

A Difficult but Possible Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):

Building a Better World with Human Rights and Democracy

by Dieudonné Amisi Mutambala

Researcher in Education, Human Rights and Conflict Transformation
Member of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
and its Adolescent and Youth Interest Group
Online UN Volunteer Award – 2006

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Abstract (150 words)

The International Centre for Conflict and Human Rights Analysis, Democratic Republic of Congo chapter (ICCHRA-DRC), in collaboration with the Congolese organization Artists for Humanity, is working with students and secondary and tertiary educational staff in Eastern DRC to explore and respond to the interconnected issues of human rights, conflict prevention and democratisation, in the light of recent political history.

The testimonies of teachers and students gathered in research by ICCHRA-DRC offer hope for a just society through democratic processes made to the measure of the needs and possibilities of the people of the DRC. Education in civil and political rights will be necessary for these processes to become reality. Artists for Humanity advocates for this education and contributes to it through arts-based activities.

Key words

DRC, Education, political and civil rights, democracy, students and teachers

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Research among students and teachers

The International Centre for Conflict and Human Rights Analysis¹, DRC chapter (ICCHRA-DRC), in collaboration with the Congolese organization Artists for Humanity², is working with students and secondary and tertiary educational staff in Eastern DRC to explore and respond to the interconnected issues of human rights, conflict prevention and democratisation, in the light of recent political history.

From militarism to democratization

Research conducted by Artists for Humanity in 2005 entitled “Civil and Political Rights Education: Need or Emergency in DRC?” found that education for civil and political rights was both a need and an emergency if these rights are to become an integral part of Congolese culture and society.³

Further research undertaken in 2006 by ICCHRA–DRC surveyed students and teachers to gauge the impact of the recent electoral processes and the events surrounding the voting. The questionnaires, results, and interpretation are available online⁴ in a report entitled “*Du*

Militarisme à une Démocratisation taillée sur mesure: les éducateurs et étudiants

¹ <http://www.icchra.org>

² http://www.respectrefugees.org/ezone/2004/ezone20040220_arthum.shtml
and <http://www.romero-online.com/respect/arthum/index.shtml> .

³ <http://www.romero-online.com/respect/arthum/Periodique6.pdf>

⁴ http://www.romero-online.com/respect/arthum/militarisme_etude.pdf

s'expriment'' ("From Militarism to a Made-to-measure Democratization: teachers and students speak"). The report's conclusion states that the "measure" during the past elections was that of the political elite. On the other hand however, the testimonies of teachers and students cited in the research offer hope for a just society through democratic processes made to the measure of the needs and possibilities of the people of the DRC. Education in civil and political rights will be necessary for those processes to become reality.

As the election of 2006 approached, the people of the DRC were expecting a handover of political power to the non-armed opposition through elections and without bloodshed. This would have been a good solution if the aims of democracy had been respected. The 2006 research asks how the interviewees experienced the election and its preparation. The teachers and students observed that the simple fact of organizing or conducting elections should not be considered evidence that the Congolese are "mature" politically speaking. Strategies for civil and political education are necessary and they are urgent.

Parameters of the 2006 research

This research was carried out in the French language with 43 teachers in Uvira, South Kivu, in the east, and 132 university teachers and students in Kinshasa, in the west, using a questionnaire of ten questions with numerous sub-points and opportunities for additional explanations. The research report outlines some socio-political realities common to the two locations:

- Military influences outweighing civic powers since the 1960s.
- Socio-economic infrastructures disastrous for more than 30 years.
- Dictatorial regime of Mobutu since 1965 and a single political party from 1967 to 1991.

- Proliferation of weapons of war and existence of several armed militias outside the control of the state...

And some differences :

- Swahili is the predominant language of Uvira/South Kivu, while Lingala is that of Kinshasa.
- Education in Kinshasha includes primary, secondary and higher education; in Uvira/South Kivu there are only primary and secondary schools.
- In Kinshasha there were armed clashes while waiting for the results of the elections of August 2006, in Uvira/South Kivu there had been armed conflicts from 1996 to 2003 between militias of resistance and allied forces of the rebellion.
- Kinshasa was governed by the government during the period of the war, but Uvira/South Kivu was under occupation by the rebellion and its allies during the same period.

Results

The results of these surveys and the observations of volunteers working under the banner of ICCHRA-DRC in the field point to a need for Congolese youth to access civil, political and human rights education. In the DRC today people are hopeful that democracy will become a reality, but there is also fear that there will be a return to the abuses of human rights that occurred during the struggle for democracy and before. Knowledge and exercise of civil and political rights can then and progressively enable the respect of social, economic and cultural rights. Therefore civil and political rights and responsibilities need to be taught or learnt in both formal and non-formal education programs. Youth should be at the center of efforts to educate for democratization.

Youth are our hope through whom we project our future, but they also represent a fear for the whole nation. A huge number of young people have no access to education. Many demobilized young combatants are out of the school and have no employable skills to help them become productive members of society. They are liable to be recruited again by new or reorganized armed groups.

Educating for Human Rights: using ads on DVDs

Having clearly established the need for civil and political rights education, ICCHRA-DRC is now working with Artists for Humanity to bring this education to youth in Eastern Congo and Burundi. Thanks to material support from Youth for Human Rights International, ICCHRA-DRC is distributing “30 Rights and 30 Ads” DVDs⁵ through the United Nations Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Protection Clusters and Sub-Clusters in the region. These audio-visual arts-based materials are designed to help viewers know and understand the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in order that they can defend and protect such rights. ICCHRA-DRC believes that as a result, youth will be able to exercise and enjoy their own civil and political rights, and contribute to making the DRC a better place to live.

ICCHRA-DRC has gathered feedback from youth participating in this educational project, and has seen an emotional and personal reactions to the DVD projection footage among youth. There appears to be a therapeutic value in the reactions that the DVDs provoke, as the youth express feelings of comfort from the solidarity expressed in the DVDs, as they see people from other continents standing for the same rights and denouncing the same abuses as the ones which they observe happening where they live.

⁵ <http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/watchads/index.html>

Conclusion

Engaging youth and teachers in discussion of political and civil rights can encourage participation in civil society and support their choices to build lives that have meaning and value. It is only with this kind of education that we can truly talk about democracy in the DRC. Enjoying and defending civil and political rights can provide youth with a positive picture, that of resources et possibilities of their country, and can lessen feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future. ICCHRA-DRC believes that civil and political rights education and other related works such as human rights promotion and protection can be progressively integrated into Congolese culture for the common good and the dignity of future generations.