



WATHI5

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THE LESSONS OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA

DECEMBER 2022

WATHI5 is the summarized version of Matakai, which presents WATHI's proposed courses of action on a thematic issue. The Matakai (in French only) and the WATHI5 can be downloaded at wathi.org.

 **OSIWA**
Open Society Initiative for West Africa

WATHI Think Tank

WATHI, a West African citizens' think tank, is a participatory and multidisciplinary think tank that aims to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and the production of ideas on political, economic, social and cultural issues crucial to the present and future of West African communities.

WATHI's geographical scope encompasses the 15 countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as Cameroon, Chad and Mauritania; West African countries that bridge the gap with neighboring African regions. The name WATHI is inspired by the Bamanakan word "waati," meaning "time" in this local Malian language. The choice of this word reflects both the pressing call for collective mobilization as well as the requisite need for long term commitment.

The WATHI association is supported in its activities by its members and by partners, including in 2019-2022: the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Open Society for West Africa (OSIWA) and the Spanish Agency for Cooperation and Development (AECID).

Mataki Publications

The word Mataki translates to "measures," in the actionable sense of "taking measures or making provisions" in the Hausa language, among the most widely spoken indigenous languages in WATHI's home region. Mataki is an extension of the debate column featured on

WATHI's website. Mataki is not intended to be an exhaustive collection of discussion topics or an all-encompassing exploration of the diverse and extensive opinions in the region. Rather, the insights and policy recommendations contained in this newsletter are intended to stimulate debate by drawing attention to novel possibilities and concrete ways to implement them. Criticisms, reactions and recommendations aimed at sharpening the proposals and their practical implementation are highly welcome.

"Covid-19 Lessons for West Africa": A Special Series

This WATHI5 and the long Mataki version are the third in a special series on the economic, political, educational, and regional integration lessons of the Covid-19 crisis, part of a project funded by the OSIWA Foundation, member of the Open Society Foundations global network.

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Photo credit : AMISOM/ Iwaria

Since March 2020, following the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 200 countries around the world have had to close their schools for a period of time, interrupting the schooling of more than one and a half billion young learners.

Barrier measures were difficult to implement and enforce in schools. This decision went hand in hand with pandemic prevention measures taken by some governments such as lockdowns and travel restrictions.

The pandemic has thus worsened the situation of education worldwide. The countries most affected are those with the weakest education systems, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa.

In Africa, more than anywhere else, progress in expanding and improving the quality of basic education may be set back by the closure of schools. This is particularly true in many Sahelian countries where large numbers of schools have already been closed for several months due to insecurity.

With the huge impact of this unprecedented crisis, some deep reflections about our education systems are needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We have identified five main courses of action based on the findings and recommendations selected from the wathinotes and webinars.

The principal finding is that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the unpreparedness and fragility of the region's education systems when faced with crises. This led to a long closure of several institutions and universities. Although alternatives were put in place, the response was not immediate nor systematic, and some were of limited effectiveness.

The second key feature of the health crisis is its ability provide opportunities for transition to more efficient, equitable and resilient systems.

As such, the five action items proposed in this document are organized first according to the most immediate reactions to the crisis in the education sector.

They then focus on medium and long-term measures aimed at strengthening education systems and therefore preparing them for future crises of varying nature.

1. Diversifying learning alternatives to ensure educational continuity for all during times of crisis

- a) Prioritize diverse platforms and approaches (internet, apps, TV, radio, print), both with and without technology or with a combination of the two. It is vital for flexibility in this approach depending on local particularities in order to ensure accessibility to quality education for all students. This would entail a novel focus on media such as radio or television that can reach a wider target audience and does not require connectivity.
- b) Establish a periodic monitoring system to limit the risk of dropout at the primary and secondary school levels, in conjunction with local and educational authorities.
- c) Develop and strengthen basic infrastructure that is necessary for digital learning, such as access to the Internet. This will allow for information and communication technologies to be leveraged in any crisis response, thus focusing on long term adaptation. (Senegal's Virtual University, with its preexisting network of digital training space, which spread throughout the country during the pandemic is a great example).
- d) Promote collaboration between traditional and virtual universities. Sharing

resources and making vital digital infrastructure available to traditional universities through a symbiotic relationship will allow universities to move towards a hybrid approach that combines face-to-face and distance learning.

e) Capitalize on successful responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from regional and international examples, such as China, Burundi, and Cambodia. These countries and other have developed alternatives to in-person education that helped them in establishing continuity throughout the pandemic.

2. Ensuring the successful return and retention of vulnerable groups of students, especially girls and young women and girls:

a) Prioritize girls' return to school by raising awareness in local communities and developing advocacy campaigns for stakeholders in the education system and as well as for parents.

b) Implement targeted programs that fill the education gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. This entails identifying those most negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, then establishing where necessary remedial education programs. Identification of such students and implementation of programs should be completed in collaboration with academic administration, teachers, and parents.

c) Establish financial support programs for the most disadvantaged parents, within the given resource constraints. The support programs should be aimed at enabling families to compensate for the provisions provided by their children and support their return to school. This initiative can be carried out by local authorities.

3. Rethinking curricula to ensure quality education during and after crisis situations

a) Implement a controlled and gradual in-depth revision of curricula. Primary to secondary education should be prioritized, with a focus on knowledge that corresponds to the most fundamental requirements for the integration of children into their local economic, social and cultural environment. Priority should be given to the following domains :

- Pedagogical methods that are attractive to and engaging for children
- Health education
- Citizenship education
- Availability of education in local languages

b) Prioritize teachers' education, as well as a well-structured support and supervision system of educators by:

- Revising teachers' educational curricula to include a wide diversity of pedagogical approaches that can be adapted to various contexts and flexible situation (focus on face-to-face and distance learning).
- Revaluing the professional status of teachers. This approach should elevate the educational career path to a higher standard by augmenting salaries across the board and rewarding both seniority as well as performance. Promotions and bonuses ought to value both long tenure as well as a given teacher's students' performance and student evaluations of said teacher.

c) Promote the development of students' natural skills, talents and aptitudes by:

- Placing more emphasis on technical and vocational training, thereby diversifying skill sets,
- Combining theoretical and vocational education beginning in secondary school. In the traditional framework, this means encouraging internships and immersion in local enterprises.
- Matching classes offered by educational institutions with the demand of local industries.

4. Building education systems that are more resilient to future crises (health, climate, political, and security)

a) Scale up government funding for education to internationally recommended levels of 15- 20% of public expenditure and 4-6% of gross domestic product.

b) Strengthen the capacities of educational policy makers and officials at all levels in order to facilitate meaningful education sector development.

c) Revitalize research into the field of educational sciences.

d) Strengthen links between decision-makers, education system stakeholders, and the private sector by:

- Creating a framework for permanent dialogue and debate on education sector policies. The framework should include government authorities, teachers' unions, administration officials, independent experts on education, public finance experts, and representatives of civil society. One major focus should

be the prevention of recurrent strikes that have catastrophic consequences on the education system.

- Involving the domestic private sector in initiatives relevant to their specialties.

5. Leveraging the COVID-19 crisis as a catalyst to pursue profound reforms that lead to efficient and sovereign education systems

Enshrine national education programmes as long-term strategies for economic, social, and cultural transformation. This requires individual countries to sovereignly determine the orientation of their education sector, based on their desired citizen model, with a coherent implementation strategy that covers long periods of time to produce lasting results. This could be accomplished by:

- Establishing in every country a Higher Authority for Education, enshrined in the Constitution, independent of the executive branch, and responsible for the following:
 - Defining central guidelines and key objectives for the country's education sector.
 - Coherence and consistency between choices made at each level of education, from preschool to higher education.
 - Reforms and corrective measures to relevant ministries.
 - Promoting and leading public citizens' debates on the education system.
- Verifying the compatibility and consistency of reforms proposed by international partners with domestic objectives and national strategy. This should be done before the start of implementation, and regardless of whether the reforms are conditionalities to external financing.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented in this document are based on the findings shared by education and training stakeholders in the region.

While not exhaustive, they aim to provide solutions to the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, to sustainably and systematically strengthen West Africa's education sector for the long term.

The crisis, while cataclysmically consequential for the progress of education

worldwide, also offers an invaluable opportunity to fundamentally redefine the infrastructure of and approach to the education sector. West Africa has the chance to emerge from the crisis with educational systems more effective, resilient and inclusive, with the aim of having a well-trained human capital equipped to meet the current and future challenges.



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