the government has received almost US\$100 million from the African Development Bank to sustain pro-poor sectors, including education.

Place of Education in the national budget

Table 1. Budget planning and Execution process for the Ministry of National Education

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
(1) In %	0.1	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.4
(2) In billions of CDF	8,350.5	10,293.0	40,150.0	91,661.0	86,366.7	90,200.0	92,741.0	63,899.7	65,790.8	118,482.2
(3) In billions of CDF	1,042.2	9,190.2	7,862.9	26,700.4	11,384.5	24,807.2	12,648.4	14,544.3	7,911.5	25,197.1
(4) exchange rate CDF for 1US\$	902.66	915.13	910.82	915.17	925.50	924.51	927.92	1215.59	1592.19	1635.62
(5) Execution rate	12.48	89.29	19.584	29.13	13.18	27.50	13.64	22.76	12.03	21.27
(2) In million US\$	9.25	11.25	44.08	100.16	93.32	97.57	99.95	52.57	41.32	72.44
(3) In million US\$	1.15	10.04	86.33	29.18	12.30	26.83	13.63	11.96	4.97	15.41

Source: Report of the Central Bank of the DRC 2016 & 2018

Allocating the necessary funds to the education sector is an emergency strategy to guarantee an adequate quality of education (Murhi Mihigo & Bucekuderhwa Bashige, 2017). However, when analysing both the budget planning and the execution process, the education sector appears to be one of the least endowed. Table 1 below presents the budget planning and execution process for the Ministry of National Education.

The general budget allocated to education is still insufficient (Bollag, 2015) and does not allow for the removal of school fees even at the elementary level. The spending allocated to the functioning of the National Ministry of Education has never reached 1% of the total budget between 2009 and 2018. The discrepancies between budget planning and execution process reflect the lack of realism. From 2009 to 2018, the execution of spending on national education never reached 30%, except for 2010. The year 2010 marks the completion point of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013). The country financed its expenditure by credit from the forgiveness of the debt. On average, the execution process of the forecasts is around only 19%. In terms of current spending per Ministry, there is a disparity in the consumption of credit granted.

Some institutions such as the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministries of Finance and Budget (RDC/Banque Centrale du Congo, 2016 & 2018) have respectively overrun of 378.4%, 388.0% and 450.3% during the execution process, while the ministry of national education is below 30% of the budget planning. This low budget allocation to the education sector blocks the effectiveness of FFBE and contradicts any populist rhetoric about it. Several countries succeeded in implementing FFBE such as the Republic of Mauritius (Harmon, 2011) because the education sector occupies a significant share of their total budget.

The evolution of education expenditure at a glance

The overall state budget is minimal, and if FFBE must be effective, almost half of the national budget must be devoted to the education sector, which is completely inconceivable. For the implementation of FFBE to be successful, the government needs approximately US\$ 2.64 billion. Table 2 below helps assess how important has been education expenditure during the 2010-2018 period, see tabel 2.

Comparing the share of the education budget to the country's national budget, which had declined significantly over time, De Herdt and Titeca (De Herdt & Titeca, 2016) confirm an upward trend that is increasingly asserting itself. As shown in Table 2, the share of the education budget in the overall national budget amounted to 10.5% in 2011 and kept an increasing trend until 2018, when it reached almost 16%. This improvement was in part due to the government's efforts to achieve the MDGs. Remarkable work has been done; however, regarding the total amount of the national budget, the amount is far less than what is needed. Moreover, as found by Poncelet et al. (2010), until today, most of the education budget is dedicated to the payment of staff.

As Shown in Table 2, the share of education over the GDP is less than 3%. With these figures, the 2010 ruling elite utterance on FFBE was mostly for electoral purposes, while the 2019 presidential utterance was to seek legitimacy. However, unlike the 2010 decision, the 2019 free-of-charge measure has the advantage of the existence of certain fundamentals on which FFBE should be built. Since 2013, a program to build 1000 schools per year has been in progress. Even though it is not carried out optimally, some schools have already been built (Bollag, 2015). Nevertheless, the budget for 2020 would consider the FFBE

Table 2. Evolution of Education Expenditure 2010-2018

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
GDP in billions of CDF	19,536.6	23,759.4	26,954.5	30,051.1	33,223.9	35,111.2	37,517.3	55,676.0	76,689.2
The national budget in billions of CDF	3,350.3	4,165.9	3,671.0	3,863.0	3,895.3	7,586.2	5,497.4	10,223.3	8,927.8
Total Education budget in billions of CDF	286.8	435.9	456.5	570.2	648.3	1,089.2	950.0	1,185.3	1,380.6
MEPSP in billions of CDF	179.8	270.7	322.4	376.2	457.6	309.9	847.6	1,089.4	647.3
As % of education budget in National expenditure	8.6	10.5	12.4	14.8	16.6	14.4	17.3	11.6	15.5
As % of Education budget over GDP	1.5	1.8	1.7	1.9	2.0	3.1	2.5	2.1	1.8

Source : Rapports BCC, 2018 and RDC/Ministère du Budget

in its planning (DRC/Ministry of Economy and Finance). Unfortunately, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic may risk casting doubt on these provisions due to the economic recession that the world economy will experience.

Consequences of free-of-charge measures in DRC

Free-of-charge measures have impacted the education sector. On the one hand, the idea is laudable and welcomed with open arms; on the other hand, its effectiveness requires a colossal amount, more realism, and an in-depth multi-sector study.

Positive aspects

While at the international level, the FFBE measure meets the requirements of E4A (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007), encouraging the ruling elites to apply constitutional provisions about free-of-charge; at the national level, it is a crucial step towards democracy. Promoting FFBE plays a role in human development in basic capabilities, especially to lead a life with elementary freedom (Sen, 2000). In addition to the enthusiasm that has risen over the FFBE utterances, a dose of reluctance persists. Scepticism is reinforced by the experience from the 2010 similar decision taken by former president Joseph Kabila which did not meet the population's expectations. At the household level, the FFBE measure has a significant psychological effect on parents. Like the 2010 FFBE measure, though with a failed implementation (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013), the 2019 utterance brought new hopes since this measure came from new leadership. The national coalition of E4A, through Remy Sazumba, had shown enthusiasm before the start of the school year 2019-2020:

We are pleasantly surprised by this measure... This year or never, we must have all the children in school.

It is at the root of the massive increase in the number of children in school and could thus reduce the illiteracy rate more quickly. According to Willy Bakonga, the former Minister of the EPSP, the effective FFBE enabled the country to recover four million pupils who were outside the school (DRC/MEPSP, 8 March 2020). While FFBE policies increased school attendance in several countries in Africa (Abuya et al., 2015), in DRC there is no evidence that it was the free-of-charge measure that increases the number of pupils, other omitted parameters may also explain that.

Negative Aspects

The negative consequences of FFBE utterances are primarily related to the hybrid model in governing the education sector (Titeca & de Herdt, 2011). As mentioned above, this decision was made in haste without meeting all the pre-conditions beforehand. In 2015, the number of schools (primary and secondary) was estimated at nearly 61,870 (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020). From a technical point of view, the re-construction of infrastructures is among the priority needs, especially when we consider that in some corners of the country, especially in rural areas, pupils study under trees. Although some reforms have been made, such as the construction of schools (Bollag, 2015), and the bancarization reform with its limitations (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020), the bulk of the work is still to be done.

The persistence of illegal fees is a downside effect of the free-of-charge measure. School fees paid by parents are only part of the expenses paid by parents to send their children to school. These expenses do not account for other costs related to endowments of school materials, uniforms, various contributions, etc. With the free-of-charge measure, several schools, with their managers' blessing, created fees that did not exist, for example, the introduction of stamps on uniforms. Other schools go so far and require parents to purchase uniforms, and communication books from schools, often at a price that is two or three times the price of the market. In some other schools, fee payment is required to have one's child's enrolment confirmed. According to the French Press Agency, parents during the school holidays in 2019, were asked to pay a down payment of between 100,000 and 150,000 Congolese francs (between 45 and 70 USD), as a confirmation fee for enrolment at Kinshasa-Gombe Primary School (Jeune Afrique, 25 August 2019). These illegal practices are partly due to the low level of school reception. Yet, some laws prohibit such practices. The 2014 framework Law includes free textbooks and school supplies (Bollag, 2015), once covered by parents. However, this directive must be respected because the management of schools remains opaque.

The free-of-charge measure is also a cause for overcrowded classrooms. This overload of classes and teachers can be observed in the recruiting classes, especially in the first year of primary school. The measure has led to an increase in primary school enrolment in a school year. The direct consequence associated with this modification of classes is the high failure rate. This can be due to difficulties in managing classes with many children. Further, the lack of accompanying measures and the persistence of school fees can likely imply a conduct many children to abandon school. Generally, this is the case for children from low-income families, though they are the ones who could benefit from the FFBE.

That is why, despite the FFBE measure announced, parents in several schools are obliged to pay school fees. Soaring student numbers require rushed recruitment of teachers. As a result, there is also a problem related to teaching payroll management, especially in a rural area (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020). School managers sometimes recruit teachers for parallel classes, and qualified unregistered teachers (De Herdt & Kasongo, 2013). As a result, out of nearly 52,000 public schools surveyed, only about 31,000 are budgeted. It causes school managers to introduce additional fees that break the free-of-charge measure. Another limitation is the teachers' payroll management (Brandt & De Herdt, 2020). The bancarization of teachers' salaries, although commendable, the limited number of banks in the country has partly made it ineffective. Besides that, we

have the problem of meagre teachers' salaries. Some teachers carry out parallel income-generating activities, such as small business. Others go so far as to be recruited in private schools, a phenomenon commonly called "double vacation", which negatively impacts the quality of education.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to contribute to debates on the political utterances about FFBE and the constraints in translating that rhetoric into practice in the education sector in DRC. The multiplicity of actors involved in the management of the education sector and the lack of educational policy negatively affect the implementation of FFBE. User payments by parents "prime-de-motivation" remains an alternative means of financing elementary education in DRC even though the state has increased the share of its participation in the sector. Other things being equal, FFBE in DRC is far from being implemented. The insufficiency of many pre-conditions devoted to the functioning of the education system perpetuates the "prime-de-motivation", and hence, a logic of "pay or decay". With a low national budget, the low salary provided to teachers, and the absence of subsidies for private schools, FFBE will remain more of a slogan in the context of DRC. As free-of-charge measures are most focused on paying teachers' salaries, without considering functioning costs, the translation of this political rhetoric into reality may be very challenging to meet. In many circumstances, the basic strategies of FFBE from the ruling elite do not meet the reality on the ground. For example, the rates of population growth are at a high level of progress without an appropriate policy. Therefore, a demographic policy would be among the prerequisites for FFBE. There is a necessity for empirical research investigating the real situation on the ground, involving all stakeholders to explore where the bottleneck would be located. For the FFBE to be effective, it is prudent for the Congolese state to make efforts at the level of basic education instead of being dispersed between primary and secondary education. Indeed, paying a stable, consistent, and regular salary to the principals of the primary school, would make the FFBE a reality and a long-term reality. Therefore, it may be concluded that FFBE is possible in DRC but without (1) traducing the political discourse into policy and strategy, and (2) reassembling stakeholders in decision-making is still a dream today.

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The first author (corresponding author) wrote the first version and the last two versions have undergone corrections and proofreading.

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