

## THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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### INTRODUCTION

School closures due to COVID-19 came at an enormous cost to children and youth in SSA (sub-Saharan Africa). Already at the beginning of the pandemic, aid agencies warned that LLMICs (Low- and Lower-Middle Income Countries) are particularly at risk to fall significantly behind in achieving SDG 4 (Sustainable Development Goal 4)<sup>1</sup> (Edwards 2020; Warren/Wagner 2020). Most countries that are forecasted to substantially increase their number of out-of-school children and/or low educational attainment, are located in the region (see Table A). The World Bank further cautioned in April 2020, that an additional 22-23 million children in SSA could be left below the 1.90 US \$ a day extreme poverty threshold as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Initial responses to COVID-19 by SSA governments varied considerably at the national level. A few downplayed the crisis, such as Tanzania (BBC News 2021b) until Samia Suluhu Hassan became president in March 2021. Others, Nigeria, South Africa or Uganda, implemented periodically very stringent lockdown measures.<sup>3</sup> In June 2021, there was growing concern over a third wave of COVID-19 infections across SSA, as new virus variants were rapidly rising (BBC News 2021a). Uganda had just re-imposed a new lockdown and closed all schools again. By the end of July 2021, UNICEF reported that the recent re-closing of schools mid-year due to COVID-19 surges left 32 million children (roughly 40 %) in Southern and Eastern Africa again out of school, in addition to the already estimated 37 million children who were out of school prior to the pandemic (UNICEF 2021a).

The true extent of COVID-19 in SSA still remains unknown, highly debated and significantly under-researched due to the lack of reliable data, resources and capacities. Some argue that under-reported death rates are not bringing the real magnitude of the pandemic in SSA to the light (Campbell 2021; Maclean 2021). Others contend that Africa's much younger population explains the apparent difference in death rates<sup>4</sup> if compared to other

regions, alongside climatic variances, pre-existing immunity, genetic factors and behavioural differences (Lawal 2021; Marsh/Alobo 2020).

These disagreements notwithstanding, one fact did become certain in the past year: children and youth in SSA had and will have to endure significant losses in regard to their education (UNICEF 2021b). Recent statistical models already predict that learning deficits for a child in grade 3 could lead to lost learning of 2.8 years by grade 10 in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Tanzania and Uganda (Angrist et al. 2021). Emerging evidence reveals that school closures as part of broader social distance measures have been associated with considerable harms to children's health and well-being (Viner et al. 2021). Loss of livelihoods, work and school closures and confinement at home can amplify caregiver stress, contributing to increasing the risk of domestic violence, including verbal and physical abuse of children (Bakrania et al. 2020). Besides, several studies have warned that emergency measures have increased vulnerability of young women to sexual violence and transactional sex (Fawole et al. 2021; Flowe et al. 2020). Other studies have shown how, in low income contexts, economic pressures on households and school closures have increased children's, and particularly boys' engagement in wage labour, often involving precarious and exploitative conditions, and increases in girls' unpaid domestic work and chores (Bakrania et al. 2020; Human Rights Watch 2021).

SSA countries implemented and enforced diverse COVID-19 rules and regulations in their respective education sectors, depending on their political, economic, social and regional environment. This, among others, now challenges a one-size-fits-all approach towards 'building back better' or 'building back equal' in education for SSA children and youth. Context matters. For instance, our analysis of interviews with young people in our recent in-depth study on the effects of the lockdown in Uganda (Parkes et al. 2020), concluded that not just at the national but also district or community

level, tailored approaches are needed to recognise the diverse effects of school closures, thereby taking into account gender, age, socio-economic status, family situation and location (i.e. rural, peri-urban and urban). There are, however, some important common threads across the most current research on the predicted and at times already visible impact of COVID-19 on education in SSA (Alam/Tiwari 2021; Edwards 2021; Human Rights Watch 2020; Manu 2020; Parkes et al. 2020; Save the Children International 2021; UNICEF 2021b). These include:

- Inequities that affected children and their families prior to the pandemic (based on gender, location, mobility, income, family relationships or socio-economic background) intensified during and after school closures.
- There is an urgent need to rethink how education is governed and regulated in SSA. The pandemic has hit low fee private schools particularly hard, which may lead to an increased switch to public schools, delay entry or increase drop out among children.
- Children across all regions in SSA faced significant challenges in accessing and benefiting from distance learning, learning technologies and materials.

We first look into inequities in education before COVID-19 hit the SSA region to better understand and shed light on how these were intensified. We then turn to education sector governance and financing during the pandemic, followed by a short discussion on the impact COVID-19 had on low fee private schools (LFPS). Illustrating how the effects of school closures intersect with many other areas in children and young people's lives, such as the lack of income, we then provide some insights from young people's experiences in Uganda. The country has enforced the longest period of full and partial school closures (77 weeks with plans to reopen in January 2022) in SSA. The ensuing section will then focus on the many challenges children and youth face across SSA in regard to accessing and benefitting from distance learning. We conclude with a reflection on the immediate and future challenges in education in SSA.

## INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION IN SSA PRIOR TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Pre-pandemic challenges in SSA's education systems that are expected to significantly worsen are **high school**

**drop-out rates**, an apparent **learning crisis** combined with the **lack of opportunities and employment**. Despite the commitment by most SSA states to implement global education policies (such as SDG 4), inequities and horizontal inequalities in SSA have not been significantly reduced through increased access to education over the past decades.

## SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATES

The number of out of school children across SSA saw a slight decrease in the 1990s but stagnated around the millennium. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, SSA consistently remained the region with the highest school drop-out rates for all age groups. Out of the 258 million children and youth who were out of school worldwide, 97.5 million are based in SSA (45.5 males and 52.0 million females) (UNESCO-UIS 2018). This number includes primary, lower secondary and secondary level education and out of school rates increase by age group and school level (UNESCO 2020b; UNESCO-UIS 2018). However, efforts to retain children and youth in school predominantly target primary and lower-secondary school aged children. Older adolescents (aged 15 and older) frequently find themselves in a complex in-between stage of coping with pressing social and economic responsibilities alongside their wish, but sometimes also the expectation from others to continue with their education. Dropping out of school is generally the result of a range of intersecting factors rather than being caused by one single event. These factors include: socio-economic background (economic well-being, education of the household head, place of residence), child labour, poverty, lack of support from parents, death, pregnancy, fosterage, poor performance in school, lack of support from teachers, sickness or disability (Ampiah/Adu-Yeboah 2009; Kakuba et al. 2021; World Bank 2017). Moreover, delayed entry to school highly correlates with being out of school (Kuésié et al. 2015).

## LEARNING CRISIS

Apart from challenges to retain children and youth in school, the quality of education and educational outcomes in SSA are alarmingly low. The World Bank (2017) warned that Africa is facing a severe learning crisis. The learning poverty rate in LLMICs is estimated to be 53 % globally, suggesting that half of all 10 year old children

cannot read or understand a simple text. In SSA that figure is assumed to be close to 90 % (World Bank 2020). Notably, the lack of basic competency across SSA is systematically lower for students from poorer families (World Bank 2017). Other reasons for poor learning quality include the lack of qualified and trained teachers, bad infrastructure for schooling and a lack of financing and resources for education.

### LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES AND EMPLOYMENT DESPITE EDUCATION

Experts warn that SSA's growing population of more educated and urbanized youth with access to few jobs in the future is a crisis in the making as unemployment is the highest among educated youth (Page 2019). Latest estimates suggest that Africa's working age population will grow by 450 million people, about 3 % per annum, between 2015 and 2035 (Brooks et al. 2014; Page 2019). If these trends continue, only about 100 million of the 450 million working age youth can expect to find decent work. It is projected that 80 % of the future workforce will be in the informal sector, and only a very small fraction will find formal and secure employment in SSA (Brooks et al. 2014). Current education initiatives, especially secondary schooling, vocational training and livelihoods programmes are often not responsive to the actual economic conditions, context and needs, as illustrated in the case of Uganda (Datzberger 2018). While agriculture remains an important source of income and revenue, areas such as information and communications technology (ICT) based services, tourism, agri-businesses, horticulture and transport are on the rise and even outpacing the growth of manufacturing (Page 2019). A reality the education sector is far from addressing.

### EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN SSA

Most countries that are expected to be at an extreme or high risk of falling back in achieving SDG 4 are located in SSA (see Table A).

Globally, between 20 March 2020 and 2 February 2021, schools have been fully closed for an average of 95 instruction days, with countries in the Eastern and Southern African region being most affected with an average

of 101 days (UNICEF 2021b). Almost all SSA countries (with one exception – Burundi), closed their schools during the first year of the pandemic (see Annex, Table B). Studies forecast that on average, in countries where schools were still not open as of February 2, 2021 (as it was the case for example in Uganda, Eritrea or Angola), nearly 80 % of classroom instruction and thus learning has been missed (ibid.). In August 2021 schools in Uganda, Mozambique and Zambia continued to be completely closed due to a surge of COVID-19 cases.<sup>5</sup>

**Table A: Countries predicted to be at extreme or high risk to fall significantly back SDG 4 due to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Extreme Risk (9 out of 12 are based in SSA)	High Risk (12 out of 12 are based in SSA)
Niger	Sudan
Mali	The Gambia
Chad	Tanzania
Liberia	Angola
Guinea	Ethiopia
Mauritania	Benin
Nigeria	DRC
Senegal	Sierra Leone
Cote d'Ivoire	Cameroon
Afghanistan	Rwanda
Yemen	Uganda
Pakistan	Burundi

Source: Warren/Wagner 2020

These long periods of school closures urgently call for new strategies in regard to aid, development and prioritisation in education. There is a pressing need to revisit SDG 4, rethink previously set priorities and introduce other areas that take into account radically different country circumstances due to COVID-19 (Lewin 2020b; UNESCO 2020a). These new circumstances are primarily long periods of missed learning, lack of infrastructure and equipment to operate schools in line with public health protocols, caregivers' growing struggles to contribute to the many (and frequently hidden) costs of schooling, and extremely precarious conditions for teaching staff. All of this is combined with an increasing gap to finance education through bilateral and multilateral aid and national government allocations.

## FINANCING FOR EDUCATION DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

Education sectors in SSA were already heavily underfunded before the pandemic. Even though aid to education reached an all-time high in 2018 with 15.6 billion US \$ globally, only 47 % of that aid was directed to basic or secondary education in LLIMCs (ibid.) – most of which are located in SSA.<sup>6</sup> According to the latest figures from the UNESCO (2020b), education expenditure as a share of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) grew rapidly in SSA, from 4.3 % in 2008 to 5.1 % in 2012, before declining to 4.5 % since 2015. Although SSA received the largest share of aid to education globally in 2015 with 1.3 billion US \$<sup>7</sup> of ODA (Official Development Assistance), this is less than half of the aid for education it obtained in 2002 (ibid.). Experts predict that aid and financing for education in SSA is very unlikely to grow as COVID-19 related recessions may suppress donor spending (Lewin 2020a). A recent study on financing education in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic further found that funds for education have already been cut or relocated to the public health sector in the past year (ADEA et al. 2021). While governments, international aid agencies, development actors but also private sector entities (including philanthropies) and households continue to mobilize funding, these available resources are far from addressing the many effects of the pandemic on the education sector, thereby also challenging attempts for safe post-lockdown schooling (ibid.). In addition, financing education is influenced by context specific factors such as conflict (e.g. South Sudan or DRC), previous or ongoing epidemics (e.g. Ebola in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea), high degrees of corruption (e.g. Botswana or Rwanda), internally displaced people or refugees (e.g. Cameroon) or the effects of climate change and extreme weather events (e.g.: Mozambique or Zimbabwe) – to name but a few.

In short, funding for education is not only at a high risk of decline because of the pandemic but education sector investments are also challenged by pre-existing conditions and circumstances in addition to the effects of COVID-19. Despite efforts by the international community (e.g.: GPE Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF, the World Bank or bilateral aid) as well as SSA governments to provide additional funding for education to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, several in-country case studies have thus far shown that these funds are piecemeal and a significant proportion of children and youth do not benefit from this aid (ibid.). Thus far, most

parents and caregivers are left with the financial burden to safely send their children back to school. School fees have infrequently been waived despite missed periods of learning. Already prior to the pandemic, the many hidden costs of education (such as school books, lunches, or fees not covered by governments), posed a tremendous challenge for the estimated 413 million people (Beegle/Christiaensen 2019) in SSA who currently live in poverty.

## THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON LOW FEE PRIVATE EDUCATION

When discussing the diverse effects of the pandemic on education in Africa, it is important to acknowledge that education sector governance takes on many different forms in SSA, ranging from public to private, non-state actor or PPP (public private partnerships) provision. Especially private sector involvement in education proliferated over the past decades as most SSA governments have, for various reasons, neither the capacities, nor the infrastructure and funding to provide state schooling for all.

Liberia serves as a prime example. Before the country's two major civil wars (1989-96 and 1999-2003) around 2.400 public schools had been established and 12.000 teachers were on the public school pay roll. During both wars about 75 % of all public schools were destroyed and many of the 12.000 teachers emigrated or took up alternative employment. Apart from school buildings also teacher training colleges were put out of operation. To this day, the Liberian education sector has still not fully recovered and was further weakened in the Ebola crisis 2014-15. The country now heavily depends on the private sector to ensure education provision (World Bank 2016). Before COVID-19, it was estimated that in West Africa alone, over 70 % of all children were enrolled in LFPS in urban areas (UNESCO-IIEP 2016). But also elsewhere (e.g.: Kenya, Uganda or Ghana), LFPS are flourishing. Half of Nairobi's primary school children are thought to learn in LFPS (Simmons Zuilkowski 2018).

LFPS are often described as budget schools, or schools for the poor, as they are not managed by the state or public authority and are independently funded through comparatively lower tuition fees than regular private schools. Whether or not LFPS are actually benefiting the poor (especially the extreme poor, who often cannot even afford the smallest fee for schooling) continues to be a very

heated debate among experts with various reasons for and against that model (UNESCO-IIEP 2016). However, most agree that LFPS need to be regulated (which is often not the case), to ensure that they meet at least the minimum quality standards and treat teachers and children's caregivers fairly (Härmä 2019). A recent study led by UNICEF (Alam/Tiwari 2021) stresses that COVID-19 school closures have in particular disadvantaged children and teachers in LFPS. School staff, mainly short contract teachers, were frequently made redundant as schools no longer received fees from parents. LFPS consequently struggled to provide remote learning support to their students and there is a high likelihood of extensive learning losses among returning students. Some of these LFPS may even close permanently which in return could lead to a surge in nearby public schools, overburdening already weak state education systems. While children who attend state schools have equally faced many challenges in regard to distance learning (see also section Distance Learning during COVID-19), public school teachers on fixed contracts, in most cases, did not lose their jobs (The Teacher Task Force 2020). They had at least some minimum support from their governments, though often deemed not enough or accompanied by pre-pandemic delays in payment (ibid.).

If anything, COVID-19 clearly brought to light the absence of policy measures to ensure accountability and good governance of the private sector, whose role can no longer be ignored in education provision in SSA. The pandemic is an urgent reminder to rethink how education is governed, regulated, funded and made accessible while retaining quality standards and ensuring fair and stable working conditions for staff. Education frequently perpetuates existing inequities instead of alleviating them (Datzberger 2018; Tromp/Datzberger 2019; Williams et al. 2015). Below we shed light on how these inequities have intensified for young people during the COVID-19 crisis in Uganda.

## UGANDA: THE COMPOUNDED EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES AND LOSS OF LIVELIHOODS

In March 2020, the government of Uganda introduced one of the most stringent lockdowns in SSA, closing schools and businesses, banning cars and public gatherings, and introducing a night-time curfew. When schools were reopened for public examination classes

only in October 2020, most school pupils remained out of school, experiencing an entire year without formal education. A phased re-opening of schools started in March 2021. Soon after, Uganda faced a surge of COVID-19 cases and all educational institutions were forced to close again starting June 7th, 2021 (Reuters 2021). In early November, schools had been either fully or partially closed for the majority of students for 77 weeks and were not expected to open before January 2022. One strategy was to only re-open schools once all teachers and older pupils are vaccinated. How quickly vaccinations will be rolled out in Uganda remains highly questionable with shortages and multiple struggles to obtain enough vaccines (Burke 2021).

While debates are ongoing on how to 'build back better' in the education sector in SSA<sup>8</sup>, there is little focus on how young people growing up in low income contexts themselves perceive, experience, handle and cope with the loss of schooling. In the attempt to fill this gap, we briefly present some findings from our ongoing study of how response measures during the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda have affected the lives of adolescent young people (Parkes et al. 2020). Our analysis is informed by qualitative data from female and male Ugandans, who have been 'core participants' in a longitudinal study for a broader research project: Contexts of Violence in Adolescence Cohort Study (CoVAC) (Devries et al. 2020). Data was gathered through five rounds of data collection with 36 girls and boys (mainly aged 16-19 years) via face-to-face and mobile phone interviews between 2018 and 2021. The data are contextualized within longitudinal biographical narratives that have been developed since 2018 and which helped us to illuminate the significance of the crisis in young people's everyday lives.

Among those still enrolled in secondary school during the lockdown, the effects of school closures have been multiple and varying. For many, costs associated with secondary schooling were already hard to bear prior to the pandemic, and young people worried that school closures reduced their chances of completing school. Although Uganda was one of the first SSA countries to implement USE (Universal Secondary Education) in 2007, the language used in the policy creates the expectation of fee-free secondary education, but in reality many costs (including fees) occur, disadvantaging in particular poorer families (Datzberger 2018; Kakuba et al. 2021). Some of the boys we interviewed during the lockdown were able to make an income while schools were closed

to contribute to fees later on, though their work was often precarious and piecemeal. Girls were less able to find work, and in a few cases unwanted pregnancies reduced their prospects for returning to school. Apio, a 17 year old girl, for example, told us:

*In our neighbourhood, there is a girl of about my age, she was in Senior 1<sup>9</sup> that got pregnant. There is another girl who stays close by my auntie's boutique in Wobulenzi, she also got pregnant and she is now staying with her boyfriend. She was in Senior 4 and now her colleagues have reported back to school but she is in her marriage.*

In interviews, young people worried about whether they would have to repeat the school year, whether their families could continue to cover the costs of schooling given the economic shocks, and whether they would fail key examinations. Kalungi, a keen student who had reached Senior 5, spoke of his worries that, with the lockdown, his mother was caring for an expanded household of siblings and cousins, all of whom she would need support to return to school. Kato, who was due to sit the UNEB (Ugandan National Examinations Board), explained his concerns about the costs that might be charged by schools when they reopen. However, when schools opened in mid-October 2020 for year groups taking public examinations only (that is: Primary 7, Senior 4 and Senior 5), instead of being waived, national examination fees slightly increased (Pamela 2020). This put even more stress on children and youth from poor backgrounds.

Among our cohort, study participants who were most vulnerable to being propelled out of school because of COVID-19, were those whose education had already been disrupted by socio-economic hardship prior to the pandemic. This is illustrated by Tom, a young male, aged 18, who has been in and out of school during the past years. Tom lives with his mother and five siblings in a remote rural community. When we first met him in 2018 he described his family as poor, with his mother struggling to earn a living through digging gardens for other people making an income below the poverty line of 1.90 US \$ a day. His father, who has a second family, rarely provides support. Prior to the pandemic, Tom also engaged in digging to generate income to help his mother pay school fees for his younger siblings and himself. With difficulties covering schooling costs, he dropped out but still planned to reenrol in early 2020. Then the lockdown

came. He had to find work to help the family make ends meet, especially because his mother and little sister had fallen ill and needed to buy medicine. In November 2020, he told us that he had worked on a farm over the summer months but soon escaped as he was not paid, often beaten up for mistakes or being slow, not given any rest and not enough food. Ultimately, he found paid work in brick-making, which allowed him to save up enough money to pay for just one single school term. It not only remains uncertain whether and how he can finance all remaining school terms to finally graduate from S4 (O-Level examinations). During the first lockdown he told us:

*What is worrying me a lot is my schooling; it feels to me like this COVID-19 is snatching away something from me that I liked the most.*

Now, with schools being closed again it is highly questionable whether Tom will re-enrol again in fall 2021. Stories like Tom's on the compound effects of school closures, lack of income, illness and poor socio-economic background are no exception. Apart from very limited donations of food by the Ugandan government for a few families during the first lockdown, none of the young people we interviewed received any help or aid to either engage with distance learning or help them return to school. There were some reported efforts to provide support (e.g.: the distribution of learning kits via various non-governmental organizations or aid agencies), including the one-off payment of UGX 100.000 (approx. 28,5 US \$), to roughly 500.000 households in Kampala. These efforts were however, critiqued as being a 'drop in the ocean' (ISER 2021) or piecemeal and scattered (Human Rights Watch 2020). For the most part, families and young people like Tom, relied on themselves or intermittent generosity of neighbours or extended family members, in facing and coping with the multiple pressures under lockdown. There is a vital need, at international, governmental and community levels, to strengthen and enhance approaches to reduce multiple pressures that emerged during and after COVID-19, which also jeopardize the educational future for children and youth.

## DISTANCE LEARNING DURING COVID-19

During periods of school closures, children and youth from rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds have faced tremendous challenges in accessing distance learning material (eLearning Africa 2020; Manu 2020;

Parkes et al. 2020). Radio and TV were seen as the most important technologies to sustain learning for students in Africa. However, radio signals are often weak in rural areas, and lessons offered on TV have been critiqued for not being accessible to those without a TV or electricity and for offering content not suitable for all levels (Manu 2020; Parkes et al. 2020). Moreover, a large scale study on e-learning in Africa during COVID-19 showed that the majority of educators have not received financial support for teaching and learning tools to help them continue teaching in the crisis, and do not feel there has been sufficient preparation to help them adapt (eLearning Africa 2020).

Most of the young people we interviewed in Uganda during the lockdown had no access or very limited engagement with distance learning resources (Parkes et al. 2020). The government of Uganda has made efforts to support learning during school closures through TV, radio or newspapers, and through making available downloadable curricula.<sup>10</sup> In some instances, schools also have offered learning content via mobile phones. However, apart from the multiple challenges to access learning content via TV, radio, mobile phones or the internet, almost all could also not afford to buy newspapers or pamphlets with exercises. Young people complained about not finding the time for remote learning either, as they had to help their caregivers with household chores or engaged in income generating activities. A female participant, for instance, spoke of how difficult it was to concentrate on studies when tired from working in the garden or while doing other household chores. With girls less likely to own phones, and more confined to their homes, they were particularly disadvantaged in accessing distance learning materials (Burzynska/Contreras 2020). A few of our participants were attempting to continue studying by revising their school books, but were frustrated by having no access to teachers or relatives able to help. For most of our school-going participants, school closures have had heavy costs on their education and created anxiety for their future life paths.

## CONCLUSION: IMMEDIATE AND FUTURE CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION ACROSS SSA

At the time we wrote this paper the effects of the pandemic continued to unfold in SSA. New virus variants emerged, restrictions were re-imposed in some African

countries, including a renewed closure of schools in three SSA states (Mozambique, Uganda, Zimbabwe), and Nigeria and South Africa had just reported a sharp increase in COVID-19 related deaths (BBC News 2021a). The longer term costs of COVID-19 in education in Africa remain to be seen, but the evidence discussed in this paper shows how already the effects for young people in SSA have been devastating. The implications are many. In the short term during periods of lockdown, new strategies and creative interventions are urgently needed to help children and youth to catch up with their lost learning. This includes to:

- **Support distance learning during periods of full/partial school closures** through partnerships with local agencies and community-based organizations to facilitate radio, TV or internet based learning spaces. This further extends to explore the feasibility and safety on in-person gatherings, including engaging teachers to support locally organized, small learning groups of children; and the potential for outdoors teaching/learning.
- **Increase and create COVID-19 relief funds** aiming at universal (not just piecemeal) cash transfer programmes targeting the most vulnerable households in rural, peri-urban and urban areas (and not just the capitals, as it is the case in Uganda).
- **Waiving of school fees and supporting vulnerable families** with the many hidden costs of education (school books, uniform, lunch) – especially in instances where fees had been paid prior to closure of schools – could potentially mitigate school drop-out rates. Additional help is especially needed for those who are most vulnerable to education exclusion, including the poorest girls and boys, young people with disabilities, or girls who have given birth or got pregnant.
- **Ensure safe return to schools and/or continuation of schooling.** Schools as crucial spaces need enough resources and infrastructure to bring children and their teachers safely back to school.
- **Provide support for teachers** who are managing the stress of coping with lost learning, and are sometimes the first point of contact for children disclosing abuse or mental health issues arising from lockdowns.

In the long term, there are still many structural barriers that hinder SSA children and youth in their educational paths. The COVID-19 crisis has brought into sharp view existing inequities, challenges and shortcomings in global and national education sector governance and implementation that have amplified during the pandemic.

Global Education Policies (such as Education for All Agenda or SDG 4), have not substantially reduced the number of out of school children in SSA over the past decades and hardly any progress has been made to improve the quality of education. Parents and caregivers continue, more than ever, to struggle with the many (hidden) costs for supposedly free schooling. All of this is joined by poor working conditions and payment for teachers, and a general lack of regulation of the private education sector, among others. These challenges are not new, but they have rapidly intensified since the pandemic. COVID-19 is a wake-up call for new policies and practices in education sector governance across SSA. Against this backdrop longer term policy recommendations that emerged in the scope of this paper include:

- **Develop strategies to ensure truly free education for all.** Governments, donors and development actors need to strategize on how to waive school fees/levies entirely, and invest in programmes that provide free school meals, and additional subsidies for those who are at a high risk of being unable to continue their studies due to the combined effects of schooling costs and economic insecurity caused by COVID-19.
- **Invest in quality education** to support and improve teacher training, salaries, better learning and working conditions and conducive school environments.
- **Introduce policy measures to regulate the private education sector.** The role of the private sector in education provision in SSA may be a contested one, but can no longer be ignored. The pandemic, more than ever, has shown the importance to rethink how education is governed, regulated, funded and made accessible while retaining quality standards and ensuring fair and stable working conditions for staff. Governments, together with donors and development actors have to ensure accountability and good governance of the private sector, and strategize how LFPS can support and complement but not replace state/government schools.
- **Rethink full or partial school closures during new COVID-19 waves.** The closure of schools caused tremendous harm for children and youth's educational trajectories and overall wellbeing. Investments and strategies to ensure safe and continuous access to education under strict hygienic measures, or in a staggered manner, are urgently needed to learn from the current crisis and avoid prolonged closure of schools during future crisis (such as the Ebola epidemic or other pandemics) similar to COVID-19.

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- 1 SDG4 aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4> (03.11.2021)
- 2 See <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/covid-19-could-push-30-million-children-in-poverty>, (03.11.2021)
- 3 See <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker> (03.11.2021)
- 4 On 29 August 2021 SSA reported 194,823 official COVID-19 deaths, out of more than 4.5 million global deaths. See <https://africacdc.org/covid-19/> (03.11.2021)
- 5 See <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#durationschoolclosures> (03.11.2021)
- 6 Over 60 % of SSA states are LICs, and 30 % are LMICs (Lewin 2020a)
- 7 This figure excludes funding from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), which is an increasing part of aid to basic education, overwhelmingly targeting sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2018). It is currently estimated that GPE accounts for about 7 % of total aid for basic education in LLMICs. From 2016-2018 GPE spent just under 1 billion US \$ in Africa (Akmal et al. 2021).
- 8 See for instance various blog posts by UNICEF (<https://www.unicef.org/uganda/press-releases/education-now-time-build-back-better>), the World Bank (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/opportunity-build-back-better-covid-19-fostering-gender-parity-education-and-skills>) or UNESCO (<https://en.unesco.org/news/build-back-better-education-must-change-after-covid-19-meet-climate-crisis>) (03.11.2021)
- 9 Senior refers to the specific grade in the secondary school system of Uganda. A secondary school is equivalent to a high school, and follows after six years of primary school.
- 10 See <http://www.education.go.ug/covid-19-sector-response/> (03.11.2021)

## Annex

**Table B: School closures in sub-Saharan Africa because of COVID-19**

Country	Total duration of full and partial school closure in weeks btw 17 February 2020-31 July 2021 <i>+ schools are currently fully or partially closed due to COVID-19</i>
Uganda	72+
South Sudan	54
Ghana	
Eritrea	50
Eswatini	49
South Africa	48+
Rwanda	47
Angola	46
Mozambique	45+
Lesotho	43
Republic of the Congo	39
Kenya	37
Liberia	37
Zimbabwe	36+
Comoros	35
Seychelles	35
Equatorial Guinea	34
DRC	33
Madagascar	32
Ethiopia	31
Chad	28
Gambia	28
Malawi	26
Namibia	25
Nigeria	24
Central African Republic	23
Guinea-Bissau	23
Mauritania	23
Guinea	22
Senegal	22
Sudan	22
Zambia	22+
Gabon	21
Botswana	20
Cabo Verde	20
Sao Tome and Principe	19
Somalia	19
Mauritius	19
Cameroon	18
Mali	17
Niger	16
Benin	15
Tanzania	15
Burkina Faso	14
Sierra Leone	14
Togo	14
Cote d'Ivoire	13
Djibouti	7
Burundi	0

Source: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse#duration schoolclosures> (as on August 31, 2021).

