

CASE STUDY

Distance learning in the context of COVID-19: the case of Rwanda

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List of acronyms

BLF	Building Learning Foundations
COVID-19	Novel coronavirus disease 2019
EICV5	Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey 5
ICT	information and communications technology
MIGEPROF	Ministry of Gender and Family promotion
MINEDUC	Ministry of Education
MINICT	Ministry of ICT and Innovation
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
REB	Rwanda Education Board
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Key messages

- On confirming the first COVID-19 case in March 2020, the government of Rwanda moved quickly to limiting the impact of the pandemic and resultant school closures on teaching and learning, introducing distance learning only a few weeks later.
- As learners at all education levels have been affected by this shift to distance learning, the government decided that the 2020 school year will not count towards their academic progress.
- Working in partnership with private telecommunication and media companies, and following consultation with school leaders, the government has broadcasted primary and lower-secondary teaching through radio and television.
- The Ministry of Education and telecommunication companies have waived internet fees for distance learning but, given that ICT coverage in Rwanda is still limited, online teaching cannot reach as many students as radio and TV.
- To meet the needs of learners with disabilities, televised lessons have included sign language interpretation. Visually impaired learners have been provided resources in braille.
- Development partner and civil society organisations have mobilised to support learners in remote areas and technological solutions such as solar powered radios.

Introduction

In Rwanda, the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) oversees education policy formulation and planning, and monitoring and evaluation. This responsibility includes policies that promote ICT in education and education for specific groups of vulnerable learners, such as the ICT in Education Policy, Girls' Education Policy and the Special Needs Education Policy. These education policies are implemented by the Rwanda Education Board (REB) for primary and secondary education. Both REB and MINEDUC receive financial and technical support from development partners. Since Rwanda's adoption in 2001 of a decentralised administration, the Commission on Social Welfare Promotion in the District Council, the District Executive Committee and other dedicated organisations are also responsible for promoting education and implementing education-related policies at the local level.

Rwanda's schooling age is 3 to 6 years old for pre-primary learners, 7 to 12 for primary, 13 to 15 for lower secondary and 16 to 18 for upper secondary. These learners are enrolled in public, government-aided and private schools — respectively 48%, 40% and 12% of learners in primary schools and 38%, 38% and 24% of learners in secondary schools.

The day after the first case of COVID-19 in Rwanda was confirmed (15th March 2020), the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) announced the closure of all schools and the government organised for all learners at boarding schools to be transported home. Country-wide social distancing and lockdowns, wherein citizen were asked to stay at home, began on 21st March. All learners at all levels of education were affected, including 2.5 million learners in 2,909 primary schools and 660,000 learners in 1,728 secondary schools.

The 2020 school year was expected to end on 23 October 2020 with the first term ending on 3rd April and the second on 18th July. However, a cabinet resolution dated 30th April indicated that schools would resume in September 2020 and the school year shall be repeated. Moreover, the schools didn't resume as planned instead they resumed in October and the ministry decided not repeat year but resume from where they stopped. This is not the case for private schools teaching an international curriculum: an informant from one international school reported that distance learning is continuing and that the 2020 school year will count towards the academic progress of performing learners.

This case study, conducted in a short period of time, is an overview of the Government of Rwanda's response to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of the urgent transition to distance learning and the use of technology to it. The study draws on available secondary data supplemented by a number of key informant interviews with representatives from government and donor institutions, non-governmental organisations and private media companies.

Rwanda's education response to COVID-19

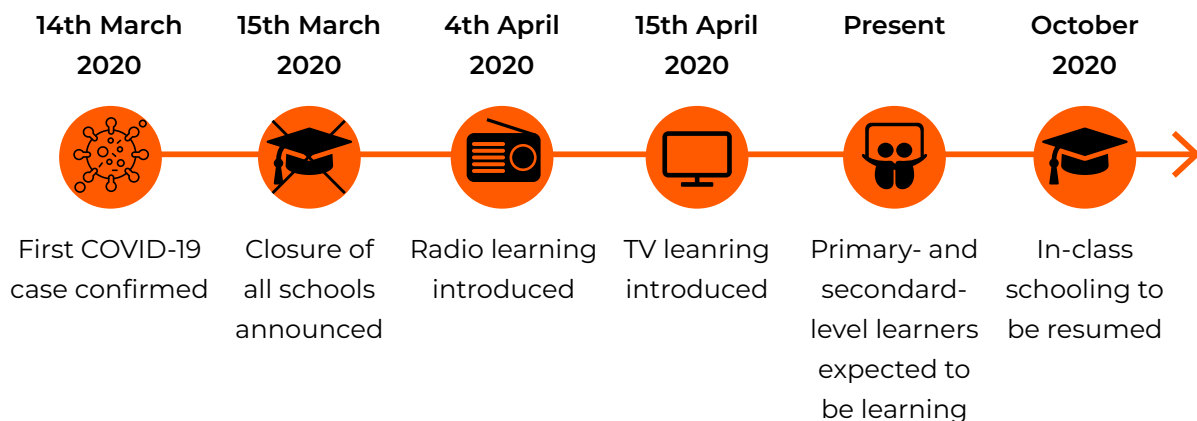


Figure 1

Key dates in Rwanda's COVID-19 education response

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Rwanda was committed to promoting information and communications technology (ICT) in formal education. A key focus of the ICT in Education Policy is promoting the use of open distance and e-learning, and the 2019 Rwanda Education Statistics show some progress between 2016 and 2019. At the primary level, the share of schools with computers increased from 65.8% to 84.4% and schools with internet connectivity increased from 9.8% to 34.8%. At the secondary level, the share of schools with computers increased from 77.3% to 85.4% and the schools with internet connectivity increased from 35.4% to 61.1%.

In late March 2020, almost two weeks after all schools were closed, the Government of Rwanda introduced distance learning. MINEDUC launched two online platforms — elearning.reb.rw for pre-primary, primary and secondary learners and elearning.rp.ac.rw for vocational learners at all levels. The platforms were created in collaboration with telecommunication companies MTN Rwanda and Airtel Rwanda, and through this partnership, internet fees were waived for the e-learning platforms to grant learners free access. One informant from REB reported that these online platforms were in place even before the COVID-19 crisis but had not been widely used.

After building partnerships with different media companies, the Government of Rwanda introduced mass media learning. From 4th April, pre-recorded lessons scripts were aired on radios, followed by televised learning 11 days later. Through local non-governmental organisations, Rwanda's development partners — primarily Unicef, the Education Development Trust (through Building Learning Foundations) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) — supported the production of television and radio lesson scripts and funded some media companies used for distance learning.¹ Learning materials were provided in text, audio, image, animation and video format for pre-primary, primary and secondary level. Primary-level content was broadcasted on radio while secondary-level content was broadcasted on TV.

¹ Key informant interview (KII), Education Development Trust, 19 June 2020.

Both public and private media companies have been broadcasting learning courses. Working as partners, REB provided the media companies with pre-recorded lessons scripts to be aired. Informants from different private radio and TV media companies in Rwanda have reported that lessons have been aired free of charge.² Informants mentioned that they assumed lessons would be broadcasted for a limited period and that the airtime should be paid for by the Government of Rwanda.

MINEDUC and REB communicated the lessons timetable weekly through radio channels, television and in newspapers, tweets, SMS messaging and on the MINEDUC website. Local governments, meanwhile, have continued to follow up on the implementation of education policies by informing the parents and carers about the availability of the distance learning. For example, a local government official reported receiving weekly timetable from MINEDUC which he later shared with community and school leaders.³

Ordinarily, in class-based learning, seven subjects are taught at lower primary, eight at upper primary and 13 core subjects at lower-secondary level. REB staff confirmed that all subjects except physical education and sport were taught remotely. Radio and TV lessons were delivered by teachers. Teachers not delivering remote lessons were expected to be using the time during the school closures to prepare lessons for when in-class teaching would resume and to further their knowledge. In September 2020, a new teaching calendar was introduced, (switching from the January to December calendar) and all learners will repeat the school year.

Students in international schools, where learning is different, are not expected to repeat their classes. A key informant from one international school said that their students are attending lessons via a digital cloud-based system and interact with teachers virtually.⁴ The same informant reported that the school had online learning system in place even before the COVID-19 crisis, which learners used for research projects and to keep busy during holidays. In their view, having an existing system in place was key to a successful shift to distance learning in the context of the COVID school closures.

Accessibility and participation

The Government of Rwanda is committed to providing universal access to compulsory and free basic education, enshrined in its Education for All policy and the Nine and Twelve Years of Basic Education policy. Nonetheless, in a country where 36.7% of the population are living in poverty, it is important to reflect on whether distance learning and the technology on which it relies reach all students, including those from marginalised backgrounds. Moreover, considerations of the satisfaction of learners and the service providers are also made.

Current participation

The available data suggests that a high number of primary-level learners have effectively followed distance learning (79%, n = 1,983,095). Recent statistics indicate that 74% of the households own a radio and 67% of households own at least one mobile phone. Given this,

2 KII, private media company in Rwanda, 17th July 2020.

3 KII, Rurindo District, 25th June 2020.

4 KII, international school in Rwanda, 17th July 2020.

a considerable proportion of learners should have access to the primary-level learning that is available via radio.

In contrast, the government's remote learning responses reached only a small number of secondary learners (11%, n = 71,800). Subjects for secondary education were broadcasted on TV. However, only 10% of all households in Rwanda own a TV set, 17% have access to internet at home and 3% own a computer. Moreover, using a TV set or computer, or recharging a mobile phone or other device requires electricity. Yet only 27% of all Rwandan households have electricity, most of whom (85%) are in urban areas. Informants also linked the low levels of engagement among secondary learners to a lack of motivation, given that learners know they will have to repeat the school year from September. Finally, informants from a private media company referred to news coverage that suggested learners were unprepared to shift from in-person to distance learning and that it was hard for them to embrace the new set-up.⁵

Distance learning and social inclusion

Disability

Different groups of vulnerable learners — especially those with disabilities, learners from poor families, and girls — found accessing the channels adopted for distance learning challenging.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Rwanda had demonstrated its commitment to ensuring that learners with disabilities enjoy their right to education (see, for example, its Special Needs and Inclusive Education (SNE) policy). Recent data indicates that 1% of learners enrolled in primary and secondary schools have some kind of total or partial disability, such as impaired hearing, vision, or vocal speech, cognitive disabilities, or physical impairments. Prior to COVID-19, schools had therefore begun adopting teaching and learning arrangements to meet the needs of disabled learners. These include arranging classrooms and timetables, and using assistive devices.

The education sector response to COVID-19 also considered certain aspects of disability. For learners with hearing impairments, REB television programmes and e-learning platforms included sign language interpretation and, in collaboration with development partners supported the translation of lessons into braille.⁶ The government is also provided braille books to learners with visual impairments. With the support of Unicef, 5,100 learners with disabilities were provided text readers and materials in braille and sign language through an initiative that started in Rwanda's southern Nyamagabe District. As noted by one informant, the programme has not reached all learners with visual impairments.⁷

Gender

Social and gender norms in the Rwandan society mean that household chores and other care responsibilities are assigned more to girls than to boys. Girls are therefore likely to miss out on learning opportunities while engaged in domestic work. Aware of this potential barrier, the Ministry of Gender and Family promotion (MIGEPROF), REB, and MINEDUC

5 KII, private media company in Rwanda, 17th June 2020.

6 KII, Unicef, 25th June 2020.

7 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

prompted parents to support their children and to protect them from this specific form of gender-based violence caused by gender inequitable division of household chores.

Poverty

In response to concerns about the affordability and accessibility of the tools and channels adopted for remote learning, local governments at district level and civil society organisations have collaborated with MINEDUC to provide solar-energy-enabled radios to vulnerable families in rural districts. The total number of radios distributed across the country is still to be determined; Save the Children have provided 950 households with solar-energy-enabled radio devices in Rulindo District. One local leader interviewed for this study said that the number of households that had been provided a solar-enabled radio was small compared to the number of those in need.

Monitoring for distance learning interventions

REB and Rwanda's development partners have monitored the distance learning initiatives that have been in place. REB staff mentioned that they can monitor the visitors to the e-learning websites and platforms.⁸ They have only estimates and anecdotal evidence about the number of learners who follow lessons via radio and TV.⁹ This is why local civil society organisations have collaborated with the REB (and received support from development partners) and also tested ways to gather data about learners and distance learning through home visits and and by calling families by phone.¹⁰

Policy focus and response

REB and Rwanda's development partners have monitored the distance learning initiatives that have been in place. According to REB staff, the number of visitors to the e-learning website is tracked.¹¹ This decision was guided by data from the Integrated Household Living Conditions Survey5 (EICV5), which included data about households' access to and/or ownership of a TV, radio, telephone, electricity, and internet.¹² with local leaders and local civil society organisations, REB and development partners conducting monitoring home visits and phone calls with households. As reported by one informant, home visits payed special attention to monitoring how learners with disabilities have been learning.¹³ The local government officials interviewed for this study reported that they had not been consulted by REB.¹⁴

Given its global presence, Unicef was instrumental in the decision to consider distance learning. Unicef Rwanda borrowed the lessons learnt from countries where COVID-19 struck much earlier and, initially, supported REB to adapt ready-made lessons for radio. These lessons are developed and recorded in Rwanda.

8 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

9 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

10 KII, Unicef, 25th June 2020.

11 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

12 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

13 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

14 KII, REB, 24th June 2020.

According to Education Development Trust, REB involved their partners in the Rwandan education sector to plan how the strategies would be implemented, and partners committed to support the initiative.¹⁵

15 KII, Education Development Trust, 19th June 2020.

Conclusion and suggestions

In Rwanda, the education sector's response to COVID-19 was fast and adaptive, and there were efforts to make the response inclusive. Equally important, this case study finds that different stakeholders worked together to deliver a holistic approach to learning continuity. A more thorough assessment is needed to understand in greater depth the experiences of local leaders, teachers, and learners.

It is also important to consider how sustainable these approaches are. Learner satisfaction — a key element for sustainability — is of particular concern given that all learners following the national curriculum will repeat the year and cover much of the same material again. In this respect, the government could learn from the effective distance learning systems run by international school, which allow academic progress.

Another element of sustainability is the extent to which the distance learning approaches have used existing structures. Existing radio and TV channels were used, and these are likely to continue even after the end of the COVID-19 lockdown and school closures. But it is important to recognise that, without receiving payment for airtime, private media companies will have little incentive to continue airing lessons beyond the immediate crisis.

Funding is also a concern. The Rwandan government secured a 18-month grant from the Global Partnership for Education and this, as well as most of other funds used in the response, are coming from agencies that cannot continue the funding perpetually.

It remains to be seen whether the COVID-19 crisis has led to greater consideration of the role of EdTech in Rwanda. It will be necessary to continue researching the extent to which the government has invested in empowering vulnerable populations to be able to access and use technology. This will not only improve the quality of education during the times of crisis, but also the education system more broadly.

At the time of writing (July 2020) the government has yet to make a statement about next steps should the COVID-19 pandemic not be under control by September. The issues discussed in this study should be considered in any approach, along with the following suggestions:

- **Uphold evidence-informed decision-making processes.** The government should endeavour to continue using data for decision-making, with particular emphasis on collecting and assessing disaggregated data on different types of learner vulnerabilities to ensure that these are adequately addressed.
- **Build a sustainable and accessible e-learning system to ensure that all learners are at the same level.** The government could build an e-learning and distance learning system to ensure that learners gain the necessary skills. TV and radio can contribute to education and learning, but they did not prove to be efficient in terms of allowing learners to progress their learning and education journey. A strong distance learning system would not only allow the learners to transition from one approach to another but would also allow for proper monitoring, ensuring that all learners are benefiting equally.
- **Increase public budget allocation for education:** Ordinary budget is more sustainable funding stream than reliance on donors for emergencies.

- **Maximise accessibility and affordability:** In terms of accessibility, the e-learning website of REB should be free of charge for streaming as committed by REB and telecommunication companies. On the other hand, the education sector response to COVID-19 has also highlighted the need to empower people and support their access to computers and other devices required for distance learning.
- **Make approaches socially inclusive.** The government should maintain its efforts to mobilise parents and carers in support of learners — whether they are a girl or a boy, have a disability or not. Programming should also take into account the wider household context: the parents' own level of education, the household's socioeconomic status.
- **Strengthen social protection schemes to cater for education needs** so that support for education is continually available and not only during times of distress.

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Annex: stakeholders supporting learning during the COVID-19 crisis

Stakeholders who have supported the initiatives for distance learning include:

- Ministry of ICT and Innovation (MINICT): supported MINEDUC to list channels that might be used for distance learning. The two ministries decided to create freely accessible educational websites for learners to access during the crisis time.
- Unicef Rwanda supported interpretation of TV lessons in sign language, lessons script development, hosting lessons on media channels, provision of solar energy-enabled radio devices to vulnerable families.
- MIGEPROF and National Commission for Children developed positive messaging on children's rights to education.
- Save the Children provided solar energy-enabled radio devices to vulnerable families.
- Education Development Trust through the Building Learning Foundations (BLF), developing thirty scrips for English and Maths lessons for lower primary level.
- USAID developed Kinyarwanda radio lessons and audiovisual materials for lower-primary level learners.
- MTN Rwanda and Airtel Rwanda partnered with REB to set up the e-learning platforms and waived internet fees for the learners to access online learning platforms for free.
- Private media supported government efforts by broadcasting lessons free of charge.

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