Learning assessments are a fundamental part of the learning process and an essential way for governments, schools, and educators to measure and monitor student learning. However, school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 necessitated changes in the assessment modes that the 39 Global Partnership for Education (GPE) countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have traditionally relied on, such as tests and national examinations. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis compelled governments to face existing, exacerbated weaknesses and inequities in their education systems, and to rethink both the format and the nature of their assessment practices.

Governments responded to the need for continuity in assessment by adjusting their policies and practices, most notably in four inter-related areas: (i) assessment types and formats; (ii) assessment delivery; (iii) high-stakes national examinations; and (iv) learning loss assessment.\(^1\) Countries tried to monitor the learning of students by rescheduling national examinations and providing distance learning solutions like take-home study resources, TV and radio, and web- and mobile-based tasks; nevertheless, many students still experienced significant learning loss.\(^2\)

As GPE partner countries in Sub-Saharan Africa gradually emerge from the COVID-19 era, there is a need to assess how much learning students lost during school closures. These assessments would enable teachers and policymakers to design interventions to reduce learning loss and mitigate its impact on students’ school retention and lifetime earnings. There is also a need to share emerging evidence and best practices to improve assessments and learning outcomes during and after the pandemic and other crises.

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\(^2\) Ibid.
Based on this need to share evidence on assessment practices, the GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) Observatory on COVID-19 Responses in Educational Systems in Africa,\(^3\) led by the Association for the Development in Africa (ADEA) and inclusive of the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and the African Union International Center for Girls & Women’s Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA), in coordination with the regional KIX Africa 19 and KIX Africa 21 Hubs, convened a webinar on May 17, 2022 on learning assessment for education decision-makers in 39 GPE countries.

This learning event featured three speakers from the governments of Kenya, Burkina Faso, and Burundi, and brought together 213 participants from governments and civil society organizations across Sub-Saharan Africa. Participants shared examples of practices, policies, and innovations from their countries, and voiced their challenges in assessing learning loss and revising assessments to be more sensitive to vulnerable learners and the demands of learning recovery post-pandemic.

In dialogue with each other, the participants engaged in the co-creation of knowledge about the nature and format of learning assessment in Africa during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report captures key learning takeaways from the government and civil society participants as they reinforced the findings and recommendations of the April 2022 KIX Observatory report “Learning assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa.”\(^4\) Their comments were recorded during the webinar and in a post-webinar assessment survey.\(^5\)

### Understanding learning loss from the impact of COVID-19

According to the KIX Observatory report on assessment, COVID-19 deepened learning poverty by more than 20 percent in some low-income GPE countries in the Sahel.\(^6\) Throughout 2020 and 2021, learners in Sub-Saharan Africa lost weeks of learning due to school closures, with learners in Uganda experiencing the longest closure of 59 weeks. Today in Kenya, fewer students are attaining at least a 50 percent grade in Mathematics and English, and in Zambia, 16 percent and 10 percent of children in grades 3 and 5, respectively, have dropped one level in literacy and numeracy skills.\(^7\)

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in significant learning loss with long-term impacts on students, households, and communities, especially in rural and poorer areas. This learning loss will likely lower students’ lifetime earnings by 43% to 61% of current GDP in low-income countries.\(^8\)

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\(^3\) The GPE KIX Observatory on COVID-19 Responses in Educational Systems in Africa (2022) Website.
\(^5\) N=26
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid.
During the webinar on May 17, 2022, Dr Emmanuel Manyasa, the Executive Director of Usawa Agenda in Kenya, shared that his government sought to reopen schools online in 2020, but decided against it upon learning that only 20% of students were actively accessing online learning. In total, Kenya lost 37 weeks of school and had to cancel exams in 2020. Learning and assessment in Burkina Faso were also impacted. During the webinar, Mr Serge Kyelem, the officer responsible for monitoring and evaluation at the Ministry of National Education, also shared that Burkina Faso lost 13 weeks of school and had to reschedule national examinations. Mr Kyelem presented the MILO (Monitoring Impacts on Learning Outcomes) project which examined reading and mathematics achievement in six African countries, to determine the impact of COVID-19 on learning and to assess the effectiveness of remote learning mechanisms used during school closures.⁹

“The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted African countries differently,” reflected a government official from Benin in the post-webinar survey. “Some have had to stop classes and postpone end-of-year exams, while others have been able to keep children in school.” This fact was reinforced by the invited speaker from Burundi, Mr Liboire Bigirimana, Director of the National School Canteens at the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research of Burundi. Mr Bigirimana noted that Burundi stands out amongst Sub-Saharan African nations as maintaining continuity of learning throughout the pandemic, with no weeks of learning lost and high-stakes exams conducted as scheduled. Indeed, at the onset of the pandemic in May 2020, the government developed a global response plan to ensure the continuity of learning at all levels.

“Burundi has a wake-up call, a chance to learn from other countries and ask themselves what they would do if they had to close schools; a chance to revisit their level of disaster preparedness to deliver distance education,” recommended Shem Bodo, Senior Programs Officer at the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), a member of the KIX Observatory team.¹⁰

Common trends in learning assessment during the pandemic

All GPE partner countries used some form of learning assessment during school closures, but with varying degrees of success, and with little monitoring of their effectiveness. Despite governments’ efforts to provide distance learning solutions, evidence shows that almost one-half of students did not benefit from them as they had little access to them and preparation on how to use them, especially in rural areas.  

According to the KIX Observatory report, common assessment practices in Sub-Saharan Africa included (i) homework assignments and quizzes; (ii) study packages and revision materials; (iii) interactive Q&A through mobile phone-based SMS; and (iv) call-ins by learners. In the webinar, Dr Manyasa from Usawa Agenda described how Kenyan teachers and students used SMS messaging to send and answer questions about take-home study materials. Kenya also trained teachers to use educational radio. Similarly in Burkina Faso, web-based platforms, TV, and radio were deployed, said Mr Serge Kyelem of the Ministry of National Education.

![Photo: Igihozo, 11, listens to a lesson on a radio after his school was closed in Rwanda. In Burundi, Mr. Bigirimana indicated the development of digital pedagogy through radio lessons in the event of a prolonged interruption as well as the development of a digital platform. Credit: UNICEF](image)

However, little is known about how many learners actually accessed these methods, and how effective they were at assessing learning. Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, there was a lack of guidelines on how to monitor and assess student learning; limited access to innovative instruments for assessment and limited capacity to use them; and inadequate provisions for assessing vulnerable groups of students such as rural learners, students with special needs, and girls who were at risk of early pregnancies.

Countries’ assessment practices during the pandemic tend to prioritize students in examination classes over other students, and national exams over formative and class-

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
based assessments. To mitigate learning loss, especially among examination candidates, 65% of GPE partner countries in Africa practised partial school reopening.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, to reduce learning loss, 60% of the countries initiated remedial programs, while 25% increased class time. The strategies were considered to be fairly effective but were only monitored in one-third (35%) of the countries.\textsuperscript{15} More evidence is needed on their impact.

During the webinar, many participants agreed with the need to strengthen assessment practices and systems after the pandemic. An education inspector for the government of Comoros reflected on “the need to set up periodic evaluations to measure the performance of education systems,” and an education project manager from Kenya expressed “the need to provide rapid assessment feedback rapidly and link the findings to learning processes.”

In the post-webinar survey, an evaluation director in the Democratic Republic of the Congo commented that continuity of assessment “is very important for a country like ours which is in a conflict/post-conflict situation. Today’s session reinforces our concern to involve the Cellule Indépendante d’Evaluation des Acquis Scolaires (CIEAS) in the management of evaluations in the context of education in emergency situations.”

### Rethinking learning assessment

During the webinar and in the KIX Observatory report, it was noted that the most common types of pandemic-era assessments—homework, assignments, revision, and quizzes—did not differ much in their scope and nature from the assessments used before the pandemic; only their mode of delivery differed, with private schools adopting internet-based delivery mechanisms and public schools sending home traditional printed materials.\textsuperscript{16} It was seen that schools and education systems operating during the pandemic were influenced by traditional assessment methods which are content-based, high-stakes, and reliant on pens and paper and the physical presence of students.

Thus, while school closures pushed schools and governments to assess students virtually and remotely, the nature and guiding principles of assessment did not change. For example, examination candidates and classes received top priority from governments, and much planning went into ensuring national examinations could be held. Additionally, the same populations of learners who were struggling to meet minimum learning standards before the pandemic, were not equitably included in pandemic-era assessment policies and practices. The KIX Observatory’s review for the report was unable to identify data or special policies aimed at assessing vulnerable learners including girls, children with special needs, and those in marginalized settings.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
Ruth Mubanga, an education officer from Zambia, reflected during the webinar that “the pandemic was a window into what goes on in schools,” and questioned, “Isn’t it time to relook at what we assess, how we assess and when do we assess? Should we still have a national set exam?”

Mr Bodo of ADEA echoed Ms Mubanga’s question and encouraged participants to envision new possibilities for learning assessment, inspired by the challenges of the pandemic. “Covid-19 is making us look at learning in general and to the assessment practices in particular,” said Mr Bodo. “It is possible to remove learning from the physical confines of the classroom and schools, and be able to engage with the learners and teachers and give practical-based assessments involving parents. This is to me an opportunity to look at the whole issue of assessment and see how we can give more power, more to the learner and to their parents so that we truly become facilitators. Therefore, I think we need to really rethink the education system.”

Dr Manyasa of Usawa Agenda in Kenya agreed that “it is important that we look at what we assess and how we assess. That should be part of building back better.” He also described how Kenya’s new curriculum encourages teachers to customize—rather than standardize—content based on the needs of their students, and use the materials available to them to enrich their teaching.

This exchange on reimagining and restructuring learning assessment had an effect on participants in the webinar. In the post-webinar survey, a subject officer in the Examinations Council of Lesotho vowed to “try and find innovative ways to carry out assessments especially school-based assessments in ways which are ongoing rather than one-off.” An education program officer from the Democratic Republic of the Congo promised to “share [their learning] with our staff and reflect on the implementation of an inclusive multi-sectoral strategy.” In addition, a senior research officer in Uganda said, “I will start working on new forms of assessment and teaching.”

Photo: A youth in Malawi studying in his recently reopened school. Credit: UNICEF
Supporting teachers and education leaders through learning recovery

Education systems are made up of teachers, education leaders, and learners. The level of unpreparedness in education systems to assess learning during the pandemic and measure learning loss is a direct reflection of the unpreparedness of education leaders and teachers. Persistent inequalities in access to education and technology, the lack of baseline data from which to gauge learning loss, and the limited capacities of teachers and students to manage distance learning made the monitoring of learning a serious challenge for education leaders and teachers.18

To support teachers and education leaders during the post-pandemic era, participants in the webinar emphasized the need for clearer policies and guidelines for assessing learning during crises and educational recovery. They also strongly stressed the need to build ICT infrastructure to provide more students access to digital learning solutions, as well as the need to strengthen teachers’ capacities to harness technology in the classroom and in distance learning. “It’s upon us in Africa to fully embrace and invest in technology in learning environments,” voiced an education technology business owner from Kenya.

In the post-webinar survey, participants were asked how they will use the knowledge they gained from the webinar in their own work. A government research officer in Lesotho vowed to promote “more research into measures that can benefit the whole population of learners during times of crisis.” A head researcher in the government of Cameroon expressed interest in “sharing [lessons] with the entire community, then encouraging decision-making and the provision of the resources necessary to improve our training systems.” A senior education officer in the Zambian government concluded, “We will need to get back on the drawing table as teacher trainers and improve the delivery of education instruction.”

Furthermore, Mr. Bigirimana from Burundi argued that strong advocacy with technical and financial partners is also needed to put in place pandemic and emergency mitigation strategies to ensure continued learning and access to essential services, especially for marginalized children.

Learning takeaways

Webinar participants’ recommendations for assessment during learning recovery mirrored the recommendations made in the KIX Observatory report. Key recommendations include:
- developing guidelines on how to monitor student learning during periods of prolonged school closure;

building the capacity of teachers and schools on using distance learning solutions for the assessment of learning;
increasing parental capacity to support home learning for children during prolonged school closures,
and monitoring learning loss and the impact of the pandemic on learning outcomes.\textsuperscript{19}

Furthermore, the MILO project in Burkina Faso issued key recommendations revolving around how learning can be improved, including: Preparing for the provision of effective remote teaching and learning for future disruptions; continuing to support the wellbeing of the school community; and ensuring that there are effective systems in place to continue to monitor learning outcomes.\textsuperscript{20}

This webinar made clear “the importance of generating data that can be used to assess the true state of readiness to ensure learning continuity during crisis situations,” expressed a government research officer in Lesotho in the post-webinar survey.

It is likely that governments, communities, schools, teachers, families, and learners will be grappling with the effects of school closures on learning outcomes for years. This expected reality makes it even more important to build resilience into learning assessment policies and practices.

Dr Manyasa from Kenya concluded by observing, “COVID did not create a crisis in the education sector in our country; COVID exposed the crisis in the education sector...there was always a crisis in our education sector that we had never either noticed or responded to, and we think that this is an opportunity to reflect on the crisis.”

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa: Monitoring Impacts on Learning Outcomes – Burkina Faso. (2022)