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

Policy
Brief

A Call for Concerted Support: African Countries Need to Mitigate the Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on Education

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Key policy messages

- Support school re-entry for all out-of-school children.
- Support school capacity to strengthen guidance and counselling.
- Support training of teachers to use information and communication technology (ICT).
- Support schools to acquire infrastructure for learning continuity, such as ICT and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).
- Invest in education data systems and emergency preparedness.

The issue

In Africa, close to 300 million learners were affected by COVID-19–related school closures, leading to massive learning setbacks. Though all countries in sub-Saharan Africa reopened schools, gaps remain with regard to understanding the pandemic's long-term impacts and how educational systems in Africa can mitigate them. Unfortunately, many low-income countries, including a majority of countries in Africa, cannot afford the huge investments associated with building resilience and reversing some of the impacts of COVID-19, such as learning loss and an increase in out-of-school children and youth.

It is against this background that the KIX Observatory on COVID-19 Responses in Africa's Educational Systems[1] collected perspectives of education stakeholders on the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on educational systems in seven sub-Saharan Africa countries of Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Nigeria. The findings of the project were documented in the report 'The Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Systems in Africa: Perspective of Education Stakeholders from sub-Saharan Africa'.

This policy brief summarizes key findings of the project. It is intended for international and national development actors who support education research, programming, and financing across Africa, as well as for those who focus on generating evidence to address educational challenges.

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[1] https://www.adeanet.org/en/kix-observatory. An initiative by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) under the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It is managed by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in consortium with the African Union's International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA) with technical support from the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

It provides suggestions for donor and research investments into areas in which the selected countries require the most support to recover from the pandemic and build resilient educational systems.

According to stakeholders across the seven countries, the support they need includes efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in three key areas:

1. **Support for learners**: focuses on school re-entry programs and strengthening guidance and counselling in schools, with an emphasis on vulnerable groups.

2. **Support for teachers**: aims to strengthen their capacities to implement distance-learning solutions, including material development, remote delivery of instructions, and digital literacy.

3. **Support for school systems**: focuses on infrastructural development, the creation of strong education data systems to inform decisions, and support for emergency preparation.

A call for support

Support for learners

School re-entry:

Children and youth from marginalized communities should not be excluded from education. Yet, learners from low-income households, those living with disabilities, the ones in IDP camps and in refugee communities, and those who are exposed to child labour are more at risk of adverse impacts on their education resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, after schools reopened following COVID-19–related school closures, many schoolchildren and youth, especially adolescent girls, did not return to school. Compared to the pre-pandemic era, girls had twice the risk of becoming pregnant before completing their secondary school. If left unaddressed, this phenomenon is likely to culminate in an increase in out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) from the 105 million who existed pre-pandemic.

Education stakeholders proposed several interventions to support learners' re-entry into schools, as highlighted in an interview with the education stakeholder from Kenya, who stated,

> "*We also need more incentives in the hostile areas. Of course, our teachers get a hardship allowance, but the children also need more incentives. If we would make those schools from hostile areas boarding schools, then we would retain so many of our children.*"

> **Therefore, international and national development partners should work with governments to support the school re-entry of all out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY). This can be done through programs and strategies such as school feeding and tuition waivers, including informal training programs to support skills development for OOSCY.**

School re-entry and retention strategies will make African educational systems more inclusive and help meet the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 strategic objective on promoting gender parity and equity, as well as the global Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes the principle of "leave no one behind."

School capacity for guidance and counselling:

Goal 3 of the African Union's Agenda 2063 promotes healthy and well-nourished citizens. Yet, pervasive psychosocial issues, arising from tensions in the home, financial constraints, sexual and gender-based violence, loneliness, substance abuse, and the significant loss of life during the pandemic heightened anxiety among learners. This was explicitly evidenced from education stakeholder perspectives in Kenya and Nigeria.

In response, stakeholders proposed several interventions towards strengthening capacity in schools to support learner and teacher mental health. In Kenya, for example, stakeholders illuminated the need to start strengthening guidance and counselling programs at various levels, including in schools, at home, and in workplaces.

> **Therefore, development partners should support school capacity to strengthen guidance and counselling. Such support may be in the form of school-based capacity strengthening among teachers to ensure that an adequate number of teachers have the relevant skills, as well as promoting peer-to-peer counselling among learners. This should go hand in hand with mapping the locations of qualified counsellors to link them to the demand for counselling services in schools.**

Such action is likely to positively affect vulnerable children, such as those in IDP camps, those living with disabilities, and those from low socioeconomic households. It will close gaps regarding access to quality schooling, implying better future educational outcomes for vulnerable children and youth.

Photo: Masked-up pupils adapting to the COVID-19 guidelines that required social distancing.

Support for teachers

Information and communications technology (ICT) skills are inevitable for instructional delivery, especially for virtual classrooms. Unfortunately, not all teachers in Africa are ICT literate. Furthermore, the design of online teaching and learning materials differs from that of traditional on-site materials. Education stakeholders from Kenya illuminated the critical role of ICT in learning continuity through supporting teaching and learning as well as administrative tasks. They also argued in favour of making it a compulsory subject in teacher training colleges and providing schools with ICT equipment.

Global trends emphasize knowledge-driven social and economic systems.

Therefore, support is needed from development partners in training teachers to use ICT to support teaching and learning, with an emphasis on vulnerable learners. One way to achieve this is to make ICT a core course in teacher pre-service training programs. The push for ICT literacy is well-aligned to the African Union's Agenda 2063 (Goal 2), which aspires to produce well-educated citizens and a skills revolution underpinned by science, technology, and innovation.

Support for school systems

An educational technology (EdTech) environment:

Closely related to teachers' capacity in ICT is the need for schoolchildren to access equal learning opportunities regardless of their circumstances, such as geographical location. Such opportunities include access to ICT infrastructure and classrooms that enhance learning continuity during emergencies as well as mitigating learning loss and alleviating the growing digital divide for Internet access. This notwithstanding, stakeholder perspectives showed that the majority of children did not have access to ICT services during COVID-19 school closures due to costs and/or access to ICT infrastructure or digital devices associated with connectivity. ICT infrastructure goes hand in hand with power supply.

WASH facilities:

Also, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities improve hygiene, which is a critical factor for children's well-being. Available classrooms and WASH facilities were inadequate due to limited resources. From the stakeholders' perspectives, low-cost private schools found WASH facilities expensive, largely because of the schools' meagre incomes and unreliable revenue sources. Stakeholders also explained that countries need support in institutionalizing WASH in schools in a way that is sustainable.

> **Therefore, private investors in ICT and power supply infrastructure and EdTech innovators, working closely with relevant government ministries, should expand education technology and access to ICT services and make Internet services more affordable. Expansion of digital technology should go hand in hand with capacity strengthening among teachers and students to ensure maximum utilization. Also, the importance of providing appropriate WASH facilities cannot be overemphasized. This call for support from international and national organizations aims to make schools more successful in learning continuity during crises.**

If this is done, schoolchildren are likely to experience less learning loss in times of crises.

Data systems:

Quality data, particularly in terms of relevance and timeliness, is not always available. However, data and data systems are critical ingredients for effective planning, including for future emergency responses. Stakeholders articulated this by highlighting the challenges experienced in data management, including lack of capacity, low quality of data, and lack of data.

> **Therefore, research institutions such as APHRC and universities in Africa, as well as regional policy bodies such as ADEA, should join forces with decision makers (policy actors) to co-design education systems that provide quality data and co-generate evidence to mitigate the long-term impacts of COVID-19. Such collaboration should also include research- and/or data-generation funders like IDRC and GPE and evidence consumers such as ministries of education.**

This will harness the power of evidence-informed decision making in education practice.

Emergency preparedness:

Educational systems that are well equipped with effective strategies and ready to respond to crises enhance learning continuity. However, educational systems in Africa demonstrate unpreparedness for emergencies. In many African countries, protocols as well as emergency budgetary allocations are largely absent. Stakeholders within education in Africa therefore recommended the need for support towards planning and budgeting to address emergency preparedness gaps. Stakeholders felt there is a need for preparedness on how to handle education within emergencies like a pandemic.

> **To address this, development partners, such as World Bank and GPE, should facilitate emergency preparedness through supporting local capacity to develop policies and progranmes at both macro (government/ministry), meso, as well as micro (school) levels for managing crises/emergencies such as COVID-19.**

This kind of support enhances educational system resilience, including cushioning the system in case of emergencies.

Resource mobilization:

Cushioning vulnerable populations against long-term impacts of COVID-19 improves the inclusivity of the educational systems. Ring-fencing budgets for education programs that target the most vulnerable is one way to ensure resource availability for this purpose. Unfortunately, various African countries work with inadequate budgets relative to demands for services. Furthermore, they experienced budgetary cuts as resources were channelled to public health–related activities to manage COVID-19. This is likely to continue into the future and be replicated in future crises.

> **As such, development partners such as GPE, IDRC, World Bank, UNICEF, and Education Cannot Wait should support national governments to mobilize emergency response resources. Such efforts should also include the private sector and other education stakeholders.**

Ring-fenced and enhanced emergency response budgets ensure a quick and effective response to emergencies. Timely responses will mitigate long-term impacts of COVID-19 on educational systems.

Conclusion

Providing support to educational systems in Africa is a moral obligation of the development partners and the private sector, working closely with African governments. This support will go a long way to mitigate long-term impacts of COVID-19 and will provide resources to generate evidence for data-driven decision making. This policy brief provides international organizations with possible areas of future investments in education that could enhance the resilience of educational systems.