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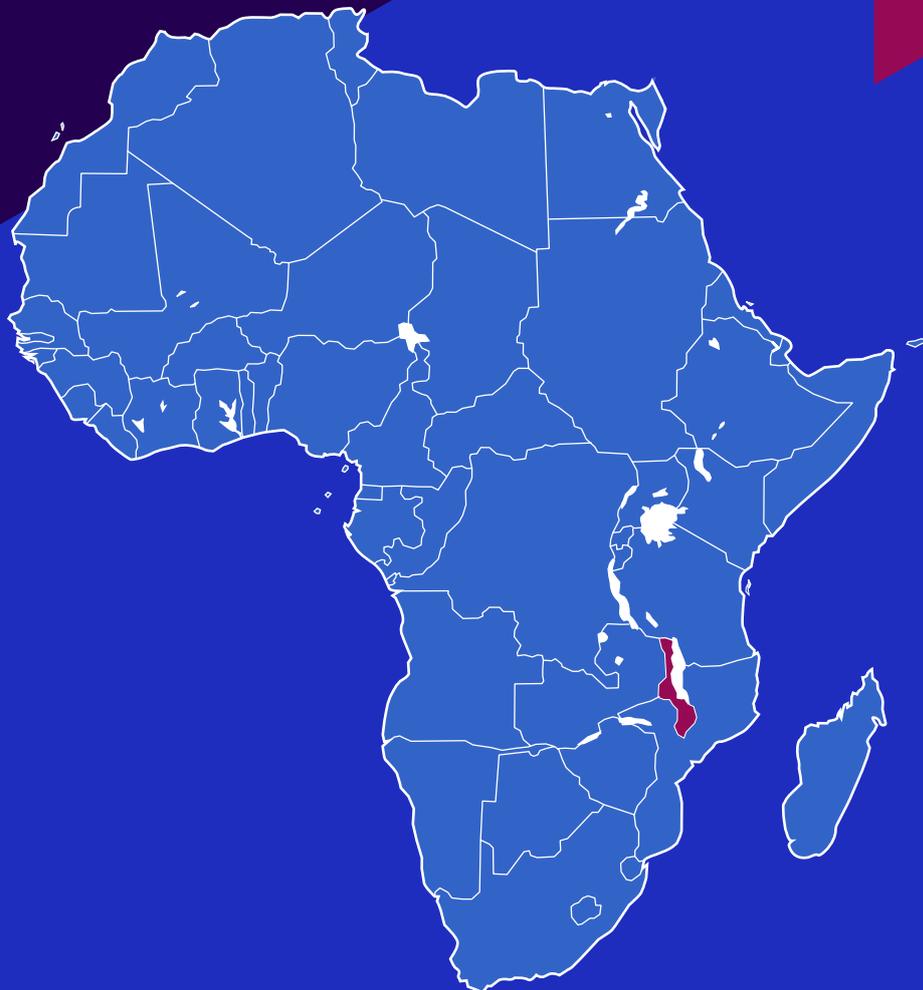
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Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Background report

▶ Digitalization in teaching and education in the context of COVID-19: Malawi

*Digitalization, the future of work
and the teaching profession project*

Tionge Weddington Saka



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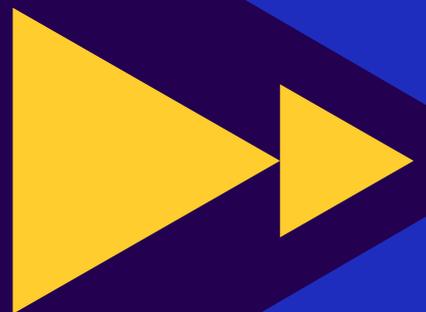
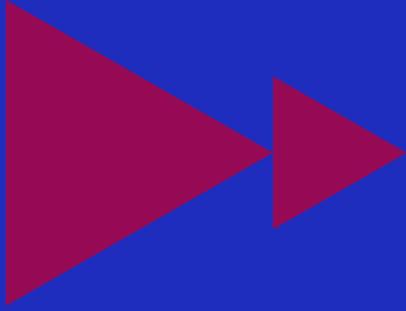
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▶ Contents

Abbreviations	iv
1. COVID-19 and Malawian education context	1
2. Methodology	2
3. Education sector COVID-19 response	3
3.1 Immediate impact and responses	3
3.2 Medium-term impact and responses	4
3.2.1 Policy and legal frameworks	4
3.2.2 Plans for continuity of learning for students	4
3.2.3 School feeding programme	6
3.3 Long-term plans and projections	7
4. Impact of COVID-19 on the teaching profession	9
5. Governance and COVID-19 response	10
6. Conclusion	11
References	13
Appendix: COVID-19-related events affecting the education sector	15

▶ Abbreviations

▶ GPE	Global Partnership for Education
▶ ICT	information and communication technology
▶ ISAMA	Independent Schools Association of Malawi
▶ STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
▶ TNM	Telekom Networks Malawi
▶ TUM	Teachers' Union of Malawi
▶ UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
▶ WHO	World Health Organization

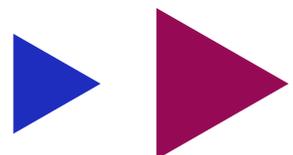


► 1. COVID-19 and Malawian education context

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a pandemic. The first three COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Malawi on 2 April 2020 (UNICEF 2020a). The proclamation of COVID-19 as a pandemic led to the immediate closure of schools and the transition to distance and online learning in most countries, including Malawi. Following this recognition, the then President of the Republic of Malawi, Arthur Peter Muthalika, appointed a special committee on COVID-19 on 8 March 2020 and declared a state of disaster on 20 March 2020. The special committee comprised eight cabinet ministers and was chaired by the Minister of Health. The role of the special committee was to effectively respond to the COVID-19 crisis and prepare the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (Obreque 2020). The special committee was dissolved due to concerns over its composition and a 21-member Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 was established on 6 May 2020 (Nkhoma 2020).

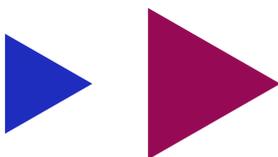
Following the declaration of the state of disaster, all public and private schools, colleges and universities closed on 23 March 2020, two weeks before the scheduled midterm closure on 6 April 2020. The closure of schools, according to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, was done with the view to protect students, teachers and parents from contracting COVID-19. Efforts were then initiated to ensure that learning continued despite the closure of schools.

Although there have been studies assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector, there have not been any studies specifically focusing on Malawi. As such, the present study, whose scope includes both public and private primary and secondary education, aims to document the education sector response to the COVID-19 crisis in Malawi, specifically focusing on activities towards providing continued learning opportunities for learners and actual or projected medium- and long-term implications of the pandemic in the education sector.



▶ 2. Methodology

The primary methodology employed for this study was a review and analysis of collected documents. Documents reviewed include newsletters and press statements in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the education sector, as produced by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; press statements produced by the education task force on the reopening of schools; national addresses made by previous and current presidents of Malawi; budget statements presented by the previous and current governments; COVID-19 guidance for the education sector; the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan; guidelines for reopening primary and secondary schools and teacher training colleges; the school reopening checklist; newsletters and reports produced by the teachers' union; reports and data produced by international organizations, development agencies and non-governmental organizations; and media reports on education and the COVID-19 crisis. The major weekend papers that were reviewed include *Malawi News*, *Weekend Nation*, *Sunday Times* and *Nation on Sunday* for content on the education sector and the COVID-19 pandemic.



► 3. Education sector COVID-19 response

This section provides a description of the education sector response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi, including immediate and medium-term responses as well as long-term plans.

3.1 Immediate impact and responses

Several key activities were carried out by the Government of Malawi in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The chronological flow of these events and activities is presented in the appendix to this report. The response was initiated with the declaration of the state of disaster by the then President of the Republic of Malawi and the subsequent closure of schools, colleges and universities. Immediately following the declaration, the Government of Malawi, with support from the United Nations humanitarian country team and partners such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), developed the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (Government of Malawi 2020a). The education cluster section of the plan highlights the following objectives: strengthen coordination with other clusters (health, protection, and water, sanitation and hygiene clusters) and within the education cluster (national, district and school levels) in COVID-19 case management; intensify awareness-raising and behaviour changes for prevention and management of COVID-19 amongst teachers, learners and communities; and promote safety of learners and teachers and continuous learning during school closures. In order to assist with implementing the plan, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and other partners worked to strengthen and initiate alternative modes of education delivery, including distance learning through radio and support for home schooling (UNICEF 2020b).

Two initiatives were consequently introduced in the education system to ensure that learners could continue to learn from home: online learning for secondary school students and an emergency radio education programme for primary school students. The emergency radio programme was publicly broadcast and targeted about 6 million primary school learners (Muthalika 2020; UNICEF 2020c). The programme covered literacy (Chichewa and English) and numeracy for standards 1 to 8 and science for standards 4 to 8.¹ The broadcast started on 18 May 2020 on Malawi Broadcasting Corporation radio channels 1 and 2 and continued until the end of the 2019/20 academic year (UNICEF 2020c).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology launched online learning for secondary school learners on 21 April 2020; however, the majority of students could not access online learning (UNICEF 2020d, 2020e). In view of this challenge, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology prepared self-learning modules in agriculture, biology, Chichewa, English and mathematics for students in community day secondary schools in hard-to-reach areas (UNICEF 2020e). To facilitate this e-learning, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology signed a memorandum of understanding with Telekom Networks Malawi (TNM) in April 2020. The memorandum of understanding established that TNM would provide free access to online education content to students for two months, depending on the situation. Students could access lessons through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology website, where the lessons were uploaded at no data cost. To access the website free of charge, students had to use the TNM line (Kapulula 2020). In a related development, Airtel Malawi, another mobile network provider in Malawi, also supported students with distance learning through zero-rated or no-cost access to the ministry's website. This support also allowed the ministry to use the network's *919# toll-free platform to broadcast COVID-19-related messages.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology also collaborated with onebillion and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), both non-profit organizations, on the onetab tablet project to provide children in rural areas with customized, low-cost tablets, which are pre-installed with an offline application containing learning material. Tablets have already been distributed to 700 households in two villages and there are plans to

¹ In Malawi, the primary school system has eight classes, starting from standard 1 to standard 8. Similarly, there are four classes in secondary education, beginning from form 1 to form 4.

expand the project to another 5,000 households that are not able to access radio and television broadcasts (onebillion 2020).

Media reports (Chisesa 2020; Matandika 2020), however, highlighted that the online learning introduced did not reach most students due to the high cost of the devices needed to access this learning, making them inaccessible to most Malawians. Additional reporting (Zakaria 2020) noted that “not all learners were able to learn through online learning. Some learners, particularly in rural areas, were not able to access phones or computers ... some areas do not have electricity ... moreover there are frequent electricity blackouts and internet connectivity problems ... and some learners are not good at using devices like cellphones and computers.”

To further support the COVID-19 response, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) provided a US\$10 million grant to support the implementation of the education cluster activities of the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan through UNICEF (GPE 2020). The funding would go towards solar-powered radios and tablets to support innovative digital learning solutions for vulnerable children with limited access to electricity; a toll-free hotline to provide additional support for lessons; training to teachers and education managers who provide online teaching programmes; awareness campaigns to encourage parents to support home learning; remedial support by teachers once schools reopen to help students through assessments; and accelerated learning and second-chance opportunities.

3.2 Medium-term impact and responses

This section highlights the return-to-school plans and procedures, including policy and legal frameworks, plans for continuity of learning for students and school feeding programmes.

3.2.1 Policy and legal frameworks

In recognition of the importance of having a legal basis for making decisions in response to the pandemic, the Government of Malawi finalized the development of the Public Health (COVID-19) Prevention, Containment and Management Rules by 1 April 2020 and gazetted them on 7 August 2020. The rules came into force on 8 August 2020. In relation to the education sector, the rules stipulate: “In order to further regulate public gatherings, the minister may suspend or restrict the operation and conduct of institutions of higher education, schools, early child development centres and adult literacy centres.” The rules also provide detailed approaches to conduct during the pandemic, including practice of sanitary and hygienic measures, provision of adequate ventilation and enforcing interpersonal distance. The rules were crucial to informing the guidelines produced by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology for use in schools.

3.2.2 Plans for continuity of learning for students

Several stakeholders were consulted in the planning of resuming in-person learning, with one of the key events being an education stakeholders’ meeting held on 13 May 2020. The meeting was chaired by the then Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Honourable Dr William Susuwele Banda, and was attended by representatives from the following institutions: University of Malawi, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Edukans, Independent Schools Association of Malawi (ISAMA), National Council for Higher Education, Association of Christian Educators in Malawi, Malawi Institute of Journalism, Teachers’ Union of Malawi (TUM), Civil Society Education Coalition, Association of Private Universities in Malawi, Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 and Malawi National Examinations Board. The meeting agreed that all decisions for the return to school would be based on proven science and public health expertise, taking into account the best interests of learners and teachers. The meeting resulted in the appointment of a National Planning Task Force whose composition includes academia, civil society, ministries, departments and agencies, development partners and school associations. According to

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Government of Malawi 2020b, 2020c), the responsibilities of the task force are to:

- ▶ advise the ministry on the reopening of pre-primary, primary and secondary schools, teacher training colleges, adult education institutions and universities;
- ▶ review and reorganize the school calendar as part of the COVID-19 post-recovery strategy;
- ▶ support and track sector resource mobilization;
- ▶ advise the ministry on issues of safety and logistical modalities upon readmission of learners when schools reopen;
- ▶ consult widely with relevant stakeholders, including parents and wards;
- ▶ advise the ministry on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the demand for education by poor households and suggest mitigation measures;
- ▶ advise the ministry on the health and safety measures to be put in place for students, teachers and entire school community;
- ▶ provide up-to-date learnings from other countries, experiences applicable to Malawi and global best practices;
- ▶ submit regular reports to the ministry on the implementation progress of COVID-19-related programmes;
- ▶ consider any other related duty that may be assigned by the Honourable Minister during this time of response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The task force proposed that schools reopen on 13 July 2020. The schools, however, were not opened because the number of new cases was still high. By this time, the task force had already coordinated the development of guidelines for reopening schools. Schools were eventually reopened beginning 7 September 2020, using a phased approach, as shown in table 1.

▶ **Table 1. Malawi's phased approach to reopening schools, colleges and universities**

Phase	Date	Target
1	7 September 2020	Standard 8 Form 4 Initial primary teacher education cohort 15 Final year students at colleges, universities and examination classes for all schools that offer an international curriculum
	20 September 2020	Initial primary teacher education cohort 14
	28 September 2020	Colleges, universities and schools that offer an international curriculum allowed to take the second phase of students
2	12 October 2020	Standards 5–7 Forms 1–3 Standards 1–4 (with reduced contact time as classes will be alternating to reduce congestion) Initial primary teacher education cohort 15 to continue with their teaching practice

Note: The staggered reopening will be determined on a case-by-case basis in consultation with the ministry. Since colleges and universities are at different stages, each institution will have to decide which group will go first in consultation with the ministry.

Source: Press statement by the Minister of Education released on 27 August 2020.

In addition to the phased approach to reopening schools, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology provided the following guidelines on the opening arrangements for schools, colleges and universities in phase 2 (Government of Malawi 2020d):

- Reduced learning time. The school day is to start at 07:30 a.m. and end at the following times:

Standard 1	11:30
Standard 2	12:00
Standard 3	12:40
Standard 4	13:15
Standards 5–7	13:55

- Schools with very high enrolment are to have staggered infant and junior sections. Learners from standards 1 and 3 are to attend school on alternate days with learners in standards 2 and 4. Learners in standards 5–7 are to attend classes daily.

Prior to the reopening of schools, according to the press statement by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology issued on 27 August 2020 (Government of Malawi 2020e), relevant stakeholders at the district, zone and school levels were trained on the following: COVID-19 guidelines for reopening primary and secondary schools (Government of Malawi 2020d); COVID-19 preventive measures; Primary School Improvement Plan guidelines; providing support to learners and students with various forms of disabilities; preventive measures and mask making;² and remediation. According to the press statement, measures captured in the guidelines for reopening primary and secondary schools include:

- disinfecting schools where necessary following national disinfection guidelines (these guidelines are already available in all districts);
- all schools to ensure that handwashing facilities are available and that handwashing is enforced;
- the school administration, led by the head teacher, should engage all stakeholders to take part in the COVID-19 preventive measures for their schools;
- all teachers should be orientated on remedial education strategies, health and hygiene education, and psychosocial support for learners;
- all learners, students and teachers should always wear masks, with learners aged 6 to 11 years using masks under strict supervision.

Considering the disturbance to the school calendar, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has produced an alternative calendar as far as 2022 to support predictability of learning (Government of Malawi 2020e). Based on the revised calendar, the current term of the school year would close on 18 December 2020, while the 2021 school year would run from 4 January to 8 October with three 12-week terms. The 2021/22 school year would run from 18 October 2021 to 3 June 2022, with three terms of 10 weeks. With this arrangement, the school calendar is expected to normalize from the 2022/23 school year.

3.2.3 School feeding programme

As the pandemic has shown, schools are not only institutions of learning but are also essential spaces for nutritional support. Some schools in Malawi have school feeding programmes. As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, primary schools serving meals are not permitted to cook porridge and meals on school premises.

² The Mother Group consists of a group of mothers trained in making masks for primary schools. The masks they made were provided freely to learners in primary schools. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology provided the materials for making the masks with support from the GPE COVID-19 funds (Government of Malawi 2020e).

Schools were advised to make arrangements to distribute rations to deserving learners so that their parents could cook for them at home (Government of Malawi 2020d).

3.3 Long-term plans and projections

The finalization of the National Education Sector Investment Plan 2020–2030 coincided with the recognition of the need for the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in schools, colleges and universities. The National Education Sector Investment Plan is a strategic document that provides guidance on the planning and implementation of all education development programmes, projects and activities (Government of Malawi 2020f). Table 2 shows the plans outlined in the National Education Sector Investment Plan in relation to ICT.

► **Table 2. National Education Sector Investment Plan: ICT-related plans**

Strategic objective	Priority actions	Activities
Improve quality and relevance of teaching and learning in primary education	Enhance learner outcomes through the use of ICT-enabled pedagogy	Procure and maintain ICT gadgets, including tablets and solar-powered equipment for schools Establish a digitalized curriculum platform Train teachers on how to use the digitized curriculum Monitor implementation of the digitized curriculum
Provide quality and relevant teacher training, including continuous professional development	Institutionalize science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), research and ICT science and technology in teachers' development and curriculum development	Develop and implement guidelines on STEM, research and ICT science and technology in teachers' development and curriculum development
Strengthen administration, financial management and accountability in the education system	Develop and implement ICT policy and strategy to improve capacity and efficiency	Develop and implement ICT policy

Source: Government of Malawi 2020f.

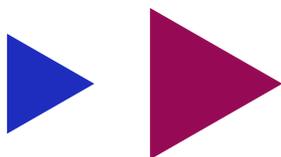
A highly relevant component of the National Education Sector Investment Plan is the development and implementation of an ICT policy, which is currently non-existent in Malawi. A recent study by the National Statistics Office (2020) provides important statistics on access to ICT infrastructure in Malawi, as shown in table 3.

► **Table 3. Access to ICT infrastructure in Malawi, 2019**

Description	Percentage
Household ownership of a functional radio in Malawi	46.0
Individual radio listenership	71.1
Proportion of households across the country with a working television set	11.6
Local TV stations viewership	69.8
Households in Malawi who owned a mobile telephone that was accessible to every household member	37.0
Proportion of individuals that owned computers	2.8
Proportion of individuals with access to internet services	14.6

Source: National Statistics Office 2020.

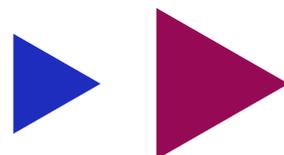
According to the National Statistics Office (2020), in addition to the overall low percentage of internet access, there is significant disparity in access to internet services between those in urban and rural areas. Electricity is vital for access to the internet; however, this remains a major challenge in Malawi. According to the 2018 Population and Housing Census, only 11.4 per cent of the population used electricity and another 6.6 per cent used solar power as their main source of energy for lighting and cooking (Government of Malawi 2019, 33). Lack of access to electricity and other supportive infrastructure hinders the country from maximizing the potential of ICT, including implementing distance and online learning.



► 4. Impact of COVID-19 on the teaching profession

The closure of schools did not financially impact teachers in publicly financed institutions, since the Government of Malawi continued to provide monthly salaries. The closure of schools, however, negatively affected private schools and teachers employed in the private sector. In Malawi, most private schools depend on the operation of schools to generate revenue, to pay teacher salaries and to account for other operational costs such as city council rentals and utility bills. With the closure of schools, many teachers in private schools were not paid salaries, which, in some cases, led to job losses as schools could not keep staff without paying them (Thula et al. 2020, 18). The worst scenario was the indefinite closure of a private school. According to the director of one of the private schools, the Government of Malawi did not put in place any measures to assist private schools financially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mvula and Banda 2020).

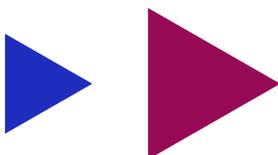
The reopening of schools may have affected public schools more than private schools due to the large enrolments in public schools. High enrolments make it more difficult to adhere to the health guidelines of physical distancing, especially since classrooms in Malawi are not adequately equipped. Learners would therefore learn while sitting down on open ground, which would be difficult during the rainy season (Salima 2020, 1).



► 5. Governance and COVID-19 response

It is difficult to assess to what extent all education stakeholders were consulted in the responses to the COVID-19 crisis. ISAMA, a grouping of all private school owners in Malawi ranging from kindergarten to primary and secondary schools, in its communication to the Minister of Education on 28 June 2020 made it clear that it was not consulted on the decision to close schools. The closure, according to ISAMA, happened when parents had tuition fee balances and collection of fees had thus been a challenge for the schools, resulting in financial strain and non-payment of teachers' salaries. Overall, the effect on private schools had not been considered. Furthermore, ISAMA had not been consulted in the introduction of alternative learning, as provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The unilateral decision to close schools forced teacher representatives to seek an audience with the Minister of Education and the President of Malawi. Following the initial decision to close schools, the National Planning Task Force on reopening schools was established, which includes TUM and ISAMA.

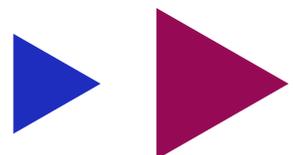
According to the press statement by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the decision to reopen schools was mainly guided by a framework on reopening schools as developed by UNICEF in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank, and the World Food Programme (UNESCO et al. 2020).

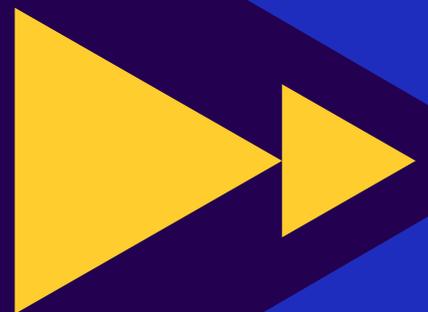
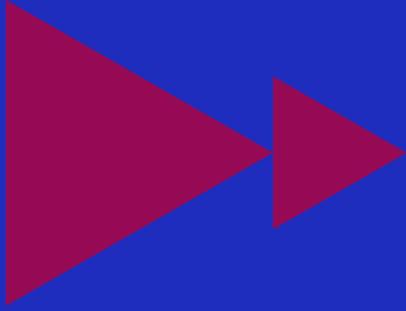


▶ 6. Conclusion

The reopening of schools has brought with it complex policy issues around how to manage the pandemic in the school environment while minimizing the negative impacts on teaching and learning. Some of the critical policy issues include physical distancing, particularly in schools with high enrolments, adequate personal protective equipment for both teachers and students, and access to water and handwashing facilities. There is also a need to assess how the curriculum will be impacted by the several arrangements discussed in this study.

The pandemic has made apparent the need for integrating ICT in teaching and learning and for training teachers in the use of technology. Malawi's education sector has a long way to go in this regard, as evidenced by the relatively low number of secondary school students that had access to the learning platform during the pandemic. The planned development of an ICT policy in education will therefore be crucial to strengthening ICT use in education.





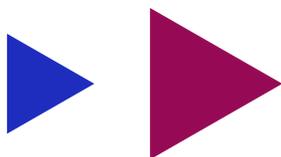
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► Appendix: COVID-19-related events affecting the education sector

Date	Key event
20 March 2020	President declares national disaster
23 March 2020	All schools, colleges and universities are closed
8 April 2020	The Government of Malawi officially launches the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan
21 April 2020	The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology launches online learning for secondary school learners
13 May 2020	An all-stakeholder national planning meeting is held in Blantyre to reflect on the impact of school closure and strategize on a safe return to learning
13 May 2020	The National Planning Task Force on the possible reopening of schools, colleges and universities is put in place
20 May 2020	The Emergency Radio Education Programme (targeting 6 million primary school learners) is officially launched
2 June 2020	The National Planning Task Force on the possible reopening of schools, colleges and universities recommends that schools should reopen on 13 July
6 July 2020	The Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 announces that schools will not reopen on 13 July 2020 as previously suggested
7 August 2020	The Government of Malawi gazettes public health (COVID-19) prevention, containment and management rules, which come into force on Saturday, 8 August 2020
15 August 2020	The President of Malawi announces in his address to the nation that opening of schools, colleges and universities will take place in early September
27 August 2020	The Minister of Education announces the phased reopening of schools in phases beginning with standard 8, form 4 and final year college students from 7 September 2020
4 September 2020	The President announces the opening of all COVID-19-compliant schools on 7 September 2020
7 September 2020	Schools, colleges and universities open to students in examination classes and final year students (standard 8 learners, form 4 learners and all final year students at college)
8 October 2020	The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology reaffirms the opening of schools, colleges and universities in the second phase from 12 October 2020
12 October 2020	Schools, colleges and universities in the second phase open to the rest of the students

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