

Access to education in high risk regions of Africa

Conference Report – October 2018

The GIGA-IAA research project on education in conflict-affected countries, financed by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law's Knowledge Management Fund, sets out to understand how education is organised in areas with limited state presence. The project seeks to decipher which actors intervene in the educative sector and how they impact the learning processes. This conference brief presents the key insights of a conference with education innovators and researchers on 17 September 2018.

On 17 September around 45 people came together at the Liberty Living Lab to discuss how education innovations can help those people facing extraordinary risks. The conference was financed by the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law's Knowledge Management Fund and organized by Svenia Busson from LearnSpace Paris. Speakers were Claire Mongeau, founder of the Kenyan startup M-Shule, Marcus S. Wleh, country director of Bridge International Academies Liberia, Anne-Clémence Le Noan, education consultant and teacher-in-chief of LearnSpace Paris, and Tim Glawion, researcher at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies.

Svenia, as organizer of the conference, kicked off the discussion by talking about LearnSpace's search for innovative education technologies. After a global voyage, she now seeks to discover each continent in more detail. Her Europe EdTech tour and also her startup incubator in Paris discovered new ideas and brought them together. The next EdTech tour will go across Africa in December and January. You can find out more here: edtechtours.com/edtech-africa-tour.

Anne-Clémence went next with a presentation on education in the Central African Republic. She discussed her analysis of the situation in the rebel-held town of Ndélé, pointing out three crucial access constraints:

- Access to knowledge: during the conflict, the library and schools were pillaged. Insecurity remains too much of a threat to invest in long-term installments such as computer rooms. M-Shule's SMS material might offer one solution to the problem.
- Access to qualified teaching: few teachers take up their posts in and around Ndélé as they find the region to be too remote and potentially dangerous. Local actors have tried filling the gap by training locals to become primary teachers.
- Access to financing: due to the absence of state finance institutions schools do not receive their annual budgets and have to run solely on what they gain through very low student fees. Due to a lack of private banks, teachers can access their salary only in the far away capital of Bangui. A possible solution might be found through Mobile Money.
- A recent report on her and Tim Glawion's findings can be found at: https://www.giga-hamburg.de/sites/default/files/md_pdf/GlawionLeNoan2018_ResearchBrief_EducationInsecurityinNdeleCAR.pdf

Afterwards, Claire joined the conference via video-link and presented her start-up “M-Shule”. She explained how she has been in the social entrepreneurial world of education for several years and founded M-Shule together with her Kenyan colleagues. M-Shule targets parents and students of low-cost private primary schools in poor neighborhoods. Subscribers receive examination questions for a small fee as text messages. Through a back and forth chat algorithm text messages adapt and progress with the user’s learning curve. On top of the learning aspect for the student it also allows to monitor learning progress to inform parents about their children’s advances and to enable schools to adapt their curriculum based on data based results. Claire sees her work in complementarity to the state’s efforts in improving access to education for the country’s poorest. You can find more on M-Shule, including touching individual stories, at: www.m-shule.com.

Marcus concluded the conference by explaining the particular model of Bridge’s engagement in Liberia. Unlike other countries, Bridge does not run its own schools in Liberia, but rather has been contracted by the government to run some of the state’s free public schools. Through this particular public-private partnership (PPP), the Liberian government hopes to increase the quality of its education system and to test innovations at such schools before introducing them nationwide. For instance, they tried all-day schooling at these PPP schools and after seeing its merits introduced it in all public schools. Marcus also told us about independent studies showing competence advances among the PPP schools compared to public schools. Nevertheless, as someone from the audience also scrutinized, long-term results will need to be seen. Marcus mentioned that the project is set up in a way that the government can in the mid-term take over the management of the schools itself.

The audience engaged all of the speakers with crucial and critical questions and comments. One member mentioned the need to look at the quality of the education whose access we are discussing. Another asked about the scientific data behind the assumptions made on education success of different innovations, and to keep in mind short-term benefits versus long-term downsides of privatizing education. Finally, many audience members asked about the daily activities of each of the speakers, be it during research in Ndélé, working at a Kenyan start-up, or running PPP schools.

All speakers thanked the audience for their time and encouraged them to stay in touch.