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COVID-19 and Education: How Education Unions in Africa are Responding

Summary of research conducted by
Steve Nwokeocha, Executive Director – Academics,
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Regulatory Authorities (AFTRA)

**EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL
AFRICA REGION**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted education systems across Africa and the whole world. This research was conducted by Education International Africa Region (EIRAF) in order to better understand the impact of the pandemic on education systems, students, teachers and education support personnel on the continent and collect examples of union and educator responses to the crisis. It complements the global survey[1] conducted by Education International (EI) in March 2020.

This summary presents a snapshot of the findings of the survey and in-depth interviews. The reader is encouraged to read the full report for detailed findings. Data was collected through (a) a survey sent to all African EI member organisations in August 2020 (gaining 54 responses across 34 countries); and (b) interviews conducted with education union leaders (n=13).

The survey inquired about a range of issues including: the timeline and modalities for school reopening; efforts by the governments to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning during school closures and their effectiveness; the impact the pandemic has had on teachers' working conditions; the extent of collaboration between governments and education unions; and the action taken by the unions in response to the pandemic. Interviews complemented the survey responses by gathering further qualitative data on the same themes.

The key findings of the research across these five areas are summarized below.

[1]   Education International. 2020. Covid-19 and Education: How Education Unions are Responding.
     Available at: https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_covid19_survey_report_eng_final

1.   Reopening of education institutions

Education institutions were reported to be fully closed, or open just for "certain categories of students" by nearly all respondents. Only 8% of respondents reported that schools were fully open and 15% reported that tertiary institutions were fully open. Three-quarters of respondents indicated that their government had opted for a phased reopening of schools, starting with secondary school examination classes.

Union views on reopening processes

Unions were divided on whether education institutions should remain closed or return to in-school learning. Fifty-three (53%) were in favour of schools staying closed, while 58% were in favour of tertiary education institutions remaining closed. Interviews revealed that in some cases (such as in Namibia and South Africa) governments had to change the resumption date of school reopening due to union opposition, whilst in other cases (such as in Malawi), unions called for schools to be reopened immediately as long as precautions were in place to keep students and staff safe.

While some unions perceived the government's preparations for reopening educational institutions (including the provision of health guidelines, personal protective equipment, water and sanitation, and arrangement for social distancing) as adequate, in general, more perceived them as inadequate or very inadequate.

2.   Teaching and Learning

Ensuring continuity of learning

The survey investigated government measures to ensure the continuity of education during school closures. Most unions (87%) reported that students were taught via radio and television programmes, 32% via paper based take-home packages and 55% via online means. However, combined, 21% of respondents reported that no action had been taken by their government, or that schools and teachers were expected to come up with their own initiatives. Online education was reported as more common in the tertiary sector – 75% of the unions indicated that tertiary education continued online during closures.

Effectiveness of distance education

Most unions (83%) perceived the distance education provided during closures as ineffective. Some interviewees pointed out that online education was mostly for privileged urban students who had access to computers, internet connectivity and electric power provision, and that little learning took place for marginalised students, including girls, students with disabilities and students in rural areas. The exacerbation of already existing educational inequalities was a key concern expressed regarding the overall impact of COVID-19 on education.

3. Teacher working conditions

Covid infections

Approximately half of the unions reported that there were cases of students and their members who had been infected by COVID-19. The highest number was 4,123 reported cases in South Africa. However, some unions indicated that in their country the infection figures were unknown.

The perceived impact of online learning

Sixty percent (60%) of respondents reported concern that a shift to online education could lead to job losses. However, 34% suggested that online education would make teachers' jobs easier and 36% felt that the pandemic had revealed a need to shift to online education in the future, and 26% thought it would have no effect on the teaching profession.

Government support for teachers

The findings suggest that government support to teachers during the pandemic has been inadequate. Most unions (62%) indicated that no measures had been taken to support teachers during the pandemic. Only 28% suggested that teachers had been provided training and professional development opportunities. Interviews showed that many unions considered their members unprepared for online teaching as they lacked equipment, infrastructure and/or digital competencies. However, some reported other types of support received. For instance, in Gabon, teachers benefited from free water and electricity and in Rwanda the government facilitated school management to apply for loans on behalf of teachers.

Employment conditions

Unions indicated that teachers (full and part time) in private schools and on temporary contracts and education support personnel had been most affected by the pandemic in terms of employment conditions. Changes included salary delays, unpaid salaries and job losses. Some interviewees noted that teachers in private schools had been particularly affected by job losses. Some also expressed concerns about increased workload.

4. Social and policy dialogue

The findings show that social and policy dialogue has not been adequate. Whilst 10% of respondents indicated that their union was consulted on decisions regarding school closures and/or reopening and that their views were taken into account, 51% reported that their views were 'sometimes' taken into account, and 28% said that the union was not consulted at all. Interviews revealed that some unions were involved with decision-making, for instance by having a representative on a national COVID-19 Response committee. Some unions had been consulted at the start of the pandemic but consultation had stopped as physical meetings became impossible. Meanwhile, others explained that their governments had acted unilaterally throughout the pandemic.

5. Union action

The survey results showed that many unions have taken action to support their members during the pandemic. Ninety-two percent (92%) reported embarking on awareness raising initiatives for their members, whilst 72% reported engaging in social and policy dialogue with the government and 38% said they had developed tools for their members. Action taken included, for instance, raising funds to purchase sanitation products; providing capacity building for online teaching; negotiating new collective agreements; and collaborating with the media to raise public awareness about COVID-19.

Based on these findings, the following key recommendations are made, among others:

For Education International Africa:

1. Continue pooling resources and encouraging exchange by sharing best practices of unions in managing teaching and learning during the pandemic.

2. Advocate for governments to provide digital professional development for teachers and educators.

3. Advocate for the revision of existing international guidelines for managing teaching and learning in times of crisis, based on lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the African Union Commission:

1. Incorporate the outcomes of this survey in AUC's "DOTSS Framework."[2]

For African governments:

1. Comply with the protocols issued by the World Health Organisation and Guidelines for school reopening issued by Education International, the Teacher Task Force, UNESCO, ILO and other relevant international authorities. The health and safety of students and education workers should be of paramount concern to governments.

2. Take concrete measures to ensure equity and inclusion, including through the strengthening of legal and institutional frameworks, provision of school feeding programmes and tracking of out-of-school children.

3. Empower teachers and students to have access to digital infrastructure and facilities and build educators' capacities in online and distance education. Create a transparent process for the integration of technologies in education and work jointly with education unions to determine the course of the integration.

4. Strengthen the relationship with education unions and involve them in policy development, monitoring and evaluation. Governments that have made unilateral education policy decisions during the pandemic must urgently consult and listen to the profession.

5. Work collaboratively with education unions to find lasting solutions to the challenges faced by teachers and education support personnel in private education and those of education workers on temporary contracts or support services whose employment terms and conditions are seriously endangered during emergencies and pandemics.

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2   DOTSS stands for: (1) Digital connectivity of schools; (2) Online learning; (3) Teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning; (4) Safety online and offline; and (5) Skills focused learning.
For further information, see: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38788-doc-policy_guidelines_final.pdf

Education International
Internationale de l'Education
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale

EI Africa regional office

N° 3, Torshie Close, Mempeasem,
East Legon Extension,
P.O.Box LGDTD
10069 Legon, Accra – Ghana
Tel: + 233 302 501 200
eirafoffice@ei-ie.org
https:/regions.ei-ie.org/africa/

Head office

15 Boulevard Bischoffsheim
1000 Brussels, Belgium
Tel +32-2 224 0611
headoffice@ei-ie.org

www.ei-ie.org
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Education International represents organisations of teachers and other education employees across the globe. It is the world's largest federation of unions and associations, representing thirty million education employees in about four hundred organisations in one hundred and seventy countries and territories, across the globe. Education International unites teachers and education employees.