

Dr. Larry Aber, Distinguished Professor of Applied Psychology and Public Policy, with Catalina Torrente and Carly Tubbs, Doctoral Students

New York University

The Congo River tumbles to sea level in only 220 miles, having the hydroelectric potential of all the lakes and rivers of the United States combined. The 35 million children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) also have enormous potential. There is the potential to live long and fulfilling lives of their choosing – but it is a potential that remains to be realized.

A century-and-a-half of conditions of extreme adversity – of colonial oppression and of armed conflict over abundant natural resources – have taken their toll on the children of the DRC. The DRC posted the lowest score out of 187 countries on UNDP's 2011 Human Development Index, a measure that assesses the health, education, and livelihoods of people across the world. The DRC's children suffer among the lowest primary school enrollment and attendance rates in the world. No wonder, then, that the small proportion of the DRC's children who complete primary school have extraordinarily [low reading and math skills](#) and experience [more victimization and mental health problems](#). And tragically, after an extended period of relative calm in the DRC over the last eight years, armed conflict broke out again last month in and around the provincial capital of Goma.

It is precisely such children in such parts of the world that the new U.S. Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity is meant to benefit. All three principal objectives of the Action Plan – building strong beginnings, putting families first, and protecting children from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect – are of the utmost importance to the DRC's children. These objectives aim to provide children living in adversity with positive and protective childhood experiences that bolster children's chances of realizing their full potential throughout their lives.

Since 2010, we here at [NYU's Institute of Human Development and Social Change](#) have been working closely with the International Rescue Committee and the Ministry of Education in the DRC on a major initiative named OPEQ (Opportunity for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education). [OPEQ](#) aims to improve the reading, math and social-emotional outcomes of 500,000 children in 350 schools in three provinces of the eastern Congo. We are working with the DRC and IRC on one of the critical supporting objectives of the U.S. Government Action Plan: Objective 5, promoting evidence-based policies and programs. Developing and maintaining a strong evidence base on how adversity affects children's development – and on which programs and policies protect children's development – is an essential element of the U.S. Government Action Plan. The challenges of conducting high-quality research in areas of extreme adversity are enormous. But the millions of children across the globe who live in adversity deserve our best efforts at developing the knowledge to guide, inform, and evaluate our actions on their behalf.

There is plenty of work to do to realize the shining vision of this Action Plan. Thankfully, the plan lays out a path to more effective action. Let's hurry and follow the river down this new path. The kids are waiting for us.