



COVID-19 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

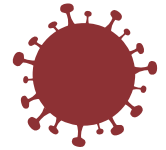
This special edition of the SIFA Newsletter reflects on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and resultant implications for skills development. Since the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic and governments have worked tirelessly to put together economic and social interventions, a 'new' normal is emerging. As a response, the African Union Commission's Human Resource, Science & Technology Department has rallied partners and stakeholders around its Youth Sector Response to COVID-19. In tandem, the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) put forward the COVID-19 Response White Paper which puts the spotlight on employment and informal sector. Addressing measures for the informal sector, prioritizing entrepreneurs and innovators increased investments in skills.

The Skills Initiative for Africa seeks to improve the employment prospects of African Youth through showcasing of best practices, facilitating expert dialogue to find pragmatic solutions for accompanying ongoing TVET reforms. Importantly, SIFA aims to strengthen public-private sector partnerships at national and regional level to drive demand-oriented skills delivery with TVET institutions. In this regard, this edition serves as a compilation of our collective analysis, reflections and insights gathered as the COVID-19 pandemic unravels and its impact in the skills development environment. Our research is based on country level experiences in terms of economic impacts and possible recovery strategies and what impact this will have on continued training and development in the TVET sector. In addition, we reflect on the dire impacts COVID-19 has had on the informal sector and the role that targeted skills development to this cohort could help restore business activity.

We are excited with the progress made in the implementation of Financing Window I & II, and are looking forward to the launch of Financing Window III which has been re-framed to respond to effects of the pandemic. Noting the call by the AU Member States for sharing of knowledge repositories of learning resources, the African Skills Portal for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship (ASPYEE) has collated a number of useful links to support continued opportunities for learning from home for millions of young people whose education has been affected.

These articles are intended to provide food for thought as countries refocus on non-pharmaceutical interventions and turn to redefine recovery strategies, to put skills development as integral and urgent in developing human capacities. Accompanying measures include enabling factors such as equitable access to ICT infrastructure, access to technology at household level, knowledge, social safety nets and quality health services.

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AU Youth Sector Response to COVID-19:

FACILITATING LEARNING AND SKILLS ACQUISITION FOR YOUTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

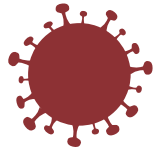
Since 11 March 2020 when the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 pandemic, AU Member States have taken steps to suppress and control the spread of the Coronavirus in Africa, including closing of schools, universities and training institutions. While closing education institutions are important in mitigating the spread of COVID-19, prolonged closures negatively impact all students and disproportionately affect the deprived and vulnerable youth. This situation therefore calls for creating opportunities for learning from home for millions of young people whose education have been affected. The Specialised Technical Committee on Education, Science and Technology (STC-EST 3) held its Virtual Extraordinary session on 30 April 2020 to address pressing challenges that have been created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the key recommendations of Ministers was the prioritization of the following areas to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on the Education Sector.

- Take advantage of the opportunity for online teaching and learning to ensure continuity of education on the continent; improvement of education systems and robust e-learning infrastructure; ensuring quality and integrating lessons learnt and good practices from COVID-19 response as espoused by the DOTSS* approach; and conceiving a model roadmap for post COVID-19 which integrates continuity of education in the different regional and national responses.



- Plan for re-opening schools with appropriate strategies to catch-up on lost period of learning by identifying time periods for catching-up on work and implement back to school campaigns and measures to curb further infections in educational institutions including schools, universities and colleges. To this end, Ministries of Education should work closely with ministries of finance to safeguard the education sector funding including establishing a Contingency Fund for Education in emergencies.





- Document the impact of school closures on children, girls, disabled persons and vulnerable populations, including those living in vulnerable conditions such as refugees, migrants, IDPs and asylum seekers. Member states should also document good practices, and monitor learning engagement with support from local and international partners, and with the view of sharing information with AUC to facilitate inter-country learning and up scaling of good practices. In implementing the decisions of the Ministers, the African Union Commission is embarking on the Continue Learning Initiative as part of the Youth Sector Response to COVID-19, which focuses on four key elements—each with several activities carried out since the onset of the pandemic.

Communication Campaign to create awareness on opportunities for online learning.

Joint social media campaigns have been held with HP and ProFuturo Foundation on Digital Skills Courses and Open Educational Resources. Furthermore, a Webinar on Opportunities for Online Learning was held on 7 May 2020 as part of a series being organised on COVID-19.

Implement joint Initiatives with Partners to support the Provision of Online Learning.

In collaboration with HP, Member States are being offered a free of charge Learning Management System and the technical support in order to provide virtual learning while schools are closed.

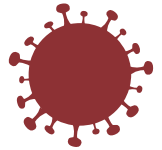
Policy guidance and dialogue with Member States.

On 30 March 2020, a joint AUC-UNICEF statement to Member States was issued targeting the education sector response. Furthermore, the Virtual Extraordinary session of the Specialised Technical Committee on Education, Science and Technology (STC-EST 3) was held on 30 April 2020. The Commission is currently in the process of developing a guidance for reopening of schools.

Facilitate learning through monitoring, documenting and disseminating best practices and lessons.

[A Knowledge and Learning Platform](#) has been developed to facilitate sharing of experiences of Member States, Development Partner Initiatives, and Innovations.

**DOTSS is an acronym for Digital connectivity, Online and offline learning, Teachers, as bfacilitators and motivators of learning, Safety online and in schools and Skills focused learning.*



Funding Window III

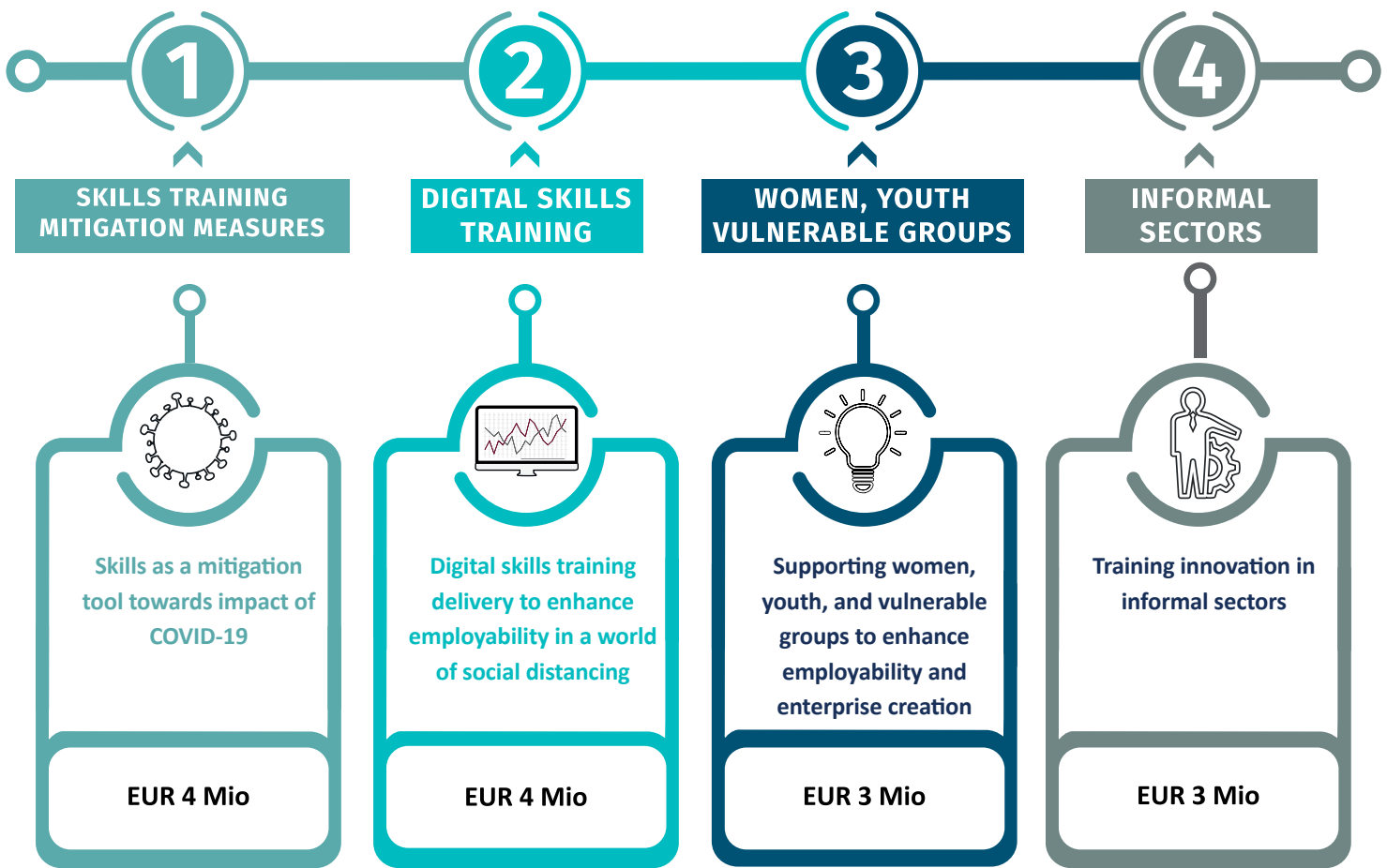
SIFA – RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Conscious of the COVID-19 implications for the world of work and learning, the Skills Initiative for Africa – SIFA – has formulated a COVID-19 response strategy to identify innovative proposals to mitigate the impact of the crisis on society by equipping learners and workers with the digital skills necessary for participation in this new era, aptly described as the new normal.

This call has been announced at the recently held African Union’s STC Ministerial for Youth Development Virtual Consultative Meeting held on 17 June 2020.

The Funding Window is placed under the campaign of the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD, ‘100,000 SME’s for 1 million Jobs by 2021’.

The four thematic areas covered by the SIFA response strategy are:

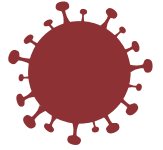


Skills training for public health and safety mitigation interventions such as COVID-19 prevention measures, production of personal protective equipment (PPEs), data analytics and tracking apps. Non-health mitigation interventions include digital solutions for agriculture supply chains and food security.

Digital skills training delivery to enhance employability in a world of social distancing, e.g. online training, multimedia learning platforms, blended learning, and digital solutions to overcome physical barriers to training facilities.

Innovative skills development ideas to support women, youth, and vulnerable groups to enhance employability during and post COVID-19.

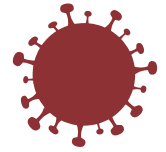
Training innovations in the informal sector using apps and online as well as offline digital tools and devices.



Funding Window II

SIFA – FIRST PROJECT SET TO TAKE OFF!





WHAT DOES COVID-19 MEAN FOR SKILLS-DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA?

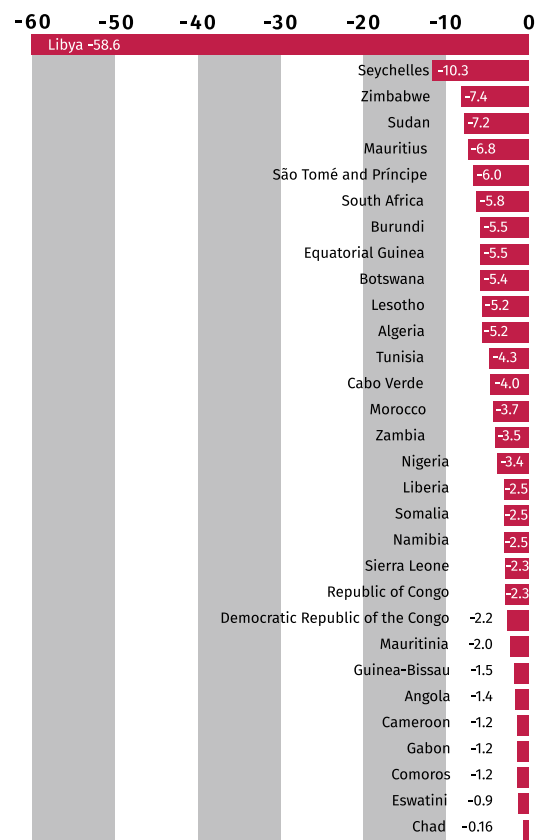
It is still very early to assess in detail what COVID-19 would mean for African economies. Certain is however that the pandemic will hit Africa especially hard. The global economy will go into recession and it is now clear that a global U-shaped downturn is the best we can hope for. What we must fear is a L-shaped slump where economies will sharply decline and will be flat thereafter. The predicted GDP drop for Africa is severe (see table). Oil producing countries are hit two-fold: by the pandemic and by the oil price collapse that we have seen in the past months and that will prevail due to the reduced global demand. Impacts will be harder on land-locked and small island economies due to decreased trade, tourism and remittances. Whilst Africa has been over the last decades integrated into global markets, the continent was not able to install shock-absorbers to cushion against the global shocks: Sectors that are most vulnerable for job losses are the one that are globally integrated: airline industries, the logistic sector, the cut flower sector in Kenya and Ethiopia, fish exports from Kenya to China, the textile sector in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt and Tunisia, tourism in general and mining and oil and other extractive industries. Although all countries will be affected, the drop will be felt differently.

COVID-19 has also shown the disproportionate impacts on low skilled workers and the informal sectors. The majority of businesses are micro & small to medium, mostly in manufacturing, service and tourism which have been hardest affected. Recovery will take between 3 to 5 years for Africa to reach its pre-Covid-19 status. Small and medium African enterprises will pay the highest price because they cannot survive a long-term economic crisis.

The key question that we have to ask is: **what are the skills that will be needed to create adaptation to the ‘new normal’ as sectors recover, re-purpose and job structures change?**

It is plausible to foresee that international companies will reduce their engagement to a certain extent and “resource” their assembly line. Direct foreign investment will be reduced because investors are becoming more averse to risks. This will force more people out of formal employment into informal economic activities. By looking at the how the continent will position to re-build and create sustainable supply chains in the wake of Covid-19, this can help to identify the Continent’s future job demands. Relatedly, the needed

skills will follow the trajectory of the opportunities that the AcFTA is already offering.



Predicted contracting of GDP 2020 by IMF, IMF Data April 2020

With reduced global trade foreseen, there will be an increasing need for local sourcing. This may lead to a short-term spike in the demand for technical and vocational skills. In the meantime, COVID-19 has exposed the urgent need for a paradigm shift on how TVET is delivered to continue training and development. In this regard the skills development agenda needs to be taken in the broader context of other measures that governments are putting in place as a response to the crisis. Skills development policies and requisite financing must be integral to the recovery plans. Empowering young people with skills will continue to be the game changer.

At the moment, one can only guess the impact of the economic downturn on skills, however a few developments are highly likely:



- Equipping the informal sector will become even more important than in the past. On one hand skills for the informal sector depend on the specific trade or “informal qualification”. How these can be formalised within national qualification frameworks? On the other hand, in addition to the generic business skills required, the skills package needs to focus on managing risks and building resilience as part of the package of vocational-life skills and entrepreneurial training. Moreover, digital literacy and adaptation to technology should be part of the solution to access e-commerce platforms that have proven to be a strong contributor to MSME survival.
- There will be more national or regional value chains at the expense of international value chains. For instance, in-sourcing of the production of medical supplies and pharmaceuticals will increasingly become more local. Why should African countries not be able to do what Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries worldwide, has done; being able to produce 97% of its demand on drugs and pharmaceuticals in country? Industrial policies that favour local and regional production in respect of regulation, taxes and tax benefits, import or export regulations are needed.
- National lock-downs have already triggered a high demand for digital solutions in production, learning and skills development. This will continue with small enterprises entering the market with new, improved or adapted products. TVET sector can play a critical role by transferring skills demanded by the labour market, whilst also internally adapting to learning with technology as part of the ‘new’ normal.
- Learning institutions, TVET colleges, governments will have to adapt fast to the new demands of young Africans for digital learning. Young people expect faster and more practise orientated learning than most of these institutions are able to deliver. COVID-19 social distancing measures have exposed new job opportunities in the training and learning delivery chain. These include content developers that can marry the curriculum of TVET institutions to real life work conditions through interactive modes.
- Whatever happens, sustaining agriculture productivity will be key to meeting food security needs. 39 African countries are net importers of food and value-chain disruptions are life-

threatening for millions of people. There is a dire need to invest into productivity and skills improvement in agriculture through improved technologies.

- Every country needs a shock absorber in cases of crisis like this pandemic. Basic social protection systems are in dire need. Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia and Equatorial Guinea offer excellent examples of countries that have regulated and put in place social protection systems for their citizens most in need.

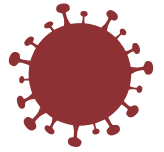
Evidently there is no clear approach to addressing informality; however, providing them with skills to adapt and re-invent themselves to find opportunities in the ‘new’ normal will be a critical bridging measure. For this, there is need to have a multi stakeholder approach to support their integration into the larger economy. A success factor will be how we can learn from the fast-tracked Public private partnerships for financing. In the same way that the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the power of partnerships, it will be networks and relationships that will be crucial to the post-COVID recovery.

The first Chief of Staff of President Obama once put said: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” In our context it could well mean that the best post-pandemic policy answers of African governments could be supporting a green and tech-supported transformation, a focus on regional rather than international value chains within the context of the African Free Trade Area and serious investments into regional infrastructure, including electricity and IT.

The COVID-19 pandemic sent us a very strong message: Nobody is alone on this planet in good or in bad times. In late January, when we read the first articles about a strange disease in a city called Wuhan in China for most of us it could have happened on the moon. Only two months later the world came to a standstill. The lesson we have learned is that better global cooperation and continental cooperation are the levers to unlock prosperity for all.

The article reflects the opinion of the authors. If one is interested in the vast growing literature and research on the predicted economic impact of the pandemic, please refer to McKinsey, UNECA, World Bank. We also have used some internal country studies that have not yet been published.

Ernst Hustaedt, GIZ and Unami Mpofu, AUDA-NEPAD



COVID-19 REVEALS DIGITAL AND REMOTE LEARNING CHALLENGES IN TVET



The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world to recognize the value of technology-mediated learning, given social distancing to preserve the health and lives of people. This is not a one size fits all scenario, as the prevalent inequalities have been highlighted across communities, countries and indeed continents. And we should not forget that the TVET sector in Africa is already in dire need of modernised facilities, equipment and infrastructure. The SIFA Technical Cooperation, organized a webinar series to engage decision-makers and practitioners to reflect on challenges, constraints and opportunities experienced in implementing digital learning and highlight opportunities for the future.

The webinar series was held in English (5th and 28th May) and French (12th and 26th May). Participants included TVET practitioners, Government officials and Non-profit Organisations from Kenya, South Africa, Senegal, Zambia, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Nigeria, Malawi, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Togo, Niger, Tunisia, Chad and Burkina Faso.

The discussion reflected on the systemic changes required beyond COVID-19 to ensure structural, long-term sustainability. How can we use the moment to do better? What are the leapfrog moments? And how do we leverage these?



Three key advocacy messages emerged that point us in the direction of thinking about long-term opportunities.

Lifelong learning means equal access to the internet and appropriate devices

Digital learning is an obvious solution in the context of national lockdown regulations and social distancing. However, participants noted that the sustained use of this medium in a context where many young people across the continent do not have access to the internet or smart devices would serve only to perpetuate and further amplify the digital inequality and widen the existing gap. Governments and civil society organisations have called on telecommunication companies to provide free access to educational websites to support online teaching and learning. Many companies have responded to these calls, however equitable access is still out of reach for many youths in the informal sector, in rural and urban areas. Many good practices using alternative technologies such as radio, television and WhatsApp were discussed; these will be shared on the [African Skills Portal for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship \(ASPYEE\)](#).

The practical orientation of TVET brings an additional challenge: Videos and streaming are essential to transfer practical vocational skills; but they require bigger data packages and are therefore more expensive. However, in the long-term video learning in TVET presents an opportunity to use technology where physical access to the latest equipment may not be possible.

Coordinated and systemic interventions are required to address this digital divide to allow all young people to benefit from the possibility to enjoy the right to life-long learning.

Pool and share open education resources (OERs)-the time is now!

The access, use, adaptation and distribution of open education resources was highlighted as a fundamental enabler: Time, budget and capacity to design and develop learning content for online, offline and remote learning is not available to every country.

As with the fast-tracked solidarity efforts that have been witnessed, the short-term response required is pooling and sharing resources and existing OER repositories in Africa. The medium to long term response required is the collaboration of multiple stakeholders at the institutional, national and continental level to create a conducive environment for pooling and sharing of resources and enabling policy provided by national governments.

Support lecturer/trainer capacity development

Lecturers/trainers remain a cornerstone to quality TVET. However, historically TVET lecturers/trainers have limited industry experience and pedagogical experience. The demands of the knowledge economy and the pace of technological change, however, require continuous skilling and re-skilling of these lecturers /trainers.

The participants noted the need to support this critical stakeholder group with both necessary skills, and the pedagogic skillsets needed to integrate ICT into teaching and learning. Content developers can help translate the teaching material to new platforms and modes of delivery.

How can lecturers/trainers be supported to develop the competencies required? The discussion surfaced the lack of dedicated training colleges to provide tailored development for them and the need to ensure demand-side collaboration to grow the industry experience and exposure.

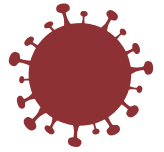
In conclusion, the pandemic has challenged some of the current TVET strategies, systems and processes, while highlighting existing gaps. We are all expected to respond to these challenges and gaps by searching for innovative ways to improve TVET at national and continental levels. The current scenario requires robust and honest reflection, with deliberation action to “build TVET better” for the future of youth skills and employment. The overwhelming theme across the three key advocacy messages is the need to ramp-up collaborative efforts between the public and private sector and to define enabling policies and frameworks for digital TVET delivery.

The ASPYEE portal aims to grow our African knowledge base to avoid duplication, maximise resources and drive innovation for replication and scale. We welcome information about innovations, examples of good practice and news, please share with us- <https://www.nepad.org/skillsportalforyouth>.

Link to ASPYEE’s resource list

<https://www.nepad.org/skillsportalforyouth/publication/open-source-resources-and-tools-continued-learning>

Zarina Khan, GIZ
Technical Adviser to AUDA-NEPAD



Funding Window III

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Communication is a key component in achieving the goal of SIFA and in approaching potential applicants for Funding Window III. Effective communication appeals to the agency of individuals to mobilize their minds and hearts, both in the long term as well as during a crisis. Content, message and information will be designed in five languages using fun and entertainment in visual

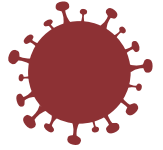
The audience varies for each of the four calls and includes individuals, family and peers, national and community leaders, informal sector workers, innovators in formal and informal settings, TVET lecturers, groups, formal and informal organizations and associations, public and private partners, policy- and decision makers, as well as journalists and members of the press.



communication to stir emotions and arouse interest. We will also use the technic of nudging which is sending out small messages (visual, animations, audio) frequently. The campaign is a continuous, dynamic process in which existing networks from AUC-HRST, AUDA-NEPAD, governments and GIZ will be activated, extended and fed into a database. The strategy is built on a push and pull approach: Media pieces are actively posted in social media, which users can pass on and share with others thus extending the network. Social media posts direct users to the website from which they download and share media pieces in different languages. In addition, users of the website can sign up with their email and receive regular updates including a newsletter. Content as press and PR kits with articles, radio pieces, banners and animations is sent (pushed) to journalists and media persons.

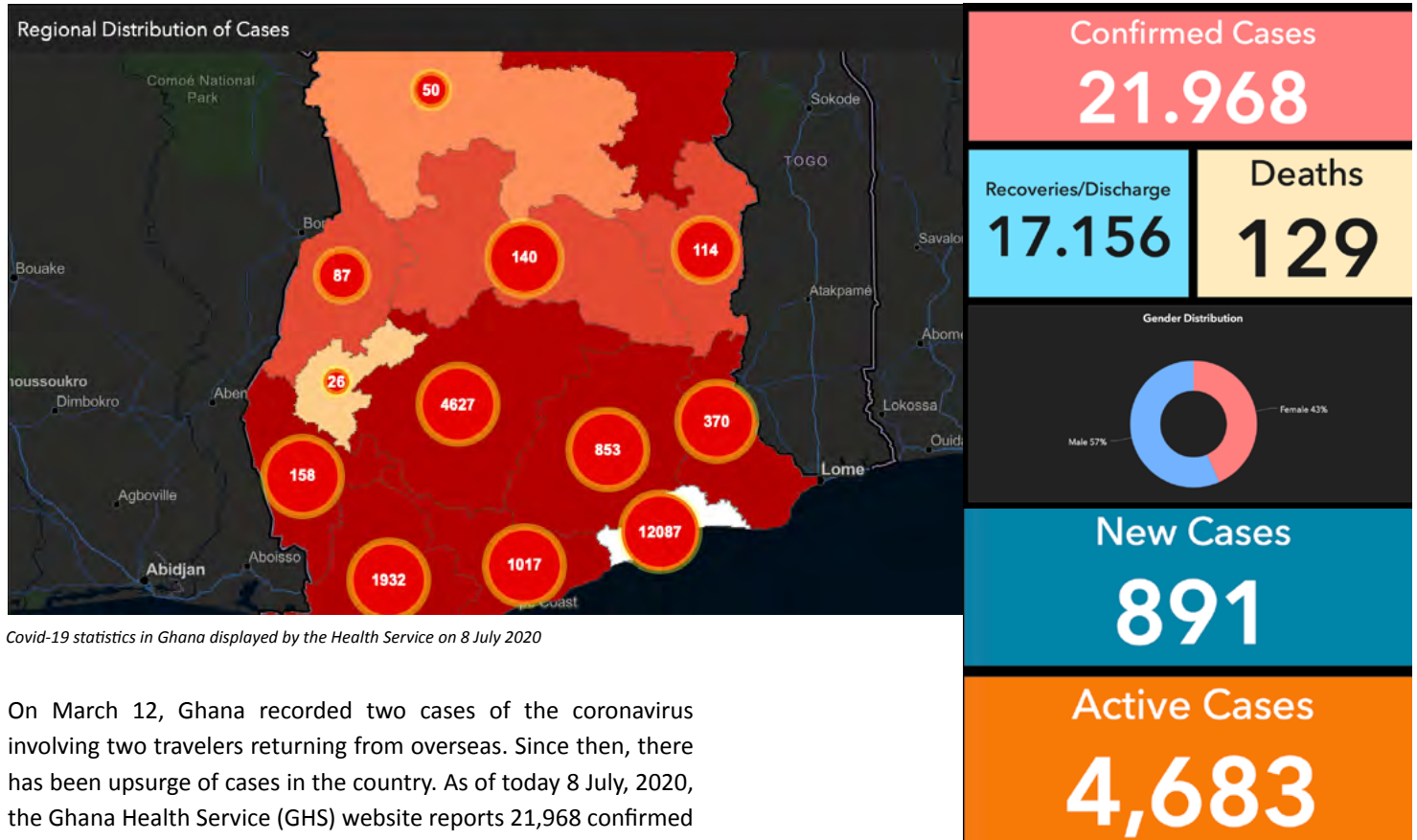
The SIFA response to Covid-19 is supported financially by the European Union and the German Government and implemented by the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) under the leadership of AUC-HRST with funding provided through the German Development Bank, KfW. Assessment and ranking of the project proposals is assured by the Fund Management Team (FMT) of the SIFA Financing Facility (SIFA FC) with approval by AUDA-NEPAD and KfW. Lastly, the SIFA Investment Committee which is chaired by AUC-HRST is the authority responsible for final selection of the project proposals for funding.

Sabina von Kessel, SIFA FC



COVID-19 ... for better or for worse!

LESSONS FROM GHANA



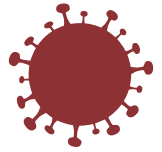
Covid-19 statistics in Ghana displayed by the Health Service on 8 July 2020

On March 12, Ghana recorded two cases of the coronavirus involving two travelers returning from overseas. Since then, there has been upsurge of cases in the country. As of today 8 July, 2020, the Ghana Health Service (GHS) website reports 21,968 confirmed cases, 891 new cases, 17,156 recoveries, 4,683 active cases and 129 deaths. To contain the spread, government introduced measures, such as restricting non-essential activities, closing public and private schools and universities, encouraging people to stay and/or work from home, suspending all social and public gatherings, social distancing, and partial lockdown of Greater Accra and Kumasi, the heartbeat of the country’s economic activities.

The lockdown brought in its wake hardships for citizens working in the formal and informal sectors and living on meagre daily wages. Cost of food, transport and other basic necessities of life skyrocketed. Things began to fall apart and the centre could no longer hold. The usual safety net was no longer capable of coping with the shock, exposing the vulnerability of most families and the fragility of the economy. The virus has put economic and social life in the country on life support which required urgent surgical intervention for survival. Consequently, the partial lockdown was lifted after three weeks (1).

The lifting of the lockdown was accompanied by relief packages for the vulnerable and the general population to cushion the negative impact. These included:

- provision of food for 400,000 individuals and homes in the lockdown communities,
- stable supply of water and electricity throughout the period, government’s absorption of water and electricity bills for all Ghanaians for the next three months, supply of water to all vulnerable communities,
- GHc600 million (about \$102 million US) soft loan scheme with a one-year moratorium and two-year repayment period for micro, small and medium scale businesses;
- insurance package for each health personnel and allied professional at the forefront of the fight against the virus;



- daily allowance of GHc150.00 (about USD26.00) being paid to contact tracers;
- no payment of taxes for all health workers on their emoluments for the next three months;
- payment of an additional allowance of 50% of their basic salary per month for all frontline health workers and,
- free bus rides for health workers in the lockdown areas/communities to and from work, along specific routes for the entire duration of the restrictions (2).

interventions were required to mitigate the impact. The central bank stepped in with measures to alleviate some of the burden by:

- reducing key interest rate;
- lowering reserve requirements for lenders
- providing liquidity support to critical sectors;
- decreasing the banks' conservation buffer
- cutting the capital-adequacy ratio
- request for \$ 1billion IMF rapid disbursement credit facility to help deal with the negative economic impact of the pandemic, amongst others (Deloitte 2020).



Carricatures from daily papers in Ghana

In addition, government announced seamless supply of water and electricity for the next three months to encourage regular handwashing and to increase citizen's access to information on radio, TV and social media. Businesses were not spared either. Immediate policy and monetary



Photo: Solar powered hand washing device to encourage safe hand-washing practices, invented by a Ghanaian citizen

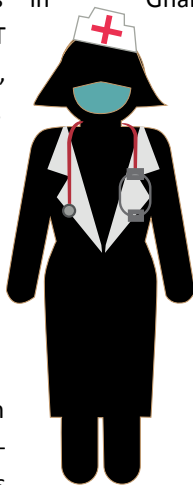
On the downside, growth forecast is expected to be severely challenged this year as a result of the global economic fallout from the coronavirus and the low oil prices. The slowdown will also affect growth in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, wholesale and retail, etc. as well as investment and remittance flow. The local currency



has also lost about 10% of its value vis-à-vis the USD (MoF 2020). Without doubt, COVID-19 has revealed the structural weaknesses of Ghana’s economy – exporter of primary goods and importer of finished products. In the education and training sector, the pandemic has also exposed major regional, social and economic inequalities and deficiencies in the country. It has brought to light the flaws in the system compelling all actors (government, policymakers, heads of institutions, parents and students) to scramble for appropriate responses to off-campus teaching and learning. As the Ghana Education Service (GES) and other education establishments struggle to develop IT platforms or exploring adoption of existing ones, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that half of the student population do not have mobile phone or computer device internet access due to high cost and affordability (3). This situation is likely to impact negatively on all levels of education and employment.

Is COVID-19 a silver lining?

If necessity is the mother of invention, is COVID-19 the spark? The coronavirus crisis has exposed the shortcomings in health, education and training systems in Ghana. In addition, the absence of a national IT ecosystem to ensure and sustain teaching, creativity, collaboration, and excellence in such increased the regional, inequalities in the country.



Conversely, the devastating effect of the virus on human activity and business has awakened the national psyche. Indeed, Ghana was the first country on the continent to adopt 'pool testing', an innovative way to maximize the use of coronavirus test kits that are in short supply globally. The crisis has also awakened the latent and nascent talent of local artisans, students, entrepreneurs and businesses in the invention, production and/or manufacturing of PPEs, sanitizers, face masks, ventilators, solar-powered and other forms of handwashing devices, hospital beds, etc.

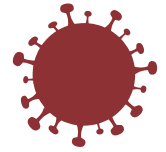
more so technical and vocational education and skills development in Ghana’s development agenda. It’s no longer business as usual. Government and policymakers should take note of the opportunity offered by the crisis to harness the positive emerging lessons and to create the enabling environment for science, technology, entrepreneurship and innovation to flourish. Skills development and other human resource development initiatives could play important role if the right policies and programs are put in place. If they do, the virus may turn out to be a blessing rather than a curse.

Dr. Frank Boahene, Country Consultant SIFA FC

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But can we confidently say we are witnessing a paradigm shift? These are early days. What we do know is that the dynamism, ingenuity, and resilience of citizens in the face of adversity is fodder for citizen mobilization and engagement toward a national discourse on the role of science, technology and creativity and



Skills development in times of COVID – 19

LESSONS FROM TUNISIA

Tunisia has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic since the beginning of March 2020, prompting the government to take drastic measures to curb this global health phenomenon. The new situation has generated new organisational modes at the level of all actors whether public, private or civil society. Today, the impact is prompting a review of sectoral development plans for the post-COVID-19 period taken into consideration the new priorities and growth opportunities in the economic and social sphere.

The introduction of a general lockdown for the entire population and a curfew with a ban on movement of persons lead to the suspension of courses in all education and training establishments as well as the partial closure of the majority of businesses and administrative

structures as of 22 March. All means of transport, both local and international, were interrupted and only medical repatriations were organised by the State with mandatory quarantine in specific accommodation sites made available by the hotel industry. All of these decisions were aimed, on the one hand, at mitigating the spread of the virus and, on the other hand, at preparing hospital structures and the medical profession to deal with the epidemic. Only companies in the agri-food, textile and pharmaceutical industries were partially kept in operation to ensure a supply of food products, medicines and health protective clothing. It is also noted that call centre services have played a key role in providing personal assistance services and supporting commercial service activities. These health measures were maintained for 6 weeks and the partial lifting of the lockdown began on 4 May, 2 weeks after passing the peak of 800 infected persons. To date, there are 1048 cases, 90% of which have recovered, and 47 deaths, accounting for 4.5% of those affected. Companies have thus partially resumed their activities by limiting the presence of staff and by working remotely.

Although overall Tunisia has been proactive in controlling this global health crisis, COVID-19 has strongly affected first and foremost the transport sector, followed by the tourism and services sectors, as

well as manufacturing companies. The impact on the number of unemployed was immediate, increasing their number to more than 125,000. Negative growth for 2020 is estimated at -2.5%, which in the long term would lead to an increase in the unemployment rate,

inequality and harmful social tensions despite the efforts made by the country.

The government took exceptional social measures so that people affected by the crisis could receive immediate social assistance and not fall into precarious situations while waiting for economic recovery. Plans are also underway to allocate specific support to companies to postpone tax deadlines in order to limit staff redundancies and to allow them, as soon as the transport sector resumes, to honour contracts,

particularly those in the export industry, and to pay their suppliers. A platform dedicated to the processing of applications from companies in difficulty has thus been created to take advantage of the planned government measures.

With regard to the management of company activities during and after COVID, all sectors combined, employers' unions, particularly UTICA, reacted quickly by creating online assistance platforms and publishing sectoral guides to ensure a rapid resumption of activities while continuing to apply health standards. At the same time, surveys were conducted among companies to identify the prospects for economic recovery, and the wage situation of employees, so that action plans responding to sectoral issues could be rapidly implemented and new financial support identified. All these measures and survey results are available online at www.utica.org.tn.

These field diagnostics are currently enabling emergency funds to be mobilised from donors to help Tunisia to continue to deal with the pandemic and its repercussions, and to support high value-added economic sectors that have shown to be resilient to the global crisis, such as companies in the digital, agri-food and pharmaceutical industries.

In terms of support for business competitiveness, the needs



Photo: Delivery of disinfection tunnels produced by the TVET centre at Sidi Bouzid, 17 May 2020



identified include a demand for technical assistance to migrate rapidly to Industry 4.0 with all the new organisational and skills development implications that this will entail. This trend would help to better control manufacturing costs across the entire value chain, increase productivity and employ a professionally skilled workforce. To this end, the SIFA programme could, through the projects selected for funding, target this specific skills.

The interruption of the informal economy has also had an impact on the already precarious health and social situation of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or countries at war. In this respect, the role of civil society has been remarkable in organising humanitarian aid through associations and thus helping these people in great difficulty.

With regard to the education and training system, some courses were provided remotely, particularly in the private sector, while in the public sector some pilot actions were set up, particularly for the students who have to write exams.

Now that the health situation is under control and new cases are extremely rare, the situation should return to normal in June, by gradually opening restaurants and restoring the traffic between the country's cities. With regard to schools, universities and vocational training establishments, priority is given to young people who have to write exams. The start of the school year 2020 - 2021 will be brought forward by 15 days so that consolidation courses can be organised before the start of the new school year.



Photo: TVET Centre communication services, Tunis: Minister's visit to the TVET "CSFH Manouba"

A focus on the vocational training system shows a minimum functioning has been ensured for the benefit of foreign trainees, particularly those from sub-Saharan African countries, and health measures were taken to ensure their accommodation in good sanitary conditions and to enable them to continue with learning activities in the workshops of the AFTP training centres. The staff of the centres and these young people notably contributed to the production of protective masks and disinfection equipment, thus demonstrating their professional know-how. These actions were

welcomed by the visit of the Minister of Vocational Training and Employment Mr Fethi BELHADJ who came to inquire about the conditions and capacity of the training centres.

At the same time, shelters with a total capacity of 12,000 beds were made available to repatriated individuals placed under health quarantine throughout the country.

On the education level, some teachers were able to provide distance learning courses for young people using e-Learning platforms as well as the resources of the "Ecole Ouverte au Travailleurs - EOT" (Open School for Workers - EOT) normally intended for continuing education.

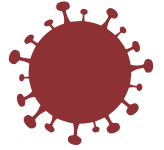
These experiments, considered to be pilot projects, thus made it possible to identify the conditions and means necessary to implement distance vocational skills training and enable a greater number of young people to benefit from it in the future, as planned in the DNFP reform plan.

This online training service has also been made available by ANETI, the National Agency for Employment and Self-Employment, for the benefit of the unemployed as part of the acquisition of new skills in demand in the labour market.

Some private vocational training institutions also provided distance learning, particularly in sectors such as electronics, computing and crafts, providing support to the instructors in this approach of educational training.

Notwithstanding the immediate repercussions of the transitional phase of the pandemic, the identification of needs for the post-COVID period has thus made it possible to identify new trends in the labour market to which new areas of skills development in the field of vocational training correspond. Also, in the context of capacity building of training institutions as well as sustainability of projects implemented by the SIFA programme, it would be relevant to promote a digitalisation strategy specific to skills development. In particular, consideration could be given to systematically introducing distance training through e-Learning platforms in all selected projects, regardless of the funding window (I or II or III). This strategy will thus be an opportunity to ensure that the results of the SIFA programme are achieved by providing as many people as possible with access to digital technologies and to the development of their skills. The post-COVID-19 period will accelerate this new demand for skills and chart a new path for the development of vocational training, providing more opportunities for young people. It will this enable them to take part in new economic activities that are emerging today in Africa.

Dr. Sofia Bahri, Country Consultant SIFA FC



COVID-19 and its Effects on the Informal Economy

LESSONS FROM CAMEROON

COVID-19 has hit Cameroon at a time when the country was already experiencing modest economic growth. From a general perspective, Cameroon has about 280,000 companies, 76% of which are SMEs contributing 34% of the country's GDP and employing over 70% of the population. In spite of this overwhelming domination of SMEs in the economy, a bad situation is further made worse by the fact that key sectors like agriculture, mining, the services industry, sales of commodities, local manufacturing, etc operate in the informal sector. Naturally, this over bearing influence of the informal sector in the economy has inadvertently had dire repercussions on the economy of Cameroon. Government's response measures to fight COVID-19 have had a great impact on the informal sector segment of the economy since it constitutes the weaker lever in the chain.

*Photo: A Douala street vendor prepares his goods in hopes of making a sale.
Creative Commons*

What do we see on the Ground?

Informal businesses in Cameroon have witnessed a drastic fall in customers and by extension, their turn-over due to the fact that most of these small businesses make profit as a function of the number of people who buy which eventually have an aggregate effect on their total income. In Yaounde and Douala for instance, most markets are closed early in the day than before, with at least 1 day per week when the markets are completely shut down for spraying and control measures.

- Many actors in the informal economy have gone jobless. Due to travel restrictions and other measures taken by government, many small businesses are unable to receive supplies be it from within or from without the country. As a result, some businesses have simply decided to shut down as a result of lack of goods for sale. Possibilities of taking loans in microfinance and other





financial institutions have become impossible due to suspension of credit facilities to avoid the risk of non-repayment.

- According to a report published by the UNDP Office in Cameroon, most households facing a drastic reduction in their income as a result of COVID-19 would rather prioritise expenses like food and shelter to the detriment of health-related expenses. If not addressed, this could have a mid to long term repercussion on their productivity since they need to be healthy in order to be productive.
- In regard to skills and education, COVID-19 is having a toll on apprenticeship and learning. Following government measures to shut-down school and TVET institutions and other learning facilities since March the 17th, most children of actors of the informal sector have either joined their parents in the respective business activities or have simply been idling at home. Although Cameroon's scholarisation rate currently stands at 75%, there are high risks that many parents from the informal sector may not be able to fund the education of their children in TVET and other institutions after the pandemic due to economic hardship. Furthermore, many of these parents can't afford online learning platforms for their children during this period of school lock downs.
- The buy-in by the children of people from the lower echelons of the Cameroonian society into the trainings offered in this time of COVID-19 is driven more by the urge to sit and pass end of course examinations rather than by a genuine desire to acquire technical knowledge using alternative means. Therefore, learning tools developed for non-end of course classes have not recorded much success. In perspective, it would be futuristic and strategic too for TVET institutions to delve into trainings on entrepreneurship as an anticipative measure geared towards introducing such learners to skills in small business management and other related courses. So, even beyond the exigencies of official examinations, they would have acquired useful skills for which even the businesses of their parents could benefit even after COVID-19.

Is there Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Since necessity is the mother of invention, the government, private sector organizations as well as individual actors in the informal sector in Cameroon have taken several measures to check the effects of COVID-19 on informal economy.

From the government bench, a series of measures to ease the burden on the private sector in general and the informal economy in particular were announced early May and took immediate effect. Bars, restaurants, market stalls and shops, public transport vehicles, etc. can now operate normally right up to late into the night while strictly respecting the social distancing measures recommended by the WHO. The government has equally suspended all payment of withholding tax, market duty, council tax and other taxes for petty traders for the second quarter of 2020. There has also been a suspension of parking fees for taxis and commercial motorcycles for the second quarter of 2020 amongst other measures.

The allocation of airtime for live learning programmes for students on the state-owned TV (CRTV) and many private TV and radio stations has provided leverage for continuous learning especially for children from low income homes. Many private educational institutions, state owned and private universities and TVET institutions have been able to migrate from on-campus to online courses to allow students the possibility to continue to learn from home. Other parents with relatively more comfortable financial means have taken up the option of private teachers for their children at home. Many TVET institutions have created WhatsApp groups where lectures notes are shared by teachers for the benefit of their students.

Following government's planned reopening of learning institutions on June 1 and the modification and extension of the academic calendar, it is hoped that students who did not have the opportunity to learn online would have the opportunity to catch-up and come to pace with the others.

Private sector organizations like the Employers' Union of Cameroon (GICAM) and the Association of Small and Media Size Enterprises of Cameroon (ECAM) though appreciative of the mitigating measures taken by the government so-far are nonetheless of the opinion that there is still much to be done to save the economy in general and SMEs and informal businesses in particular. These associations have been organizing several webinars and other online events to coach their members on how to deal with the effects of COVID-19 on businesses. They have also made several written proposals to the government on the way forward. While hoping that the government is going to further react to these proposals in a positive manner, there is optimism that things might get better if both government and actors in the informal economy show signs of responsibility in their handling of this crisis.

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IMPRINT

Published by:

Skills Initiative for Africa (SIFA)

An Initiative of the African Union Commission (AUC) and the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)

Implemented by:

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Supported by:

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in cooperation with ILO and ETF: SIFA TC

KFW Development Bank: SIFA FC

Co-funded by:

Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ)

The European Union

Concept & Design:

Laura Erfen (SIFA TC), Sabina von Kessel (SIFA FC)

Photos and Infographics:

Title Collage: Sabina von Kessel, 2019, photos Sabina von Kessel and IStock

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Infographics p. 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 13: Sabina von Kessel, SIFA FC

This project is co-funded by the European Union and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development



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