STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE EDUCATION EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN AFRICA USING DISTANCE LEARNING SOLUTIONS

Prepared by Opportunities/Issues Based Coalition 3 (OIBC3) on Harnessing Demographic Dividends, Gender and Youth for Development

CONTEXT

Harnessing Opportunities for Education in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to UNESCO, as of 20 April 2020, over 91% of the world's student population – 1.5 billion children and young people – are affected by school closures across 191 countries[1]. As the number of confirmed cases of the coronavirus disease surge in Africa, with over 26 163 confirmed cases and 1 228 deaths registered on 23 April 2020 (WHO Situation Report 94), governments have taken increasingly stringent measures to control the spread of the virus, ranging from basic hygiene practice, social distancing, to lockdown status.

In Africa, over 330,535,859 learners across levels of education from ECD to Higher Education are affected and over 8,532,394 teachers are not able to facilitate children's learning activities from home. Virtually all countries on the continent have enforced lock down measure, entailing an extensive disruption of the education system, compelling children to learn and parents to work from home.

The above situation compels governments to use distance-learning[2] solutions, including TV, radio and new digital learning technologies, to ensure that education continues. This raises questions of availability, capacity and coverage of IT infrastructure, of access to learning platforms by teachers and learners, of the extent to which learners engage in interactive learning, of online teaching and assessment of learning, and of technical support to teachers and parents to support student learning. In addition, countries in Africa have different capacities in terms of geographical coverage of national media, telecommunications and ICT infrastructures and services, of availability of devices such as TVs, phones or radios to transmit lessons, of availability and quality of content, among other things. These differences have a strong bearing on access to learning by different groups, especially the marginalized, rural populations, refugees, internally displaced people, persons with disabilities, pastoralist communities, children living in urban informal settlements, or girls and women. Lack of access also limits the acquisition and development of

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[1] UNESCO. COVID-19 Impact on Education. Retrieved from https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse on 20 April 2020.
[2] For the purpose of this paper, distance learning is meant as a broad category that also includes remote learning and e-learning, through a range of technologies based on paper, radio, TV, phone, tablets, computers or any other support or device, both offline and online.

the foundational learning and other skills and competencies, including transferable skills, digital literacy, job-specific and related pedagogical skills required by teachers, students, and their communities to make the most of the available learning resources.

While posing great challenges for education systems throughout the region, these closures are likely to exacerbate the pre-existent learning inequalities. The impact will fall disproportionately on the poorest countries and the most marginalized and vulnerable communities, including refugees and internally displaced, especially those living in remote rural areas where the digital divide will worsen the education divide. The secondary impacts of the outbreak will particularly affect girls, especially the most marginalized, due to harmful social norms and double discrimination based on age and gender.

School closure is a temporary response aiming at protecting children, students education providers and families from the COVID-19, and at avoiding a steep increase in the number of new cases at country level. However, school closures have several adverse impacts, including interruption of learning, increasing inequalities for under-privileged children and young people, significant psychological impact, economic cost, increase in child marriage, increase of early and unintended pregnancies, sexual exploitation and abuse, child labour, lower admission to higher education, decreased student mobility, and challenges to ensure that children and young people return to schools. The longer children and young people stay out of school, the less they are likely to return, thus an anticipated high drop out rates. Most marginalised and vulnerable populations need to be catered for, through targeted back-to-school and catch-up programmes, to ensure they return to school, remain in education and continue learning at their level.

There is an urgent need to support national efforts to ensure the continuity of learning, mitigate the adverse effects of school closure, enhance the education sector response to the COVID-19, and prepare the ground for the safe return to better school at the end of the closure. In addition to catch up classes and remedial lessons, improved water, sanitation and hygiene services will mitigate risks of new infections.

In response, several actors gathered in a Global Education Coalition to facilitate inclusive distance learning opportunities for children and young people during this period of sudden and unprecedented educational disruption, including in Africa. In this context, the purpose of the present strategic framework is to provide a concerted regional approach in support of the African Union (AU) response to COVID-19 in the education sector. In doing so, it also supports AU Commission's Africa e-education strategy.

Key principles governing the response to COVID-19

The Strategic Framework builds on the underlying principles guiding the OIBC3 – namely Partnership, Integration in national plans, Inclusion, Multisectoral convergence and coherence, Use of evidence in policy decision making, and Scale and sustainability of innovation. Additional or complementary principles allows for the deployment of the distance learning solution to be successful in the context of COVID-19.

- *Partnership and coordination*, in consultation with partners of the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition and the Education in Emergency Working Groups, and in close collaboration with the African Union and regional economic communities, sub-regional

and national coordination mechanisms, UNCTS, technical and financial partners, including humanitarian and development stakeholders, civil society organisations, humanitarian and development stakeholders, the private sector, and the media (radio and TV).

- *Health, safety and wellbeing* of learners, parents, caregivers, and teachers are the most important during the crisis period. This entails addressing issues such as nutrition, gender-based violence, early and unintended pregnancy, child labour and exploitation, water and hygiene, and stress and anxiety, in addition to the COVID-19, putting human rights first. Clear communication on school reopening and close collaboration with communities will also reduce stress and anxiety.

- *Ensuring the right to quality and inclusive education at all levels*, especially for those most disadvantaged and vulnerable. Exclusion on grounds of gender, location, disability, ethnolinguistic differences, displaced and refugee status, and socioeconomic status be carefully addressed.

- *Sector wide approach,* covering all levels and subsectors of education, including pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education, TVET and non-formal education, and support for teachers and faculty, in order to align interventions with international standards of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability.

- *Adaptation to available distance learning solution with a focus on technologies and infrastructures* to deploy user-friendly, accessible and affordable distance learning platforms and tools, both high and low tech, and aligned to national curricula and locally contextualized. This entails assessing the available means of delivering education in contexts where there are no connectivity, emerging connectivity, or full connectivity including digitization of the curriculum.

- *Preparedness and resilience of national education systems,* through inclusion of risk informed preparedness and response in sector plan and national education policies, is crucial in strengthening the humanitarian and development nexus in times of crisis and during the recovery process. Education sector resilience entails contingency planning for emergency preparedness, forced displacement, the use of school facilities during emergencies, response and recovery in the context of the current crisis or future ones.

PRIORITY ACTION AREAS

Regional coordination plan to provide support to countries

A solid response hinges on building on existing global, regional and in-country partnerships and coordination mechanisms involving African governments, UN agencies, NGOs, bilateral and multilateral Donors. Coordination platforms that bring together education actors are the Regional Working Group on SDG4-Education at regional level, the Global Partnership for Education for the coordination of development assistance at national level, and the Clusters for the Coordination of Education in Emergencies and Post-Conflict Transitions at global, regional and country levels. Each of these Coordination mechanisms have clear terms of reference and support systems that accompany governments in sector-wide strategic planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of policies, plans and programs.

It also hinges on a regional coordinated action plan that clarifies how partners and governments will work together, within the framework of a regional roadmap, media and public communication modalities, oversight of regional field support and funding issues, and modalities for coordination across action areas. Coordination depends on clear consensus among stakeholders to define a streamlined mechanism that engages all partners, starting with the African Union, regional economic communities, sub-regional and national coordination mechanisms, technical and financial partners from both humanitarian and development sectors, private sector and the media (radio and TV).

Mapping of existing strategies, capacities and interventions across region

Several countries have been actively responding to the crisis by developing new or adapting existing strategies and toolkits, supporting governments to develop and scale up sector response plans and making use of available distance teaching and learning materials, resources, platforms and technologies. Governments and partners have been digitizing curricula, exploiting training and learning resources and platforms originally developed for other purposes to fill the learning gap during the COVID-19 crisis. Successful efforts are underway in several African countries to map and align open digital resources to different national curricula. There is a need to take stock of distance learning solutions that the education sector has been able to deploy and that it could scale up rapidly and at a lower cost, as it will be key to respond to children, university students and young people's learning needs.

OICB3 members can work collaboratively with service providers to facilitate putting together of the information on existing interventions and provide guidance on the use of Connected Education to build on the initial study carried out by the Association of Education in Africa (ADEA) in 12 countries across Africa, Association of African Universities (AAU), Regional University Associations, Higher Education Councils, and Higher Education Quality Assurance Networks.

Adaptation of educational resources and setting up of a digital library of distance learning solutions as part of the Knowledge Management hub of the RCP in Africa

Setting up a digital library involves cooperation on compiling available distance learning resources, including open educational resources, and determining how to adapt them to different contexts and languages and how to make them available to governments. A focus will be on equity and inclusion within this process to ensure continuity of education for all learners, with special attention to pre-primary children, girls, refugees and forcibly displaced, rural or economically deprived areas, areas with no connectivity, disabled students, and previously out-of-school children.

Delivery mode should match available communication infrastructures and technologies, and content should be accordingly adapted to them, contributing to the development and implementation of the Africa e-Education Strategy to ensure that the continent's over 100 million children that are now out of school can continue learning. This will build on ongoing teaching and teacher learning platforms developed by technical and financial partners, and with private companies. Available teaching and teacher learning platforms need to be fully exploited to make public, private and civil society digital learning resources that are ready to deploy through available technologies, relevant to African contexts, and sustainable. Regional distance learning hubs that would build on existing learning and teacher training tech platforms to ensure easy

access to ready-to-deploy distance or home learning resources. Strengthening such learning and training solutions would support three future-facing needs: (i) improve preparedness for any crisis that leads to school closure; (ii) improve the quality of resources for out-of-school children and those who have an inconsistent, irregular relationship with schools; and (iii) improve the resources and expertise on supporting communities, parents, caregivers, siblings and others to be active in children's learning when they're not in school.

Engaging with different partners from the private sector contributes to making digital resources available to education authorities, teachers, faculty, parents and students alike. Global leading information technology partners and educational organizations have joined this effort. Their contribution may range from providing interactive learning and teaching platforms, delivering mobile applications for learning in a variety of contexts, or opening up artificial Intelligence training for university faculty throughout the region for countries that are ready.

A range of solutions based on different technological requirements will enable an adaptation to regions where there is no connectivity, emerging connectivity, or full connectivity. These solutions may include intranet platforms, community radio, television, feature phones, smartphones, tablets, computer and Internet-based platforms. Complementary means such as USB memory sticks, crank-up radios, and solar panels can also increase the range of distance learning programmes to underserved areas and populations who risk 'being left behind'. In addition, the Strategic frameworks fully acknowledge the central role that parents, caregivers and communities can play to bridge the learning gap through intergenerational education.

Data and monitoring

This involves determining the types of data and information that will help inform effective policies and strategies for distance learning and for supporting teachers and parents in enhancing the continuity of learning and the methods for data and information collection. It will also support the data analysis and application of the analysis to support better educational responses during school closure and to help prepare governments, partners and schools for school reopening and evaluating different catch-up measures.

This will be designed to provide a platform for private and public schools and universities, senior officials of ministries in charge of education, regulatory bodies, and partners to discuss ongoing responses: what technologies they are using to deliver the curriculum at distance, challenges encountered, lessons learnt, and who they are working with. All data collected on the education sector response to the COVID-19 would feed into the Opportunity/Issue Based Coalition 1 on Strengthened integrated data and statistical systems for sustainable development.

Sharing promising practice and strengthening country response capacities

Regional organisations are in a privileged position to identify emerging and good practice and share it across the region, while disseminating guidance stemming from global research and learning. They can rely on this position to strengthen national initiatives and spur further action when needed.

A platform made of public and private schools, ministry of education officials, the private sector, civil society and technical and financial partners will create a space to discuss what schools and higher education institutions are doing, what technologies they are using to deliver the

curriculum at distance, the challenges encountered, feedback from learners and community members, lessons learnt, IT partners they are working with. Online exchanges between and within countries through expert networks and webinar sessions will further inform responses at country level.

Communication/harmonized messages

At a time of over media coverage and increasing use of social media by both institutions and individuals, there is a high risk of conflicting, confusing and counterproductive messaging. Clear guidance to limit content to essential and evidence-based communication around COVID-19, redirecting to trustful, evidence-based and state approved sources, will provide the ground for a more effective response to the pandemic.

Another aspect of communication addresses messaging on the impact of school closures, anxiety due to missed exams, advice to parents about how to manage virtual learning, and how schools will manage remedial classes for those students returning to school, and health and safety measures put in place at school to avoid new infections. Community engagement is critical to disseminate trusted messages that include mental health and psychosocial support considerations, detect rumours and misinformation, and respond to concerns in order to ensure the well-being of affected populations.

The regional level shall also lead with responsible messaging against human rights abuses such as gender-based violence, stigmatisation, xenophobia and mob violence. Carefully prepared communication will be disseminated widely at country level working closely with the media fraternity including training platforms for training of media personnel on 'infodemics' and the risks of fake news and misinformation on social cohesion.

Children's health and health education for children and their parents

School closure, social distancing, lockdown and isolation have unintended consequences on the health and wellbeing of learners, teachers, parents and community stakeholders alike. Students no longer receive meals at school and some families are not able to cope with the additional burden of responding to their nutrition needs. Lockdown and social distancing can become source of distress and affect mental health. Adolescent girls and young women who no longer benefit from the protection of the school environment are at greater risk of unintended pregnancies and gender-based violence.

Meeting health, safety and wellbeing needs for learners and providers starts with building capacities to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 and seek health services when infected. A coordinated regional action also addresses stress and anxiety, gender-based violence, early and unintended pregnancy, and nutrition issues in a context of confinement, school closure and economic duress, through a human rights based approach. The regional level accordingly supports the identification, sharing and use of teaching and learning content on health, wellbeing and human rights, and the development of protection programmes to deal with nutrition. It also share guidelines and examples of country level communication mechanisms on how to report instances of gender-based violence as well as referral mechanisms for child protection.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

The uncertainty of duration of school closures require flexible scenarios which prioritize sustainable protection of all learners through physical and mental health support and continuity of learning. Context-specific benefits and risks analyses should be conducted to support a safe approach to school reopening.

Short term actions

- Establish a streamlined coordination mechanism at regional and country levels spearheaded by the UN lead agencies and UNCTs, with a division of labour and clear channels of collaboration with the AU, sub-regional and national coordination mechanism to respond to the COVID-19 along with the technology solution partners.
- Engage with all potential partners, including the AU, the regional economic communities, the private sector, education community, and other potentially interested financial and technical partners.
- Map out ongoing initiatives and resources that the education sector can use to ensure continuous learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as part of the UNCT COVID 19 response plans.
- Identify, share and support the use of contextualized educational content by national education authorities and other stakeholders to ensure continuous learning for all students.
- Strengthen mechanisms to deliver education through a wide range of distant learning modalities (e.g. Internet, tablets, radio, including community radios, TV, or mobile apps) adapted to settings with no, emerging, or full connectivity, and involving teachers, parents and caregivers as learning facilitators.
- Coordinate all ICT related education strategies to avoid duplication.
- Deploy the services of the COVID 19 global alliance partners at the level of countries to work with ongoing initiatives to ensure no learner is left behind.
- Short crash courses on capacity building of teachers, TVET instructors and higher education institutions on ICT skills and on-line teaching and learning, including instructional design for virtual learning and cloud computing.
- Engagement with telecommunication operators to reduce tariff for teachers and students at the national level.
- Investments in smartphones for teachers to assist with interactive teaching with students
- Engage in initial dialogue to increase investments in ICT infrastructure and renewable energy to accelerate efforts to digitize education services, equip learning environments with digital infrastructure, and increase connectivity beyond the main cities and develop an appeal with government to mobilize investments to develop its weak IT and energy Infrastructure.
- Cost proposed actions, identify resources and gaps, fund raising.

Medium term actions

- Produce evidence and thought pieces to stimulate policy dialogue on central issues such as the impact of the crisis on education spending and learning outcomes, health and well-being, equity and inclusion.

- Support countries to prepare and manage reopening of schools where conditions permit
- Identify strategies to bring back students most at risk of not returning to school due to economic distress, isolation, pregnancy, child marriage or handicap.
- Support planning and teacher training to prevent school dropout when back to school (children will return to classrooms having missing months of schools with very different degrees of exposure to learning content, they will thus need dedicated and differentiated support such as accelerated, catch-up & remedial programs).
- Resource mobilisation strategy to expand weak ICT and energy infrastructure.
- Prepare the school buildings to ensure they have been sanitised, that WASH has been improved and schools are safe environments for children to return to.

Long term actions

- Policy dialogue and data-based education sector crisis planning strategy to reduce vulnerability to outbreaks and other crisis affecting learning with systematic inclusion of preparedness measures and continued learning opportunities for all crisis-affected children.
- Reinforced investments on IT infrastructure and renewable energy to accelerate efforts to digitize education services through online classes, and digital platforms application, and ultimately reduce education disparity and digital divide.
- Global advocacy to radically improve the digital learning infrastructure in Africa, starting with the goal of making all school digital hubs.
- Regulatory frameworks for distance and online education.
- Sector wide establishment of functional mechanisms of quality assurance and accreditation in distance training and learning delivery.
- Institutionalize capacities and strengthen partnership and collaboration network developed during COVID-19 pandemic for long term approaches on blended delivery of education through an effective e-education strategy in line with the AU 2063 strategy on education.

EXAMPLES ONGOING INITIATIVES

[Learning Passport](#)