

# DISTANCE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR SYSTEM RESILIENCE | JULY 7, 2020

## ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

[LINK TO WEBINAR RECORDING](#)

[QUESTION AND ANSWER RESOURCE FROM APRIL 16 USAID WEBINAR ON DISTANCE LEARNING](#)

### 1) How would you assess the local context in the current pandemic so that a certain approach could be most feasible?

**Carrie Lewis, Education Development Center:** EDC's toolkit, [Learning at Home in Times of Crisis Using Radio: Interactive Audio Instruction Repurposing Toolkit](#), is used to adapt pre-existing IAI programs for home use. Most IAI programs are designed for classroom or center use and assume that a facilitator and other children are present. To contextualize what families are listening to and provide additional guidance on how best to use programs, we recommend certain protocols before broadcasting. The toolkit may be useful for programs other than IAI and for considering options for broadcast, messaging and mediating learning.

**Bjoern Hassler, EdTech Hub:** To assess the local context in the current pandemic, data gathering is crucial. This includes collecting data on the percentage of the population with access to different technologies, internet availability rates, existing infrastructure, government COVID-19 policy responses, and additional data related to the impact of COVID-19 responses and the side effects of school closures. To read more about contextualising responses, read our report: [A Five-part Education Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) which unpacks this in more detail.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** Choosing distance learning modalities is both a science and an art. Planners have to be clear on a target audience or audiences, knowledgeable about what technologies can reach them, realistic about which education objectives can be achieved given local circumstances, and pragmatic about budget available. Context analyses must seek data that can drive decisions about all these planning elements, while also surfacing ways in which to ensure inclusivity, equity, and safety for all learners.

### 2) In WorldReader's experience, what barriers to reading do students run into when using a download and read format for curriculum textbooks?

**Rebecca Leege, Worldreader:** Screen size makes a difference per subject. For reading, most phone sizes can work but if you are looking to have students understand charts/tablets etc then

tablets are best. A very significant element to offering tech solutions is to ensure that the backend data pipelines/systems are in place to effectively offer the evidence of engagement that is required with distance learning. At this time, a question that should be asked through data is who isn't accessing information because then programs know how to iterate for more effective distance learning options. In addition, it is important to reflect on, not necessarily creating new edtech solutions, but leveraging existing ones, enhancing them and strengthening SDG Goal 17 around collaboration and partnership. COVID-19 will be a significant test of collaboration and partnership within the education sector for the benefit of this current pre-primary/primary generation.

### 3) **How can we design a distant learning system that contributes to improving the resilience of the education system at a national level?**

**Carrie Lewis, Education Development Center:** Crisis preparation should be built into the system. A strong Distance Education Unit that works closely with primary, secondary and tertiary leadership to duplicate and deepen opportunities for learning is a good goal in normal times and can support systems in times of crisis. Distance education should consider multiple modalities: phones, online portals, radios and files accessible for download. In Zambia, EDC loaded teacher development videos onto phones to show best literacy instructional practices.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** In some ways, the degree to which you can respond to and resist impact from shocks and stressors is directly correlated to the number of options you have for achieving the objectives you want to pursue. Education systems seeking to be resilient will need, among many other things, multiple options for reaching a large number of development and learning objectives. Investing in long-term creation of multi-modal distance learning systems that have avenues and adaptations, allowing learning to be accessible to a wide variety of marginalized participants, will build systemic resilience. While “adapting the existing” is important in the short term, in the long term, the best way to leverage distance learning for resilience is to make it as multi-pronged, sustainable, and carefully planned and targeted as possible.

### 4) **What about building resilience and inclusivity for students with disabilities? Normally their schools may have the technology needed but with COVID, learning at home has been challenging.**

**Sarah Banashek & Wafaa El Adawy, USAID-Egypt:** The Career Centers at Egyptian public universities offer services to support students with disabilities. Each Center has a special advisor dedicated to assisting students with the disabilities and connecting them to the job market. After COVID-19, the Centers partnered with the private sector to launch the “Virtually...We are Equal” initiative to equip students with kinetic disabilities with the skills to build a career in areas such as social media management and sales.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** No intervention can reach everyone in need at the same pace and with the same quality at the same time, and no one modality will work for all learners. Sequencing and pacing of audience selection, always with a commitment where possible to starting with the most in need and the most marginalized, is critical. All distance learning modalities will exclude some learners, and learners with disabilities are always at great risk for exclusion.



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Therefore, removing learning inequalities from distance learning efforts is an iterative process that is best begun by focusing first on the hardest to reach, whoever that may be in your context. When conditions allow, engaging in longer-term planning that can more methodically ‘set aside’ resources for each segment and subset of a population can assist in eventually eliminating these inequities. Stakeholders should look to tools like the [Universal Design for Learning Toolkit to Help all Children Read](#) for a framework for designing inclusive education systems.

**5) How can we trust the process of evaluating students online, knowing that it’s possible for them to access outside materials and therefore cheat on exams? How can you integrate formative or continuous assessment into teacher professional development?**

**Carrie Lewis, Education Development Center:** Through guided questions, group exercises or games, all formats used in IAI, teachers can assess if learners are mastering content. If this question is about teachers’ professional development (and not their practice in assessing learners) it certainly can. We have used an asynchronous approach to teacher professional development where in-service teachers learned, discussed and practiced new concepts mediated by a trainer.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** It is usually inherently impossible to “require” participation in distance learning or distance-based assessment. Successful distance learning interventions create motivation through building connection and engagement, and are structured to assist students to want to improve their progress, rather than to monitor their interaction with every element of the technology. Accustom students to demonstrate participation regularly, and provide the opportunity to gain credit for doing so. Keep assessments either short and highly feasible, or project-based and more iterative or inductive, so that rote copy/paste work and tests are minimized. In sophisticated systems, individual sign-in codes for tests and/or requirements for the students to create individual time-stamped videos of their testing participation are possible. But in the vast majority of contexts, the “work” of making sure students don’t cheat during distance learning happens long before the assessment, by creating an accessible, feasible, engaging, and easy to follow curriculum that builds learner enjoyment and self-confidence.

**6) Do you have experience in teaching teachers online how to work with special needs learners? Can someone talk about online teacher testing platforms?**

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** Distance modalities can support teachers with a wide variety of professional valorization and development opportunities. Depending on context, it should be possible to identify a delivery system for teaching teachers how to support students with disabilities. Simple, subsidized “closed networks” can allow teachers to communicate with one another about given topics over text message, and/or pre-recorded video or audio that can be played from an MP-3 storage device, and have been shown to be an effective means of supporting teacher skill development. Teacher testing platforms, on the other hand, are less common; it has not been habitual to certify teachers fully through distance formats because most certification courses require in-person participation by candidates for teaching degrees.



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**7) How have PD interventions in low income countries influenced these challenges: digital divide among teachers, digital divide among students?**

**Bjoern Hassler, EdTech Hub:** In our report on [Synthesis of Reviews on Teacher Professional Development in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), we describe features of effective teacher professional development and highlight ways in which technological innovations can support the implementation of such programmes. Through the provision of effective teacher professional development, teachers can be equipped with the digital skills they need to bridge the digital divide and help their students do the same.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** Technology, if it follows its ordinary course, does not “naturally work” to lessen these divides. Planning to lessen them must be intentional. As touched on in the webinar, low-cost and low-tech solutions must be prioritized in order to mitigate these divides and, even when they are, they will still exclude some portion of the learner population. Intentional planning to address the most isolated and marginalized will help reverse the patterns that deepen digital divides.

**8) The greatest challenge faced by low income countries is connectivity. I like the idea of mobile learning. Could you share your experience working with teachers and students in those areas?**

**Sarah Banashek & Wafaa El Adawy, USAID-Egypt:** Connectivity is a big challenge in Egypt, particularly in rural areas. Resources must be dedicated to ensure continuity of education through connectivity. To enable student access to our Career Center courses, mentoring and one-to-one counseling prepaid internet packages were distributed to students who cannot connect from their homes.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** Country governments can and should subsidize connectivity to permit distance learning to be a permanent feature of education systems; over the long term, changes can be made to plans and budgets to allow for a context-specific agenda to create connectivity for all. But, in the short term, asynchronous learning formats may be the only option where connectivity is low. Pre-recorded audio, like Interactive Audio Instruction (IAI), is an excellent example of a distance learning tool that does not require internet connectivity. Offline libraries, (able to be stored in a cache on a computer’s hard drive) and/or text-based programming may also be options to explore until connectivity improves for large percentages of population.

**9) Do we have evidence of some education systems that have quickly shifted and adapted to COVID-19 to ensure continuity of learning and mitigate learning loss/inclusivity?**

**Carrie Lewis, Education Development Center:** In Mali, before the pandemic, EDC developed customized programming for the North to meet the needs of children out of school due to armed conflicts in the area, and now during COVID-19, we have worked with the government to adapt existing programs for broadcast. They are being broadcast now. Malawi is also broadcasting IRI programs for children at home. In Zambia, we are working with the government to broadcast short reading-focused programs for teachers and learners to keep reading alive.



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**Rebecca Leege, Worldreader:** One of the most critical elements to mitigate learning loss is to ensure children have access to reading materials. At a minimum, books can offer language support in terms of math and science concepts, while the relevant curriculum is being modified as needed for distance learning. Worldreader’s solution BookSmart offers content that supports such learning concepts. It is feasible for a family to read one book a week with a phone in the home and have it confirmed by backend data that reflects the reading speed, level of book engagement, and time spent reading to at least ensure a student/child is maintaining exposure to vocabulary and concepts. This approach, coupled with radio instruction and story hours, can at least begin to mitigate some loss during this unprecedented time.

**USAID Reading & Literacy Team:** Some countries, like Liberia and South Sudan, have been able to access resources used during prior crises to support distance learning. In Liberia, during the Ebola epidemic, for example, IRI was used successfully to provide ongoing learning opportunities to children and youth. USAID/South Sudan has looked to existing IRI models and disseminated curriculum for grades 1-4 on 31 radio stations. In Haiti, the government is currently considering using previously recorded television and radio programming to enhance instruction. USAID’s Edulinks website includes a trove of distance learning materials and resources that can be adapted and used in different contexts. Those can be found here: [USAID IRI AND IAI Resources](#).



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