CHILDREN, CHILDREN’S RIGHTS
AND THE CONTEXT
OF THEIR EDUCATION
IN SOUTH KIVU
IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
OF THE CONGO

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Introduction

South Kivu is a province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo consisting of two parts: a mountainous area and a forested area. The mountainous part of South Kivu belongs to one of the most populous regions of Africa, with densities of around 150 inhabitants per km² and concentrated points such as the island of Idjwi in Lake Kivu, with a population density of up to 450 inhabitants per km². In this rural setting, that is both spectacular and disquieting.

Children are such an important value in this region that composed the song Omwana Akwira (The child is a miracle). This ballad is highly popular in Bukavu.

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and in lakeside Kivu because it helps enliven countless marriage and birth celebrations! Although the Havu proverb that *when you give birth you do not know the child's future* is true, it is nonetheless interesting to note that after the travails of childbirth the mother is radiant, and that those who love her and share in her joy formulate this unanimous wish: 'Do it again—you won't find any thorns!' This is as much as to say: 'No matter how great the suffering, let's forget these thorns and just keep hold of the rose.' In corroboration of this wish, Bahavu wise folk state bluntly: 'To have just one child is not to have any at all.' The strength of the family lies in having as many descendants as possible. Not to have any children is the worst ill that there is. Thus, for example, you say to someone that you hate: 'May you die without leaving behind any children, like a banana tree with no buds.' For, as the Bashi say, 'A home without children is like a day without sun' (Kagaragu, 1976, p. 110)

South Kivu also has a part that is quite rightly described as forested. Here the population density is often lower than ten inhabitants per km². Children are equally miraculous here, this time by virtue of their scarcity. As the adage says, that which is scarce is dear, in other words precious.

The present paper articulates an argument based on the four main themes in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: survival, development, participation and protection. It compares these rights with the conditions of daily life for the children of South Kivu, which have an impact on their education. Knowledge of these conditions is a prerequisite for any proposal for the improvement of this education.

The right to survival and the right to health

The contrast between the two parts of South Kivu may lead one to contemplate a double appeal to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Articles 6 and 24, which concern the life and health of children. The child who has good physical, mental and social health has plenty of opportunity to benefit from parental and school education. This good health is all the more important as patterns of schooling become increasingly restrictive, even for very young children. Consequently, it is necessary to look into the health conditions of the children of South Kivu, as this is one of the prerequisites for a sound education.

THE FOUR PLAGUES

Children and adults alike in South Kivu suffer regularly from four plagues: malaria, various forms of diarrhoea, respiratory infections and malnutrition. In certain districts, many experience famine, and this is true even in the urban centres of mountainous and lakeside South Kivu, where food supplies are insufficient and very costly. One day in June 1998, Patrice, aged 4, told his mother about the situation he had just experienced at a cousin's house in the district of Ibanda, the middle-class area of Bukavu: