

## CORONAVIRUS

# Covid-19 deepens Kenya's educational divide

Pierra Nyaruai 9 Jul 2020



On March 15, Kenya's government shut down the country's schools. 17 million learners were told to stay at home in an effort to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. (Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP)

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## NEWS ANALYSIS

**O**n March 15, Kenya's government shut down the country's schools. Seventeen million learners were told to stay at home in an effort to contain the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is not a school holiday. Children are expected to keep learning, with schools and universities scrambling to facilitate distance learning, and parents are having to become teachers.

Joyce Wanjiru is a single mother. She looks after her two sons, aged 15 and 10, and a seven-year-old daughter. Wanjiru sells vegetables on the side of the highway that links Nakuru with Nyahururu. She earns just enough to feed and clothe her family. In normal times, Kenya's system of free public education means that her kids go to school, and she can usually afford whatever supplies they need.

But now that things have changed, Wanjiru is struggling to keep up.

"Since school was suspended, I have to buy more food since they are home, and pay for learning aid," she told the *Mail & Guardian*. "I have a friend who's a teacher, so she sends me exams they can revise with. I know it's not a curriculum, but it ensures they don't forget the basics of their classwork. They also teach each other. I'm not usually there to supervise, but they show me

[their] work when I get home. They also help me with farmwork now they are free some of the time, so that keeps them away from bad company.”

Wanjiru dropped out of school after standard six, so she struggles to teach the schoolwork to her children, or to correct their work. At this stage, she just wants to make sure they keep reading — and don't forget what they have learned already.

The situation is very different for Lilian Madogi, whose children attend a private school in Nakuru. With access to computers and the internet, and able to afford a one-off fee of 3 000 Kenyan shillings (about R475) her children are able to attend classes virtually via Zoom, Google Meet and Google Classroom. There are about 25 to 30 students in each virtual class. Madogi is a teacher herself, and is able to administer learning and accurately grade her children's work.

In the absence of physical schooling, Kenya's socioeconomic and geographical divides are having a disproportionate effect on education — and, as a result, being replicated in the next generation.

For example, homes in urban areas are more likely to have access to technological aids such as smartphones, laptops, and computers (whether in the home or in cyber cafés or libraries). Families in rural and lower-income areas, meanwhile, may struggle to access books and stationary.

The timing of the school shutdown has not helped. With the onset of the rainy season, children at home in rural areas have been helping with land preparation and crop planting. In nomadic communities, young boys are likely to herd and tend to livestock rather than attend school and catch up with learning.

Girls are at even greater risk. Last month, Machakos county — one of 47 Kenyan counties — announced a huge increase in teenage pregnancies, with more than 4 000 recorded between February and May. The age of consent in Kenya is 18 years. The county's children's officer, Salome Muthama, said that some of these teenage pregnancies involved rape by a family member.

For some of these girls, this might mean the end of the educational road. Even if schools do return, they may never be able to sit for their final exams, because they will be responsible for raising their own children.

Kenya has yet to announce when schools will reopen, although dates in September and January have been mooted in talks between teachers unions and the government.

“The position of the parents has been very firm that we don't open until the curve is flattened and the parents are the major shareholders,” said George Magoha, the cabinet secretary for education.

As of July 7, Kenya had recorded 8 067 cases of Covid-19, including 164 deaths. The country's economy has been battered by the pandemic: pre-Covid-19 growth projections of between 6% and 7% have been slashed to just 1.5% by the World Bank. This too will affect schoolchildren: as families suffer from job losses and lost income, so children may be forced into labour at a younger age.

Kenya's situation is far from unique. Unicef, the United Nations children's agency, estimates that less than a quarter of Africa's school-going population has internet access — making virtual learning almost impossible.

“Access to the technology and materials needed to continue learning while schools are closed is desperately unequal. Likewise, children with limited learning support at home have almost no means to support their education,” said Unicef's chief of education, Robert Jenkins. “A learning crisis already existed before Covid-19 hit. We are now looking at an even more divisive and deepening education crisis.”

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