Digital-shy Zimbabwe's schools feel the brunt of COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how citizens become vulnerable when governments do not protect and promote human rights in the online environment. The pandemic has critically affected the global education sector, potentially compromising the right to education.

Across the globe, over 1.2 billion children had their right to education infringed following enforced school closures as part of the measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. Most developed countries have turned to alternative means to deliver education through the use of online or electronic learning aided with digital technologies, thereby preserving learners' human rights to education and health. Italy, China and the United Arab Emirates are some of the states that are arguably doing significantly well on education delivery.[1]

However, in Africa, this has been a different scenario all together. African governments are battling over whether or not to reopen school premises, while those that had already taken the bold step to resume classes were forced to abruptly suspend lessons after they recorded a spike in new infections. Henceforth, e-learning has become a central talking point in African settings. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe is a typical example where debate is raging over the need for government to set up human and financial resources to address affordability, access and availability of infrastructure, devices, internet and content to aid e-learning.

TEACHERS UNIONS TAKE AIM AT PREMATURE REOPENING

In disregard of submissions from various quarters, the government of Zimbabwe announced a phased approach to reopen primary and secondary

1   Daniels, L. (2020, 20 May). Reopening of schools during Covid-19: How other countries have fared. *IOL*. https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/reopening-of-schools-during-covid-19-how-other-countries-have-fared-48212849

schools with effect from 28 July 2020, starting with learners writing exams. Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Permanent Secretary Thumisang Thabela also said mid-year examinations will run between 29 June and 22 July 2020. Thabela said there was enough time to address outstanding health concerns before schools open.

Teachers unions have, however, warned that a rushed approach would be catastrophic at a time when the country's COVID-19 infections are increasing. The infection rate had reached 340 people by 11 June from 149 on 28 May.[2] Health Minister Obadiah Moyo also warned of a major surge.

It must be noted that the COVID-19 outbreak forced schools to prematurely close on 24 March instead of the scheduled term ending date of 2 April. Classes were expected to resume on 5 May. Technically, both teachers and learners lost teaching and learning time, respectively, in terms of syllabus coverage and preparation for June and November examinations.

Teachers unions acknowledge the government's bid to ensure the right to education, but lamented that this is being done at the expense of the right to health. Also, nine schools are operating as quarantine centres,[3] which would disadvantage learners and teachers of occupied schools in the event that classes resume in the given timeline. But the government hinted that it will no longer use schools as quarantine centres and they are set to be rehabilitated and disinfected upon being vacated.[4]

The Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) has argued that the government – which had over the past two months struggled to test 40,000 people – had no capacity to periodically test 4.6 million students, 136,000 teachers and 50,000 ancillary staff by July 28. Furthermore, according to the PTUZ, the procurement and delivery of test kits, thermometers, sanitisers and personal protective equipment is yet to be done at the 10,000 schools, making an early reopening impossible.[5]

Moreover, there is a need to design the school transportation programme, recruit an additional 50,000 teachers, and carry out the infrastructural development to allow physical distancing for a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:20.

"The reopening of schools is not advisable and has no merits whatsoever. Fundamentally, there has been no task force to carry out COVID-19 risk assessment in schools involving teacher unions, health and education officials," said PTUZ president Takavafira Zhou. "We have also recently witnessed a quantum leap of COVID-19 cases in Zimbabwe and opening schools would be against WHO recommendations."[6]

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2   Xinhua. (2020, 29 May). Zimbabwe's COVID-19 cases climb to 149, adding 17. *XinhuaNet*. http://www.xin-huanet.com/english/2020-05/29/c_139098680.htm

3   ZimFact. (2020, 6 May). Zimbabwe COVID-19 isolation and quarantine facilities. *ZimFact*. https://zimfact.org/factsheet-zimbabwe-covid-19-isolation-and-quarantine-facilities

4   Mashininga, K. (2020, 6 May). Use of colleges as quarantine centres exposes system decay. *University World News*. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200506085705742

5   Interview with Takavafira Zhou, president of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, 28 May 2020.

6   Ibid.

E-LEARNING IN ZIMBABWE

Dr Zhou said solutions to the education crisis posed by COVID-19 must ensure two key human rights, which are learners' right to education with equal measure applied to their right to health. The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Primary and Secondary Education concurs and recommends e-learning as the most suitable solution under such circumstances.

"School premises should reopen when it is safe for pupils and teachers. Government should in the meantime focus on e-learning," said the committee chairperson Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga.[7]

Telecoms giant Econet Wireless Zimbabwe has taken the lead as it introduced online learning tailor-made for Zimbabwe's education system. Through its subsidiary Cassava Smartech, Econet launched Akello Digital Classroom[8] and Akello E-Library,[9] which allow students to have online classes and access to hundreds of school curriculum books online approved by the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council and international examination boards. Tertiary institutions had already been making use of Skype and email to foster distance learning, which can be adopted to further learning in junior schools. Zoom and Google Classroom are also among the many platforms recommended by UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Responses.[10]

Misihairabwi-Mushonga said there are other basic e-learning initiatives readily available and already in use such, as the WhatsApp Messenger application, where a parent can help a child follow through educational modules.

"We should also look at the opportunities brought by e-learning with or without COVID-19. If we invest in information technology, it will help children, even those who have been walking long distances to school," she said.

Several primary school teachers have opened classes through WhatsApp Messenger groups with parents, in which work is given to pupils through their parents. At secondary schools, classes are conducted either directly with students or through their relatives via the same social media platform.

E-LEARNING AND ICTS AS A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO EDUCATION

The director of the Zimbabwe Internet Governance Forum, Cade Zvavanjanja, has explained that "the internet and ICTs [information and communications technologies] have a significant role and are relevant in addressing the COVID-19

7   Interview with Priscilla Misihairambwi-Mushonga, chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Primary and Secondary Education, 25 May 2020.

8   Mudzingwa, F. (2020, 28 May). Cassava Launches Akello Digital Classroom With Free Education Content For 1st Month. *Techzim*. https://www.techzim.co.zw/2020/05/cassava-launches-akello-digital-classroom-with-free-education-content-for-1st-month

9   The Herald. (2020, 9 June). Boost for learners as Cassava Edutech launches an e-library. *The Herald*. https://www.herald.co.zw/boost-for-learners-as-cassava-edutech-launches-an-e-library

10   https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions

education challenges, though not a panacea on their own."[11] Zvavanjanja said that although there were various bespoke, free and commercial tools that could be used for e-learning, keys to harness these platforms were access, affordability, availability of infrastructure, digital gadgets, internet and content.

He further stressed that as Zimbabwe leverages the use of technology in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the use of technology must be in line with the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms.[12] The African Declaration is a pan-African initiative that seeks to give guidance to governments and other public stakeholders in the regulation of the internet and the use of communication technologies. It contains 13 principles to promote internet rights and freedoms.

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Zimbabwe, which deals with media and internet rights, has identified principles 2, 4 and 10 as of particular importance to guarantee e-learning.[13] Principle 2 calls for accessible and affordable internet; principle 4 is based on the right to information; and principle 10 focuses on promoting internet access to marginalised groups and those at risk.

The outlined principles set the tone and basis of where Zimbabwe should start from in order to implement e-learning effectively. The African Declaration advocates for internet rights and freedoms as human rights, which dovetails with the trajectory that Zimbabwe is pushing for under e-learning. Therefore, it is imperative that Zimbabwe borrows from these principles to ensure that the process and fruits of e-learning are not compromised.

Key principles such as wide internet access are essential, as this will avoid a situation where there is wide internet coverage that is, however, beyond the reach of many, or cheap internet charges hamstrung by limited accessibility. Most importantly, the majority of Zimbabwe's schools are in the rural areas that are highly underdeveloped in terms of internet accessibility, infrastructure and power generation – requisites that are essential to e-learning. Therefore, the principles of the African Declaration give Zimbabwe a solid model to adopt when it implements e-learning, considering that various shortcomings have been identified.

SHORTCOMINGS

In the current situation, Zimbabwe cannot fully embrace e-learning, as it would prejudice and be discriminatory to persons without internet access or those who cannot afford access to the internet. Students in rural and marginalised communities do not have the capacity in terms of hardware (mobile phones or other devices that facilitate access to the internet), infrastructure and finances to access the e-learning portals.

Some cannot even afford to purchase the subsidised or discounted data

11   Interview with Cade Zvavanjanja, director of the Zimbabwe Internet Governance Forum, 3 June 2020.

12   https://africaninternetrights.org

13   Interview with Nompilo Simanje, legal and ICT policy officer at the Media Institute of Southern Africa Zimbabwe, 9 June 2020.

offered by the internet service providers for e-learning. In light of the above, students' access to information continues to be infringed during this time, said MISA Zimbabwe legal and ICT policy officer Nompilo Simanje. According to Simanje, data charges, internet coverage and technical skills required by teachers and students to utilise digital platforms and tools for e-learning remains a stumbling block towards the advancement of the edutech revolution.

MISA Zimbabwe is currently spearheading a #DataMustFall campaign against telecommunication companies that pegged data charges beyond the reach of many. A snap survey indicated that unlimited monthly data costs an average of USD 50 across internet service providers.[14] This technically infringes on affordability of internet, which is a key element towards the e-learning matrix, considering that civil servants who constitute the bulk of Zimbabwe's formal employees earn a paltry ZWL 2,800 (USD 40) as at 12 June.[15]

Zhou concurred and added, "Other than WhatsApp, e-learning is out of reach for many students due to challenges with internet connectivity, let alone affordability."

The veteran educationist said e-learning currently has limited applicability due to limited power in rural Zimbabwe coupled with incessant power cuts in major cities.

"Currently more than 65% of secondary schools are not electrified, while more than 75% of primary schools are not electrified. Several schools have no single computer or laptop and it will take a responsible government to ensure that these challenges are addressed," said Zhou, adding that in-service training for the teaching staff is a necessity.[16]

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

Notably, the Zimbabwean Constitution has a declaration of rights, which suffices as a foundational basis for digital rights. There should be no demarcation as to rights that are exercised online and those that are exercised offline. In terms of a resolution by the UN Human Rights Council, the same rights exercised and protected offline should also be exercised and protected online.[17] Taking note of the supremacy of the Constitution, the foundational framework is present for the exercise of digital rights in Zimbabwe.

However, Simanje highlighted the need to address challenges to do with e-learning from a legal and administrative perspective, taking advantage of the

14   Masarakufa, C. (2020, 2 May). Comparative analysis of internet connectivity options In Zimbabwe. *StartupBiz Zimbabwe*. https://startupbiz.co.zw/comparative-analysis-of-internet-connectivity-options-in-zimbabwe

15   Vinga, A. (2020, 31 January). New Civil Servants Wages To Wipe Out Budget Surplus – Economists. *New Zimbabwe*. https://www.newzimbabwe.com/new-civil-servants-wages-to-wipe-out-budget-surplus-economists

16   Interview with Takavafira Zhou, president of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, 28 May 2020.

17   ARTICLE 19. (2017, 14 June). ARTICLE 19 at the UNHRC: "The same rights that people have offline must also be protected online". *ARTICLE 19*. https://www.article19.org/resources/article-19-at-the-unhrc-the-same-rights-that-people-have-offline-must-also-be-protected-online

recently gazzetted Cybersecurity and Data Protection Bill[18] that must give direct impetus to the protection and promotion of human rights online.

"The objective is therefore to ensure that online spaces are safe for communication and for transactions as well," she said. "With regards to the educational sector, seeing that children or students will be resorting to the internet for their learning, research included, there is definitely a need to ensure that the online space is safe for them."

GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT QUESTIONED

However, Misihairambwi-Mushonga argued that and e-learning enabling environment needed to be available regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's sad that government is now contemplating on the possibilities of utilising e-learning now that COVID-19 threatens the education sector," she commented. "If there is anything that the COVID-19 pandemic has done, it has exposed government's reluctance to expedite online learning, which was recommended by Dr. (Caiphus) Nziramasanga back in 1999," she said as she questioned the government's will to embrace the internet.

Veteran educationist Caiphus Nziramasanga, through his 1999 Nziramasanga Commission, recommended the need to digitalise education, but it was not given priority.

Though the late former president Robert Mugabe launched the National Schools Computerisation Programme the following year, it must be noted that the National e-Learning Programme was launched 12 years later. Since then, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has only managed to install internet facilities in 50% of the country's primary and secondary schools as part of its snail-paced efforts to enhance e-learning.[19]

The government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with three contractors, namely ZARNet, e-Learning Solutions and the country's third-largest mobile operator TelOne Zimbabwe. ZARNet was tasked to install internet facilities and services to 1,300 schools at a cost of USD1.1 million, while TelOne was allocated 2,500 schools, and e-Learning Solutions was expected to deal with the remainder. However, the Ministry heaped the slow pace of the e-learning exercise to the contracted players.

"Of the three companies we signed MoUs with, only ZARNet has done something, the rest have not really taken off," said former education minister Paul Mavima.

It should be noted that the ruling party, ZANU-PF, has strong reservations toward the promotion of online spaces, which they describe as advancing a regime change agenda through social media platforms such as Twitter and

18 Runyanga, N. (2020, 6 June). Cybersecurity Bill: Joining global cybercrime fight. *The Herald*. https://www.herald.co.zw/cyber-security-bill-joining-global-cybercrime-fight

19 Matimaire, K. (2019, 20 September). 50% of Zim Schools Connected to WiFi - Govt. *The Industry and Trade Expert*. https://theindustrytrade.com/2019/09/20/50-of-zim-schools-connected-to-wifi-govt/

Facebook. The social media platforms have been used by dissenting voices to expose misrule and corruption in government.

SIX-STEP PLAN TO ENABLE E-LEARNING

nevertheless, the education sector has clearly illustrated how the country stands to benefit from online spaces, as it has become apparent that reopening school premises exposes not only teachers and learners but their contacts to the deadly COVID-19. Therefore, the government should adopt already existing solutions gathering dust in its archives in the form of the 1999 Nziramasanga Commission recommendations, and expedite school computerisation and e-learning pro-grammes. Pursuant to this, Zimbabwe can follow at least six prerequisites to successfully digitalise education.

This starts by respecting the 2000 Dakar Declaration that stipulates that the educational budget must be above 22% of the total national budget. Other complementary funding sources such as the Universal Services Fund adminis-tered by the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe could also be utilised to develop ICTs in the sector. The same goes for funding that is currently being channelled into the country for COVID-19 responses.

Second, mobilised funds must be invested in wide internet coverage through infrastructure development. Third, the government must scrap duties on ICTs in order to lower the prices of digital devices such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smart phones to make them available at affordable prices, considering that they play a key role for one to connect to the internet.

Fourth, there must be skills enhancement programmes to ensure digitally literate adults targeting teachers, learners and parents to help children cope with their lessons. Fifth, there must be a relevant e-learning course that aligns with the syllabi. Equally important is the need to develop digital literature accessible online and offline. Lastly and most importantly, there is a need to align laws that infringe internet use to the 2013 Constitution and ensure that the Cybersecurity Bill conforms to Southern African Development Community (SADC), African Union and African Declaration principles.

In essence, the COVID-19 pandemic has reawakened the debate on the importance of the internet, which has not been prioritised in Zimbabwe. As the debate rages on, there is a clear indication that Zimbabwe is evolving into the cyberspace as means to circumvent the effects of COVID-19, with the education sector set to become a top beneficiary through e-learning. This cannot become a reality without adhering to the African Declaration principles. Principles 2, 4 and 10, which by and large speak to accessibility and affordability of the internet for all groups, can be safely guaranteed when the Zimbabwean government follows the six-step plan.