

# Contextual Drivers of Success in Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence and Insights from Within and Across 7 Countries in Africa

**Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful"**

**Margaret J. Wheatley**

## Introduction

Reflection is a valuable practice that allows intentional assessment and evaluation of situations and practices, while taking stock of lessons learned and identifying areas of improvement, individually or collectively. Similar to other sectors, the education sector was significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of lives, livelihoods, and negative effects on learning cannot be overstated or accurately defined due to the magnitude and unavailable metrics to quantify the loss or impact. Within the backdrop of disruption and loss, it is imperative to highlight and accentuate factors that facilitated continuity of learning, contributed to improvements in education processes and brought out the strength of education systems in countries in Africa.

**Three years after the initial effects of COVID-19, this is an opportune time for the educational community to reflect on the lingering lessons from the pandemic. This reflection is based on a case study research in seven African countries - Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Nigeria - as part of the Observatory Project. This reflection is critical for five reasons:**

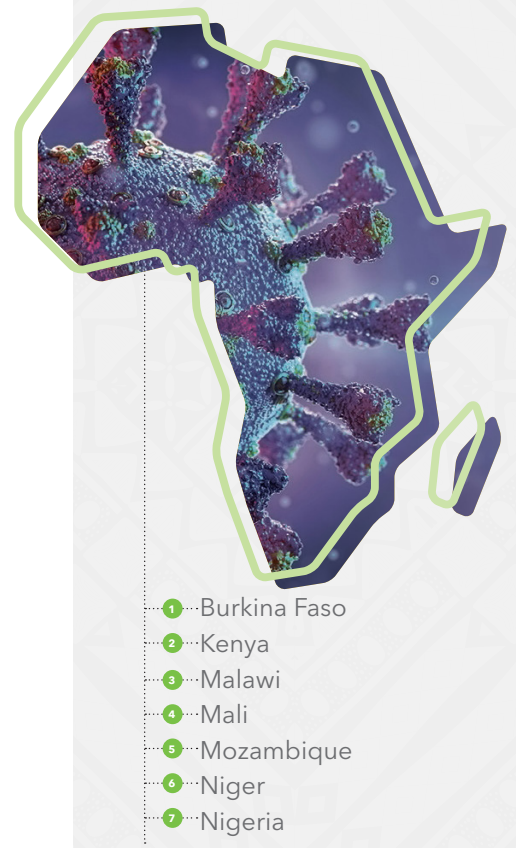
1. Identifying and accentuating factors supporting learning continuity provide stakeholders with nuanced insights on what can be scaled up and sustained.
2. Understanding the weak links and areas that require strengthening can largely contribute to building robust systems.
3. Different countries can share and adapt strategies, reducing duplication of resources and increasing knowledge sharing and mobilization.
4. Taking stock of what worked well provides information that can encourage proper stewardship of limited resources and increase efficiency.
5. To aid researchers (see [Triolo, 2022](#)) predict future pandemics and crises arising from conflict,

war, or climate change, which calls for preparedness that covers multiple bases and planning.

**The reflection also helps decision-makers and researchers to answer key policy questions including:**

- a. What existing challenges (e.g., infrastructural) require prioritization?
- b. What resources are required to ensure students access quality education and inclusion during a crisis (e.g., pandemics, war, conflict)?
- c. To what extent are countries leveraging current education systems, policies, and practices during a crisis?

### COVID-19 Observatory Project in Africa



# Challenges

**This section highlights a few challenges the seven countries experienced in the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

## » Digital divide

Distance learning alternatives, including educational technologies and radio and T.V, were innovative approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital divide encompasses discrepancies in terms of technology access and use. Countries used available internet resources and products on educational technologies to ensure learning continuity. For instance, countries trained teachers and students on the use of Google Classrooms, an existing platform, to facilitate virtual learning. However, students in rural areas, under-resourced communities, and vulnerable populations (e.g., students with special needs, and students internally displaced) were disproportionately excluded from educational opportunities partly due to pre-pandemic inequalities. For instance, there was limited access to resources, including electricity, laptops, and the internet. Further, due to parental loss of income and economic constraints, priorities shifted, pushing some learners to seek employment at the expense of learning. The case studies show that all seven countries encountered these challenges. Beyond student learning, teachers without access to distance learning resources faced challenges accessing training and providing students with necessary instruction. Further, inequalities were also present in terms of teacher capacity development which compromised instruction delivery as teachers were not trained on using the novel tools.

## » Delays in service delivery

Many countries were unprepared for the shocks and ripple effects across the education systems as a result of the pandemic. Various functions in education were disrupted and revealed the need to strengthen existing systems and develop crisis preparedness to allow for a smooth pivot when the need arises. Beyond providing students with learning opportunities, schools offer life-saving services, including nutrition through school meals, socio-emotional support through counseling, and relationships with peers and adults. These are some of the tangible functions that schools provide that were largely disrupted by the pandemic and had far-reaching negative effects for students. Countries needed to move swiftly to ensure a smooth continuation of learning and service delivery. Due to limited crisis preparedness, countries experienced these delays in their responses. Some responses required construction of facilities and procurement of important materials. For instance, in Kenya, schools needed WASH (e.g., water stations) facilities to meet the required health guidelines, ranging from building water stations in Kenya or Malawi, construction of new desks and make-shift tents to

ensure decongestion and physical distancing in classrooms. Limited information, data, and under-developed data-sharing mechanisms contributed to some of the delays. In Mozambique, for instance, there were delays in the distribution of school meals due to unavailable contact information for parents and students. Complicating these delays were supply chain challenges and restrictive movements, which disrupted procurement, operations, and delivery of materials.

## » Inequalities related to limited resources

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), inequality levels were already high pre-pandemic due to a complex set of factors, including low allocation of resources, structural constraints, and under-developed infrastructure, reducing access to basic resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). The pandemic exacerbated these pervasive inequalities as livelihoods, and economic opportunities were lost. Notably, the harmful effects of crisis and pandemics affect individuals disproportionately depending on socio-economic status, gender, and context. For instance, an individual with a low socio-economic status will likely experience severe effects compared to an individual with a high socio-economic status and more economic resources at their disposal. In the COVID-19 context, for instance, learners in displaced communities in Burkina Faso faced challenges accessing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, learning materials, basic resources, and information about the pandemic. Complicating existing inequalities were the pre-existing drought, war, and conflict crises. Moreover, COVID-19 was an extension of existing challenges further making it worse for vulnerable populations, including victims of gender-based violence, as reports show increased cases during the pandemic.

Fullan (2021) defines a contextual driver as a policy; what separates a good driver from a poor one, is one that works and does not exacerbate a negative situation. Contextual drivers in this brief report include policies and practices that alleviated the deleterious effects of the pandemic, guided strategy development, and increased success.

Collaboration  
among  
stakeholders

Innovations and  
locally-based  
solutions

Leveraging  
existing  
frameworks

## Contextual Drivers

**This section discusses selected contextual drivers that fueled the response and recovery in the seven countries.**

### » Collaboration among stakeholders

The realization of the interconnectedness among systems came to the fore and brought unlikely collaborators together. For example, in Kenya, ministries of health and education collaborated to ensure safe school reopening and continued learning according to approved health guidelines. The Ministry of Education equipped schools with WASH facilities including water stations, soap, and sanitizers, whereas the Ministry of Health developed mandates that prioritized teachers to receive COVID-19 vaccination. In Mozambique, development partners worked with the Ministry of Health and Human Development to provide students with meals during school closures through a household feeding program where schools distributed meals to families. The lesson learned here is that to reduce delays, stakeholders should consider strengthening synergies between different sectors and work collaboratively in regular programming, and also when developing crisis preparedness to use and prioritize resources efficiently, especially WASH facilities that are foundational to healthy functioning.

### » Innovations and local-based solutions

Some countries in Africa had policies and mandates for integrating technology in schools before the pandemic. Most plans and intentions were inactive as other competing priorities took over. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed schools out of the brick-and-mortar settings, and globally, countries looked to virtual and distance learning approaches. The pandemic was therefore a catalyst that reactivated technology policies and challenged stakeholders to re-introduce remote approaches. In some

instances, innovation included the use of low-tech alternatives. For instance, radio and television options were not new mediums across the seven countries, but their importance had been minimized and overlooked. The appeal of low-tech alternatives was in their scope, both geographically and in terms of student reach. For instance, radio and television programming provided education content to large numbers of students across the country.

Additionally, countries deployed diverse educational technologies such as application software and iPads. Some countries mobilized different educational agencies to develop digital educational content. The Ministry of Education in Kenya liaised with the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development to provide students with learning materials through the Education Cloud. Community learning centers were an innovative approach that pooled limited available resources and provided more learners with educational opportunities. In Kenya, students attended community learning centers where one teacher simultaneously provided instruction to several students. Another innovation was in Mozambique where the government in Mozambique encouraged local farming to reduce dependence on unreliable food imports and increase sustainable alternatives. The lesson learned here is that the use of digital tools as well as local innovations are important as part of the responses to crises situations. Moreover, local contexts provide ideas that should be tapped into and not overlooked in the quest for solutions.

### » Leveraging existing frameworks

In most countries, crisis preparedness was accorded low priority before the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic tested existing structures, systems, and frameworks to the limit due to the sudden changes and overwhelming demand for services. Existing structures and frameworks provided a launching pad to recovery and learning continuation. For example, in Kenya the Center for Mathematics Science and Technology (CEMASTEA) provided teachers with online professional development options during the pandemic, a continuation of the training that started prior to the pandemic. The pre-pandemic model allowed adaptation to reach more teachers and provide teachers with critical support without lengthy delays. CEMASTEAs in conjunction with the Ministry of Education employed a train-the-trainer framework that facilitated the training of several teachers within a short period of time. In Mozambique, the existing school feeding program provided a mechanism for distributing household meals to students during school closures, ensuring students received some

nutrition. On educational technologies, countries used available internet resources and products to ensure learner continuity. For instance, countries trained teachers and students on using Google Classrooms, an existing platform, to facilitate virtual learning. Countries such as Mali adapted their programs focused on providing girls with mentorship before the pandemic to include COVID-19 awareness, support for victims of gender-based violence and continued support using community resources (e.g., community leaders). The lesson learned here is that existing education systems and frameworks can offer needed support during a pandemic, provide a launch pad for rebuilding and offer a streamlined system that facilitates effective use of resources.

The full benefits arising from these contextual drivers were compromised due to challenges from the pandemic's catastrophic nature and from existing systems' loopholes.

## Policy implications

**The following policy implications can inform future crisis preparedness:**

### 1. Building data systems

Countries need robust data systems that provide just-in-time information on available resources, student contact information, and learning progress. Stakeholders (e.g., teachers, school leaders, parents) can access this information as necessary and in the event of a crisis, data can provide key information and reduce delays in service delivery. Student learning progress data can allow for continuous assessment, inform instruction and reduce gaps from lack of accurate student data. Parent and student contact data can enable delivery of learning materials or school meals, increasing efficiency and response time. Countries can maintain a database with pertinent information (e.g., guidelines for crisis response) on available agencies, providing information about their services, contacts, useful articles and links. This data can enhance communication and coordination of services.

### 2. Distribution of resources

In response to the digital divide challenges, successful integration of educational technologies requires an intentional investment of resources. However, the case studies showed that the current reality in the seven countries is that there is a discrepancy between learners with the required resources and learners without the resources. Additionally, there is a need for a revision of policies to cater to the current realities (e.g., education reforms) and changes in educational technologies.

Therefore, stakeholders should ensure strategic investment of resources to equip schools and learners with adequate resources that facilitate learning during regular periods. Furthermore, stakeholders should develop emergency guidelines and set aside funds for crisis response. These guidelines and funds can ensure minimal interruption when there is a dire need for financial and material resources. Strategic investment involves conducting a needs assessment and responding to the local needs and contexts with input from teachers and school leaders.

### 3. Prioritizing vulnerable populations

One way to address the challenges of inequalities lies in prioritizing students from vulnerable populations (i.e., learners from under-resourced populations, students with disabilities and learners likely to be marginalized (e.g., girls or children from lower income households). This includes evaluating existing or under-developed infrastructure, policies and resource allocation to respond to learners' needs. Also, policies should address mechanisms that provide these vulnerable populations with adequate protections that ensure their well-being. One option could be through cash transfers that alleviate the financial burden and empower individuals economically. Another option can include strategically mobilizing multiple stakeholders (e.g., development partners, community leaders, private sector) to reach different student populations.

#### 4. Collaboration and synergies

The case studies showed that multi-agency collaboration was a key driver across the seven countries in facilitating response and recovery. Ministries of health and education coordinated and collaborated in providing schools with needed resources. Therefore, intentional planning and commitment is required to continually strengthen synergies between the different sectors in order to use resources efficiently, engage in continuous improvement and scale up best practices. Innovations from the local context can provide short and long-term solutions to certain challenges. For instance, in the context of COVID-19, in Kenya, various local organizations produced masks and improvised water stations, reducing unnecessary procurement delays arising from bureaucratic procedures.

#### 5. Monitoring and evaluation

In contexts where these synergies exist, stakeholders can examine and assess the effectiveness of these synergies through monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Another area that showed great potential was the partnership among the Ministries of Education, Ministries of Information Communication and Technology, and the private sectors, specifically the communication sector. The case studies show that in different countries, governments, through various education agencies, collaborated with the private sector to build digital infrastructure and educational content. Stakeholders should continue exploring ways to provide teachers with professional development and provide schools and learners with needed digital resources, especially in hard-to-reach areas and for students in low-socio-economic households that are often marginalized during no-crisis periods and a situation that is exacerbated during crisis and pandemics. Further, in countries with digital literacy programs, the next step can involve a focus on ensuring the content aligns with the curriculum standards, assessing whether the program includes adequate support for students with special needs, and ensuring these policies promote equity and inclusion. Lastly, continued partnerships with development partners can provide additional resources and support.

## Conclusion

Pandemics and crises are usually sudden in onset, and COVID-19 was not exception. The disruptions that followed disrupted various functions in education and revealed the need to strengthen existing systems and develop crisis preparedness to allow for a smooth pivot when the need arises. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic weakened existing educational systems in relation to teaching, learning, well-being, and transitions. Similarly, in SSA, existing education systems were disrupted and stretched to the limits compromising education opportunities for learners. The case studies also highlighted some contextual drivers that facilitated the response and recovery in the different countries. For instance, organizations previously characterized by bureaucracy and rigidity, showed agility following the pandemic and collaborated in achieving shared objectives. This report highlights key reflections on how stakeholders can focus priorities, strengthen alliances, encourage local innovations, and prepare for unlikely events to ensure learning continuity and effective service delivery.

#### About the Observatory:

The KIX COVID-19 Observatory is supported by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX), through the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of GPE, IDRC or its Board of Governors.

The Observatory is monitoring the policy and practice responses to COVID-19 in the education systems of 40 GPE partner countries in Africa and is collecting emerging research evidence on the topic. It focuses on the pandemic's impact on the functioning of education systems and the well-being of learners.

The Observatory is implemented by a consortium consisting of "<https://www.adeanet.org/>" ADEA "<https://www.adeanet.org/>" and "<http://www.cieffa.org/>" AU/CIEFFA "<http://www.cieffa.org/>". Technical support is provided by "<https://aphrc.org/>" APHRC "<https://aphrc.org/>" and the "<http://uis.unesco.org/>" UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

#### Authors

By Elishaba Kiru, Moses Ngware, Patricia Kitsao-Wekulo

#### References

Fullan, M. (2021). The right drivers for whole system success. Retrieved from <https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Fullan-CSE-Leading-Education-Series-01-2021R2-compressed.pdf>

Triolo, T.J. (2022). Predicting future pandemics. Retrieved from <https://news.asu.edu/20221118-predicting-future-pandemic-patterns>

United Nations Development Programme (2017). Income inequality trends in sub-Saharan Africa: Divergence, determinants and convergence. Retrieved from [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/africa/undp-rba\\_Income-Inequality-in-SSA\\_Chapter-1.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/africa/undp-rba_Income-Inequality-in-SSA_Chapter-1.pdf)