

LEARNING BRIEF

Findings and messaging from a research study on the impact of COVID-19 in the SADC Region

Impact of COVID-19 on adolescents' access to education

<p>Date: June 2021</p> <p>Author Yvonne Gamuchirai Tagwireyi</p> <p>Contact bashni@miet.co.za</p> <p>Key words comprehensive sexuality education (CSE); digital divide; early pregnancies; education; education financing; Life Skills Education (LSE); ESA Commitment* on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRH[R]); school re-entry policies</p> <p>References See list at the end of the document</p>	<p>Key findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school closures resulting from COVID-19 lockdowns have impacted 127 million learners in East and Southern Africa. One million girls in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of not returning to school because of early pregnancies. Projected school dropouts could wipe out gains made in reducing out-of-school youth by 25% since 2012. • The weeks of school closures in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region mean learning will decline and dropouts will increase, especially among the most disadvantaged. • For the most vulnerable young people—including those with disabilities and those living in poor or marginalized communities—education is lifesaving. Beyond the classroom, schools are spaces of support, providing young people with nutritious meals, immunization, and psychosocial support (PSS) and SRHR services for their wellbeing and development. • COVID-19 has brought challenges for young people leading to an increase in early pregnancies by as much as 65% in SADC Member States. • Bridging the digital divide is crucial for the region's development. The limited access to mobile phones and internet connectivity is widening the education gap, particularly for girls living in rural and remote areas. Governments should improve e-governance by investing in modern information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and supporting the education sector in using a blended approach to teaching and learning to suit learner needs. • As the COVID-19 curve of infection flattens, Member States are urgently called upon to safely open schools, focusing on equity-based access to education to ensure SADC truly “builds back better” and leaves no young person behind. 	<p>MIET AFRICA's learning briefs are developed to share new ideas, best practices and learnings arising from our specific experience in implementing a project or through some other activity, so as to grow knowledge and share learning, with the ultimate aim of <i>improving the lives of children and youth.</i></p>
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Background

Education is society's greatest equalizer and a significant determinant of sustainable economic growth. Halting education exacerbates socioeconomic and gender inequalities within and between countries and negatively impacts future generations. It is estimated that about 90% of the world's learners, which equates to approximately 1.5 billion young people in 188 countries, were unable to continue with their education due to the global lockdowns and imposed restrictions.

As part of stringent measures to protect young people from contracting and spreading the virus, all SADC Member States instituted partial or full school and tertiary institution closures. During the 2020 academic year, schools were closed for more than 100 days on average, an estimated full semester's worth of education lost for children in the region. The school closures impacted 127 million learners in East and Southern Africa.¹ The school closures meant physical learning and teaching was not possible. Even in instances where the disruptions were short-term in some Member States, learning gaps will still have severe, lifelong consequences for young people. School interruptions, even for

* Ministerial Commitment on CSE and SRH services for adolescents and young people in East and Southern Africa (ESA)

weeks, can have a significant impact on learning outcomes such as test scores, test-score adjusted years of schooling, transition and dropout rates and future income-earning potential.

The COVID-19 school closures have led to increased dropout rates due to early and unintended pregnancies, compromised nutrition, lack of access to adequate health services (including for SRH), and have deprived young people of opportunities to access mental health and PSS services.² Even more worrying is that many learners will become permanent dropouts, adding to the 100 million young people who were out of school before the pandemic.³ There is a growing concern that if learners are not properly supported, many may never return to school. This would further worsen pre-existing disparities, thereby reversing progress made on the achievement of education outcomes, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education).

Approaches to continuing education during the school closures

As a first step towards mitigating the negative effects of the COVID-19 school closures on learning, SADC Member States chose diverse policy responses to provide remote teaching and learning. Online learning platforms were the most commonly used channel to support teachers, learners and their families. In the study, 82% of youth and 76% of adult respondents confirmed that government and civil society organizations provided learners with computers or tablets, as well as internet access, or organized remote teaching through television, phones, radio, instructional packages and resources (textbooks, notes, worksheets and printouts). Although online platforms were commonly used for teaching and learning, governments used more traditional distance learning modalities in areas with limited connectivity, often including a mix of television and radio programming and the distribution of print materials.

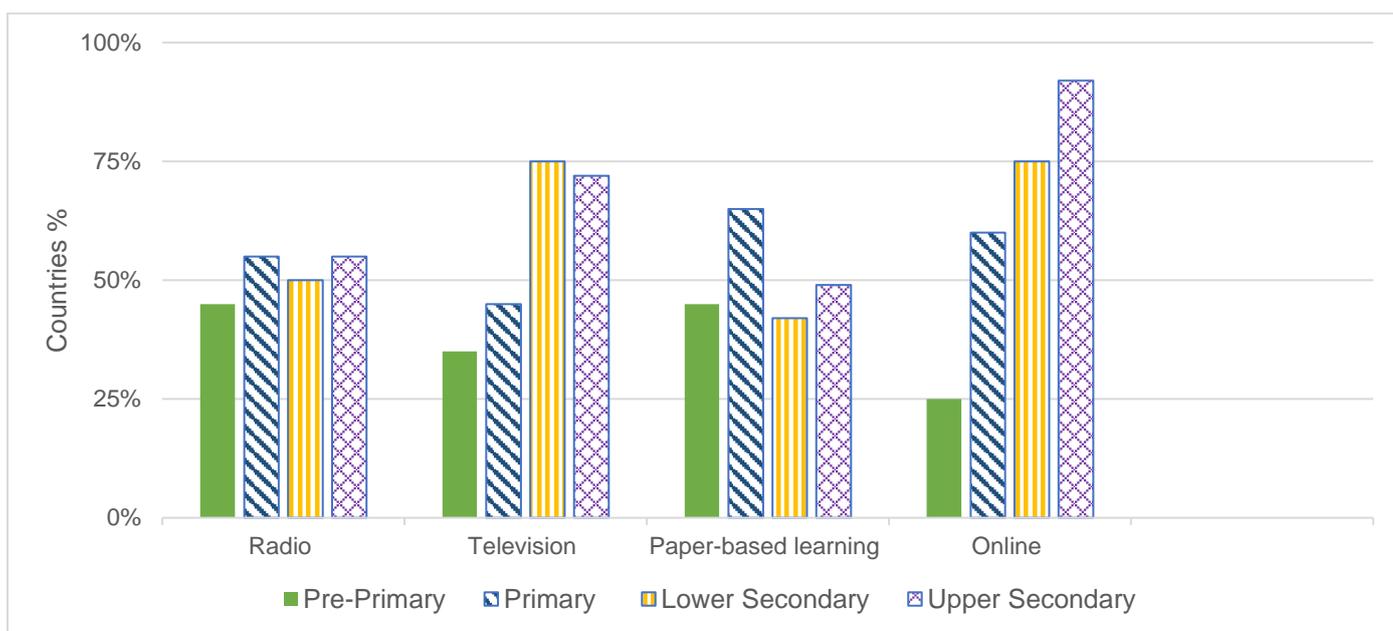


FIGURE 1: MEMBER STATES' CHOICE OF DISTANCE LEARNING PER EDUCATION LEVEL (AS A PERCENTAGE)

Various distance-learning platforms were preferred over others for the different education levels. For early childhood development, Lesotho, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe put “virtual kindergartens” in place for children aged 3–6, often provided by private pre-primary institutions. Radio and TV learning programmes were preferred options for lower school grades (pre-primary and primary) and for learners living in remote areas who could not afford online lessons. In their opinion, these learning modalities offered greater national learner coverage. However, these still had limitations as they were either not regularly scheduled or, in the case of Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe, many learners did not have access to radio and TV. Online classes were commonly used for the lower and upper secondary classes. For higher learning institutions, online and paper-based learning were most commonly used in the region.

Language is an essential component of educational instruction: it provides not only improved educational outcomes, but also the wellbeing, sense of belonging and self-worth. Eight out of the sixteen SADC Member States implemented initiatives aimed at providing online multi-lingual learning resources to reach the learners who may face language barriers in education. But learners from indigenous communities in Mauritius, Zambia and Zimbabwe had to access

content that they could not understand. In these contexts, learners have limited options for education both online and at home, with only a few having access to computers, a stable internet connection, the means to pay for educational language tools, and other resources for them to learn in a language they understand.

Clicking but not learning—challenges experienced by learners

Most of the adult (67%) and youth (82%) respondents believed that it was very likely that remote learning was of a lower quality than face-to-face instruction, confirming the global concern that remote learning could further widen the gap between those who have resources, skills, abilities and adequate support to devote to distance education, and those who do not. Learners reported learning significantly less since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Learners in Lesotho, Malawi and Zimbabwe reported the following common challenges to class attendance: high data prices; poor to no internet connectivity; lack of caregiver support with homework; limited communication with teachers on difficult concepts; keeping up with the revised remote learning timetables. The youth respondents' self-reporting confirmed that learners from countries with long-duration school closures and that also have low rates of internet connectivity, are most at risk of missing out on learning opportunities that use internet-based technologies, putting them at severe risk of falling behind with their education.⁴ Competing home priorities (particularly increased household chores and support to younger siblings), limited home supervision, personal challenges with self-directed learning, and grasping and retaining previously learnt topics in various subjects, were reasons given for not attending remote classes.

Before COVID-19, the traditional face-to-face pedagogical approach enabled teachers to provide feedback, engage in asynchronous instruction, monitor learners' progress, and gauge their level of understanding. Where needed, teachers could provide support through remedial classes, or provide more hands-on support to learners. Teachers reported significant difficulties in reaching all learners at any given teaching period, as well as the challenges in addressing learners concerns after submission of assignments and workbooks. Most adult respondents (72%) reported that maintaining positive discipline and holding learners accountable for missed homework or incomplete schoolwork proved difficult. Delivery of teaching within the context of remote learning of technical subjects such as Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Biology was reported by teachers as challenging.

FEMALE YOUTH FACILITATOR (23 YEARS, MALAWI)

"The study at home has not been working for most learners. In most communities in Malawi internet connectivity is slow. The mobile data prices are expensive. Parents are just not able to afford the data bundles and internet at home."

Despite significant internet coverage growth in Africa, Southern Africa still faces challenges in ICT coverage, with an estimated of only 4% of SADC residents being internet users.⁵ But while internet use spreads, digital divides persist both in access to and use of technologies, and this has important implications for the use of digital technology in education.

The digital divide challenges were confirmed by youth respondents in Lesotho (65%), Malawi (61%) and Zimbabwe (73%). Learners in Zimbabwe reported that to be able to effectively participate in a full day online class timetable, they required 1.2 gigabytes of data, costing approximately US\$13. The situation was the same in Malawi, where learners reported exorbitant prices and weak connectivity, with failures to log into Zoom and Skype lessons. For many learners in the SADC Region living on less than US\$1.91 per day, the costs are far too high to secure continued learning during COVID-19. With the increased demand in ICT and internet, the estimates are that two out of five learners will miss out on remote learning due to lack of devices and access to internet. The gender digital divide is even more pronounced. Girls and young women are 50% less likely to use the internet than men are.⁶ In low and middle-income countries, boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a mobile phone than girls are, and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access the internet.⁷ Even when smartphones and internet are accessible, the cost associated with using internet data is prohibitively high for many girls.

Missing more than a classroom—limited access to schools as protective environments

The region-wide school closures have affected learners in ways beyond the absence or remoteness of learning. Before the pandemic school closures, schools provided frontline support to learners, providing them with important PSS, nutrition and protection. For adolescents and youth, connecting is key to their sense of belonging and overall wellbeing. Long-term confinement and isolation from educational spaces will erode the social support networks young people build with each other. Beyond accessing education, learners are missing out on the social interaction they had with their fellow

learners and teachers, which are essential to their wellbeing, protection, development and social-emotional skills. Such social support also enables them to be change agents and empowers them to make healthy decisions. Furthermore, they miss out on the opportunity to learn essential life skills, such as how to manage emotions, cope with stress, build healthy relationships and resolve conflict without violence. While young people are generally very connected digitally, many others still do not have regular and affordable internet access and may fall behind on social interactions as learning and participation shifts to online platforms.

In addition to providing a structure for social interactions and support, many young people in the SADC region who depended on school-based feeding and nutrition programmes are missing out on a daily meal or more, necessary for good nutrition. School closures have disrupted the normal distribution channels through which school meal programmes operate, leaving vulnerable young people without a vital source of food. In Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia Zimbabwe, this nutrition loss impacted more than 50% of younger learners, with Eswatini and South Africa recording the highest percentage of young people going without a school meal during lockdowns. For many HIV&AIDS-positive learners on anti-retroviral treatment, these meals were important to support them with treatment adherence.

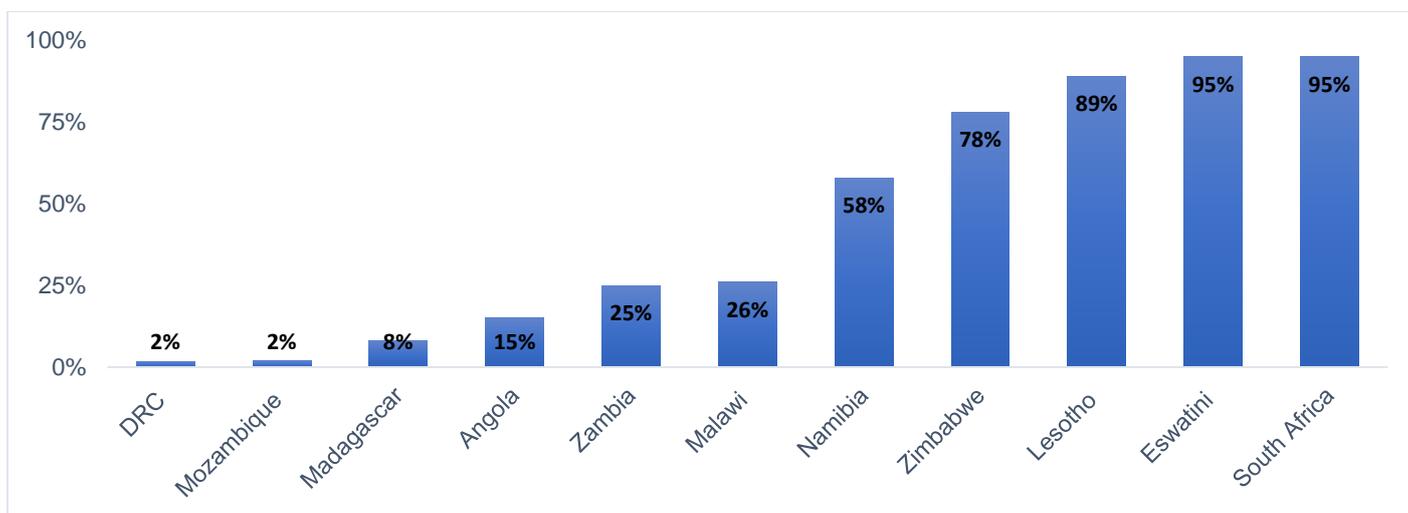


FIGURE 2: LEARNERS MISSING OUT ON SCHOOL MEALS—% OF POPULATION AGED 5–17

School closures have also removed a protective environment, resulting in increased sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children and young people. The majority of youth respondents (78% female and 63% male) indicated that school closures had increased the vulnerability of girls and young women to child marriage and early pregnancy, and they also noted that gender-based violence was on the increase. While school absenteeism of girls is 33% higher than before COVID-19, boys are also dropping out (for example, in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe) as they attempt to support themselves or their families by activities such as gold panning, livestock herding or trade.

The school disruptions have also caused health concerns, particularly the limited access to SRH and PSS services, since education institutions also serve as platforms for prevention, diagnosis and counselling. Learners access important CSE and SRHR information and services within or through the school setting. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, twelve Member States were providing some form of LSE and CSE within schools, as well as linkages to youth-friendly SRHR services in health facilities. Such support services are critical for young people in the SADC Region because of the high prevalence of HIV infection—with 600 adolescent girls being newly infected every day in sub-Saharan Africa. Most learner respondents (78%) reported that before the lockdowns, schools provided them with CSE. But as schools transitioned to remote learning during lockdown, most education facilities in Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe did not offer CSE, LSE and Physical Education, leaving young people with no access to critical SRHR information, services and linkages to health facilities. Adolescents and young people reported that in the absence of scheduled CSE sessions, they were depending on their peers, the internet and healthcare facilities for SRHR information and services. But they noted challenges in accessing SRHR support and services directly from healthcare facilities, including the fear of catching the COVID-19 virus in clinics; receiving poor and/or judgemental treatment from untrained healthcare providers who were not linked to learning institutions; prohibitive costs.

Digital sexuality education should be made more accessible and effective since it can reach many young people at the same time across large geographical areas. It can also support marginalized, left-behind populations of young people, such as out-of-school pregnant youth and those with disabilities, who may otherwise be excluded from mainstream CSE and SRHR programmes. While not a silver bullet on its own, digital CSE complements face-to-face CSE and, during the COVID-19 pandemic period, is an especially important supplement in the absence of, or with significantly reduced access to, face-to-face CSE in and outside school settings. However to maximize effectiveness, digital platforms and tools and other out-of-school CSE resources must be a part of broader efforts to promote SRHR, including the provision of SRH services and commodities. Teachers in SADC Member States should also advocate with school administrators on the added benefits of continuing CSE delivery throughout the pandemic as part of the essential learning package, through both formal and non-formal education.

The online environment is, however, not free of challenges in providing adolescents and young people with correct SRHR information, and in protecting them. Due to information overload from various organizations and interest groups with different priorities and areas of focus, adolescents who rely solely on digital CSE may be at risk of receiving uninformed advice or “false facts”, or of using unproven approaches to make decisions about their sexual choices and behaviour. Furthermore, increased unsupervised online activity puts young people, particularly girls, at heightened risk of online violence and abuse.

A looming threat to education—the rise in early pregnancies in the SADC Region

The Global Partnership for Education reports that the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening girls' education as never before.⁸ School closures and limited access to SRH services increase vulnerability to child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence, all of which decrease the likelihood of girls continuing their education. Before the COVID-19 crisis, girls and young women already faced considerable challenges in accessing essential SRH information and services. But the estimates now project that one million girls in Southern Africa will not return to school after the pandemic due to early pregnancies and child marriages. Early pregnancies recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic are usually unintended and largely linked to poverty, sexual violence, limited school-based CSE and PSS services, and restricted access to SRHR services (including access to condoms and other contraceptives). The risks of complications related to pregnancies and childbirth, coupled with repressive return-to-school laws for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers in some Member States, will have devastating consequences for those affected. Prior to lockdown, schools in the SADC Region were able to track school absenteeism consistently and to report girls who were absent or at risk of abuse or early pregnancy to police, education boards or community-based protection mechanisms, which was not possible during the school closures.

As schools reopen in phases in most SADC Member States, the impact of the lockdown and school closures on adolescent girls is becoming clear. Early and unintended pregnancy leads to an enormous loss in educational opportunities. Reports from interviewed peer educators, youth facilitators and Ministry of Education officials as many as half of the girls in exam classes were pregnant, married or not returning to school for other reasons, such as work, or loss of confidence in the school system due to the length of time classes were missed. One out of five youth respondents were aware of at least one pregnant girl (under 18) or a young mother (under 24) who had given birth during the past six months. Three out of five youth respondents knew of a peer, relative, neighbour or acquaintance who was married off before the age of 18 in the past three months, or who had moved to another village, town or country (mostly to South Africa) due to child marriage. The study found that young people needed critical SRHR support and services, and in their opinion, the unmet SRHR needs in the school environment or health facilities were key drivers of increased cases of early and unintended pregnancies. Poverty is also a major contributor to increased pregnancies.

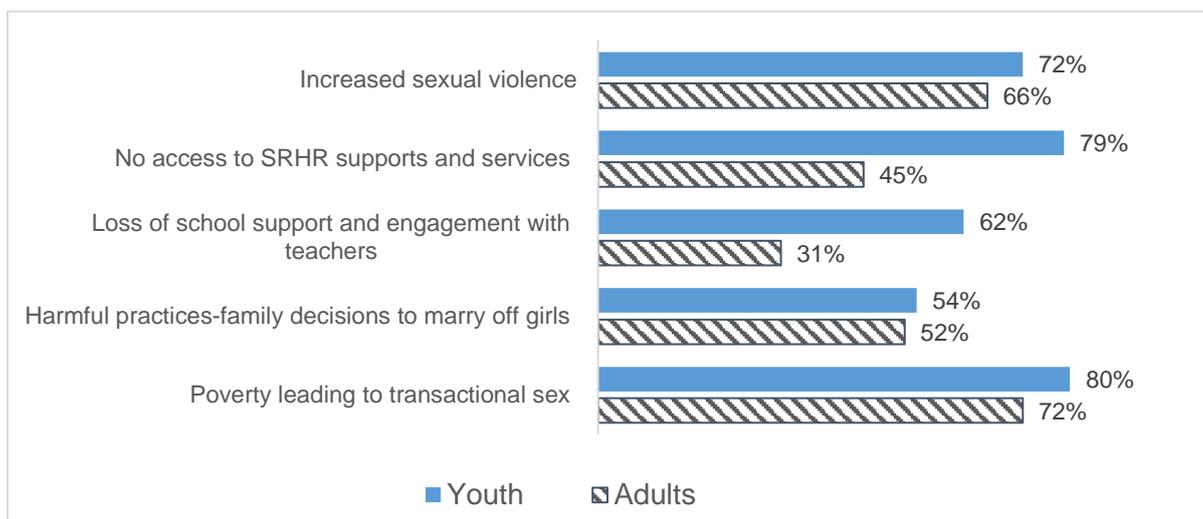


FIGURE 3: YOUTH AND ADULT RESPONSES ABOUT THE DRIVERS OF EARLY PREGNANCIES AND CHILD MARRIAGES DURING COVID-19

Because of the high early pregnancy rates, the SADC Region is increasingly confronted by how to address and facilitate the continued learning of pregnant learners and young mothers in school. Education has proven to be one of the most cost-effective strategies to promote development and economic growth, and governments and other stakeholders are tasked with supporting the safe return of girls to school. A loss in education is catastrophic to young mothers, their children and their communities.

Back-to-school policies in support of pregnant girls and young mothers range widely across the region, from outright expulsion of pregnant girls to strategies that support the continued education of adolescent mothers. Re-entry policies are in place in Botswana, Eswatini, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia, with Zimbabwe and Tanzania recently providing re-entry legislative policies. Despite these progressive legislative and policy school re-entry amendments, additional supportive strategies in communities and schools are required to guarantee girls' rights to stay in school during pregnancy and to return after they give birth. In response to these recommendations, 57% of young respondents felt that addressing social norms, learner and teacher discrimination and communities' perceptions about early pregnancy and promiscuity, was important to create an enabling environment for the continued education of pregnant girls and the re-entry of young mothers into schools. Youth respondents also recommended that young mothers be supported at home with their babies as they pursued their studies.

To adolescents and young women, the benefits of a full secondary education, of social and economic empowerment and of the full enjoyment of their human rights—are priceless. The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals hangs in the balance unless the scale and quality of investments in adolescent girls' and young women's education, access to SRHR information and services and achievement of gender equality are radically intensified.

Increasing accountability towards education outcomes in the region

Before the pandemic, the region already faced formidable challenges in fulfilling the promise of education as a child's basic right. Despite the near universal enrolment at early grades in most Member States, an extraordinary number of children were out of school. From a financing point of view, the challenge was already daunting before COVID-19. The early 2020 estimate of the financing gap to reach Sustainable Development Goal 4—quality education—in low and lower-middle-income countries was a staggering US\$148 billion annually. It is estimated that the COVID-19 crisis will increase this gap by up to one-third.⁹ While many African governments allocate a substantial share of available resources to education, the amount spent relative to the size of the learner population remains low. The average amount spent per learner in Africa is only US\$533 for primary and US\$925 for secondary school. With an already precarious education financing trajectory, COVID-19 has exacerbated education financing and equity in spending for the most vulnerable youth. Southern African countries can close significant gaps in education and training if they prioritize universal foundational skills, by improving the literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional skills, and life skills of children and youths.

Recommendations for action

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the importance of equitable access to education for adolescents and young people in Southern Africa. Preventing the COVID-19 learning crisis from becoming a long-term impact on human development needs to be a priority for duty bearers and the education community. Central to *building back better*, Member States are encouraged to pursue the following recommendations and actions.

SADC Member States are called upon to:

- Ensure continued learning during school closures including CSE
Governments should reduce the impact of school closures and education disruption by urgently rolling out youth-friendly, age-appropriate distance education methods such as television, radio, or online learning, as well as printed learning materials where there is no connectivity. The distance education approaches should include LSE and CSE as a priority.
- Plan for urgent, inclusive and safe re-opening of schools
As the curve of infections flattens, governments need to prioritize the safe and swift return to school to minimize further disruption to young people's lives. Member States should follow the UN Framework for Re-Opening of Schools.
- Re-affirm the ESA Commitment SRHR strategy as part of efforts to achieve universal access to CSE for adolescents and young people
- Remove barriers to internet connectivity in Africa through improvement of ICT infrastructure and subsidized or zero-cost arrangements for education institutions as part of efforts to bridge the digital divide
- Provide training, orientation, or guidance for staff and teachers on remote facilitation and mentoring
- Train teachers on instructing learners with disabilities remotely
- Ensure schooling facilities are safe and are equipped with water, sanitation, and handwashing facilities with soap, menstrual health management supplies, and support
- Fully finance the education sector by strengthening domestic resource mobilization, and preserving the allocation of the share for education by limiting budget cuts
As a priority, tackle inefficiencies in spending to ensure budgets on education reach the most vulnerable children.
- Focus on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups, while accelerating efforts for three priorities:
 - (i) catching up on learning losses
 - (ii) bringing back to school learners at risk of dropping out
 - (iii) focusing on social and emotional welfare of the learner population, teachers and other staff
- Remove barriers for the re-entry of pregnant girls and young mothers into the formal education system

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