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RESILIENCE IN RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19

ZAMBIA CASE STUDY

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This report is dedicated to the tireless teachers, learners, and parents around the world who continue to endure this global emergency.

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ACRONYMS

AMEP	Alternative Modes of Education Provision
CAMFED	Campaign for Female Education
DODE	Department of Distance Education
ECE	Early childhood education
ECW	Education Cannot Wait
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Information and communication technology
IPA	Innovations for Poverty Action
IRI	Interactive radio instruction
JAR	Joint Annual Review
KII	Key informant interview
MoGE	Ministry of General Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
RtL	Return to Learning
SCREAM	School Readiness and Accountability Monitoring
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level
TWG	Technical Working Group
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
ZANASU	Zambia National Student Union
ZANEC	Zambia National Education Coalition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

This case study examines the return to learning (RtL) processes and strategies of the education system in Zambia from March 2020–April 2021. The report sits within a [compendium of five case studies](#) and an overarching synthesis report (Heaner et al. 2021) that examine the RtL process during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. This report documents the RtL processes and strategies of the education system in Zambia over the first 14 months of the pandemic.

The overarching purpose of this research was to (a) document descriptions of the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions in order to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies, and USAID’s Resilience White Paper, which framed the overall methods and analysis (Shah 2019).

METHODS

The research team was comprised of four international “core” team members and five local research consultants, one in each case study location. This case study was comprised of four waves of qualitative, primary data collection in Zambia, conducted by the team’s local research consultant over a six-month period. The researcher conducted 57 key informant interviews targeting education stakeholders that included ministry officials, donors, international and local NGOs, civil society organizations, researchers, and union representatives. Over the course of the research, the team conducted ongoing review of documents and literature that described the RtL processes, decision-making, policies, and strategies.

Across the five case study locations, all consultants, the core team, and USAID came together to review findings and process them after each wave. The purpose of these workshops was to unpack findings, compare them across contexts, iterate lines of inquiry and priorities for the subsequent wave, and share methodological challenges and learning. After each wave, local consultants developed priorities, plans, and targeted interviews for the next wave. After four waves, the local consultant, in collaboration with the core team member overseeing that case study, transcribed and analyzed the data for each location. The findings from each case study are offered as descriptive, stand-alone pieces and are analyzed alongside each other in a synthesis report.

CONTEXT AND COVID-19

The Zambian government’s response to the pandemic occurred alongside significant economic impact and challenges, many of which pre-dated COVID-19. These issues—high debt, fiscal deficit, declining copper prices, drought and flooding impacts on the agriculture sector and food security, and a high poverty rate—have since been exacerbated by the pandemic. Zambia became the first African country to default on its debt in the COVID-19 era in November 2020. At the beginning of 2020, Zambia had achieved near universal primary school completion (national completion rates of approximately 92

percent), but transition rates to secondary school remained relatively low (approximately 68 percent). [Girls record](#) higher levels of dropout in both upper primary and secondary levels, as well as poorer transition rates.¹ [Efforts to address equity and inclusion](#) in education have featured centrally in Zambia's national education strategy.²

The first case of COVID-19 in Zambia was confirmed on March 18, 2020 and the Zambian government took immediate and significant action to prevent its spread. This included school closures beginning on March 20. Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) and its cooperating partners—a network of stakeholders in the education sector—produced the Education Contingency Plan for COVID-19, covering early childhood to secondary education levels. In May 2020, Zambia became one of the first ten countries to receive direct assistance for its pandemic education response via the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) accelerated funding mechanism.

Most relevant for the time frame of this research, the Contingency Plan outlined a Phase 1 Response Plan focused largely on continuity of learning during school closures and a Phase 2 Early Recovery Plan that includes plans for school reopening and return to in-person learning. Schools were closed across Zambia from March–August 2020, with examination grades returning on June 1 and schools across the country reopening in September.

FINDINGS

This case study describes the alignment of response with the USAID RtL framework's five priorities for primary and secondary education levels, as well as challenges and opportunities for contributing to resilience during the responses. In particular, the Zambia case demonstrates that much of the RtL framework may be adopted in the initial stages of crisis response to better absorb shocks, although ensuring continued engagement with learning during school closures was challenging. Overall, all priority areas—learner reengagement, education reopening plans, instructional time, curricula, learning supports, exams and promotion, and educators and the learning space—were relevant to the MoGE response planning for distance learning and subsequently return to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specific “pockets of promise” were identified during this research that highlighted capacities that were leveraged to respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These included: (a) strong collaboration between cooperating partners and the MoGE for planning processes and response; (b) effective response in establishing school safety and ensuring community/parent trust for sending children back to school; (c) established strategy and departments for distance learning and alternative modes of

¹ A [UNICEF study](#) found that a main barrier to girls' secondary education was secondary education school fees, which are unaffordable to households living in extreme poverty. Relatedly, Zambia records some of the highest rates of both child marriage (29 percent) and teenage pregnancy globally (32 percent of girls age 15-19 were pregnant or already had given birth in 2018).

² In the 1990s, this included outreach to learners living in extreme poverty via the Poverty Reduction Strategy, then the Programme to Advance Girls' Education. Following that, there was legislation on behalf of children orphaned during the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as well as for children with special educational needs (Serpell and Jere-Folotiya, 2011). The country instituted a school re-entry policy to allow girls to return to school after giving birth in 1997; a 2015 assessment of the policy's impact noted that, while educational attainment has increased for adolescent mothers since its implementation, this rate of increase is still lower than for girls overall (Mwanawasa, 2020).

education (including remedial and catch-up); and (d) a strong history of policy and practice prioritizing equity and inclusion, which led to its embeddedness in the COVID-19 response.

Overall, in Zambia, emergent practices, priorities, and institutional learning were observed that may contribute to longer term systematic changes that increase equity and inclusion and overall resilience. These occurred, however, within significant macroeconomic constraints and vulnerability that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the pandemic is not over, and the extent of many impacts (including, importantly, at the learner level) will likely not be fully understood for some time. COVID-19 will continue to have significant and long-lasting impacts on global economies, which will challenge education systems everywhere in coming years. Zambia offers examples of emergent strategies in the face of a profound, global stressor and it is the intent of this case study for the documentation of such examples to be useful in the context of future crises.

I. INTRODUCTION

This case study sits within a compendium of five case studies plus an overarching synthesis report that examine the return to learning (RtL)³ process during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Learning regarding RtL processes and resilience in education systems more broadly is explored further in the synthesis report (Heaner et al., 2021). The purpose of the research was to (a) document descriptions of the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn, 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies, and USAID’s Resilience White Paper (Shah 2019), which framed the overall methods and analysis. The research was guided by seven research questions ([Appendix B](#)).

Each of the case studies examines, describes, and analyzes specific localized processes, decision-making, and intricacies of continuing education and reopening schools, tracking responses to COVID-19 against USAID’s RtL framework. With equity and inclusion at its core, this framework recognizes that crises affect learners in different ways, and offers guidance on critical plans and processes needed during crisis response to ensure that education authorities: (1) support all learners to return to/maintain a connection with learning; (2) mitigate learner dropout because of the crisis; and (3) facilitate return to learning both for learners who have dropped out during the crisis and learners who were outside the system prior to the crisis. When facilitating the return to learning—in-person, distance, or both—the RtL framework encourages education planners, partners, and leaders to “leverage this opportunity to address historic educational disparities faced by the most marginalized” to ensure that not only is learning loss mitigated during crisis response, but that systemic resilience is, in fact, built through crisis response (USAID 2020, 1.).

USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID’s Resilience Framework may be understood in relation to resilience capacities (defined in the box below), and to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19 (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context to better understand how it may be applied more effectively.

Absorptive resilience capacities – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stressors through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid long-term negative impacts.

³ Throughout this report, “return to learning” or “RtL” is referred to when describing the broad effort to get learners back into some capacity of in-person, distance, or hybrid modality of education services, and the “RtL process” refers to the various steps in getting there, which may not necessarily include, at that moment, in-person learning.

Adaptive resilience capacities – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to make informed choices and changes in response to longer term social, economic, and environmental change.

Transformative resilience capacities – The ability of communities and institutions to establish an enabling environment for systemic change through their governance mechanisms, policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, community networks, and formal and informal social protection mechanisms.

METHODS OF INQUIRY

The research team was made up of four international consultants (three researchers and one technical advisor) who served as the core team, and one local consultant per case study country.⁴ One core team researcher served as the main point of contact for the local consultant for each case study. In general, the local consultant was responsible for conducting interviews (in person or online/by phone, as appropriate) and supplying notes or recordings to the core team member, who would review and provide feedback as necessary. In some cases, the core team member participated in interviews or conducted interviews on her own. The local consultant also collaborated with the core team member on refining lines of inquiry, selecting participants, supporting data analysis, and writing the report. The study comprised three phases: (1) inception, (2) document collection and review, and (3) four “waves” of primary data collection through key informant interviews. After each wave, lines of inquiry were refined as needed.

As part of the inception phase, five countries were selected in a manner that considered Mission-level capacity to support and benefit from the study and various features and characteristics of the contexts. USAID (either the Missions themselves, or colleagues working in the region) suggested an initial set of 14 countries. From those 14, the team aimed to select five that would allow for comparison across contexts in order to identify common themes, but also with enough breadth to show diversity in contextual approaches to RtL. A scoring rubric was prepared to assist in this selection. The rubric was designed to allow for each case study context to be coded on two administrative criteria (USAID Mission concurrence and existing vetted GK Consulting contacts), and five situational criteria to generate a “contextual profile” for each, thereby balancing the uniqueness of a case study with its complementarity within the set. These situational criteria were:

1. Resilience: experience with a health crisis, or a crisis in which schools closed at scale for a protracted period of time
2. Return to learning status: schools have reopened/are currently open/funding allocated or provided
3. Context vulnerability: nature of existing shocks and stressors on society, and specifically on learners
4. Diversity of income levels

⁴ In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to the state-level government agencies.

5. Geographical diversity (aim to include one each from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa)⁵

The five countries selected using the criteria were: Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Colombia was selected because of its upper-middle income status, as well as experience dealing with natural hazards and an ongoing refugee situation. Georgia served as a good contrast to Colombia given that it, too, had an upper middle-income status but had fewer ongoing shocks. Nigeria was selected because of its lower-middle income status and previous experience battling a public health crisis (Ebola in 2015) along with recurring instances of violence in the north. Lebanon and Nigeria complemented each other in terms of their similarly multi-risk contexts and lower-middle income status, but were distinct from one another in terms of geography and geopolitics.

Also during the inception phase, the research questions initially articulated by USAID were elaborated on and situated within a conceptual framework of resilience, and local consultants were hired to lead the case studies in each of the selected contexts.

For the second phase, the research team conducted a comprehensive desk review and gathered (a) frameworks published by international agencies on education sector responses to COVID-19; (b) reports on education during the pandemic school closures; (c) situation analyses of access to education during school closure in each of the countries; and (d) government plans drafted and decreed in response to COVID-19 (specifically in the education sector) for each of the countries. At this point, additional thematic areas of focus were considered for certain contexts.

The third phase focused on interviews with key informants in the education sector—from government agencies, donor agencies, university faculty, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector—over a series of four waves of research. After each wave, the local and international research teams convened to discuss emerging findings and recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. In the case of Zambia, a total of 37 interviews were conducted.

Exhibit I. Respondents in Zambia interviewed during research

INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED IN ZAMBIA	NUMBER
Government officials	6
Donors	4
International and national NGOs	13
Civil society organizations	5
TOTAL	37

⁵ A separate set of case studies had already been planned through the USAID Asia Bureau, so Asian countries were not considered in the set.

Common limitations across five case studies

Several limitations must be considered in contextualizing the findings of this study:

Challenges accessing information from key informants

While the multi-wave methodology allowed for a substantial amount of time to reach out to key informants and to build relationships with individuals and organizations/agencies over the course of the research, the team's ability to access some individuals was limited, especially at the government level. This was true both in terms of securing an interview and in hearing candid responses from individuals. As a result, in some cases, the government perspective was provided by just a few individuals who offered a particular perspective on successes or challenges; in some cases, these perspectives were in contrast to more critical descriptions offered by other respondents.

Subjectivity and potential for bias from the research team

As with respondents, researchers are subject to their own biases, which can emerge in the data, particularly with the open-ended qualitative approach employed for this study. The local researchers had significant influence and autonomy over shaping the questions that were asked in each interview, and in analyzing and interpreting responses. This helped ensure that the questions were relevant and appropriate to the context at the time in terms of COVID-19 and other developments in the education sector in each setting. Constant reflexivity within the research team, and a process of triangulating information (where possible), served to mitigate some of the inherent biases individual researchers brought to their work. Local consultants regularly engaged with the core team and each other to share findings and analysis. Local consultants were also asked to reflect on their own biases emerging from the research.

Focus on first fourteen months of ongoing crisis

This study was conducted during the six months from November 2020 to April 2021 and was designed to reflect both on the initial eight months of crisis response and on the ongoing response, decision-making processes, and actions that took place during the course of the six months of data collection. It was beyond the scope of this study to capture longer term outcomes of the RtL process. As such, some of the research questions can only be partially addressed, and in some cases, have introduced more questions to ask in subsequent research. For example, the research found that the majority of coping strategies deployed across the contexts were absorptive in nature, rather than adaptive or transformative, given that the COVID-19 emergency was still ongoing. Thus, the research focus is more on absorptive capacities deployed and the characteristics that have allowed some contexts to more readily build on these capacities to then deploy adaptive strategies, and less on transformative capacities. The potential for both adaptive and transformative capacities to be further leveraged in the future has been explored in the pockets of promise and serves as an important focal point for future research.

Context-specific limitations in Zambia

For Zambia, specifically, the most notable limitations were the team's ability to access government contacts for interviews. The process of official introductions and approval of research took significantly longer than in other locations. In addition, numerous respondents rescheduled interviews multiple times. Much of this was because this research took place during the country's largest COVID-19 surge to date, which meant that staff were engaged with direct response efforts and, thus, often had unpredictable

schedules. For this case study, all ministry interviews were conducted during the fourth wave of data collection, the opposite of the intended protocols. The team was unable to procure introductions or approval with the Ministry of Higher Education, and therefore, this case study focuses mainly on the primary and secondary levels.

Additionally, while there was significant reference to ongoing monitoring and data collection, it was still challenging to access specific data for this research. Much of this data may be made available at later dates, but could not be obtained for our use. Therefore, there are references in this report to ongoing monitoring efforts, but no further elaboration on that information.

2. CONTEXT

NATIONAL-LEVEL CONTEXT AND RESILIENCE

The Zambian government's response to the pandemic—characterized by swift action and cooperation—occurred alongside significant economic impact and challenges, many of which pre-dated COVID-19. These issues—high debt, fiscal deficit, declining copper prices, drought and flooding impacts on the agriculture sector and food security, and a high poverty rate—have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and Zambia became the first African country to default on its loans in the COVID-19 era in November 2020.

Both the Zambian response to and ultimate recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic are deeply entwined with and dependent on the country's increasing macroeconomic vulnerability, a trajectory begun prior to 2020. It is critical to examine the COVID-19 response within the economic context of the last two decades, in particular. The early 2000s saw notable growth in Zambia's economy (an average growth rate of 5.6 percent from 2000–2010); this peaked at 10.3 percent in 2010, leading to the country's reclassification from low to lower-middle income (World Bank 2016). By 2019, this growth had slowed substantially (to an average real output growth of 3.3 percent between 2014–2019) as a result of lower global copper prices and climate-related agricultural loss (UNCTAD 2021).

Since the start of the pandemic, real output growth has declined by 4.5 percent, the Zambian economy's first negative growth since 1998 (UNCTAD 2021). Additionally, over the course of 2020, the poverty rate increased from 58.6 to 60.5 percent (World Bank 2020). Zambia's socioeconomic and demographic characteristics differ significantly across its ten provinces, particularly between the Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces (and their large urban areas) and the more rural provinces. The agriculture sector in these provinces is vulnerable to climate-related risks, including drought in the northeast and rainy season flooding in the southeast (Braimoh et al. 2018). Food security in these provinces is a particular concern.⁶ An already highly socioeconomically inequitable country has only seen this inequity increased during 2020.⁷

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on economic well-being at the household level in Zambia. Research in 2020 described significant financial insecurity, loss of jobs and opportunities, and depleted household savings across the country (Silumesii 2020). Both economic and social outcomes have

⁶ Interview 32

⁷ Interview 14, 20

deteriorated over the course of the year due to underlying macroeconomic issues that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Increased debt spending in the last five years has led to declining budget allocation to education, though such decline is true for most sectors, including health. Since 2015, the education budget has been reduced from 20.2 percent (2015) to 12.4 percent (2020), a 39 percent reduction over four years (ZANEC 2018). In September, it was announced that the 2021 allocation to the education sector will be 11.5 percent of overall government expenditure (Zambia Ministry of Finance 2020).

OVERVIEW OF THE ZAMBIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Zambian education system consists of early childhood education (ECE), primary, secondary, and tertiary or professional levels. ECE enrolls children ages 3–6; primary ages 7–13 (grades 1–7); secondary ages 14–18 (grades 8–9 in junior secondary; grades 10–12 in higher secondary). National examinations for transition between levels occurs at the end of the school year for Grades 7, 9, and 12 and is overseen by the Examination Council of Zambia. Examinations for Grade 9 and the General Certificate of Education are held for external candidates in August.⁸ Higher education includes four-year undergraduate programs as well as vocational and technical college programs.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) recognized two alternative approaches to formal primary schooling: community schools and distance learning via Interactive Radio Centers (provided by the Education Broadcasting Services). These non-formal options specifically target marginalized learners such as those who have missed an extended portion of schooling, refugees or displaced children, and geographically isolated children (MoGE 2020c).

By the beginning of 2020, Zambia had achieved near universal primary school completion (approximately 92 percent), but transition rates to secondary school remained relatively low (approximately 68 percent). This transition rate is partially explained by the lack of spaces in secondary schools to accommodate primary graduates. There are regional differences in all education statistics (UNICEF 2019). Exhibit 2 offers an overview of key education indicators for 2019.

Exhibit 2. Key education indicators, 2019 (MoGE 2020c)

INDICATOR	RESULT
Net primary school enrollment	87.9%
Net secondary school enrollment	42.9%
Primary Gender Parity index	1.03
Secondary Gender Parity	0.93
Completion rate to Grade 9	79.3%
Completion rate to Grade 12	42.3%

⁸ External candidates are learners who are not enrolled in education during the school year but who wish to sit for the exam.

INDICATOR	RESULT
Transition to secondary school	67.5%
Total primary enrollment	3.38 million
Total secondary enrollment	918,000

Girls record higher levels of dropout in both upper primary and secondary levels, as well as lower transition rates (UNICEF 2019). A 2015 UNICEF study found that a main barrier to girls’ secondary education was secondary education school fees, which are unaffordable to households living in extreme poverty (UNICEF 2015). Zambia also records some of the highest rates of child marriage (29 percent) and teenage pregnancy globally (32 percent of girls age 15–19 were pregnant or had already given birth in 2018) (UNDP 2019). Updated statistics were unavailable at the time of this writing.

Efforts to address equity and inclusion in education have featured centrally in Zambia’s national education strategy (GPE 2019). In the 1990s, this included outreach to learners living in extreme poverty through the Poverty Reduction Strategy, then the Programme to Advance Girls’ Education. Following this, there was legislation on behalf of children orphaned during the HIV/AIDS pandemic and for children with special educational needs (Serpell and Jere-Folotiya 2011). In 1997, the country instituted a School Re-entry Policy to allow girls to return to school after giving birth; a 2015 assessment of the policy’s impact noted that, while educational attainment had increased for adolescent mothers since its implementation, this rate of increase was still lower than for girls overall (Mwanawasa 2020). The MoGE tracks equity indicators, including: Gender Parity Index, out-of-school children ages 7–13; orphans; children with special educational needs; pregnancies; and re-admissions (MoGE 2020c).

As of 2020, there were approximately 90,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and former refugees living in three refugee settlement and urban areas in Zambia (UNHCR 2020). Refugees have limited access to education, health services, and other basic services, even though they are included in national, formal school planning and guaranteed access by the 2017 Refugees Act (Government of the Republic of Zambia 2017).⁹

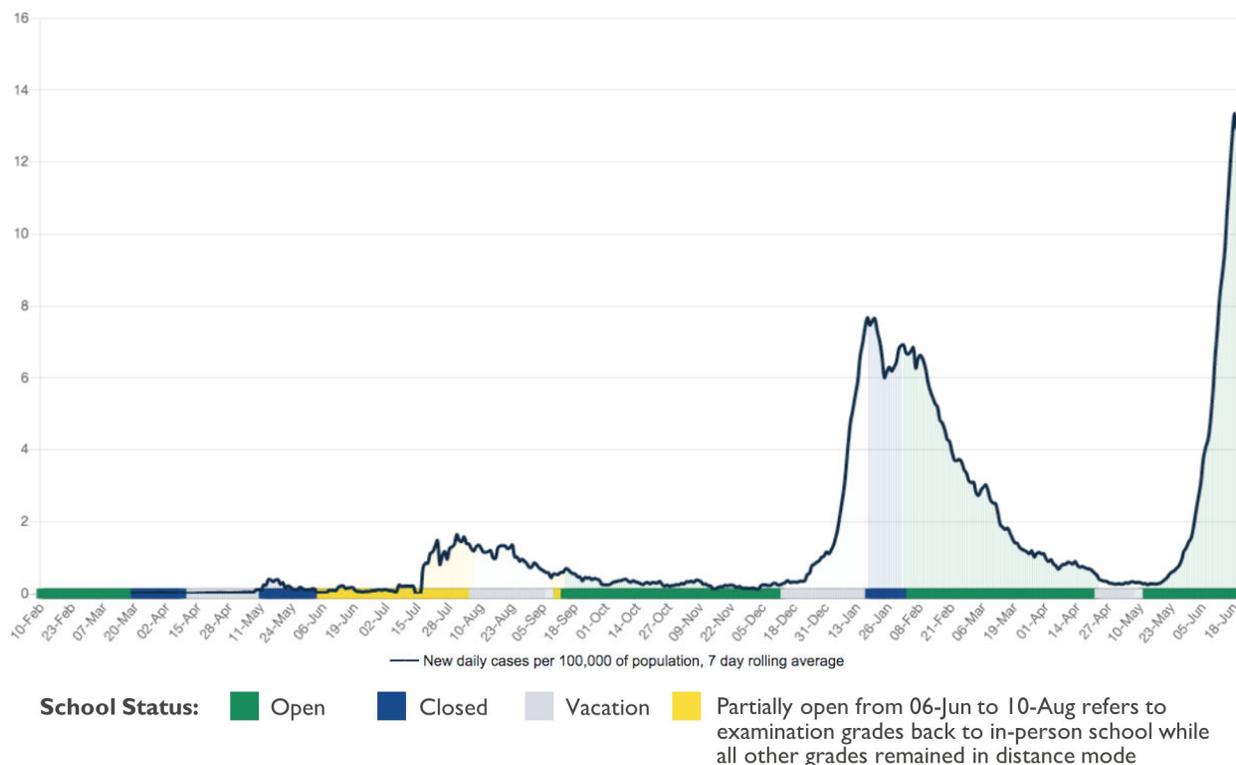
Challenges for the education sector at the start of 2020 were: (a) not enough schools, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels (UNICEF 2019); (b) issues of quality such as low completion rates, low pupil-book ratio, and low contact hours (MoGE 2020c); and (c) difficult contextual factors for the MoGE, including high turnover rates and financing and accountability challenges (GPE 2019). According to GPE, these were exacerbated by “severe domestic resource shortages” (GPE 2019, 19).

Girls and poor-performing and poorly resourced regions were particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 on education systems and outcomes. Nationwide, school closures had disrupted the learning of 4.4 million children and adolescents as of this case study’s writing. In mid-2020, Zambia’s additional COVID-19-related emergency appeal had not been funded.

⁹ Interview 30

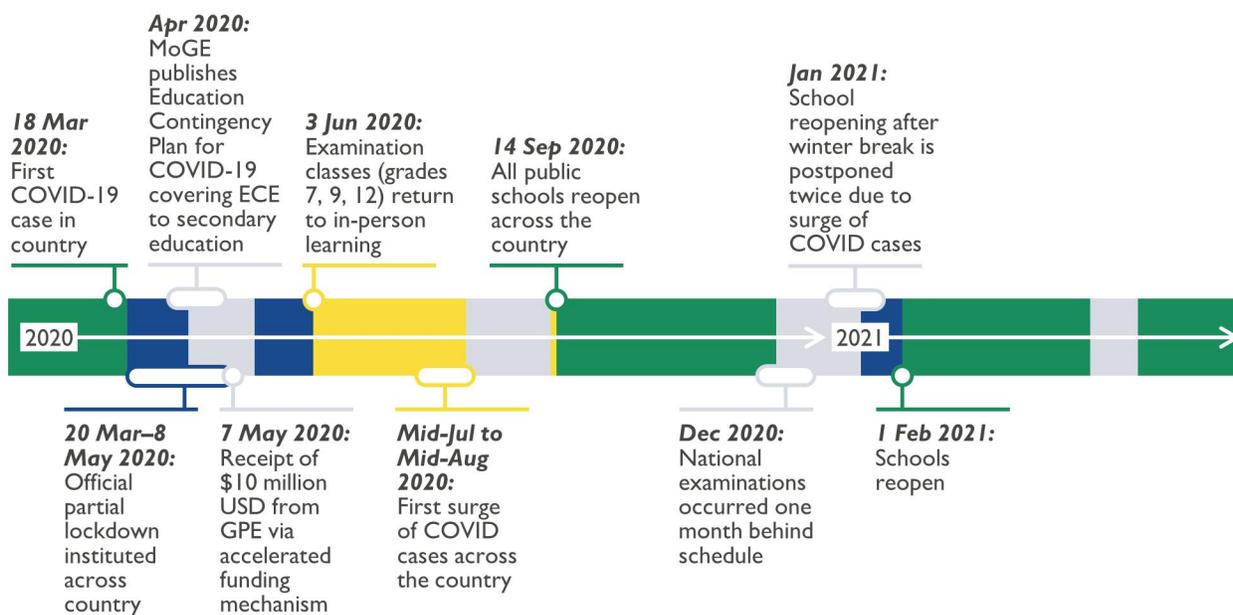
TIMELINE OF COVID-19 AND EDUCATION SYSTEM RESPONSE IN ZAMBIA

Exhibit 3. School closure in relation to new COVID-19 cases in Zambia, per 100,000 of population. Data retrieved on June 22, 2021 from <https://infographic.education.org/insights/en/>.



Note: School closures in this figure are for ECE, general education (primary and secondary level), and higher education.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS



Narrative overview

The first cases of COVID-19 in Zambia were documented on March 18, 2020; the Zambian government responded swiftly with measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, including a partial lockdown from March 20 to May 8.

In late March 2020, the MoGE and its cooperating partners—a network of stakeholders in the education sector that includes international and national NGOs, donors, UN organizations, the World Bank, and civil society organizations—conducted a rapid assessment to understand the potential and capacity for distance learning during school closures. This included mapping potential education response and content from ECE to secondary education levels. The Education Technical Working Group (TWG) met to develop the components and priorities for an official education system response plan for the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

In April 2020, the MoGE—in close collaboration with its partners—produced the Education Contingency Plan for COVID-19, which covered the ECE to secondary education levels (MoGE 2020a). This plan outlined a comprehensive, two-part strategy for education during the pandemic. With the swift production of this plan, Zambia submitted an application for assistance to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) via its accelerated funding mechanism. On May 7, \$10 million USD was approved in a GPE grant administered by UNICEF; Zambia became one of the first ten countries to receive direct assistance for its pandemic education response (GPE 2020).

The Contingency Plan outlined: (a) a Phase 1 Response Plan focused largely on continuity of learning during school closures, (b) a Phase 2 Early Recovery Plan that included plans for school reopening and a return to in-person learning, and (c) a Post Recovery Plan focused on system strengthening.

In April and May, the MoGE and its partners implemented the response plan through efforts to ensure continued learning for students at home (distance learning), mainly through expanding radio programming access and content; increased access to and content for online platforms and television, and homework packs for students. Many of these strategies expanded on plans and activities that had been implemented by the Department of Distance Education (DODE) prior to the pandemic, including the Alternative Modes of Education Program (AMEP) and the previously implemented Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) program.¹¹ This phase of response was characterized by significant cooperation with cooperating partners, civil society organizations, and schools.¹²

On May 6, the MoGE announced the suspension of payment of school fees for public schools (Lusaka Times 2020). Shortly after this, the COVID-19 Guidelines for Schools for official reopening was released. Its purpose was to offer guidance on the protective measures that schools should take in order to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 for learners, school staff, and communities (MoGE 2020b). This plan clarified roles for the various departments involved in the response, including the MoGE; the Ministry of Health (MoH); DODE; the Directorate for Planning and Information; the Finance Minister

¹⁰ Interview 8, 15

¹¹ Both the AMEP and IRI programs were aimed at increasing access to education for out-of-school children and youth throughout Zambia. This was facilitated through alternative modalities of learning such as radio.

¹² Interview 8, 13, 15, 19, 20

within the MoGE; the Directorate for Standards and Curriculum; provincial education officers overseeing schools; and all education sector cooperating partners.

On June 1, examination classes (grades 7, 9, and 12) returned to in-person learning. These grades were prioritized by the MoGE to ensure that national examinations could take place as scheduled. During this month, the Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) conducted a study covering 501 schools in all ten provinces across the country to assess readiness for country-wide general reopening and if/how learners were engaging with distance learning during the response phase. This project—School Readiness and Accountability Monitoring (SCREAM)—was funded via the GPE grant. Simultaneously, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) was commissioned by the MoGE to assess the reach of alternative modes of education at the secondary level and the Zambia National Student Union (ZANASU) was commissioned by ZANEC for similar assessments at college and university levels.

Throughout the summer months, there were extensive monitoring visits, assessments, and outreach by the MoGE and cooperating partners to ensure that schools were prepared to open safely. The Ministry noted that the education budget shifted substantially toward preparation and prevention of COVID-19 transmission in schools.¹³ In July, the country received a \$600,000 grant from Education Cannot Wait (ECW) for COVID-19 education response for refugees, to be administered by UNHCR (ECW 2020).

From mid-July to mid-August, Zambia experienced its first “surge” of COVID-19 cases nationwide; this subsided by mid-September. In August, the MoGE Joint Annual Review (JAR) was conducted virtually. There was strong advocacy from actors across the system (for example, civil society partners and NGOs) to reopen schools for in-person instruction. Monitoring data from school visits (from the SCREAM and IPA studies) were presented to Ministry officials—including the MoGE, the Ministry of Higher Education, and line ministries—and other education stakeholders, and the decision was made to prioritize full reopening. This decision was reaffirmed when, on August 20, the WHO and UNICEF released a joint statement urging the safe reopening of schools across Africa, specifically citing the risks to children who had been out of school for extended periods of time (WHO 2020). Return to School campaigns were conducted throughout the country, largely implemented by cooperating partners and civil society organizations. Outreach to marginalized learners such as girls and children with special educational needs were prioritized.¹⁴ Grade 9 external examinations and General Certificate of Education examinations occurred between August 31 and September 15 (MoGE 2020d).

On September 14, public schools from ECE to secondary level across the country reopened. Institutions of Higher Education reopened in September. In December, national examinations occurred one month later than normal. This additional month was scheduled to ensure that learners had adequate opportunity to prepare.¹⁵

In late December, the first cases of the 501.V2 variant were recorded in Zambia. This led to the country’s second COVID-19 wave, a substantially larger surge than had previously been experienced during the summer. This surge coincided with the school break, so schools did not need to be officially closed again. In January 2021, the MoGE postponed school reopening twice, from January 4 to January

¹³ Interview 36

¹⁴ Interview 12, 18, 19, 22, 25, 26, 27, 29

¹⁵ Interview 36

18 and then to February 1. Monitoring visits were conducted across the country to ensure schools were ready to reopen safely. On February 1, 2021, schools at all levels of education reopened.

In February 2021, all examination grades for 2020 had officially been recorded. Grade 7 recorded pass rates (100 percent) consistent with 2019; Grade 9 improved pass rates (53 percent compared to 46 percent in 2019); and Grade 12 pass rates were slightly reduced (64 percent compared to 65 percent in 2019) (MoGE 2020d). In addition, there was an overall increase in the number of students who sat for examinations.

On April 14, the MoH began a national vaccination campaign supported by the global COVAX program. At the beginning of June, a new surge in cases began; on June 17, schools closed for 21 days. The government plans to assess the situation before announcing its decision on school reopening before July 18.

Timeline summary of key events

Exhibit 4. Timeline of school status, key COVID-19 events, and other contextual stressors

DATE	EVENT
March 18, 2020	First COVID-19 case confirmed in Zambia
March 11, 2020	WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic
March 20–May 8, 2020	Partial lockdown across Zambia is instituted by GRZ
March 2020	MoGE and cooperating partners conduct rapid assessment of potential for distance education
April 2020	MoGE publishes Education Contingency Plan for COVID-19 covering ECE to secondary education
May 6, 2020	MoGE announces suspension of payment of school fees for public schools
May 7, 2020	Zambia receives \$10 million from GPE via accelerated funding mechanism
June 3, 2020	Examination classes (grades 7, 9, 12) return to in-person learning
June 2020	ZANEC conducts survey to assess readiness to reopen and learning during school closures
July 2020	Zambia receives ECW grant for COVID-19 education response for refugees
Mid-July to mid-August 2020	First surge of COVID-19 cases occurs
August 2020	WHO and UNICEF released joint statement urging the safe reopening of schools in Africa (and globally)
September 14, 2020	All Zambian public schools reopen
December 2020	National examinations occur one month behind schedule

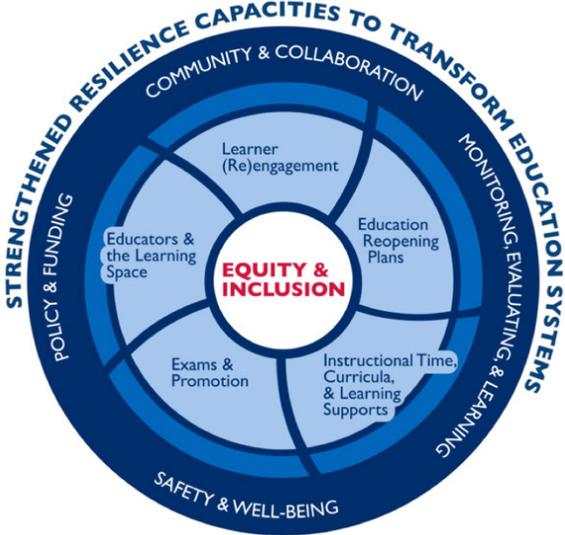
DATE	EVENT
December 2020	First cases of the 501.V2 variant are recorded; second surge of COVID-19 cases occurs
January 2021	School reopening after winter break is postponed twice due to surge of COVID-19 cases, first from January 4 to January 18, and then to February 1
February 1, 2021	Schools reopen
April 14, 2021	The Zambian MoH begins its national vaccination campaign supported by the global COVAX program
June 22, 2021	Zambia records its highest new daily case rate since the start of the pandemic, signalling that the country is in a new surge of COVID-19

3. USAID RETURN TO LEARNING FRAMEWORK AND THE ZAMBIA RESPONSE

This section tracks the Zambian education system’s responses to COVID-19 against USAID’s Return to Learning framework ([Appendix C](#)) (USAID 2020). It outlines where and how the Zambian education system was or was not aligned with the components of the framework for the RtL planning and processes. Descriptions of the response are organized by these components.

For this case study, the initial decision was made to seek a broad focus across all levels of the education system (ECE to higher education) to present a full picture of response decision-making. However, much of the state-led response to COVID-19 centered on general education. In addition, the research team was unable to procure interviews with the Ministry of Higher Education; therefore, the majority of data presented here reflects primary and secondary levels. Still, when possible, this report notes when respondents discussed specific activities or examples that also applied to ECE or higher education.

Exhibit 5. USAID RtL framework overview



Zambia’s education response to COVID-19 was characterized by swift, collaborative action. The MoGE Contingency Plan—published within weeks of the first documented cases of COVID-19 in the country—reflects all domains of the USAID RtL framework, as well as each of the cross-cutting considerations. Much of this close alignment reflects Zambia’s commitment (pre-COVID-19) to targeting the most marginalized learners and its pursuit of alternative modes of education to ensure “last mile” access and increased quality for all. The broader relevance of USAID’s RtL and resilience frameworks are further analyzed in the accompanying Synthesis Report and Policy Brief.

RtL Priority I

(Re)engage all learners, especially the most marginalized. This priority emphasizes that not all learners are affected by crises in the same way or to the same degree, and that education planners “need to understand how learners, especially the most marginalized, have been affected, and strategize to re-engage them in education.” (USAID 2020)

Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups. The Contingency Plan centers around the most marginalized learners, stating that efforts to ensure learning while schools are closed must “aspire to reach all children with an appropriate platform, with due consideration for girls, children with disabilities, and any vulnerable groups” (MoGE 2020a). The subsequent Guidance for Opening Schools further emphasizes this point, noting that the decision to open schools must consider the public health risks posed by COVID-19 alongside the consequences for learners—“particularly the poor and vulnerable”—remaining out of school (MoGE 2020b, 1). In this way, the Zambian response—like the RtL framework—places equity and inclusion as a foundational component of all planning.

Still, while this focus on engaging and reaching the most marginalized learners features prominently in all official COVID-19 strategic planning documents, there were significant challenges to effectively doing so. Respondents (NGOs, civil society organizations, United Nations bodies) described that, despite awareness that the pandemic was having an unequal impact on learners, there were significant economic and logistical barriers to reaching the most marginalized.¹⁶ Prior to the adoption of the Contingency Plan, a rapid assessment was conducted to understand capacity for distance learning. Although efforts to use radio and TV for continuous learning were quickly mobilized, only 37 percent of households across the country had a working TV and approximately 40 percent owned a working radio (as of 2018). For rural areas, these numbers were significantly less, at 15.5 percent (TV) and 34 percent (radio). Only 8.1 percent of households in the country owned a computer (2.7 percent in rural areas) (MoGE 2020a, 5). These statistics are in the MoGE Contingency Plan, indicating awareness of the challenges posed by distance learning modalities.

Actively communicate, consult, and collaborate with educators, communities, and other stakeholders. The Zambian response to reaching the most marginalized included capitalizing on programs across the country already engaged in such work. ZANEC is a network of more than 75 civil society organizations that supports the MoGE in its delivery of education across the country. ZANEC, comprised of community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, NGOs, and teacher trade unions, was immediately involved in the COVID-19 response when it took charge of the GPE-funded assessment of school readiness in June 2020 by leveraging its network of member organizations (ZANEC 2020).¹⁷

Other cooperating partner programs were also involved, including: the Campaign for Female Education’s (CAMFED) work promoting girls education, Plan International and others’ school feeding programs; back to school campaigns run by Save the Children, Plan International, and World Vision; and the Keep

¹⁶ Interview 1, 14, 18, 20 26, 27, 28, 29, 30

¹⁷ Interview 1

Girls in Education Program funded by the World Bank.¹⁸ GPE funding (during school reopening) was channelled to 20 districts in five provinces that were deemed vulnerable by the Central Statistics Office.¹⁹ Cooperative partners that already operated in those districts implemented context-specific programs appropriate for the specific learners targeted; these partners were able to leverage existing relationships with communities and schools. For many rural schools, capacity and infrastructure for proper sanitation was a main focus. Targeted outreach to the most marginalized was prioritized during both distance learning (via expansion of radio programming) and back-to-school campaigns.²⁰ In urban areas, civil society organizations and local NGOs (such as Zambia Open Community Schools) worked in close alignment with communities to ensure space for learning and to recruit volunteer teachers when schools were closed.²¹

Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time.

Joint monitoring visits between the MoGE and partners were conducted to schools to ensure compliance with COVID-19 guidelines at the national and sub-national levels. The SCREAM assessment by ZANEC, in particular, tracked access to and use of distance learning options (ZANEC 2020). For higher education, ZANASU conducted a similar assessment to identify levels of and barriers to access.²²

Promote alternative pathways back to education. The Contingency Plan specifically outlined the need to develop strategies for remedial lessons and Accelerated Education Programmes (elaborated on in points 3.1 and 3.3 below) (MoGE 2020a). Prior to COVID-19, the Alternative Modes of Education Provision (AMEP) program, operated by the Directorate of Open and Distance Education (DODE), had targeted out-of-school learners with alternative modalities such as radio, television, and e-learning.²³ IRI programming had previously been implemented by the central government in order to reach out-of-school children, youth, and adults, so efforts to revive such programming were seen as an efficient option. The MoGE leveraged these alternative modalities—first in distance learning and then in considering options for remedial education—for the duration of the pandemic, noting however, that the efforts to scale such activities were time intensive and expensive.²⁴

Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Zambia had policies in place aimed at inclusion of marginalized learners. This included the policy of re-entry for girls after giving birth, a strategy for inclusion of children with special education needs, and a policy guaranteeing access to formal education for refugees (Serpell and Jere-Folotyia 2011; GRZ 2017). In May 2020, the MoGE announced the elimination of all school fees for public schools in hopes of supporting households that were experiencing economic loss due to the pandemic. It was suggested at this time that such a policy remain post-COVID-19.²⁵ In April 2021, ZANEC released a study (funded by GIZ) examining the outcomes of this policy on quality of learning

¹⁸ Interview 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22, 25, 27, 29

¹⁹ Interview 11, 13, 22, 25

²⁰ Interview 18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 26, 27, 29

²¹ Interview 1, 12, 13, 18

²² Interview 1, 12

²³ Interview 1, 3, 33, 35, 36

²⁴ Interview 33, 35, 36

²⁵ Interview 9, 14

and operational and financial challenges. The study concluded that there was a boon in enrollment numbers but that all schools studied were operating with budget deficits (ZANEC 2021b).

RtL Priority 2

Education reopening plans. This priority encourages decision makers to consider methods for reopening institutions to ensure physical safety for students, teachers, and school administration when meeting in-person and monitoring and flexibility to be able to continue to adapt to the context, and to “transition between remote and in-person learning depending on the local risk factors.” In ensuring equity and inclusion are principled in actions taken, this priority encourages participation of a range of stakeholders in decision-making processes around reopening and contingency planning, and clear, consistent communication with all stakeholders across all processes.

Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making. As noted above, phase two of the Contingency Plan prioritized the safe reopening of schools, a process that the readiness indicators in the Guidance Document subsequently elaborated on. The decision-making guiding reopening was largely centralized, but initial reopening plans (and, in particular, attention to school readiness in terms of safety precautions) were determined by a consultative process with regional stakeholders that included regional education officers, NGOs, civil society organizations, and other local groups. The MoGE determined that a phased approach to reopening would take place, which prioritized examination classes (grades 7, 9, and 12) returning to school first. This would allow for examinations to occur on schedule and, thus, students to be promoted without disruption. Schools reopened for examination classes on June 1.²⁶

Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance. Also in June 2020, ZANEC conducted an assessment (SCREAM project) of primary school readiness funded through the GPE grant; the study sought to document compliance with health guidelines and progress in effectively delivering distance learning. Five hundred and one schools were visited and assessed, and 98 percent were deemed to meet the health guidelines stipulated to reopen safely (ZANEC 2020). Simultaneously, it was noted that the AMEP activities—i.e., distance education—were not reaching all learners, and that for those who were accessing these options, little learning was taking place.²⁷ Similar studies were commissioned for secondary education by IPA and for the tertiary level by the Zambia National Student Union.²⁸

Based on the findings of these studies—presented during the MoGE’s Joint Action Review in July 2020—it was recommended that all public schools reopen. According to a Ministry respondent, “we saw that our strength was in keeping the environments safe, and not in remote learning.”²⁹ Additionally, there was lobbying from civil society and community-based organizations to reopen, as well as a

²⁶ Interview 1, 24, 34, 35, 36

²⁷ Interview 1, 3, 25, 28

²⁸ Interview 1

²⁹ Interview 1

recommendation from the WHO and UNICEF for schools globally to prioritize reopening (WHO 2020). Full public school reopening was therefore scheduled for September 14. Respondents (civil society, unions, NGOs) noted, in particular, the success of the virtual JAR process, which offered the opportunity to have more localized input at low cost.³⁰

Overall, health and exposure risks were prioritized for the reopening process—categories in the school compliance checklist included sensitization/training of personnel, physical distancing, face masks, health facilities/room, sanitation and hygiene, health education, health monitoring, and disease management (MoGE 2020b). Notably, schools were positioned as an important resource for health education (for learners, teachers, and communities), with COVID-19-related activities integrated into existing subjects and all planning processes. This included provision of psycho-social support.

Develop an outbreak response plan at the school level. Guidance for the development of a school-level outbreak plan was included in the MoGE's School Reopening Guidance Document (MoGE 2020b). According to the SCREAM study, 92 percent of schools surveyed prior to the reopening had established a clear referral system or reporting mechanism for COVID-19 cases (ZANEC 2020).

Communicate clearly and consistently. Throughout the spring of 2020, the President and Minister of Health gave bi-weekly and weekly addresses, respectively, to offer clear updates on the state of COVID-19 and the government response.³¹ These addresses featured plans for education. In addition, the MoH (in collaboration with the Zambia National Public Health Institute and the establishment of a Risk Communication and Community Engagement sub-committee) responded to the information needs of communities with posters and leaflets; sensitization in high-density areas; public service announcements on TV and radio; billboards (including in local languages); and SMS platforms that sent information and could receive and answer questions (Ministry of Health 2020). Multiple respondents (NGO, civil society) noted that there was some confusion with regard to reopening plans for the 2021 school calendar. Initially, the Ministry announced that the third term of 2020 was to run from January to March 2021. Later, teachers were advised to use accelerated education to complete their work; 2021 was to run with three terms as usual. This caused confusion for school administrators and teachers.³²

Monitor the situation regularly. After the second wave, additional monitoring visits were conducted in January 2021 by national and sub-national MoGE personnel and cooperating partners. This ensured continued compliance with health guidelines, which allowed schools to reopen during a heightened daily case count compared to September 2020.

Respondents (civil society, research, other education sector actors) noted significant complications in the health and school monitoring systems that prevented data from reaching policymakers, as well as a lack of formal coordination between education and health sector monitoring systems. In particular, health facilities that track school health were often not fed back to schools themselves, making it difficult to assess intervention impact at a school level (ZANEC 2020).³³

³⁰ Interview 1, 2, 4

³¹ Interview 36

³² Interview 13, 15.

³³ Interview 1, 12, 18

RtL Priority 3

Instructional time, curricula, learning support. This priority is recommended to sequentially follow the previous priority and focuses on ensuring that modifications to educational programs are made with attention to, and prioritization of, core learning objectives. Consideration of various catch-up options—and the financial and human resources needed for these—is recommended, as is considering the importance of ensuring that learning objectives also take learners’ psychosocial, social-emotional learning, and protection needs into consideration.

Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up. Even before COVID-19, there were examples of catch-up options targeting learners who had been out of school in Zambia. The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) methodology, supported currently by USAID in multiple countries, was promoted by cooperating partners and the MoGE as an established response that was also relevant for the current learning loss challenges. This program had served approximately 300,000 learners in Zambia prior to 2020, and was quickly extended to an additional 100,000 by May.³⁴ Respondents (donor, NGO) described TaRL’s significant impact in terms of both improved learning and access to education appropriate to learner age, and described the necessity to scale up the program for learners across the country.³⁵

Revise the academic calendar and schedule. With physical distancing a key indicator in the reopening checklists, schools across Zambia had to adapt their scheduling to ensure adherence. With an average primary pupil-teacher ratio of approximately 42.06, it was decided to offer multiple learning “streams” (i.e., shifts) that would accommodate fewer students to ensure proper physical distancing (World Bank 2017). Rotational schedules were determined at the school level, with most classes divided into two or three streams. This reduced instructional time by at least half.

From September 2020 until the end of the year, the academic calendar functioned normally. For 2021, all three school holidays were reduced by one or two weeks. However, this did not make up previous time but instead covered the three-week delay of reopening in January/February 2021.

Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials. Official guidance from the MoGE for teachers on adapting/condensing was to “use accelerated pedagogies” in order to attempt to not lose additional learning, but the guidance did not elaborate on this approach. Many stakeholders noted that there was not nearly enough support or guidance for schools (and especially for teachers) to do so effectively.³⁶ Efforts to support teachers and teaching is elaborated on under RtL Priority 5.

According to the MoGE, the AMEP programs were intended to supplement the shorter school days, as students could continue learning in the home in the afternoon, but this had limited effect.³⁷ According to

³⁴ Interview 8, 13

³⁵ Interview 8, 13

³⁶ Interview 13, 15, 25, 28

³⁷ Interview 34, 35, 36

NGO respondents, “there was a double learning loss: First during the school closures, and then another after their reopening.”³⁸

Curricula were not adapted at the national level. When assessments indicated that not all learners were benefiting from the AMEP programs, schools and teachers were advised to start from where they ended when schools closed: “We were guided that we start from where [teachers/classrooms] ended, but also to use the pedagogical approaches that accelerate the teaching and learning so that they cover a lot of content in a shorter period.”³⁹ Additional support, capacity development, or instructions were provided for specific projects—for example, via the GPE-funded implementation by VVOB or UNESCO trainings—but such support did not occur effectively at scale.⁴⁰

According to respondents (all levels), teachers and learners strongly felt the burden of adapting to each phase of the Contingency Plan. During distance learning, teachers required support and capacity development to use ICT, adapt lesson plans, and effectively teach via new mediums. In addition to access to radio, Internet, or TV, learners required new ICT skills and support adjusting to different modes of education. When schools reopened, teachers required distinct support and capacity development to use accelerated pedagogies, revise and adapt curricula, and manage classrooms with different levels of learners based on their engagement/continued learning throughout the closure. Students also had to adapt to new curricula and pedagogy—adapted by implementers, schools, or teachers—with strong focus on catching up on literacy and numeracy and exam preparation.

Identify learners’ social-emotional, protection, and academic needs. The official MoGE school reopening guidance emphasized the need for adequate WASH facilities, and projects addressed infrastructure challenges during the summer months leading up to general school reopening (MoGE 2020b). The Contingency Plan explicitly notes the need to ensure psychosocial and social-emotional support to learners (MoGE 2020a, 6). Specific projects address these needs, but respondents (NGO, civil society organizations) noted that mental health support needs for learners were high and available resources inadequate.⁴¹

Consider where distance learning should continue. As described above, learning during school closures was limited, with significant barriers to students accessing distance learning opportunities. The MoGE and other key actors described a need to improve on this access, given the possibility of future, similar crises. In an effort to increase radio coverage and access, the MoGE negotiated broadcasting rates with private radio stations to increase the reach of the MoGE’s national content; these negotiations were ongoing as of the beginning of 2021. Overall, for the 2020/2021 school year, in-person education was prioritized to ensure access to learning for all students.

Higher education institutions in Zambia have used distance learning methods since before the pandemic. For example, the University of Zambia has operated with two modes of delivery since it first opened in 1966. The purpose of offering distance learning was to increase access, specifically to those who faced barriers to in-person or full-time attendance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities that offered

³⁸ Interview 25

³⁹ Interview 24

⁴⁰ Interview 1, 3, 6, 8, 10, 15, 24, 25, 26

⁴¹ Interview 27, 29

distance options were prepared to pivot to distance mode using the mechanisms and platforms already in place.⁴²

Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming.

Respondents (donors, ministry, NGOs) described a lack of funding and capacity for country-wide scaling of catch-up options such as TaRL.⁴³ A significant lack of funding for all “recovery” and “post-recovery” activities as outlined in the Contingency Plan affected the ability to respond with appropriate catch-up programming options, in addition to the numerous other barriers to effective return to learning across the country. As of June 2021, these additional phases of the Contingency Plan were still unfunded.

RtL Priority 4

Exams and promotion. This priority encourages education planners and decision-makers to be strategic and methodical when considering if, how, and when to promote learners, and to carefully consider how to communicate and justify changes in examination processes and procedures.

Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis and identify which exams are a priority. The MoGE prioritized the examination grades for return to in-person classes over non-examination grades. Education classes (grades 7, 9, and 12) returned to school nearly three months earlier than the non-examination grades. National examinations were held in December 2020 instead of November to maximize teaching and learning. The Examination Council of Zambia made additional adjustments, such as an increase in the number of days to conduct the exams, to ensure that all protocols for physical distancing and clean facilities were established and followed.⁴⁴

Develop a learner promotion strategy. For non-examination classes, promotion to higher classes occurred automatically, as usual. Respondents (NGO, civil society) noted that the non-examination grades had much higher levels of lost learning because of six months out of school, which these respondents stressed will pose a problem in 2021 if learners are not properly caught up in time for 2021 exams.⁴⁵

Communicate with learners, families, and educators. Communication about examinations occurred alongside education updates via formal addresses by the MoGE and MoH. No additional communication to learners, families, or educators was described since there were few changes to the ways in which exams were administered.

Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place and Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams. The Examination Council of Zambia ensured monitoring systems to track student enrollment, payment, and grading of exams operated per

⁴² Interview 19

⁴³ Interview 6, 8, 10, 15, 24, 25, 26

⁴⁴ Interview 24

⁴⁵ Interview 25

pre-COVID-19 guidelines. No major changes to workforce or facilities (beyond ensuring physical distancing of exam takers) were reported.

RtL Priority 5

Educators and the learning space. This priority reminds education planners and decision-makers of the essential role of educators and other personnel, and their needs, preparation, and mobilization in planning to “welcome learners back safely” (MoGE 2020a). Workforce (including recruitment, deployment, certification) and capacity development (including both the professional and PSS needs of personnel) requirements are highlighted, as is the need to ensure that learning environments are safe. This priority also reminds education planners to ensure that adequate policy and financial support are available.

Revisit workforce needs. Teachers mostly continued working during the pandemic; most were deployed to new classrooms when the examination grades returned to in-person learning in June 2020. At that time, classes were split into smaller sizes to ensure physical distancing and following of health precautions. For some teachers, this meant they had less time for their pre-COVID-19 classroom students who were engaged in distance learning; these teachers now had two classrooms of students (the new examination class and the pre-COVID-19 class in distance mode).⁴⁶

Address educator capacity development needs. During the school reopening planning period, teachers were provided trainings related to safety and COVID-19; this included prevention and intensified hygiene practices; identifying sick learners; reporting mechanisms; and where to turn for resources.⁴⁷

Overall, for the distance learning phase of response, the Contingency Plan focused largely on the development and repackaging of learning material for different platforms, prioritizing radio but also including printing and distributing teaching, learning, and self-instruction materials. The plan emphasized that such materials should be inclusive of the most disadvantaged and marginalized children, and that materials targeting children with special educational needs should be developed. Support to teachers for distance learning was noted, but ministry respondents emphasized that the plan did not put adequate focus on how teacher capacity would be built during the distance learning or school reopening phases: “One main challenge is that when you look at the contingency plan, it is not clear on how teachers were going to support remote learning. Remote learning means both a learner and a teacher... use new methods.”⁴⁸ This was especially true once schools had reopened, with little support for teachers to learn new pedagogical approaches and condensing of the curriculum for accelerated learning. Ministry respondents noted that cooperating partners, many funded by the GPE grant, took on significant responsibility for supporting teachers.

⁴⁶ Interview 6

⁴⁷ Interview 2

⁴⁸ Interview 32

Implementing organizations and programs across the country offered support to teachers within their networks through a number of activities: VVOB staff (funded by the GPE grant) regularly visited schools (visits were ongoing in June 2021) to mentor teachers from early grades to Grade 9. This included support for TaRL methods, assessments, and monitoring. UNESCO provided capacity development for distance learning pedagogy, use of ICT, and approaches to accelerated teaching and learning. A UNESCO rapid assessment of teaching and learning during school closures noted that the capacity to use ICT was low for teachers, and especially so in rural areas.⁴⁹ Training manuals were developed for teachers, and official training was conducted at the Charles Lwanga College and the Technical and Vocational Teaching College. According to a ministry respondent, “360 teachers were trained via this project. This was good, but of course is a drop in the ocean compared to the total numbers of teachers in the country.”⁵⁰ Under the World Bank-funded Zambia Education Enhancement Project, teachers were trained on how to prepare self-learning materials, which learners could use without a teacher present: “The goal was that once that is done the materials that will be developed will be distributed to schools and we are hoping that the topics that are covered in those modules can help children to teach themselves even when there is no teacher.”⁵¹

There were numerous teacher support initiatives broadcast through radio and television. Teacher WhatsApp groups were used at school level to disseminate information and sharing of teacher tips. The MoGE leveraged this method, accessing previously established Teacher WhatsApp groups to support continuous professional development, including PDF print-ready materials.⁵²

Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings. Addressing infrastructure needs was a priority of the MoGE and education strategy pre-COVID-19. This was particularly true for secondary education, as lack of spaces and schools was cited as the primary barrier to increasing transition rates (UNICEF 2019). Building new schools across the country was one of four key priority areas for 2020, prior to the shifts that occurred because of the pandemic.⁵³ In particular, the Zambia Education Enhancement Project focused on building secondary schools in provinces, districts, and areas where there were no such schools, a project that has continued as planned since these challenges are relevant, too, during the pandemic. Under this project, there has been an increased focus on sanitation; for example, ensuring that schools have menstrual hygiene facilities. These priorities have been further emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they promote a safe school environment that can enhance physical distancing and hygiene practices.⁵⁴ Additional classroom blocks for refugee populations are to be built under ECW-funded interventions.

Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps. As is the case across all aspects of the return to learning process, funding to support capacity development of teachers was (and continues to be) insufficient.

⁴⁹ Interview 30

⁵⁰ Interview 32

⁵¹ Interview 35, I

⁵² Interview 15

⁵³ Interview 35, 36

⁵⁴ Interview 3

4. OUTCOMES OF THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS IN ZAMBIA TO DATE

This section outlines outcomes that resulted from decisions made when planning and implementing the return to learning process in Zambia. There were similarities between the initial COVID-19 responses in Zambia and those in the other case studies,⁵⁵ with all five countries seeking, first, to absorb the shock of COVID-19 by closing schools and resorting to distance learning strategies to protect the physical health and safety of teachers and learners, then subsequently seeking to institute longer term adaptive response strategies.

This section examines in more detail the outcomes⁵⁶ of these responses in Zambia across various levels of the education system, primarily: (1) learner, (2) teacher and school, (3) parent and community, and (4) national and ministry. There is an additional category for cross-cutting outcomes. This section also notes “pockets of promise”—opportunities identified during the pandemic response in Zambia that may, in future, be leveraged to build more system-wide adaptive capacities and contribute to systemic resilience.

LEARNER LEVEL OUTCOMES

There was a substantial lack of engagement with education during closures. Overwhelmingly, learners had limited engagement with distance learning during the 18 weeks of school closure (non-examination grades) across Zambia. According to a respondent (university researcher): “Overall, the children did not learn anything during COVID. You cannot count 2020 as an academic year for most groups.”⁵⁷ The SCREAM report, in addition the majority of respondents across all levels, underlined this fact. Challenges to accessing distance learning included insufficient Internet, TV, or radio coverage; low digital literacy; limited access to printed material; electricity disruptions; and insufficient readily available content (ZANEC 2020).

This lack of engagement with education during closures is an important point of consideration for Zambia moving forward; the following exhibits (6 and 7) have been adapted from the SCREAM assessment to provide specific data on this point. The study targeted learners in ECE, primary, and secondary education levels. Exhibit 6 shows the hours learners spend studying per day and Exhibit 7 the type of learning modality used.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The findings of the five case studies are synthesized in the associated RtL Synthesis Report.

⁵⁶ In considering the following as “outcomes,” bear in mind that, at the time of this research, the return to learning process for COVID-19 was far from “over.” As such, many of the research questions and objectives evolved, with documentation and description of decision-making and planning a key point of focus for the research activities. The following section reflects notable changes at various levels of the system that were described by key stakeholders throughout the duration of this research, but with acknowledgement of the still unpredictable and changing nature of the pandemic at the time of writing.

⁵⁷ Interview 14

⁵⁸ The SCREAM assessment targeted 501 schools in ten provinces (50 per province plus one additional school in three districts of each province). The Directorate of Standards at the MoGE led the methodological decision-making, working directly with Provincial Education Officers to select districts and schools. The SCREAM monitoring teams were made up of ZANEC member organizations and MoGE officials.

Exhibit 6. Type of distance learning used during school closures. Data adapted from ZANEC, 2020, p. 23.

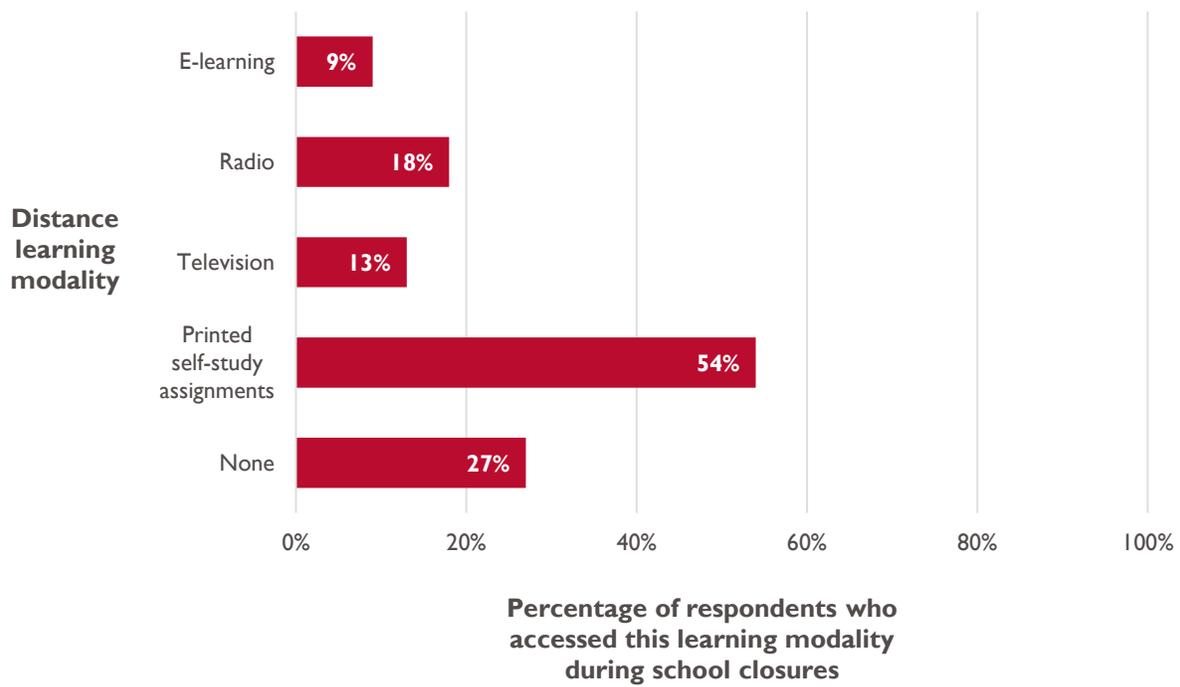
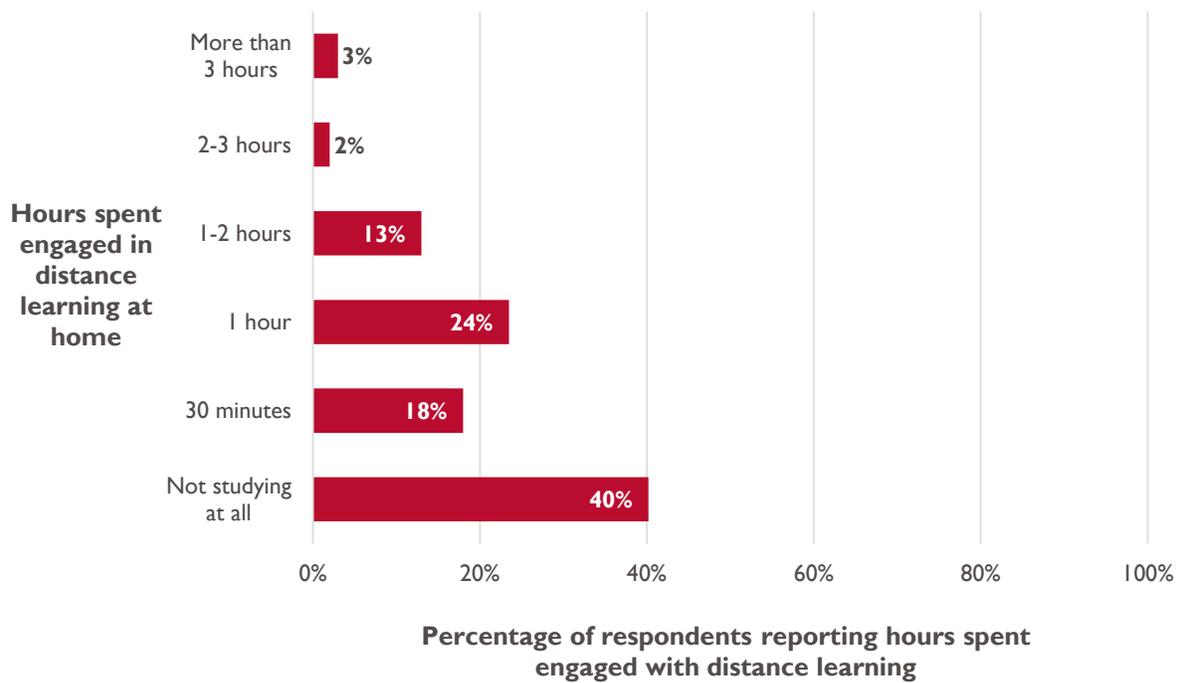


Exhibit 7. Type of distance learning used during school closures. Data adapted from ZANEC, 2020, p. 29.



While the SCREAM assessment outlines engagement with education during initial school closures (March–August, 2020), by 2021, there was ongoing study and monitoring by numerous organizations to assess learning loss for the non-examination grades. Initial reports and small-scale assessments (e.g., from implementers such as VVOB) show significant loss. Upon reopening, too, there was a significant reduction in time spent in school due to the multiple streams used to enable physical distancing. Respondents (donor, NGO) noted that “Primary learners were really affected because learners were expected to only be in school for about two hours a day and on a rotational basis. So if a child goes to school Monday/Wednesday/Friday in one week then they will go only Tuesday/Thursday in the next.”⁵⁹ The learning loss is, thus, twofold: firstly, during school closures and then, during reduced learning hours after reopening.

Learning loss is likely greater for those who were already more marginalized, including children living in rural areas, those with lower socioeconomic status, girls, and children with specialized educational needs. According to one respondent (civil society) “There were so many plans and ideas for distance learning, but they just were not equitable and a lot of children could not engage.”⁶⁰ Studies have shown increasing rates of child marriage and teenage pregnancy over the course of the pandemic, both globally and in Zambia specifically (UNICEF 2020). For examination classes, the return rate was not considerably different for girls versus boys, but data were not yet available for return rates in the non-examination classes, which numerous respondents emphasized may be different due to the extended time children were out of school.

Examination passing rates for 2020 were very close to prior years for all examination grades. This outcome likely reflects the MoGE decision to prioritize the examination grades, meaning that those learners did not miss out on significant periods of in-person learning. According to the examination results released in April 2021, passing rates did not decrease notably for 2020.⁶¹ Respondents (numerous levels) noted that this will, of course, only be true of 2020, as the rising examination grade learners who will take exams in 2021 will have to make up for the 18 weeks of lost learning prior to that exam.

TEACHER-LEVEL AND SCHOOL-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Health and school safety was the utmost priority in reopening efforts, and was implemented effectively. There was significant focus on ensuring that schools were able to meet safety standards for reopening as outlined in the MoGE Guidance Document for Reopening Schools (MoGE 2020b). The SCREAM study concluded in June that 92 percent of schools assessed were able to meet the general safety measures (ZANEC 2020). Teachers were targeted with sensitization and education campaigns, as well, including how to identify sick learners, what to do, and resources.⁶²

⁵⁹ Interview 8

⁶⁰ Interview 1

⁶¹ Only announcement of passing rates was available at the time of writing. Numerous key informants noted that national examinations are norm-referenced, and thus further study may be necessary to assess the performance of students on 2020 compared to 2019 or other prior exams.

⁶² Interview 2

A ministry respondent noted that “We worked hard at the Ministry level because we knew that when parents take their children to school, they are entrusting us to keep them safe. We worked hard to assure this and communicated to them specifically to ‘please bring your children, we are ready and will take care of them’... We saw a positive response [i.e., learners returned]. We knew that they had their trust and so the health guidelines remain a priority for schools.”⁶³

POCKETS OF PROMISE

Effective response in terms of establishing school safety



Teachers remained engaged and, through targeted programs (especially those funded by the GPE grant) were offered support for adapting their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, such teacher support did not occur at scale. Teachers remained employed and, thus, engaged, throughout the course of the pandemic, as many were shifted to the examination grades between June and September of 2020. Teachers were mainly supported with safety and health precautions, and less for adaptations needed for learning itself. This was true of the distance learning period, but even more so during return to learning.

Teachers were supported in the use of ICT and distance learning pedagogies, as well as for remedial and accelerated education, through implementing organizations’ programs. Many of these were funded via the GPE grant. Respondents at all levels noted that, while effective for participating teachers and schools, such support was insufficient at a national level. Moving forward, significant investment will be required to support the efforts of making up learning loss, and interviews regularly noted that this cannot fall on teachers or schools that are not equipped to do so.⁶⁴

At the higher education level, distance education was already integrated into the options for many schools and programs. At the University of Zambia Institute of Distance Education, for example, distance education has been a mode of delivery since its formation in 1966 as a means to increase access. During the pandemic, these programs were able to continue operating as planned, with minor adjustments to accommodate student needs related to COVID-19.

POCKETS OF PROMISE

Methods for distance learning pedagogy and practice in place at Tertiary Level



While this study was unable to focus closely on the exact responses at the tertiary level, many respondents noted that there was much to be learned from the higher education institutions and their ability to adapt. According to a respondent (university), there is significant expertise and experience related to pedagogy and practice of distance learning that could be leveraged to other parts of the system. In particular, there were ways in which this distance learning program adapted to student need, as such adaptation and student-centered approaches were already conceived of as foundational to the success of distance learning.⁶⁵

PARENT- AND COMMUNITY-LEVEL OUTCOMES

According to interviews—in particular, with civil society organizations—**many schools and teachers report an increase in parental engagement.** Much of this occurred during the school closures

⁶³ Interview 24

⁶⁴ Interview 13

⁶⁵ Interview 9

because of the lack of support or options available to students and included examples such as newly established pathways of communication between schools and teachers and WhatsApp groups for parents to share resources.⁶⁶ There were specific community radio programs that targeted parents during school closures; for example the USAID-funded “Parents as Partners” initiative, which offered advice for parents to support their children’s learning at home.⁶⁷

At the community level, both decision-making and support to schools was collaborative. In addition to schools and civil society organizations, church bodies, unions, and traditional leaders were involved.⁶⁸ Radio programming was largely implemented through community radio stations, ensuring that material was relevant and appropriate for contexts.⁶⁹

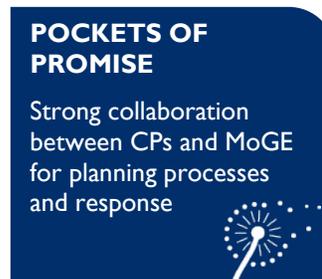
NATIONAL- AND MINISTRY-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Coordination and collaboration between education stakeholders were timely and effective throughout the 2020 response. The quick coordination between stakeholders to produce the Education Contingency Plan in April 2020 led directly to Zambia receiving GPE funding in the first round of its accelerated funding mechanism. This funding allowed significant, immediate action to quickly fulfill the first actions planned. Respondents (at all levels) described the strong collaboration and coordination between education stakeholders, in partnership with the MoGE, as an important “success story.”⁷⁰

Stakeholders strategically mapped efforts to avoid duplication, leveraged programming already in place to ensure access to marginalized learners, and networked to ensure funding for important measures: “In the TWG, all partners shared their plans, their information, their ideas; it created a network to identify priority areas for each implementer.”⁷¹ While much of the decision-making and planning was centralized, there was also wide consultation with key stakeholders and partners, and across levels of government (from MoGE and MoH to sub-national levels such as province and district) throughout 2020.⁷²

Coordination was successfully conducted via virtual platforms, which offered increased opportunity for more localized participation at decreased cost. This was exemplified by the Joint Annual Review in August 2020 when the decision to reopen schools was made. According to multiple respondents (donor, NGO, civil society), this learning should be taken forward: “We learned that we can do communication and collaboration much more cheaply via virtual platforms.”⁷³

All school fees in general education were eliminated. While primary education up to grade 7 had already eliminated fees prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this new policy applied to grades 8–12 to support households struggling during the economic downturn of the pandemic. Eliminating these



⁶⁶ Interview 2

⁶⁷ Interview 15, 13

⁶⁸ Interview 1

⁶⁹ Interview 9, 13

⁷⁰ Interview 8, 13, 18, 20, 28

⁷¹ Interview 8

⁷² Interview 2

⁷³ Interview 1

additional school fees was well-intentioned, but there were some negative consequences. ZANEC conducted a study on the impacts of this policy, noting both a decrease in the quality of education provided in classrooms and considerable operational and financial challenges for schools. The report outlines recommendations that emphasize expedient grants to support schools and potential adjustments to the policy (ZANEC 2021b).

While there have been significant efforts to research and assess various aspects of the education system and COVID-19, national-level data on learning are not readily available. In addition, coordination between and within sectors (such as health) for sharing data was challenging, with many gaps in pathways of communication. For example, health facilities track school-level health data but do not share these data directly back to schools (ZANEC 2020). School-level health data are not streamlined to share with regional and national education administrators. Thus, monitoring school-level health data for decision-making and policy was not streamlined for COVID-19. For learning data, respondents (donor, civil society) noted this as well: “We need better documentation to measure change over time. Even the 2020 statistics will not reflect much when they are released, as data is collected every year in March when COVID-19 had just begun.”⁷⁴ In addition, adapting monitoring processes to be virtual or use more ICT was difficult, especially in rural areas.⁷⁵

CROSS-CUTTING OUTCOMES: EQUITY AND INCLUSION

The Contingency Plan centers marginalized learners; as a result, the GPE grant was administered to projects that largely focused on rural, poorer provinces and those that specifically targeted marginalized learners such as girls. This focus on equity and inclusion is likely partially explained by Zambia’s strong historical focus on equity and inclusivity in its national education strategies and policies since the country’s founding. However, implementation occurred on a limited scale due to resource constraints and, thus, many marginalized learners across the country have not benefited and, instead, may have become more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

POCKETS OF PROMISE

History of policy and practice prioritizing equity and inclusion led to it being embedded in COVID-19 response



Over the course of 2020, there was significant investment in developing resources for radio programs and streamlining pathways of delivery to the most marginalized. Because of limited access to e-learning platforms and Internet, radio programming was prioritized to reach the most learners possible with distance learning. Increasing access to radios costs less than other Internet-based options, including solar and other self-powered radios for contexts with limited or unpredictable electricity. Producing lessons for radio (and subsequently television) was a main priority, and such resources will provide a foundation for future distance learning (MoGE 2020a).

The MoGE and its cooperating partners recognized early on that non-technology, non-electrical methods of learning material would also be necessary to reach locations where there was no radio coverage. **Printed study materials were also used, and it was clear that this strategy was**

⁷⁴ Interview I, II

⁷⁵ Interview I

necessary to reach certain learners. Self-study materials were developed by the Zambia College of Distance Education and other implementing partners and schools across the country.⁷⁶

Across the country, there were a myriad of unique and context-specific outreach efforts to the most marginalized and those who could not access any of the ICT-based options for distance learning. AMEP, under the DODE, already had programs in place that targeted out-of-school children and youth (also open to adults) for evening classes. Even before the pandemic, these were free and had no age restriction or uniform requirement.⁷⁷ The MoGE paid teachers an extra-duty allowance to teach these courses. The CAMFED association scaled its curriculum to new communities, targeting girls to ensure continued learning and a return to schools.⁷⁸ The World Bank-funded Keep Girls in School program increased support to vulnerable girls in its implementation sites.⁷⁹ Back-to-school campaigns run by multiple partners (e.g., Plan International, Save the Children, and World Vision) ensured outreach to the most remote and rural communities with COVID-19-related health information and to promote a return to schools in September.⁸⁰

5. USAID’S RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK AND THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS IN ZAMBIA

USAID RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID’s Resilience Framework relates to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19 as shown in Exhibit 8 (Shah 2019). This research set out to better understand how this framework can be applied more effectively.

⁷⁶ Interview 22

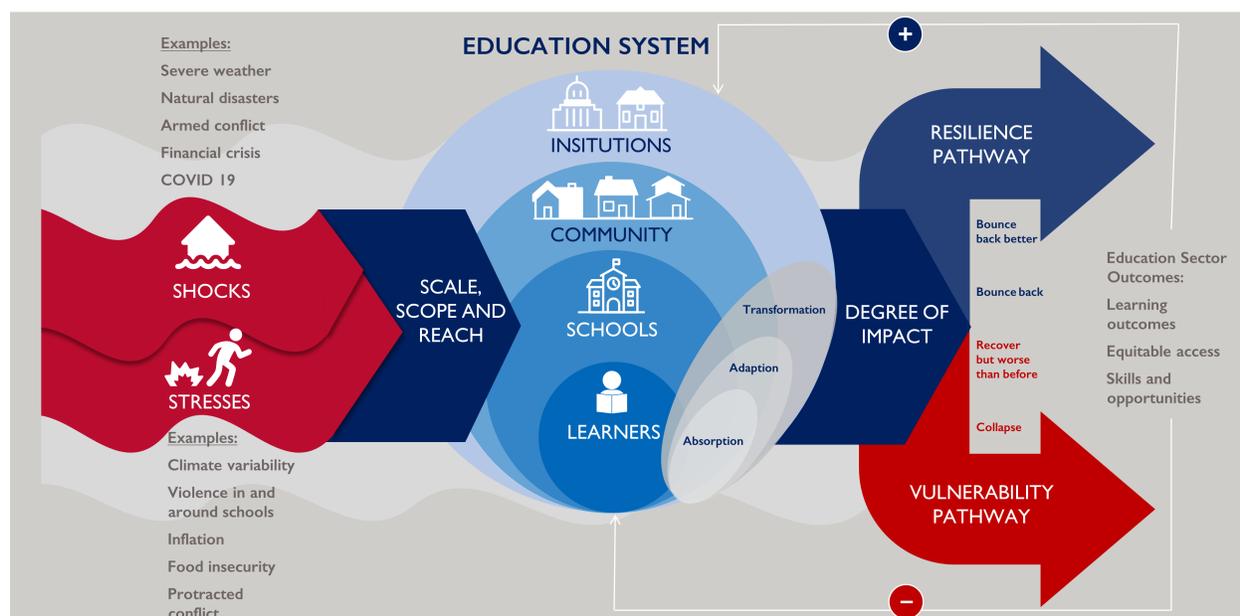
⁷⁷ Interview 1, 3, 6, 33, 35, 36

⁷⁸ Interview 22

⁷⁹ Interview 12

⁸⁰ Interview 27

Exhibit 8. Pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19



Reconceptualizing COVID-19 from a *shock* to a *stressor* over the course of the pandemic affected countries' responses and this research. According to the USAID Resilience White Paper:

Shocks are typically short-term, acute deviations from long-term trends that have substantial negative effects on people's current state of wellbeing, level of assets, livelihoods, and safety or their ability to withstand future shocks. Stressors, on the other hand, tend to be chronic, long-term trends, pressures, or protracted crisis that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it. (Shah 2019)

The terminology itself is less important than the underlying change in perception and, thus, response to the COVID-19 crisis. Our research trajectory, in fact, serves as a microcosm of sorts in terms of adapting questions, methods, ideas, and assumptions as the duration and nature of the pandemic evolved. In each country context, COVID-19 interacted with other shocks and stressors in unique ways, with both similar and contrasting impacts on the education system. While scale, scope, and reach of the pandemic differed, so too did the ways in which each country's education system responded in attempts to mitigate impact. Ultimately, the relationships and interactions between COVID-19's impact and the underlying political, economic, social norms/structures, and processes of response were illuminated in unique ways in each of the five case studies, with each case study demonstrating specific characteristics and qualities of resilience. The accompanying synthesis report offers in-depth analysis of resilience across these contexts.

RESILIENCE IN ZAMBIA

At the beginning of the pandemic, education systems worldwide launched into COVID-19 responses with great uncertainty and, largely, in "emergency mode." Given the sudden onset of such an unfamiliar threat, these response strategies were logical. Education systems around the world prioritized securing the health and safety of their teachers and learners, and ensuring they maintained some connection to

each other and to learning through remote measures. Countries have now started making plans for what a more sustained response will look like.

In considering resilience, Zambia's response (like most countries) is first understood in terms of the capacities that were present before the pandemic that could be effectively leveraged in response to the crisis. Examples of these capacities include:

(a) Mechanisms and structures of coordination and collaboration

The Zambian education response to COVID-19 was characterized by swift, thorough planning and strong collaboration from day one with an extensive network of stakeholders. The Education Contingency Plan outlines emergency, recovery, and post-recovery actions with budget lines for each, reflecting an awareness of the need for planning beyond “emergency mode” that may be unique from other country responses. An effective network of stakeholders with structures and practices of communication, collaboration, and coordination was already present. This network included global and national-level actors (ministry, donor, United Nations, national-level civil society, and NGOs), as well as regional and local actors (such as those NGOs that implement in specific areas, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, and unions). During the pandemic, these networks mobilized to quickly craft the Contingency Plan, leading to Zambia being one of the first countries to receive GPE funding. This process was a notable success, as described across the majority of research interviews. In addition, the coordination mechanisms within this network allowed for efficient sharing of practices and activities, providing a clear picture of gaps in coverage and funding.

This network was also able to collect and disseminate information quickly; interviews overwhelmingly noted the large number of studies, assessments, and research conducted in 2020 and 2021 to understand various aspects of the response and the pandemic's impact on learners.

(b) A strong historical focus on equity and inclusion

Zambian education systems, planning, and strategy have long reflected the prioritization of reaching the most marginalized learners. A 1996 Government of Zambia document entitled “Educating Our Future” noted that “where access, participation and achievement in education are impeded by gender, physical, mental, economic, or social factors, the government will seek to eliminate sources of educational disadvantage in order to enhance equity... the concept of equity in education necessitates the diversification of the curriculum in order to suit different abilities, talents and interests” (GRZ 1996). Since that time, numerous policies have upheld this commitment, for example, by reaffirming the rights of girls to re-enter education after giving birth (see [Overview of the Zambian education system](#)).

In recent years, significant advances have been made in regard to education equity indicators (UNICEF 2019; GPE 2019). Respondents noted the fear that such progress may be undone because of the pandemic.⁸¹ Respondents also noted that Zambia is characterized by significant inequity. Despite much effort and investment in closing these gaps (for education specifically but also across other sectors), tremendous disparity endures.

⁸¹ Interview 13

There are many other examples of mechanisms that offer opportunities to learn and to scale. As outlined in the previous section, these include the following pockets of promise: (a) programs and methods for catch-up and remedial learning at the primary and secondary levels; (b) programs and methods for distance learning, including pedagogy at the tertiary level; and (c) structures, including an already-established directorate, for distance learning and alternative modes of learning. With numerous national and sector strategic plans ending in 2021, including the current seventh National Development Plan and the Education and Skills Sector Plan, there is an opportunity to continue these promising programs and approaches. Notably, the current Education and Skills Sector Plan included the AMEP programs; with lessons from COVID-19, there may be potential for more resources to be allocated to fully invest in this.

Overall, there is much potential in Zambia for these pockets of promise to be examined for their potential to scale, and for them to be funded as an investment in overall systems resilience going forward. Indeed, many interviews for this research emphasized the role of organizational learning in contributing to overall resilience:

In terms of resilience, it was like the first school closures were a ‘pilot’ in terms of how we adapted. Now, we will only be able to understand our resilience if we see what we learned then in order to use it during a second wave.⁸²

*I think [COVID] gave us an opportunity to reconsider our interventions and understand how they are limited in terms of effectiveness if we have a crisis. It’s an opportunity there to look at how we create a resilient system – going forward, what can we do better? I think that is the big question we have now: ‘What can we do and how are we going to do it?’ We have realized the gaps, so then how do we try to address these gaps **going forward**. And I think that is an opportunity, because without this wake-up call maybe we would have not realized just how vulnerable our system is.⁸³*

However, the resilience of Zambia’s education system is deeply entwined with and dependent on the resilience of the country’s economy. As described in the context sections above, in the years leading up to 2020, the Zambian economy had become increasingly fragile and vulnerable to shocks such as fluctuating copper prices and climate-related agricultural losses. Ultimately, COVID-19 found Zambia in an already-vulnerable position with questionable ability to withstand the additional economic shocks caused by the pandemic.

Resilience of all sectors in Zambia are intrinsically tied to the resilience of the economy, including those most relevant to the challenges of the last year, such as public health. With decreasing public expenditure on education—and across all sectors—it is important to acknowledge that there are significant financial barriers to recovery and building resilience. Dependence on foreign aid to fill some of the country’s financing gaps is necessary, but unsustainable. Still, based on the pockets of promise and lessons learned on resilience during COVID-19, the education sector has significant potential to help build a more resilient and diverse economy.

⁸² Interview 17

⁸³ Interview 12

6. CONCLUSION

In many ways, Zambia provides a unique perspective of a country that demonstrates strong planning for equity and inclusion and systematic resilience, and yet is constrained in its development by continued and increasing macroeconomic vulnerability. The Education Contingency Plan, for example, aligns closely with RtL priorities, yet, many of its medium and longer-term plans will go unrealized once funding is exhausted. In this way, an education system may remain “stuck” on the pathway *toward* resilience while never reaching it because of overwhelming and perhaps insurmountable barriers. For education, this has meant that Zambia struggles to move beyond this initial response phase regardless of examples of good practice and strong coordination and networking capacity. Perhaps the most significant impact is on its ability to move beyond access and toward quality learning as learners and systems recover in the years to come.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>1. Planned Process for RtL: What was the process by which countries planned for/are planning for the return to learning during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. What policies and plans exist or were developed to support the return to learning?</p> <p>b. What were key triggers/decision points when planning the return to learning, and what factors contributed to the decisions made?</p> <p>c. Who was involved in decision-making, and how were decisions made about the return to learning across the education continuum (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, technical training)? What were the explicit (and implicit) priorities?</p> <p>d. Were the decision-making processes harmonious, across different stakeholders?</p>
<p>2. Actual Process for RtL: What was/is the actual process by which countries returned/are returning to learning (from an implementation perspective) during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How did countries reach and retain marginalized populations; adapt the academic calendar; adapt instructional time, curricula and learning supports (including integrating distance learning); modify exams and learner promotion practices; and re-engage educators and prepare infrastructure?</p> <p>b. What were the key challenges and opportunities that emerged to ensuring a safe, equitable, and inclusive return to learning, especially regarding (but not limited to) safety and wellbeing; communication, consultation, and collaboration; monitoring, evaluating, and learning; and policy and funding?</p> <p>c. Which learners became (further) marginalized by the actual return to learning process?</p> <p>d. What strategies were common across contexts; which strategies had particular relevance to specific countries? What contextual, political, or other factors seem to explain the differences between planned and actual RtL processes?</p> <p>e. How were strategies changed or adapted in response to contextual factors (e.g., insecurity, rising COVID tests, political transitions, natural hazards)?</p>
<p>3. Appreciating Shock/Stress Context for RtL: What are the ways in which COVID-19 intersects with ongoing shocks and stressors in context and do these additional shocks/stressors affect some populations more than others? (i.e., Are certain populations/ demographics/ locations more vulnerable due to additional shocks/stressors?)</p>	<p>a. How has this been identified and tracked through the return to learning period?</p> <p>b. How are response efforts recognizing and responding to the differential impacts of the pandemic on communities, educators/school personnel and learners, and targeting action accordingly?</p>
<p>4. Identifying Pockets of Promise in RtL: How are educational decision makers seeking to identify not only problems/issues with the COVID-19 response, but also where things</p>	<p>a. This may include investigation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Local level autonomy vs. the need for centralized decision-making support</i> – <i>Communication between teachers and parents</i>

<p>went well and seeking to build off of these “pockets of promise”?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Capacity of educators and policymakers to adapt quickly and nimbly; the functionality/local leadership of coordination mechanisms</i> - <i>Focus and attention on student well-being, pre-existing contingency plans and structure, etc.</i> - <i>Role of non-state actors and potentially the private sector or civil society in supporting educational continuity</i> - <i>Coherence between education actors and health, humanitarian, protection, social protection or other actors</i> - <i>The extent to which these ‘pockets of promise’ are absorptive/adaptive vs potentially transformative</i> <p>b. How can these “pockets of promise” be built upon/strengthened so as to embed as common practice in the education system as a whole? And particularly, from an inclusion/equity standpoint?</p>
<p>5. Outcomes of RtL Process: Retrospectively, according to key stakeholders, what positive and negative, intended and unintended consequences were observed as a result of decisions made when planning the return to learning?</p>	<p>a. What were the intended or unintended outcomes of the return to learning process on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Equitable and inclusive access to education?</i> - <i>Learners’ well-being or ability to cope with adversity?</i> - <i>Promoting or inhibiting learners’ resumption of learning?</i> - <i>Building resilience of learners, schools, families, communities, and the education system?</i> <p>b. What do key stakeholders identify as the most important lessons learned from the return-to-learning process?</p>
<p>6. Utility of USAID Frameworks: To what extent are USAID’s RtL and Resilience and Education Frameworks useful for conceptualizing, planning, and carrying out the return to learning during and after an education disruption such as COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How could the frameworks be amended, adapted, or contextualized in light of what has been learned in the application of them to examining educational responses in a range of country contexts (for example, by specifying in greater detail adaptive, absorptive, transformative capacities, or thinking about exposure and sensitivity to risk)?</p> <p>b. How are the two frameworks related/how do they inform one another? What can we say to the hypothesis that enhanced resilience capacities within entities engaged in the RtL process will enhance the potential that the RtL is equitable, minimizes learning loss, etc.</p>
<p>7. Perception of Education as a National Priority: How is/has education being/been positioned as a key driver for national COVID-19 response and recovery efforts?</p>	<p>a. How is/has cross-sectoral approaches and perspective affecting/affected this positioning, especially in regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>education as a site for strengthening lines of communication between health officials and communities about the pandemic</i> - <i>use of education as a vehicle for workforce upskilling/ redeployment</i> - <i>balancing public trust in schools’ health/safety measures, with student demand/need for protection and return to learning and the need for equitable provision of learning (social capital)</i> - <i>continuity of education as a part of a social protection strategy, portfolio, or package</i>

	<p>– coherence of the national COVID-19 public health strategy and the education return to learning strategy (i.e., the prioritization of the education workforce for vaccinations as they become available⁸⁴)</p>
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⁸⁴ See: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/immunization/sage/covid/sage-prioritization-roadmap-covid19-vaccines.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=bf227443_2

APPENDIX C: CHECKLIST: RETURN TO LEARNING DURING CRISES PRIORITIES⁸⁵

✓	(RE)ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED
	Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups.
	Collaborate with communities to (re)engage all learners.
	Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time.
	Promote alternative pathways back to education.
	Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education.
✓	DEVELOP EDUCATION REOPENING PLANS
	Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making.
	Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance.
	Develop an outbreak response plan at the school-level.
	Communicate clearly and consistently.
	Monitor the situation regularly.
✓	ADAPT INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, CURRICULA, AND LEARNING SUPPORTS
	Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up.
	Revise the academic calendar and schedule.
	Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials.
	Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs.
	Consider where distance learning should continue.
	Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming.
✓	MODIFY EXAMS AND LEARNER PROMOTION PRACTICES
	Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis.
	Identify which exams are a priority.
	Develop a learner promotion strategy.
	Communicate with learners, families, and educators.
	Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place.
	Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams.
✓	RE-ENGAGE EDUCATORS AND PREPARE THE LEARNING SPACE
	Revisit workforce needs.
	Address educator capacity development needs.
	Develop or revise policy to meet education workforce needs.
	Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings.
	Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps.

⁸⁵ Boisvert K. and N. Weisenhorn, 2020