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Pandemic and digital education in sub-Saharan Africa

About 300 million people in Africa have been affected by the pandemic's closure of schools.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the time has come to bring students back into the classroom after some 300 million people in Africa have been affected by the pandemic's school closures. Learning has tried to move online, but inadequate access to the internet, computers or electricity has been a challenge for students.

Educational organisations have developed innovative solutions to address the immediate need, but the pandemic has highlighted that the future of education lies in a more digitised approach to learning. That is, without long-term action, the most marginalized, especially those living in remote rural areas without devices or connectivity, will be disadvantaged, Fiona Mavhinga, executive director of the non-profit Campaign for Female Education, told CNN.
"The digital divide is real, it is wide, especially for those who are marginalized and come from poor communities," she said. "They have no way of accessing any online education. They don't have the data or telephone credits to download educational materials".

Learning through WhatsApp, radio and TV

The non-profit association Camfed (Campaign for Female Education) has a mission to eradicate poverty in Africa through the education of young women in Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
The organisation has helped to ensure continuity of learning during the pandemic in some of these countries through innovative distance learning methods, such as radio and television programmes, offline data sharing applications and WhatsApp.

In Zambia and Tanzania, Camfed reaches nearly 80,000 students through radio programmes. Frontline workers are sometimes invited to talk about the virus, with the broadcast divided into local dialects so that everyone has a clear understanding.
These sessions are also replicated on WhatsApp, where students can ask questions and interact with the teacher.
"These innovative measures can potentially be implemented to ensure that even the most marginalized students have access to learning despite the pandemic, and that they do not lose hope for the future," told CNN Patience Mkandawire, a member of Camfed.
The UK charity Voluntary Service Overseas works with radio stations in Rwanda to provide educational content. Its team calls parents to make sure their children can listen to the radio programme and have support during the broadcast.

Ajayi Basirat, a teacher from Lagos, created a small WhatsApp group called Mathematics Clinic in March, aimed at senior students in a single college. By the end of April, the group had garnered a lot of outside applications and exceeded the WhatsApp user limit for a single group, and was then transferred to Instagram, where its student population grew to nearly 2,000 students.
To ensure that disadvantaged students did not drop out of class, it began recording its teaching sessions in the form of short videos, compressing them for low data usage and uploading them to Telegram, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

"It hurts to see students miss classes because they have no data," Basirat told CNN. His videos have reached students in different parts of the world, including India, South Africa and Canada.

The need for a digital transformation

Globally, nearly 10 million children may never return to school because of funding cuts and poverty caused by the pandemic, warned the international NGO Save the Children. This adds to the 258 million children who had already "left" education before the epidemic.
In March, Africa Teen Geeks (ATG), a non-profit IT organisation, launched STEM Digital Lockdown School in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education of South Africa. Of the country's 12 million students in basic education, only 500,000

have enrolled in ATG's Zoom classes.
The lack of success was due to the cost of data traffic and lack of devices, Lindiwe Matlali, founder and CEO of ATG, told CNN.
Teachers also need to receive more comprehensive technology training, but the challenge is the lack of opportunities, rather than skills. "We found it was easy for teachers to put internet technology at the heart of training. 99% of our teachers taught online for the first time after receiving literally four hours of training".

The future of sub-Saharan education

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world are giving priority to other social and economic challenges, Nganga told CNN. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, according to UNESCO, $11.8 trillion has been spent in stimulus packages as a fiscal response to save lives and mitigate economic shocks. Of this, only $91 billion, or less than 1%, has been spent on education.

But there are encouraging signs of awareness of the importance of online education resulting from the pandemic.
Basirat received a phone call from the educational authorities of Lagos State, who praised his work, interviewed him and made a documentary about his teaching techniques. A month later, in June, the government started distributing mobile phones to students from low-income families so that they could benefit from e-learning programmes, according to information on the government's official website.
In April, the authorities in the state of Oyo in southwest Nigeria announced the offer of 500 MB of free data to students participating in the state's e-learning programmes. Other states, the educational authorities say, have adopted similar ideas, involving students via radio, television, WhatsApp and other channels.
Morocco and Tunisia were only able to move quickly to blended learning during the lockdown because they made long-term investments in these areas.

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