

POLICY BRIEFING

28 JANUARY 2022

Policy and programme considerations to address education challenges in Malawi due to Covid-19 disruptions

On 23 March 2020, the Malawi Government announced the closure of all schools to contain the spread of Covid-19. A gradual re-opening plan was announced and fully implemented in October 2020. Schools were then closed again in January 2021 due to a surge in Covid-19 cases, followed by teacher industrial action which impacted on learning and dropouts as learners were sent home or left unattended during the stand-off. Schools were then reopened in March 2021. This brief explores the challenges children faced in accessing education during school closures, and the continued challenges they face in returning to school and catching up on lost learning despite ongoing mitigation efforts. It draws on these findings to offer policy and programme recommendations to support ongoing efforts to mitigate the impacts of the crisis on learning in Malawi and to build a more resilient education system in the future.

Key messages

-  Distance learning has helped some children in Malawi continue to learn through school closures, but many were unable to access the necessary technologies and uptake was low.
-  Direct and indirect school fees, pregnancy, and child marriage among leading causes of school dropouts.
-  Children are struggling to catch up after returning to school due to timetable disruptions and lack of teacher training to support remedial learning.



Evidence of the need for greater action to mitigate lost learning

Distance learning uptake has been limited

The Ministry of Education (MoE), with support from partners, introduced emergency distance learning to mitigate learning gaps during school closures. Radio programmes were publicly broadcast for primary school students covering numeracy, science and literacy (Chichewa and English). Various initiatives have been distributing solar-powered radios to rural and vulnerable groups to support access to radio learning. Online learning for secondary school students was extended through an agreement with Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM) to provide free online access to courses on the MoE website at no data cost. The MoE collaborated with non-profit organisations to provide 700 households in rural villages with low-cost customised tablets with offline learning material with plans to extend to an additional 5000 households. Some schools have continued to provide some form of remote learning since schools reopening, suggesting some of these programmes may outlast the crisis.

Despite the implementation of these measures, uptake appears to be quite low. A survey of headteachers from 374 schools found that more than half of schools did not adopt any remote learning strategies during the two periods of lockdown. Limited uptake of radio and online learning has been attributed to households' inability to access the necessary technologies.

According to 2020 data from the National Statistics Office, just under half of all households (46%) own a functional radio, 15% have internet access and only 3% own computers. The costs of batteries for radios and data for mobile phones were also cited as barriers, while some areas lack electricity and experience blackouts or internet connectivity problems.

School fees, pregnancy, and child marriage

A nationally representative survey found that 4.3% of Malawian students dropped out of school between February 2020 and March 2021. This dropout rate is higher than the dropout rate from the previous academic year of 1.2-1.3%. The leading causes for dropping out of school based on this survey were cited as prohibitive school fees for boys, and marriage or pregnancy for girls. A spike in teenage pregnancy of more than 40,000 and a further 12,995 child marriages were reported during the first period of school closures.

“My niece was a well-behaved girl, but she fell pregnant during the second school closure. She was in form 2 and we were all surprised that she became pregnant.”

- Female respondent, Balaka, February 2021



A young boy attending class in a community school of the capital of Malawi, Lilongwe.
CREDIT: Marcel Crozet / International Labour Organization (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

This evidence is supported by qualitative data collected through repeated in-depth interviews with a small number of respondents from rural and urban Mpika and Balaka. The study found that several households are continuing to face financial challenges in sending their children back to school.

None of the respondents reported recovering income that was lost during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis or from the drop in livelihoods since markets have reopened. Education is one area where some households have had to reduce expenditure.

“I have seven children in primary school, and they are frequently sent back because I cannot manage to pay the development fund. Each child is required to pay between K500 (\$0.61) and K800 (\$0.98) per term, now for seven children it is too much for me.”

- Female respondent, Balaka, November 2021

Children are struggling to catch up after returning to school

Remedial learning for children who are experiencing difficulties in specific subject areas has been promoted by the MoE to mitigate learning disruptions during school closures. However, interviews with teachers found that they are strained in providing these lessons due to understaffing and resource constraints. Changes to school timetables to accommodate social distancing measures has caused disruptions to learners' productivity.

“Learners in standard three go to school at 10 am so it is hard for parents to divide their time to prepare children for school and run some errands to support the home, be it going to the farm. This implies that I can only leave home after my child has gone to school. Before Covid-19 children were going to school early in the morning, say by 7 am, and we had enough time to work in the garden.”

- Female respondent, Mchinji, August 2021

Parents are also struggling to support children with their learning at home due to the added demands on

them to maintain household subsistence through the economic challenges brought on by the pandemic.

“At first we encouraged them to study but it has been a long time and not any hope. The responsibility of taking care of their needs has also increased. We need to think about what they can eat in the morning since they used to get school meals and now, we cannot manage to give them breakfast.”

- Male respondent, Balaka, March 2021

Children with disabilities have faced barriers to education prior to the pandemic, but these were exacerbated even for those children that have managed to access appropriate services in the past. Measures were implemented to support children with disabilities such as accessible messages on Covid-19 prevention, and provision of radios and personal protective equipment for learners. However, the MoE has acknowledged that these have been inadequate.

A telephone survey of 99 parents and carers of children with disabilities found they were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with the educational experiences of their children during the pandemic. A significant number reported that they had no contact with the school or the teachers during closures and that children with disabilities spent very little time on formal learning activities.



A day in a primary school in Malawi CREDIT: GPE/Tara O'Connell (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Policy and programme recommendations



Additional material support is needed for households to access distance learning

Radio and online instruction can be used to disseminate learning materials but access to appropriate technologies is limited in Malawi. Scaling-up initiatives such as solar powered radios, tablets and free internet access to learning materials may extend the reach of these EdTech solutions, but evidence on their effectiveness in the Malawian context is limited.



Training is needed to ensure teachers and communities can support distance learning in future crises

Helping students to remain focused and motivated while learning by distance, in addition to developing technical skills to use appropriate technologies are critical. Teachers and communities require training on how best to support students' learning needs by distance.



Poor households require financial support or school fee waivers

Many households are experiencing economic hardship because of the pandemic and are unable to pay for children's education. To cut down on household costs during the, many have had to discontinue funding their children's education. These households require financial support to prevent their children dropping out of school.



Measures to address teen pregnancy and child marriage are needed to prevent more girls dropping out

This is a longstanding challenge in Malawi that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Cash transfers and other support to keep girls in school can have a positive effect on reducing child marriage in Malawi.



Teacher training and resources need to be scaled up to meet learners' needs

Disruptions to school timetables and parents' limited capacity to support their children's learning due ongoing pressures of the pandemic mean that children's learning environments have yet to stabilise. Remedial learning will be needed to prevent student from falling behind. Some groups may be at even greater risk, such as children with disabilities, whose access to appropriate learning resources were already limited prior to the pandemic.

Further reading

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