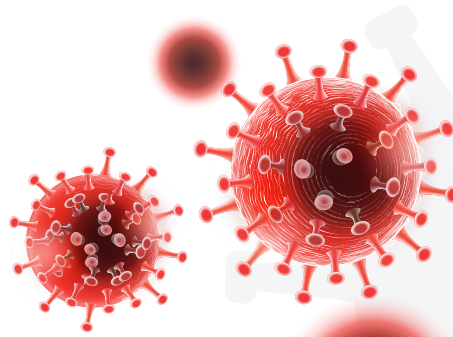# Building Back Better

Building Resilience in Africa:

Let's take action now so that the Early Childhood Development sector comes out of the COVID-19 pandemic stronger and more inclusive than it was before!

The onset of COVID-19 has been described by Jaime Saavedra, Global Director for Education, as the "largest simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetimes" (World Bank 2020). The resultant lockdowns and school closures have exacerbated a pre-pandemic global learning crisis rooted in our failure to make sure ALL young children have opportunities to play, learn and thrive irrespective of their gender, language, religion, ability, geography, socio-economic status or nationality. Research by Human Rights Watch showed that the pandemic children already at risk of exclusion are most severely affected by these closures.

While almost 40 million young children worldwide are locked out of early learning systems because of the pandemic, the truth is that many more have never had the chance to be enrolled. Even before COVID-19 UNICEF (2019) estimated that 175 million children, half of the global population of young children, were missing out on pre-primary schooling with only 1 in 5 children in low-income countries enrolled.

Less than 25%   From 25% to 49.9%   From 50% to 74.9%   From 75% to 94.9%   95% and above   No data
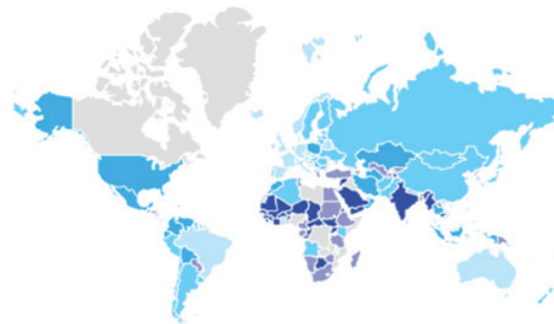
Figure 1 The map depicts pre-primary gross enrolment ratios across countries before the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights the disparities in provision across the world showing Africa lagging behind with a significant pattern of uneven provision between countries on the continent (SOURCE: UNICEF, 2019. A World Ready to Learn).

This blog highlights three key opportunities for the ECD sector in Africa that have come its way on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, ECD is the foundation of all learning. Ensuring the quality and reach of ECD programmes is fundamental to improving education outcomes and strengthening systems efficiencies. Let's ensure that ECD is on every education agenda as part of the restore and rebuild deliberations and commitments. Secondly, we have the chance to create an ECD system that is more inclusive. While we focus on accelerating learning for those children who have lost months of pre-primary education let's work to expand access to the many vulnerable children who have never benefited from organised early learning programmes. And finally, as we reboot, the innovations and programs that have been used to carry learning through the pandemic provide a platform from which to launch a more resilient ECD sector that is better able to withstand a future of uncertainty.

Following the trends of these learning opportunity deficits, estimates are that by 2030, one-third of the world's children who live in Africa and shall account for:
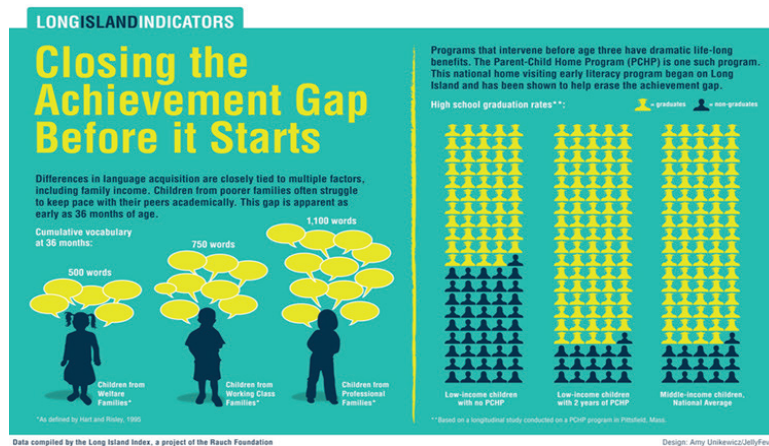- 70% of the out of school population compared to 40% today, as well as,
- 60% of the children who do not finish primary schooling compared to 40% today

The resultant human capital deficit could result in 90% of the world's poor being in Africa.

ECD is part of the continuum of human development, foundational to the formation of human capital and the realisation of the rights of the child. Evidence shows that learning gaps begin in the early years before formal schooling starts. Those children who begin school lagging behind their peers often never catch. Gaps in learning and development can persist across the lifetime perpetuating a cycle of underachievement and inequity. Starting early prevents gaps higher up the learning ladder. When children and families are ready for schooling, education systems can be more efficient because children learn better, are more likely to progress and so place less strain on the system.

A study in Uganda showed that children who did not attend pre-primary school were 3.8 times as likely to repeat an early grade as pupils who did attend pre-primary. Similarly, in Mozambique, children in rural areas enrolled in pre-primary programmes were 24% more likely to attend primary school. By adopting a more fair and inclusive approach that opens the doors of opportunity from the start of life we can prevent learning gaps and help children to develop the important abilities they need to navigate the demands of primary schooling.

As we consider ways to accelerate early learning and regain lost ground for those children who are sitting out of playrooms and care programmes because of COVID-19 measures, we must be mindful and pay attention to those who have never had access to early childhood opportunities and support. We must advocate for a plan to address lost time for those young children who missed out on early learning because of the closure of preschools and childcare facilities; AND push for the inclusion of the many children who because of poverty, disability, nationality, geography, gender, disability, social status and so on, are left out. If we pay attention to children's development form the start of life, we change what happens higher up the learning ladder, thus supporting their potential to be lifelong, successful learners. Innovations and programmes that widen the reach of ECD provision and bring those families and communities who have long been marginalised into the system, is a win for all.

Separating children's early development and learning from education systems creates a false idea of when children actually begin to develop cognitive, literacy, numeracy and life skills. As advocates for young children, we must boldly push for space for ECD on global as well as regional agendas and dialogues about building and restoring education systems. We have the chance to shout out for ECD and make sure it is included as part of a resilient education sector across our continent so that every child begins their primary schooling ready for the next step in their growth and learning. There is a great opportunity at this moment, to foreground early learning and development as part of the global, regional and national deliberations underway about re-opening and building back a system that is more agile and resilient. This is our chance to build back a better, more inclusive and resilient ECD sector, let's take it.


LONG ISLAND INDICATORS

Closing the Achievement Gap Before it Starts

Differences in language acquisition are closely tied to multiple factors, including family income. Children from poorer families often struggle to keep pace with their peers academically. This gap is apparent as early as 36 months of age.

Cumulative vocabulary at 36 months:
500 words — Children from Welfare Families*
750 words — Children from Working Class Families*
1,100 words — Children from Professional Families*

*As defined by Hart and Risley, 1995

Programs that intervene before age three have dramatic life-long benefits. The Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) is one such program. This national home visiting early literacy program began on Long Island and has been shown to help erase the achievement gap.

High school graduation rates**: = graduates = non-graduates

Low-income children with no PCHP
Low-income children with 2 years of PCHP
Middle-income children, National Average

**Based on a longitudinal study conducted on a PCHP program in Pittsfield, Mass.

Data compiled by the Long Island Index, a project of the Rauch Foundation   Design: Amy Unikewicz/JellyFever

Solutions are not just in the hands of government. The non-profit sector, business, communities and parents, can work together to increase childrens' learning opportunities and boost their potential. Here are four ideas:

1.   Develop approaches and programmes to accelerate learning. Reverse crisis-related learning loss and increase opportunities for learning for children who are not part of any early learning programme. Place special emphasis on readiness for primary schooling. Engage teachers and early years practitioners in training and coaching so they are well equipped to help young children catch up, and ensure that school environments are safe and protected. As schools begin to re-open, include young children in mass re-enrolment campaigns and accelerated learning innovations.

2.   Access to the internet and digital tools is not a privilege, it's a essential. UNESCO reports that 826 million students have no access to a household computer and 706 million have no internet at home. The majority live in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, almost half of the 56 million learners in locations not served by mobile networks, live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Technology has been shown as a key tool to expand access to learning opportunities. We have to widen its reach and bring young children, their parents and communities into the ecosystem. One of the ways this could be done is by; integrating a focus on early learning into the Africa Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa 2020 -2030 which serves as a guide to all AU member States. The other way is to advocate for strengthened partnership between governments and the private sector to increase access to the internet and devices like computers, cell phones and tablets.

In Liberia and Morocco, children living in remote areas or form poor families benefited from the distribution of radio sets and tablets. Orange through its subsidiaries has provided free internet access to accredited learning platforms in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A similar package is being explored for Botswana, Cameroun, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Madagascar.

3. Keep parents engaged by capitalizing on their current involvement in remote and playful learning to improve school readiness outcomes. As a result of COVID and ensuring government responses, parents across the world have had to spend more time with their children. The closure of schools and ongoing remote learning, for example, has meant that parents play a greater role in supporting the learning of their children. As a result, various home and community based initiatives have been designed and implemented to support parents as teachers. A recent study from the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development emphasized the role of parents and siblings as key to the facilitation of remote learning. The inclusion of 'households' in the reach of low-tech and no-tech communication solutions can be a key enabler of early learning.

4. Develop and use multiple media platforms, on and off-line to expand, strengthen and supplement the opportunities for young children to access early learning opportunities. Include radio, TV, video, internet, social media, cellphones, paper-based and home-based parenting support programmes. USAID shares lessons in this regard, noting a strong evidence base for the use of all of these modalities. Developing these platforms provides mechanisms not just to address the immediate crisis, but to look beyond it, as part of an intentional approach to greater access for children across urban and rural contexts and form part of a more resilient ECD sector for the future.
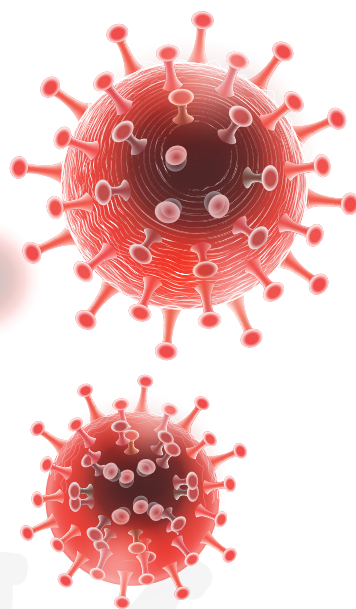
Learning from the field: Good practices from our continent

• Cote d'Ivoire's Ministry of National Education launched an online education platform called *My School at Home* in March 2020. The platform is organised by grade for general education which includes a focus on preschooling. In addition, lessons have also been broadcast via television and radio together and SMS's used as a platform for sharing resources and key messages.

• Cabo Verde *Learning and Studying at Home* is broadcast on Radio and Television. It's also available on the YouTube platform and includes a focus on preschool education.

• The *Namibia Reads* APP is a curated digital library that allows easy access for young children to narrated, illustrated e-books without ads, animation, videos and games. It includes more than 1000 e-books, activities and quizzes for young children between ages three and 12 years. The books were developed by teachers and educators to promote reading, vocabulary development and comprehension skills.

• *Tshwaragano ka Bana - Working together for Children.* UNICEF South Africa in partnership with the Department of Social Development, the Department of Basic Education and the LEGO Foundation, have developed and shared a set of easy to use activity sheets for parents and caregivers of children from birth to five years. The playful activities are designed to be easily integrated into the daily routines of families at home. They have been translated into South Africa's 11 official languages. The materials were shared using various online platforms including Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Some organisations also downloaded and included them in resource packs being distributed to families.

• Using edutainment: *Sesame Workshop* programs are broadcast in more than *15 countries* and while *Ubongo TV and Radio* programs reach 40 countries in Africa.

In countries *where ICT infrastructure is limited, printed materials* are still a great way of reaching children and families. Regina Brenner, Director, Creative Skills Factory, South Africa shared her story with us.

"What became very clear through the early lockdown period was that many children in our communities have no access to online learning, educational resources or books, making home education very difficult. Another challenge was that caregivers were often not well educated or equipped to teach and support their children at home, despite their best intentions. We came up with the idea of putting together small mobile book and toy libraries for caregivers and their children. The idea is to pack a box with books, games, puzzles, Art & Craft materials, and include a manual on how to use this resource. The boxes would then be distributed into each street and the children would be able to borrow books and other educational resources close to home from a trained community facilitator."

Additional resources

A World Ready to Learn Prioritising early childhood education: Global Report. (UNICEF, 2019).

Advancing Early Childhood Development – From Science to Scale. (2007, 2011).

Care for Child Development: an intervention in support of responsive caregiving and early child development. (Lucas, J.E., Richter, L.M. and Daelmans, B., 2018).

The Early Catastrophe - The 30 million word gap by age 3. (Hart, B. and Risley, T.R., 2003).

Early Literacy: Policy and Practice in the Preschool Years. (Strickland, D.S. and Riley-Ayers, S., 2006).

Early Childhood Education: The Long Term Benefits. (Bakken, L., Brown, N. and Downing, B., 2017).

Investments in Education May Be Misdirected. (New York Times, 2013).