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In northeastern Kenya, Garissa County faces unique challenges that disrupt its educational system due to recurring climate-induced disasters, particularly severe flooding and prolonged drought. These natural events and issues like conflict, disease outbreaks, and economic instability create substantial barriers to educational continuity. During each rainy season for example, nearly 98% of Garissa experiences flooding, leading to school closures, high rates of absenteeism, and increased dropout rates, especially among vulnerable populations in sub-counties like Mbalambala, Garissa Township, and Fafi. These crises have had severe implications for students, families, and educators, with the impacts often stretching beyond immediate educational disruption.

Many students miss weeks or even months of lessons, and the psychological toll of displacement and lost resources compounds the difficulty of returning to school. While short-term measures have been implemented—such as temporary learning spaces, emergency supplies, and hygiene kits provided by organizations like the Kenya Red Cross and UNICEF—these efforts alone cannot resolve the underlying challenges. In addressing this, the TeachWell project, as funded by the LEGO Foundation as well as Gundfos Foundation, has established a consortium to support education system adaptability and resilience to ensure learning continuity during crises.

The consortium comprises five core partners with International Rescue Committee as the lead and Research Triangle Institute International (IRTI), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Film Aid Kenya (FAK), and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) as the other partners. Through a recent situation assessment of school system resilience in Garissa, TeachWell generated evidence towards actionable recommendations to build a resilient education system in Garissa County, where all students can continue learning despite the recurring impacts of climate and other crises.

What did we find out?

Impact of Flooding on Education

Flooding poses a severe risk to educational continuity in Garissa County, impacting nearly 98% of the area each rainy season. According to data from the TeachWell project, the sub-counties of Mbalambala, Garissa Township, and Fafi are particularly affected, each experiencing extensive flooding that damages essential school infrastructure, such as classrooms and restrooms. This flooding leads to widespread school closures and significant absenteeism as the rising waters also often displace families. For instance, in Mbalambala, 31.58% of schools face flood disruptions every rainy season, while Dadaab frequently experiences total closures due to severe flood conditions. Furthermore, as captured in the assessment, the frequent flooding results in increased dropout rates, especially among vulnerable children from low-income families or refugee camps, as their education is repeatedly disrupted.

Drought Effects on Learning

Alongside flooding, drought is another persistent crisis affecting Garissa's education sector. Schools in drought-prone regions experience water shortages and high levels of food insecurity, not leading to leading to temporary closures and reduced school attendance. As reported in the TeachWell's assessment, 40% of schools in Fafi sub-county have closed due to drought, with Garissa Township and Mbalambala seeing 28.57% and 25% closures, respectively. The assessment also highlights the limited and varied support available to mitigate effects of drought on education, as only 12.5% of schools in Mbalambala and 50% in Lagdera sub-county for example, received adequate support, making them highly vulnerable to recurring interruptions in learning.

Conflict, Insecurity, and Disease Outbreaks

Conflict and insecurity, as well as recurrent disease outbreaks, further disrupt education in Garissa. According to the assessment findings, Fafi and Garissa Township experience notable insecurity, with 42.86% of schools in these areas affected by conflict-related disruptions. The study also documented the toll of disease outbreaks on educational continuity, particularly in regions prone to cholera and respiratory infections. In Mbalambala, up to 50% of learning activities are compromised during disease outbreaks, with Garissa Township and Fafi similarly affected. As noted in the report, these crises exacerbate school closures and absenteeism, further complicating the county's educational landscape.

School and Community Preparedness for Crises

According to the assessments, schools in Garissa County generally have limited preparedness for dealing with crises. Although some schools have established basic hygiene practices, such as handwashing stations, and teacher-led awareness campaigns on health and safety, the overall capacity for crisis management still needs to improve. The community's reliance on basic coping mechanisms, such as relocating to higher ground or seeking external aid, illustrates the inadequate infrastructure and resources available for dealing with floods, droughts, and disease outbreaks. Livelihood challenges, including road inaccessibility and high inflation, further hinder school attendance and contribute to high dropout rates as parents struggle to afford education-related expenses for their children.

Coping and Adaptation Strategies

Garissa's communities and schools have adopted various coping strategies. As TeachWell project's assessment highlights, many rely on support from organizations such as the Kenya Red Cross, which provides temporary shelters and hygiene management assistance during floods. Additionally, local adaptation strategies have been taken up, including the construction of drainage systems, relocation to safer areas, and community-driven initiatives like tree planting to reduce the impact of floods. However, as observed in the report, these coping mechanisms are often inadequate, necessitating long-term solutions to manage recurring natural and man-made crises sustainably.

So, what can be done to provide long-term sustainable solutions?

A comprehensive and collaborative approach is needed to address these challenges and build a resilient education system. These are our recommendations:

Invest in Flood-Resistant Infrastructure

- ·Construct elevated classrooms and reinforce school structures to withstand flood impacts.
- ·Improve drainage systems around schools to prevent waterlogging and property damage.
- ·Support community-driven flood management efforts, including flood barriers and reforestation to prevent soil erosion.

Establish Early Warning and Disaster Preparedness Systems

- ·Implement school-level disaster preparedness plans, including evacuation procedures and emergency supplies.
- ·Develop an early warning system to alert schools and communities to potential crises, allowing for prompt protective measures.
- ·Train teachers and staff in crisis response, including trauma support for students affected by crises.

Provide Financial and Resource Support for Vulnerable Families

- ·Introduce scholarships, school fee waivers, and resource distribution (e.g., books, uniforms) for families impacted by floods and droughts to reduce financial burdens.
- ·Strengthen partnerships with organizations like the Kenya Red Cross and UNICEF to provide emergency supplies, temporary shelters, and learning materials during crises.

Develop Alternative Learning Spaces

- Establish mobile classrooms or elevated shelters as temporary learning spaces during crises to ensure learning continuity.
- Invest in feasible digital learning tools so that students can access learning resources remotely when physical attendance is disrupted.

Enhance Community Engagement and Capacity Building

- ·Empower local leaders, parents, and educators to mitigate disaster through training and proactively participating in resilience-building activities.
- ·Facilitate community-driven planning for flood and drought management to foster a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for school safety and student well-being.

Conclusion

Garissa County's education system faces significant challenges due to recurring natural disasters, resource limitations, and socioeconomic disruptions. However, the county can create a more robust and adaptable education system by investing in resilient infrastructure, preparedness, and community engagement. Collaboration among government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities is essential to secure a stable learning environment for Garissa's children and safeguard their future against the unpredictability of climate-related and other crises.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

