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Improving surveillance of attacks on children and education in South Kivu: a knowledge collection and sensitivity analysis in the D.R. Congo

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ABSTRACT

Armed attacks on education affect students and school personnel around the world. South Kivu province in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is thought to have particularly high rates of attacks on education, but robust prevalence estimates are challenging, as there are currently no validated, streamlined, and pragmatic methods available for monitoring attacks on education. Drawing on the wealth of information across organizations within the child protection and education sectors, this study used semi-structured interviews with key informants throughout South Kivu to enumerate the attacks that took place during two separate periods. Over the two rounds of this study, 405 attacks on education were documented in South Kivu, with 167 reportedly occurring between 25 December 2009 and August 2010, and 238 between 25 December 2012 and August 2014. Purposive samples of these reports were verified on site through interviews with school directors, teachers, and village leaders, and a confirmation rate of 53% was achieved for the first period and 79% for the second. Real-time monitoring of attacks on education could achieve sizeable improvements in these confirmation rates, as a large proportion of the invalidated reports were in fact corroborated, but had taken place before the study period. These findings suggest that semi-structured interviews with key informants using a short recall period, and then confirming a subsample of the reports, constitutes a feasible, reliable, and relatively sensitive method for monitoring attacks on education.

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Democratic Republic of the Congo; health and human rights; child protection; education; grave violation

Background

Armed violence and the forceful use of schools by militant groups threaten students and educators across the world, harming individuals, upending families and communities, and violating the rights to education and health (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack [GCPEA], 2014). Having survived a Taliban assassination attempt when she was 15, Malala Yousafzai has drawn global attention to the need for safe and equitable access to education in recent years, earning a Nobel Peace Prize

for her advocacy in 2014. That year, the Taliban killed 145 people in a military academy in Pakistan, Israeli attacks on schools in Gaza killed 45 people, and Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls in a Nigerian school (Associated Press [AP], 2014; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2014; Segun & Muscati, 2014; Tremblay, 2014; Walsh, 2014). Although these particular events were widely reported by the news media, human rights groups, and United Nations (UN) agencies, many more like them are likely to have gone undocumented due to the absence of validated, streamlined, and pragmatic methods for monitoring attacks on education (GCPEA, 2014).

UN Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005) was a first step in creating such a system. It established the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, which would come to manage the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for grave violations against children. Attacks on schools, including attacks and threats against associated personnel, is one of the six violations tracked by the MRM (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict [OSRSG-CAAC], 2014). The mechanism, however, operates in a limited number of countries, and the data must pass rigorous UN-verification procedures – meaning that the vast majority of cases may go unreported (Alfaro, Myer, Anonymous, Ali, & Roberts, 2012; Potts, Myer, & Roberts, 2011). Indeed, the 2014 *Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, which publishes the official MRM results annually, indicated that, '[a]ccess by the United Nations remained severely restricted throughout 2013, significantly disrupting the monitoring and reporting of grave violations against children' (UNSG, 2014), a condition that remained largely unchanged for the most recent report in 2015 (UNSG, 2015).

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)'s *Education under Attack 2014* is the most comprehensive study of attacks on education to date, though it refrains from issuing a total number of incidents (2014). Instead, the study – which covers January 2009 to September 2013 – uses broad ordinal categories, including 'very heavily affected' (1,000 or more reports), 'heavily affected' (between 500 and 999 reports), and 'other affected' (between five and 499 reports), to estimate a 'minimum count' per country. The report cites a lack of adequately detailed documentation and of verification processes as critical challenges.

According to the GCPEA's analysis, 'there is still a need to strengthen monitoring and reporting partnerships between UN agencies, international and national NGOs and education ministries and district education offices [...]' (2014). In response to this need, Columbia University, in partnership with a Congolese organization named Rebuild Hope for Africa (RHA), has conducted a study in the province of South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), to assess the use of semi-structured interviews as a reliable and pragmatic tool for surveillance of attacks on education. While the study does not claim to capture the global total of attacks on education throughout South Kivu during the study periods, it aims to demonstrate the utility and robustness of such a method.

Despite being the subject of numerous treaties and peacekeeping missions, DRC is still home to dozens of armed rebel groups, making it a difficult place to provide reliably secure educational services, and an important place to test new surveillance methods. The GCPEA categorized DRC as 'heavily affected,' with between 500 and 999 attacks from 2009 to 2014, mostly concentrated in the eastern region, including South

Kivu. The 2014 *Report on Children and Armed Conflict* verified 95 such attacks in the year of 2013 and 25 incidents of the military use of schools all across the country (2014), whereas in 2014 the UN verified 22 attacks on schools and 12 cases of the military use of schools (2015).

Methods

Data collection occurred in two rounds, each spanning 3 months. Both rounds consisted of semi-structured interviews with key informants from the education and child protection sectors in South Kivu. The team created a list of all Congolese and international NGOs and UN agencies operating in the major cities of South Kivu with child protection or education programming, as well as the public and religious school administration offices in those cities. The team contacted the child protection, education, and monitoring and evaluation specialists from those organizations by phone when possible and visited their offices to schedule interviews. Each key informant was also asked to identify other potential key informants. Interviews were conducted in person after gaining informed consent verbally.

In the first round, which took place between late May and August 2010, the team interviewed representatives from 26 such organizations in Bukavu, the provincial capital, covering a recall period between 25 December 2009 and early August 2010. The second round took place between late May and August 2014, and the research team interviewed key informants from 54 organizations, this time in the cities of Bukavu, Baraka, Shabunda, Uvira, and Walungu, with a recall period between 25 December 2012 and June 31, 2014. Thus, the second round was more extensive in terms of report collection effort on the part of the investigators, and the recall period was longer.

Participants were asked in French and Swahili if they were aware of any disruptions of education caused by armed groups in the province within the given recall period. They were then probed on the description of the event, as well as its date or period, location (including village, territory, and school), and the group suspected of being responsible for the event. They were also asked to supply any relevant reports or databases in their organizational archives, and were informed that they would not be rewarded for their participation in the study. Key informants were ensured confidentiality, the interviews were not recorded, and study notes did not contain any identifying information about participants.

'Disruption' was used as a broad term so as not to limit informants' responses to a narrow conception of 'attack,' which in French has a more limited meaning than in English. The interviewers then clarified that the study focused on attacks on education and provided the following list: *intimidation, theft, indoctrination, recruitment, abduction, kidnapping, illegal incarceration, injury, abuse, torture, sexual- or gender-based violence, forced labor, forced marriage, and murder, whether in school or on the way to school, as well as the military use of schools (i.e. for shelter), and partial or total destruction of school buildings or other facilities, by an armed group*. This definition was derived from *Education under Attack 2014* (GCPEA, 2014), and was culturally tested and adapted through preliminary interviews at the beginning of the study. Although the UN distinguishes between 'attacks on schools' and 'military use of

schools,' this study considered both 'attacks on education,' as each can interfere with the right to education.

Reports were accepted if they included at least: (1) a description of the event that met the previous definition; (2) a date or period within the recall period; and (3) the school name. Reports were excluded if the details reported for two or more of these criteria were incongruent (i.e. if an abduction of students happened in August, during summer vacation), if there was uncertainty as to whether the event happened in or on the way to school, or as to whether the event was caused by an armed group (i.e. if a school was looted at night, but there were no witnesses).

The reports were deduplicated, and when two reports covered the same event but with slightly different details, priority was given to the stronger source of report (i.e. a written field evaluation would trump an oral report). Within each round, the events were mapped digitally, and about 10% were selected from various territories within the province, based on access, geographic spread, and diversity of sources that provided the reports. A given report was not considered for verification when informants reported a heavy ongoing presence of the alleged perpetrator in the affected village that could compromise on-site informants. Reports were also not considered for verification when they took place in especially remote locations that were over a day's reach from any other reported attacks.

As part of the verification process, the team interviewed on-site informants, including school directors and village chiefs when possible, and teachers from the school, or other reliable sources otherwise. Reports were considered confirmed if the events fell within 3 months of the initial report, even if the details of the attack differed (i.e. the type of attack was classified as 'looting' rather than 'extortion'), as long as the on-site report matched inclusion criteria. These same on-site informants were also asked whether nearby schools had been attacked to their knowledge. Lastly, in the second round, after a given school was verified, the two nearest schools were also visited, when possible – even when no attacks were reported there – and on-site informants were interviewed so as to gain some insight into the sensitivity of the key informant reports.

This project was deemed exempt from IRB review because it involved no interaction with human subjects and was based solely on public information collected from educational and child protection organizations and their representatives.

Results

Over the two rounds of this study, 405 attacks on education were documented in South Kivu, with 167 reported between 25 December 2009 and August 2010, and 238 between 25 December 2012 and August 2014. In the first round, 161 of the attacks were reported by key informants in Bukavu and six attacks were added by on-site informants during the verification process. Sources in the second round were more varied, with reports coming from five cities, and an additional seven attacks being added by on-site informants during the verification process, for a total of 238 reports (Table 1). There were close to no reports repeated by more than one organization in the first round, whereas there were 17 (7% of all reports) such reports made in the second round.

The reports involved everything from military use of schools, looting, and extortion, to rape, abduction of children for forced labor, and torture. Informants sometimes

Table 1. Distribution of reports by city of informant in phase two.

Source of report	Number of reports
Bukavu	173
Uvira	33
Shabunda	8
Baraka	10
Walungu	7
Added during verifications in villages	7
Reports repeated in two or more cities	4
Total	238

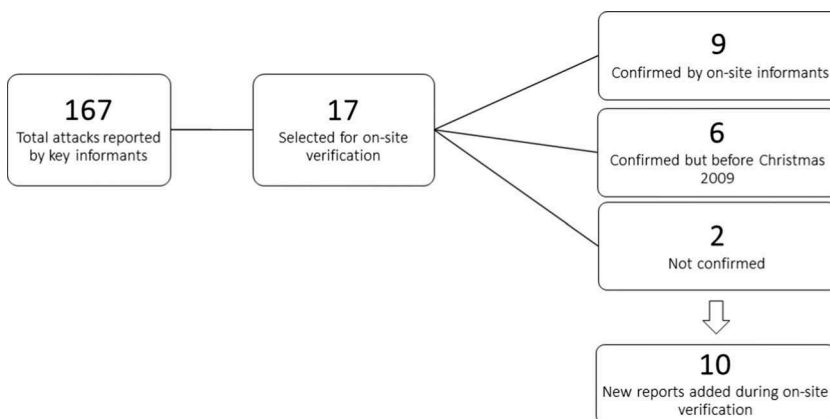
expressed uncertainty about the specific details of the events, and, when multiple were interviewed at once there were sometimes inconsistencies. A similar trend appeared with regards to suspected perpetrators; and in some cases, informants who were afraid to name specific armed groups instead named multiple groups. For these reasons, the complete set of frequencies for attack type and alleged perpetrators are not reported.

Nevertheless, it is clear that most of the reports constituted serious violations of human rights and UN Security Council Resolution 1612. For example, of the consistent and non-conflicting reports in the second round of the study, there were at least 10 incidents of rape, 11 incidents of child abduction, six of child recruitment, seven of forced labor, eight of torture, and four murders; though the military use of schools (100 incidents) and looting (112 incidents) were by far the most common.

Numerous reports were also made of attacks by ‘unknown bandits’; and hundreds of cases were reported of school being disrupted or discontinued indefinitely due to insecurity in the village or mass population displacement, though none of these were included in the 405 figure, as they did not match the inclusion criteria.

Verification

Of the 161 initial reports made in the first round, a sample of 17 reports was selected for verification from the Kalehe, Kabare, Uvira, and Shabunda territories (Figure 1). Nine of these verified reports were confirmed by on-site informants, and two were

**Figure 1.** Organization of verification procedure, phase one.

invalidated. The remaining six reports were corroborated by on-site informants, but had occurred before 25 December 2009, leaving a total confirmation rate of 53% within the specified period. Assuming this confirmation rate remains constant for all reports in the first round, at least 85 attacks on education took place in South Kivu province through this eight-month period.

During the verification, four novel reports were documented during household surveys related to a contemporaneous study published elsewhere (Alfaro et al., 2012), and two were added during conversations with school officials, chiefs, and other educational actors on site.

In the second round, 24 schools were selected for verification in Uvira, Fizi, Shabunda, Walungu, and Kabare, drawing on reports by seven different sources, and of these, 18 were confirmed by on-site informants (Figure 2). An additional four attacks that were reported by informants during the study period were verified by one of the authors before May 2014, of which three were confirmed. In four of the six total reports not confirmed, the *event* took place, but it either occurred before the recall period, or was perpetrated by ‘unknown bandits’ rather than the armed group in the original report. One of the other reports was of a fire set by an armed group, but the director claimed it to have been caused ‘by nature’ during the verification. Only one report involved events that did not seem to have actually taken place. Altogether, that constitutes a confirmation rate of 79%. Assuming this confirmation rate is constant for the initial 231 reports, at least 182 attacks on schools took place in South Kivu during this period.

During verification, on-site informants reported seven additional attacks on schools. Four of these seven concerned schools that were already being verified, but for previously unreported events. For instance, while confirming one event at a given school, on-site informants reported two additional events at that same school. When asked if any attacks had occurred in neighboring schools, three additional attacks were reported. When visiting the geographically nearest schools on 12 occasions, no additional attacks were identified.

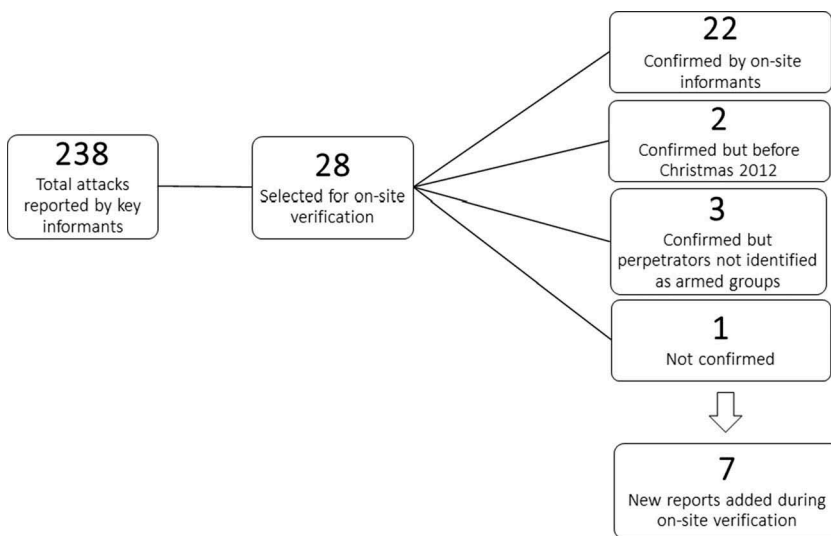


Figure 2. Organization of verification procedure, phase two.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. The narrow definition of ‘attacks,’ the need to document the names of schools and suspected perpetrators, and the focus on informants in urban centers, limit the scale of events reported, likely neglecting a host of violent events that are less direct but potentially no less consequential to the lives of students and educators. Furthermore, because the verification sites were chosen by a purposive sample in both rounds, the confirmation rates may not be representative of the non-verified reports. Selecting verification sites in part based on accessibility favored sites where attacks were clustered together, often meaning that there were no schools along a route that had not been reported by key informants. This reduced our ability to test for Type 2 errors, as we were only able to visit 12 schools that had not been reported by key informants. To achieve a more accurate assessment of this method’s sensitivity, future studies should explore the feasibility of using probability-based samples for verification procedures.

The fact that this study drew primarily on recall information affected the quality of the reports in some cases. This led to inconsistencies in the details of the attacks when redundant reports were cross-referenced and during verification. Among those reports in the first round that were verified but not confirmed, 75% had actually occurred, but before the recall period (telescoping bias); and in the second round, 83% of reports not confirmed during verification resulted from telescoping and poor information regarding perpetrator identity. Improvement in the verification rate from the first phase to the second was likely due in part to better-informed selection of key informants drawing from lessons learned during the first phase.

Discussion

The quantity and quality of these 405 reports not only attest to the need for an enhanced method for surveilling attacks on education in South Kivu, but also demonstrate the feasibility, relative reliability, and sensitivity of a method using semi-structured interviews. It is clear that actors in the province’s education and child protection sectors have a wealth of knowledge about attacks that is not currently being leveraged effectively, resulting in an underestimation of the risk over one million students in South Kivu and their educators face every day.

Because of the study’s narrow inclusion criteria, the 405 figure likely underestimates the disruption of education by armed groups and forces in South Kivu during these two periods. Still, this figure is much greater than those suggested by either the *Education under Attack 2014* report, which estimated under 1000 attacks throughout the entire country over four-and-a-half years (GCPEA, 2014), or the MRM, which reported 14 attacks throughout the country in 2010 (UNSG, 2011) and 154 attacks (including military use of schools) from the beginning of 2013 to the end of 2014 (UNSG, 2014, 2015).

Much of this discrepancy likely results from the fact that attack reports are not considered official by the MRM until they have been verified on-site by the designated UN body. This requirement aims at improving confidence in any given report being valid (predictive value positive), but places a high demand on human resources and reduces sensitivity immensely, such that incidents in the most insecure places, where

attacks on education are likeliest, often go unverified, and thus unreported. As the results suggest, a method using semi-structured interviews with carefully-selected key informants can increase sensitivity greatly while still providing reliable reports.

Informants from Congolese NGOs and education administrations often had more detailed knowledge of incidents than MRM-participating organizations, especially when the incidents took place in remote locations. This suggests the need for enhanced efforts to engage local organizations in surveillance. By the same token, these informants, operating in less secure areas with fewer resources for security, may face greater risk from sharing incident reports. Beyond the assurance of confidentiality, informants often wanted to know how the study's results would be used before accepting the risk of participating. Any surveillance efforts for attacks on education drawing on semi-structured interviews should begin by developing safety policies and procedures directly with key informants. Improved surveillance should be used to prevent and respond to school attacks. Future studies should also explore how this method is suited to investigating other types of violence at the community level, such as attacks on hospitals and health care centers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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