

Meeting Communiqué

Forum on Continuous Learning and Safe Reopening of Schools in Africa

The Specialised Technical Committee on Education Science and Technology (STC-EST 3) in their Extraordinary Session held on 30 April 2020 charged the African Union Commission (AUC) to foster knowledge and experience sharing among Member States in order to strengthen the Education Sector response to COVID-19. In implementing this decision, the AUC in collaboration with UNICEF organised a Virtual Forum on Continuous Learning and Safe Reopening of Schools on 10th September 2020, to foster learning and experience sharing among education experts and advisors in Ministries of Education.

The Experts from Ministries of Education of AU Member States and Partner Organisations acknowledged and recommended the following in relation to the Education Sector response to COVID-19 in Africa.

I. Consequences of School Closures and Challenges in Continuous Learning and Safe Reopening of Schools:

The following key issues were raised as negative consequences of school closures

1. Reduced access to school-based services including health, nutrition, information and social services.
2. Increased exposure to domestic violence and increase in child marriage and early pregnancies.
3. Interruption in learning, leading to learning loss and its long-term effects.
4. Risk of disengagement with the school system and increase in school drop-outs.
5. Increased inequities against the marginalized who have limited or no access to initiatives for the continuity of learning.

The following emerged as common challenges in ensuring continuous learning and safe reopening of schools

6. Limited budgetary allocations to cover the implementation of changes in operations when schools are reopened.

7. Inadequate multi-sectoral approaches to the Education Sector Response to COVID-19.
8. Difficulties in monitoring COVID-19 transmission when schools reopen in countries and communities with poor surveillance and reporting mechanisms.
9. Low level of internet connectivity, software, hardware and technical capacity to support learning through alternative modes while schools are closed.
10. Quality of learning using alternative modes may not be the same as in-person learning.

II. Recommendations for Continuous Learning during School Closures

The following measures were proposed for ensuring continuity of learning during school closures

11. The innovations that are being implemented to support education during COVID-19 should be documented and considered for their potential to support the education system in the longterm.
12. Public-Private Partnerships to facilitate the provision of remote learning and reduction of cost to students and teachers as relates to requisite connectivity, software and hardware.
13. Build capacities of teachers to provide needed facilitation support in the implementation of remote learning.
14. Adopt context specific mediums and approaches in the provision of remote learning for various communities.

III. Recommendations for Safe Reopening of Schools

The following measures were proposed for ensuring safe reopening of Schools in Africa

15. Policy adjustments to support guidelines, including clear policies for school opening and closure during public health emergencies, reforms needed to expand equitable access for marginalised and out of school children.
16. Prioritise budgetary allocations to address the impact of COVID-19 on education and invest in strengthening education systems for recovery and resilience.
17. Effective coordination and enforcement of operational measures towards reducing transmission of COVID-19, safeguard essential services and supplies and promote healthy behaviour.

18. Focus on practices that compensate for lost instructional time, strengthen pedagogy and build on hybrid learning models such as integrating approaches in remote and distance education.
19. Expand focus on students' well-being and reinforce the protection of children through enhanced referral mechanisms and the provision of essential school-based services including healthcare and school feeding.
20. Adapt school opening policies and practices to expand access to marginalised groups such as previously out-of-school children, displaced and migrant children and minorities.

Furthermore, the meeting commended the efforts of the African Union Commission in facilitating experience sharing among the Member States as an important resource for strengthening the Education Sector response to COVID-19 in Africa.

10th September 2020