Ushirika wa Maendeleo ya Elimu Barani Afrika
الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا
Association for the Development of Education in Africa
Association pour le développement de l'éducation en Afrique
Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação em África

KIX Observatory on
COVID-19 Responses in
Africa's Educational Systems

Policy
Brief

**Successful Responses in Education
during the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Lessons from Seven countries in Africa**

September
2023

African Population and
Health Research Center

GPE KIX
KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

IDRC · CRDI

Canada

Successful Responses in Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from Seven Countries in Africa

Introduction

Similar to other sectors, the education sector was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To mitigate the disruptions caused by COVID-19, African countries responded in various ways. This policy brief presents policy messages based on selected initiatives that countries in Africa implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the operations of educational systems. The initiatives include teacher training and school reopening as well as the well-being of learners, focusing on nutrition, support for displaced persons, psychosocial support, and support against sexual and gender-based violence. The brief will provide stakeholders in ministries of education, ministries of planning, and education curriculum experts at the national and sub-national levels with information on how to prepare for future crises and build resilient educational systems. The qualitative case studies research was done in seven African countries – **Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Nigeria** – as part of the Observatory project. The Observatory project examines what is known and unknown about system-level responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and how countries respond to learning needs and the well-being of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Additionally, the project identifies emerging gaps that countries need to address and useful lessons for managing the disruptions, while examining future preparedness and building resilience in educational systems in Africa.

From the case study findings, successful strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 were as follows:

- On **teacher training**, countries such as **Kenya** and **Niger** provided teachers with online professional development opportunities and skills on how to use 'teaching at the right level' approaches, respectively.

- On **school reopening**, countries such as **Malawi** implemented back-to-school campaigns, improvised learning spaces, and staggered learning to ensure continuity.

- On **nutrition**, strengthening of the food production system was witnessed in **Mozambique**, with development partners coming together to fund, mobilize, and implement food production and distribution initiatives.

- **Support to displaced persons**, including providing learning resources to children in camps for internally displaced persons, was offered in **Nigeria**.

- On **overall learner well-being**, successful responses included increasing awareness and mitigations of sexual and gender-based violence against girls, as reported from **Mali**.

Key policy messages

Based on the findings from the case studies, the following key messages and policy recommendations can inform future crisis preparedness and support building resilient educational systems.

Operations of the educational system

Strengthening teachers' capacity and building infrastructure to provide instruction in times of crisis is critical for learning continuity. In countries such as **Kenya**, teachers were exposed to and trained on remote learning instructions and tools, including Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams. This greatly enhanced teachers' ability to reach schoolchildren during COVID-19-related school closures and reopenings, as well as enhanced skill sets on how best to support learners' well-being. A cascaded train-the-trainer framework for teacher training was used. In other countries, such as **Niger**, the focus was on learner-centered pedagogy, such as Teaching at the Right Level. Two key messages emerged from this:

- First, governments should work collaboratively with the private sector to expand Internet infrastructure to reach more teachers and learners, because Internet access is necessary to facilitate distance learning away from schools.

- Second, teacher professional development programs should enhance continuous improvement through in-built mechanisms that allow teachers to be better prepared to deal with emergencies, such as by the acquisition of digital skills.

These two interrelated actions will ensure that teachers are ready to play a meaningful role as educators during crises and hence contribute to mitigating negative implications of crises, such as learning loss.

Safe school reopening is critical following a pandemic. During COVID-19, adherence to health guidelines was critical during the reopening of schools to ensure safety for learners and teachers. In **Malawi**, initiatives for safe school reopening included reducing class sizes, where classes were decongested to minimize the spread of the virus; schools also introduced high enrolments and staggered classes. There was stakeholder engagement at district and school levels on how to contain the spread of the virus and ensure that all teachers and learners would be safe once they returned to school. Multiple stakeholders, led by the Ministry of Education, successfully collaborated to support the school reopening efforts, including conducting return-to-school campaigns. Three key responses that can be scaled up emerged:

- First, to continually strengthen collaborations and partnerships among various institutions, and work with communities, such as mothers' groups, to implement responses such as back-to-school campaigns for girls and other marginalized populations during emergencies.

- Second, governments should prioritize provision of basic resources and infrastructure, including additional teachers, to decongest classrooms and increase access to clean water, including by sinking boreholes that can provide a potential source of water supply. Such measures enhance the learning environment.

- Third, stakeholders should consider the effects of condensed school calendars that result in increased anxiety for learners. To this end, they should consider broader socio-emotional aspects related to school reopening.

Overall learner well-being

Access to proper nutrition is essential in facilitating well-being and overall individual development. The school feeding program in **Mozambique** provided nutritious meals to learners during school closures. Importantly, understanding the components of the school feeding program that have worked well can help stakeholders to scale it to larger populations. Two key messages that ensure overall well-being for learners and teachers emerged:

- First, there were initiatives to strengthen the food production system. For instance, development partners collaborated with the government and provincial education directorates in Nampula, Inhambane, and Zambézia provinces in additional initiatives to ensure food availability. These initiatives adopted new strategies to reduce food dependency through local community participation in efforts to boost food production and improve nutritional levels. To this end, governments should provide incentives to schools that engage in developing school gardens. These incentives can include the provision of the necessary equipment, seeds, and support with maintenance costs. School gardens can provide a local and sustainable solution that reduces over-reliance on food imports.

- Second, governments, in conjunction with development partners, can provide a universal basic income or cash transfer program to equip families with financial resources to enable them access basic needs, including school-related expenses, during emergencies. In addition to these interventions, governments and development partners should consider incorporating monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure accountability.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Interventions based on quality educational opportunities can provide an avenue for discussing the deleterious effects of SGBV and equip girls with the necessary information and resources to protect themselves. In addition, psychosocial support is necessary for learners experiencing effects from the violence. In **Mali**, for example, to address SGBV, organizations such as Girls Leadership and Empowerment through Education (GLEE) focused on raising community awareness about SGBV as a critical first step in addressing and reducing incidences of violence.

Two key messages emerged that can improve initiatives on SGBV:

- First, creating awareness is critical and is a first step in mitigating SGBV. It should include aspects of providing education around topics related to consent between parties as well as power dynamics to equip girls with critical information surrounding their rights. More broadly, increasing community awareness about SGBV is critical in addressing the scourge. Therefore, communities should be targeted with critical information about available resources and the importance of ensuring that the rights of girls are protected.

- Second is the need to use a systems approach or multi-sectoral approach while dealing with SGBV. GLEE had the benefit of being anchored in other social support resources in the country. For instance, the government established psychosocial support mechanisms linked to the pandemic and offered protection for the most vulnerable groups through education and training. Teachers received training on providing learners with psycho-social support upon re-entry. This was critical as the pandemic and co-existing crises of war and conflict upended lives and caused instability for many learners. **Mali**'s government collaborated with development partners and civil society organizations to ensure delivery of GLEE-related services. Social support such as access to vocational training and economic opportunities, as well as reporting mechanisms, can provide crucial pathways for people affected by SGBV. To this end, poverty-reduction programs such as cash transfers can empower girls economically and lower their risks of SGBV by providing safe options to source an income. Additionally, governments, development partners, and the private sector should develop anonymous and confidential hotlines that provide support and allow victims to report incidences of gender-based violence.

Learners in vulnerable environments require intentional responses to reduce their marginalization and ensure their protection, especially during a crisis such as a pandemic. In **Nigeria** and **Burkina Faso**, governments and development partners provided learners in displacement camps with learning support during the pandemic to ensure learning continuity. Two key messages on providing support to displaced people emerged:

- First, to increase access and inclusion for learners in difficult circumstances, curriculum experts should review curriculum materials and develop pedagogical innovations that contribute to learning, especially in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

- Second, scaled innovations, such as using solar panels and trained local personnel, should be used to provide more learners with access to resources to facilitate quality learning. The training should include basic teaching and learning approaches and ways to provide psychosocial support to learners and children in IDP camps.

Conclusion

This policy brief provides senior decision makers in the relevant ministries in African countries with valuable action points in terms of the operations of educational systems and the well-being of learners. This includes lessons learned from successful interventions implemented in the seven countries in Africa to ensure learning continuity during COVID-19-related school closures and/or reopening. The brief is a call to action on various responses on teacher training, school reopening, nutrition, providing support to displaced people, and addressing challenges of sexual and gender-based violence. These efforts were bolstered by partnerships with development and community partners who facilitated scaled efforts and efficiency in service delivery.