



Education

Impact of COVID-19 on education

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Last updated 27 October 2023 using IFs 7.84

Impact of COVID-19 on education

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on education in Africa. The restrictions and protocols associated with the pandemic caused many schools to shut down and learning temporarily suspended. At the peak of the pandemic, more than 90% of African students had their studies interrupted as a result of school closures.[1] Even in South Africa, where the education sector is relatively well-resourced and information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure is better developed than in many other countries, UNICEF[2] estimates that the average student lost between three-quarters and a full year of schooling, and up to half a million children dropped out of school entirely since the beginning of the pandemic.

Countries with larger rural and extremely poor populations seem to have suffered the most. In many countries, children received no education at all during the COVID-19 pandemic, either because schools without facilities to teach remotely closed entirely or because of inadequate ICT infrastructure to allow students and teachers to log in to classes. Economic inequalities have again become decisive, with wealthy students who have access to well-resourced schools and homes equipped with high-speed Internet having experienced minimal disruption to their programmes, while many rural and poor students without such resources lost access to school entirely.[3]

Even when they were able to access lessons, the sudden shift undermined learning as students struggled to focus in a home setting or received inadequate personal attention through online classes, with resulting mental health consequences of lockdowns that, in some instances, lasted up to two years. Outside school, children were also more susceptible to exploitation of child labour, particularly girls with respect to unpaid domestic work, further distracting them from their studies and undermining their fundamental rights.[4]

Although students around the world have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher levels of poverty as well as the significant digital divide in Africa have rendered Africans particularly vulnerable. Internet access rates are very low in Africa compared to the rest of the world, with studies estimating that 60% to 85% of African university students did not have the necessary devices or Internet access to continue online education.[5] This highlights the need for a greatly expanded roll-out of quality and affordable ICT infrastructure (see the theme on leapfrogging) and integrating these technologies into education, including reskilling teachers.

Endnotes

1. African Union Commission and UNICEF, *Transforming education in Africa: An evidence-based overview and recommendations for long-term improvements*, UNICEF, 20 September 2021.
2. UNICEF, *COVID-19 and children*.
3. UNICEF, *Learners in South Africa up to one school year behind where they should be*, 22 July 2021.
4. Human Rights Watch, *Impact of COVID-19 on children's education in Africa*, 26 August 2020.
5. P Koninckx, C Fatondji and J Burgos, *COVID-19 impact on higher education in Africa*, OECD Development Matters, 19 May 2021.

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Cite this research

Enoch Randy Aikins and Jakkie Cilliers (2024) Education. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/06-education/> [Online Resource] Updated 27 October 2023.

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