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LEVERAGING COMMUNITY-BASED INNOVATIONS DURING COVID-19 TO STRENGTHEN THE HAITIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

War, natural disasters, and other emergencies regularly disrupt children's education in developing countries. The digital divide has long since affected low-resource and rural schools' responses to crises that necessitate distance learning, often excluding children in remote and rural parts of countries from internet-dependent online learning programmes. In no place is this truer than in Haiti where, prior to August 2020, political unrest combined with the COVID-19 pandemic caused learners to miss 60% of their scheduled days in the 2019–2020 school year with only 45% of Haitian households having access to a power source, let alone internet or a smart device, that would enable them to participate in online learning. This study presents findings from exploratory research on the readiness of the Haitian education system to withstand crises and the impact of COVID-19 on the system and its learners. Through analyses of secondary data and semi-structured interviews with a variety of education stakeholders, the research reveals gaps in the system's readiness; identifies key challenges prompted by school closures in Haiti and shares a handful of innovative responses developed to respond to these challenges. Findings indicate that the COVID-19 health crisis has not created the need for educational reform in Haiti, but rather, by exacerbating pre-existing gaps and frailties within the system, the pandemic has heightened the urgency with which educational reform must be pursued. Salient gaps include a significant digital divide, financial instability and inattention to learning adjacent needs such as nutrition and psychosocial health for parents and children alike. While this initial research has exposed a series of significant gaps and inequalities in the Haitian education system, moving forward, more comprehensive research is needed to determine how such inequalities can be most effectively addressed. Although the Haitian government has a key role to play in addressing these inequalities, findings from this study reveal that governmental responses to COVID-19 school closures and broader digital learning inequalities, were ineffective in their reach and did not reflect the majority of Haitian learners and their families' realities. Findings also identify numerous innovations and assets on the part of non-governmental actors striving to address these gaps. However, these mechanisms were limited in scope and lacked the coordination among one another and the government that would be required to have scalable or measurable impact. Therefore, more research is needed to determine what the most successful mechanisms for addressing inequalities in the Haitian



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education system are and how they can be most effectively leveraged and scaled to create a more resilient education system moving forward.

Keywords: *Haiti; COVID-19; hybrid-learning; resilient education; digital divide, distance learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Jacques Abraham, a Haitian educator and researcher, explained that the Haitian education system “is made up of a set of unevenly effective educational institutions [...] offering different educations to the students depending on their socioeconomic background” (Abraham, 2019: 1172). In Haiti, schools offering high quality education are few and are co-opted by parents in high income brackets. In this context, students who are socio-economically disadvantaged do not benefit from the same quality of education as others “and become disadvantaged in terms of both their learning and their learning outcomes” (Abraham, 2019: 1172). Abraham later argues that

the Haitian school system, in its manner of functioning and its method to separate social and school [...] does not treat all the students the same way [...]. Therefore, quality education for all is far from being a reality in Haiti despite the commitments made by the Haitian government (Abraham, 2019: 1172).

The learning realities and experiences of students in Haiti illustrate these inequities clearly where half of students, after attending school for two full years, are unable to read a single word in Creole, their mother tongue language (Ball, Paris & Govinda, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; RTI International, 2012). Close to 15% of primary school aged students do not attend school and the average Haitian, 25 years or older, has only had five years of schooling (USAID, 2020). Classrooms are overcrowded and under-resourced; children are often under-fed; the school days are short and teacher and student absenteeism is high. Teachers are not paid a living wage, are poorly trained and supported and work in extremely challenging conditions teaching classes of well over 40 students, most of whom live in extreme poverty and have an array of learning needs (D’Agostino, Liberiste-Osirus & Schuenke-Lucien, 2020). Only 20% of Haitian teachers are trained in literacy education and only 25% have received an education beyond eighth grade (Inter-American Development Bank, 2007). Classrooms frequently lack student books, instructional materials, adequate lighting, ventilation, protection from weather and adequate space for large class sizes (D’Agostino *et al.*, 2020).

While COVID-19 did not cause any of these gaps or inequities, it did expose and exacerbate the pre-existing vulnerabilities in the system. When COVID-19 shut down schools in Haiti in March 2020, the system was already in a fragile state having just reopened; months of political turmoil in the fall (autumn) of 2019 had disrupted three months of the 2019/2020 calendar. Owing to limited to no support in place for the continuation of learning outside the confines of classrooms in Haiti and frequent disruptions, the majority of Haitian students missed 115 of 189 days of school in the 2019/2020 school year.

In June 2020, a former Haitian government official estimated that most Haitian learners had covered less than 30% of the school curriculum (Government, former MoE Interview). In an effort to make up for the missed days, the Haitian Ministry of Education (MoE) instituted a 54-day catch-up period for the 2019/2020 school year from August to September 2020. This resulted in the official 2020/2021 school year beginning in November 2020 and being condensed from 189 days to 172 days (Haiti Libre, 2020c) with expectations that there may be further disruptions due to political unrest and/or natural disasters. While the MoE

oversees curriculum development, official exams and academic calendars, 85% of Haiti's primary schools are private and managed by communities, religious organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (USAID, 2020).

This paper presents initial findings of the gaps in the Haitian school system that affected the overall development and well-being of students when schools were not in session during COVID-19. Through secondary source analysis and interviews with key stakeholders, this exploratory study assesses the state of the Haitian education system prior to COVID-19 as well as the impact of COVID-19 on the system. The paper then introduces promising practices developed in response to the impact of COVID-19 by a variety of stakeholders. Finally, the authors call for more comprehensive research into how to most effectively address the inequalities and gaps discussed.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to examine the state and readiness of the Haitian education system for distance learning and to understand which factors affected the quality and continuation of student learning and well-being in real-time during the COVID-19 school closures. An initial scoping exercise revealed there was no clear portrait of the state of the Haitian education system that addressed its challenges and capacities for a resilient and comprehensive distance learning response despite frequent school closures; therefore, an exploratory research method was employed to develop an initial portrait of the Haitian education system prior to COVID-19 and some of the impacts of the pandemic on the education system and learners. Insights and ideas shared in interviews prompted further exploration of the secondary research to understand more fully the variety of factors impacting the Haitian education system, and insights gleaned from secondary research were fed back into the interviews to understand the lived experience of what was being reported or was available as data. Therefore, secondary sources and interviews were consulted in unison to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students and families' access to learning and learning adjacent needs.

Recognising the restrictions of COVID-19, the immediate nature of the crisis and its impacts, as well as the ongoing technological constraints of the Haitian context (e.g., irregular access to power, internet and data), the authors sought to rapidly capture a range, rather than a depth, of experiences through semi-structured interviews in order to construct an initial and wide understanding of the readiness of the Haitian education system and suggest relevant next steps and future areas of inquiry. Owing to technological constraints and confidentiality concerns (e.g., stigma associated with hardships imposed by COVID-19 and job security), interviews, held over Zoom and WhatsApp, were not recorded. Instead, the interviewers took meticulous notes. Interviewees gave consent for their comments to be summarised anonymously and anecdotally rather than directly quoted. This process gave interviewees the opportunity to speak freely and without concern of ideas being traced directly back to them by a neighbour, colleague or family member.

In order to understand the extent of the impact of school closures on the Haitian education system, this research took a holistic view of the system and assessed factors that not only impact a child's academic progress but also his or her basic needs and psychosocial well-being. Specific areas of inquiry included exploring 1) who had access to learning materials in the midst of school closures? 2) how did schools and the government respond to closures?

3) what was done to support distance learning in remote, rural communities? 4) who were the key actors in the continuation of education efforts? 5) what was done to support learning adjacent needs such as nutrition and psychosocial well-being? And 6) what do the events of the crisis and subsequent responses suggest in terms of fostering a more resilient Haitian education system moving forward?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 83 key stakeholders including Haitian government officials; telecommunications and technology private actors; healthcare civil society actors and leadership, teachers, parents and students from public, private and NGO schools across Haiti’s ten geographical departments throughout a four month period of the COVID-19 pandemic during which time schools were closed in Haiti and eventually reopened (Table 1). Purposive sampling was utilised to identify the initial cohort followed by snowball sampling as the research progressed. Government officials, private actors, civil society actors and school leadership interviewees were selected for their ability to provide knowledgeable insight on a specific topic or process. In the case of parent, teacher and student interviews, interviewees were selected to ensure representation from each of Haiti’s geographic departments. Researchers received verbal consent from parents before interviewing students. Insights and experiences from these interviews have been used to inform the findings detailed below. Additional insight was pulled from webinars hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), and International Education Funders Group (IEFG). Research occurred from 27 April 2020 until 27 August 2020.

Table 1: Summary of interviews by position

Civil society	3
Government-former government	13
NGO	23
Private sector	7
Parent	10
Teacher	11
Student	10
School admin	6
Total	83

In order to facilitate a clearer relationship between what was discovered about the state of the Haitian education system through secondary source analysis and the lived experience of stakeholders in Haiti during the selected research timeframe and to reflect the research methods, the authors have included secondary sources within their findings as they relate to each key issue.

3. FINDINGS

In May 2020, the Haitian MoE issued two tentative calendars for the reopening of schools in the fall (autumn). Interviews with educators revealed that a minority of Haitian students (an

estimated 1%) were able to continue instruction and complete their school year in full through remote learning programmes either online or via take-home packages. These learners would return to school in September 2020 to begin their 2020/2021 school year. The MoE required all other schools to use August and September as catch-up days for the 2019/2020 school year and thus had to condense their calendar for the 2020/2021 academic year (Haiti Libre, 2020d; Haiti Libre, 2020e). In interviews, parents, school leadership and teachers expressed concern that the pre-existing education gap between students from high-income and low-income backgrounds has widened for marginalised students compared to the elite who were able to access remote learning.

Study findings have been organised around four key issues of education inequality related to distance learning in Haiti and themes that emerged in interviews and the secondary research: the digital divide, financial instability, learning adjacent needs and non-governmental responses.

3.1 The digital divide: Access to connectivity and technology

The digital divide, the separation between those who have access to the internet and technology and those who do not, has long since impacted learners and their families in low-income contexts, barring or limiting their access to educational materials. The digital divide is particularly stark in Haiti. In the World Economic Forum's 2016 Network Readiness Survey, Haiti ranks 137 out of 139 countries, scoring 2.5 out of 7 in the Network Readiness Index, which measures a country's propensity to leverage communication and information technology (Baller *et al.*, 2016).

Looking at the breakdown of technology ownership and access to the internet further illustrates the deep nature of the digital divide in Haiti where only 6% of households have access to a computer, and 15% use the internet regularly (Finscope, 2018). While 60% of Haitian adults do own some form of a cell phone, this number can be misleading (Finscope, 2018). Consumption patterns shared by cellular network companies as part of this research revealed that only an elite minority of consumers use between 30 to 100 gigabytes of internet data a month, while the vast majority of Haitians use a mere 150 megabytes per month. Compare these numbers to a typical household in the United States that uses, on average, 268 gigabytes per month (Toledo, 2020). For most teachers and parents interviewed for this research, the purchase of data comes in direct competition with buying food, paying rent and paying tuition. In addition, network service follows existing consumption patterns; therefore, low-income communities, with low data purchasing power have limited to no access to coverage, and when they do, it is of poor quality. Moreover, only 45% of Haitian households nationally have access to the electricity that would enable them to regularly charge and use a device (The World Bank, 2018a). This number narrows even further in rural areas where only 3.5% of the population has access to electricity (The World Bank, 2018b). Here too, statistics can be misleading; in recent months, coinciding with the COVID-19 health crisis, Haiti has been plagued with nationwide blackouts lasting for weeks, affecting the existing communication infrastructure and eliminating access to electricity for all but the few who can afford private back-up sources (Charles, 2020).

Despite these realities, the government's response to COVID-19 school closures and distance learning was composed of two components and was solely tech-dependent. The first, Pr@ctic, an online platform and digital learning solution, was introduced in mid-April and contained resources for students, parents and teachers. An interview with an MoE official in

June revealed that Pr@ctic recorded an average of 67 000 visits a day – reaching 1.67% of learners. Pr@tic is supported by the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and UNICEF (Haiti Libre, 2020b).

The second initiative, *Télé École*, was a collaboration between the *Télévision Nationale d'Haïti* (RTNH) and the MoE. This televised education programme featured a variety of courses (Haiti Libre, 2020a), but student interviewees shared that the programmes stopped running a few weeks into broadcasting due to logistical problems. This was later confirmed in an interview with a media official. Thus, students without access to technology and connectivity at home were not reached in government-implemented distance learning programmes and other online learning solutions. Students interviewed for this research expressed frustration at the disconnect between the government's initiatives and their own realities, stating that even the capital had no electricity when *Télé École* aired. Furthermore, there was no way to retrieve the educational shows later on an alternate platform. The broadcast also shed light on the limited reach of the state-run television programmes. Government officials interviewed could not give an exact figure on the channel's audience or evaluate its geographical reach beyond Port-au-Prince. Learners in cities outside of Port-au-Prince shared that they could only tune into RTNH through its relay on private satellite companies such as CanalSat, which is the largest satellite provider in Haiti. A CanalSat employee shared that monthly subscriptions for CanalSat cost between \$7 and \$35. Today, the company has approximately 60 000 monthly subscribers nationwide. Due to limited connectivity, most Haitian student learners were unable to access other online learning solutions that learners leveraged globally during COVID-19.

3.2 Financial instability

Economic stability in Haiti has been challenged by its history of political stability, natural disasters and poor economic management (Heritage, 2020). Half of the population lives below the poverty line on less than \$2.41 a day (The World Bank, 2020). Additionally, transfers from the diaspora account for over 36% of Haiti's GDP (Bojarski, 2020), and data reveals that there has been an 18% decline in remittances to Haiti in the previous year (March 2019 to March 2020) (Cela & Marcelin, 2020). In October 2020, Haiti's GDP was expected to decline by 3.1%, and incoming cash transfers to the region had significantly dropped (The World Bank, 2020). In every parent interview conducted during this research, either one or both caregivers had lost all or part of their source of income due to COVID-19. Loss of jobs was particularly high in the garment industry, affecting tens of thousands of low-income women. As of 11 June 2020, 18 000 women had lost their jobs in textile factories in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area alone (Le Nouvelliste, 2020).

When COVID-19 forced school closures in Haiti, the economic realities of students and their families had direct implications for learners' continuation of education. Students who attended schools beneath a certain tuition threshold were less likely to have access to any form of a distance learning programme, making tuition a key indicator in whether students would be able to continue learning during COVID-19. As could be anticipated, schools with higher tuition were more likely to have some type of programme — although it was not always online — while schools with lower tuition frequently had no formal programming, and parents with students enrolled at these schools received little to no communication from their children's teachers. For example, one elementary school observed in the Nord charges \$200 per month for tuition. This particular school held class every day on Zoom. Just a few kilometres northwest, another school of a similar size, where parents pay \$5 per month for

tuition, had no communication with parents once schools closed. A parent interviewee from the latter considered unenrolling their children and borrowing money to put them in a school where “learning continued”.

Notably, students who attended schools beneath a certain tuition threshold were less likely to understand the gravity of COVID-19. In all research interviews with young children who attended better quality schools — almost all with tuition over \$60 a month — students stated they learnt about the COVID-19 health risks in school and became mobilising forces in their households and communities, teaching others about preventive measures such as frequent handwashing and social distancing. Interviews with children from lower resource schools revealed that they had limited to no understanding of the virus and did not know why schools had closed, making it an abrupt and unexplained disruption to their day. This difference in experience sparks an area of inquiry the authors believe should be studied further to determine if the resource-level of schools has a direct impact on children’s access to vital health information.

Additionally, based on the study’s ten parent interviews, a family’s economic situation was a key determiner in whether children would be able to attend school post COVID-19. Families with multiple children had to make difficult decisions regarding which of their children to enrol in school for the fall (autumn). Interviews revealed that faced with these tough decisions, parents would prioritise sending boys, younger children and children with “better” learning capacities back to school over girls or “slower” learners. Some parents shared how they would send their children to school on a rotation basis, giving access to each child for one semester.

In other cases, financial hardships and school closures had direct implications for the physical safety of learners. In interviews, parents admitted to abandoning children with suspected developmental impairments, reflecting a global pattern that crises disproportionately impact differently abled children.

The impact of school closures on schools themselves, frequently accompanied by families’ inability or refusal to pay tuition, was also significant. School administration shared that schools’ financial stability affected teacher salaries, the quality of education delivered and schools’ ability to reopen in the coming year. Unfortunately, throughout this research, school principals and administration expressed that the government had offered little relief to schools’ financial turmoil. These observations reflect what most education actors in Haiti already know: funding for education in Haiti is limited and COVID-19 has only exacerbated a pre-existing issue. In June, one NGO official anticipated that as many as 20% of schools in their network would not reopen due to financial difficulties. Similar numbers were recorded in December 2019 following three months of political lockdown (World Food Program, 2019).

3.3 Learning adjacent needs

Access to quality nutrition is another key component of a child’s educational experience in Haiti. Research has long established the links between nutrition, academic success and key developmental gains (Huebner *et al.*, 2016). For example, undernutrition (stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies) often negatively affects cognitive development (Black & Dewey, 2014). Poor nutrition can negatively impact brain development, causing permanent cognitive impairment and leading to poor school performance, early termination in the workforce, decreased work capacity and ultimately, limited future earning potential (Huebner *et al.*, 2016).

In Haiti, 300 000 children rely on daily meals provided by UN-funded school canteens in over 1 000 schools countrywide (World Food Program, n.d.). For many children, this serves as their only daily meal. In January 2020, months prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, Haiti had already surpassed the WHO emergency threshold for malnutrition, with over 2% of its population experiencing severe acute malnutrition and 6% of children within the acute malnutrition threshold (Haiti Libre, 2020f). Given the large number of Haitian school children who rely on school meals for daily nutrition, school closures leave many children vulnerable to hunger and their parents wondering from where their children's next meal will come. According to the World Food Program (WFP), Haiti is among the top 10 countries most affected by food insecurity, with projections that half of the country's population will be in severe nutrition insecurity by 2021 and one million people in emergency need for food assistance (Le Figaro, 2020).

An employee of the WFP in Haiti, which spearheads the UN canteen programmes in Haiti, had no detailed information on the nutritional impact of the pandemic and the halt of the pre-COVID-19 canteen programme on its typical 300 000 beneficiary children. As of 29 June 2020, according to a WFP official, the WFP had triaged their supplies in order to reach as many of these students as possible but ultimately only reached 90 000 children through emergency rations.

Fast forwarding to September 2020, the WFP estimated that 42% of the Haitian population needed nutrition assistance, of which 9% were in Phase 4 Emergency – the level preceding famine (Le Figaro, 2020). Civil society actors and NGO officials interviewed through this research echoed the realities of these numbers for the families they serve and expressed concern over the absence of interventions from nutrition organisations as well as active organisations' small scale and slow pace.

To further complicate the situation, to date, many schools do not have an established system for collecting basic contact and demographic information on their students and families. There is no coherent student information system in Haiti; therefore, school officials have very little data available to locate families and their children outside of the school environment. As a result, word-of-mouth emerged as the main communication method to reach learners' families during COVID-19 school closures. This made it nearly impossible for nutrition organisations to locate beneficiary children or assess their needs.

In addition to limited access to nutrition during school closures, NGOs and civil society actors disclosed the reality of living through the stress of COVID-19 where a lack of psychosocial support put students, parents and teachers at risk for dangerous behaviours and had significant implications for their mental health and overall well-being.

In fact, NGO officials and civil society actors reported recording a notably high level of distress calls from students, parents and teachers in their networks who shared that they felt hopeless. For young children especially, the psycho-emotional implications of the lockdown were recognisable. One parent described how their children took on their classmates' identities in efforts to remember their friends and maintain social connections.

For Haitian mothers, who traditionally bear most of the household and child rearing responsibilities, the psychosocial impact was particularly salient. All mothers interviewed reported feeling isolated, stressed and concerned about finances and their children's next

meals. This stress, self-admittedly, manifested itself in being taken out on children, with mothers sharing that they were more prone to beat or yell at their children.

3.4 Non-governmental responses

Recognising the academic, financial, nutritional and psychosocial gaps and limited to no comprehensive interventions on the part of the government, NGOs, school officials and civil society members, interviewed in this research, developed and implemented their own responses to address the gaps outlined above. The examples and information below come from participants in this research.

3.4.1 Addressing the digital divide

Example 1:

In Cap-Haitien, there is an elementary school that balances the country's digital and economic divide. When it first opened in 2002, the school strove to create an elite school that offers a world-class education accessible to students from all socio-economic backgrounds. Over 30% of the school's students come from low-income communities and attend school on a full scholarship. For others, tuition costs approximately \$75 per month.

Given its diverse demographic, the school caters to students on both sides of the digital divide; therefore, developing a distance learning plan in response to COVID-19 became a task of identifying practices for sharing resources that would be accessible to all students. The principal, interviewed in this research, shared how the school went through multiple iterations and encountered numerous obstacles when developing a programme.

By mid-May, the school had put together a rotation system where parents picked up and dropped off printed homework at assigned times from the school, which proved to be effective and meet all learners' needs. Given its success in maintaining learning through a printed rotation system, all students completed their school year and the school was one of the few to start the 2020/2021 school year as scheduled in September 2020. Unlike other members of this small cohort, the school did not use high-tech methods such as Zoom classes to keep children learning.

Example 2:

In Haiti, 52% of households have access to a radio, making radio the most common medium for media consumption (Finscope, 2018). Recognising radio as the most democratic and effective means of disseminating learning materials in Haiti, a university-based research centre, in collaboration with two international NGOs, created three radio programmes – a literacy programme supplemented with a reading hour programme and a pre-K social and emotional learning (SEL) and parent engagement programme – as part of a comprehensive approach to distance learning in a low-tech environment. Broadcasting on a countrywide network of community and Catholic radio stations was supported by the distribution of 15 000 radio devices equipped with solar panel chargers. Adapted from a pre-existing classroom curriculum and leveraging an agenda of listener-centred activities, radio episodes integrated learning opportunities in French and Creole while also seizing opportunities to support students in developing key social and emotional skills during shutdowns. Accessible to students outside of the centre's typical beneficiary schools, the radio programme attempted to reach students on the wrong side of the digital divide and enabled thousands of students to remain engaged in learning despite being unable to communicate with their teachers and classmates.

Example 3:

An NGO founded in 1994 whose main objective is the “elimination of social barriers to learning,” prioritises education projects in rural, peri-urban and underserved communities of Haiti. Over the past two decades, the NGO has created digital content for learning in French and Creole and introduced hundreds of interactive whiteboards (TNI) into classrooms. Today, 50 000 students across rural Haiti have TNI in their classrooms (NGO, CEO Interview). During the COVID-19 school closures, the NGO adapted some of its material for radio broadcast to target primarily high school students. They broadcasted through Radio *Télé La Brise* in the South Department (NGO, CEO Interview).

3.4.2 Addressing a lack of psychosocial support

Example 1:

A foundation based in Haiti’s Artibonite region uses the arts, psychosocial support and education to foster resilience and empower at-risk adolescent girls and differently abled and marginalised youth in rural Haiti. Taking a whole-person approach to cultivating resilience, the foundation provides counselling, health and well-being education and support, along with literacy, academic strengthening, skills-building and scholarships to its learners.

In an effort to support psychosocial health, during the lockdown, the foundation provided a basic cell phone to each of its 1 000 beneficiaries and set-up weekly check-in calls with their girls. In these check-in calls, staff listened and encouraged the girls to journal. The foundation distributed packets with tools to support youth in detecting, accepting, articulating and defusing any stress. The foundation also introduced an innovative toll-free hotline for their beneficiaries to call from Monday to Saturday from 9AM to 3PM in order to speak to a nurse, teacher or counsellor.

Example 2:

Students were not the only demographic struggling with the psychosocial impact of COVID-19. Based on a need identified through interviews with mothers during this research in August 2020, a university-based research centre organised a series of focus groups for Haitian mothers to discuss the specific causes of stress in their lives during the pandemic and what, if any, action could be taken. Mothers shared that they felt “overwhelmed,” “unseen,” “isolated,” and “hopeless”. In an effort to mitigate the negative impact of these stressors, the centre launched *Alo manman, kòman ou ye?* or “Hi Mama, how are you?” in which Haitian mothers in the programme, aged 20 to 45, received a well-being and check-in call once a week from a trained facilitator. Calls were tailored around empathetic listening, positive coping mechanisms, stress-reducing techniques and optional prayer and song.

Addressing gaps in nutrition

One of the key revelations of this study is the limited response to food insecurity for students during school closures. While the WFP distributed food to 90 000 children, there were no other clear or systematic approaches identified and no clear information on the outstanding 210 000 students who rely on school canteen programmes for daily nutrition. In some interviews, parents discussed how their children’s principals took the initiative to distribute the school’s canteen supplies to families they knew to be in need. More detailed research and inquiry is needed to fully map the reality of the response to nutrition gaps in Haiti.

In an interview, a senior official in the Haitian Ministry of Education highlighted the National Policy for School Feeding Programs released in 2016 (Republique d'Haiti, 2016). This policy was designed to eliminate hunger as a barrier to education by working with the department of agriculture to shift sourcing from imported goods to quasi-exclusively local supplies. The report outlines the complicated "call for tender" system in Haiti that ultimately prohibits informal local producers from participating in production. It recommends the creation of a database to register local suppliers as primary suppliers for school feeding programmes. The recommendations of the 2016 policy, to date, have not been taken up. The interviewee felt strongly that the implementation of these measures could have countered the challenges food distributors faced during COVID-19 shutdowns due to disruptions and delays in global supply chains. At the time of the interview, the interviewee reported that four million Haitians were on the brink of famine and hundreds of thousands of students were left without their school meal on 19 March 2020 (Government, MoE Interview).

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this research illuminated a variety of promising and innovative practices, perhaps more importantly, it revealed limited coordination among responders and on the part of the government or other entities that were able to comprehensively impact the majority of students. The experiences of interviewees exposed serious inequities as it relates to learners' ability to continue education (digitally or through other means) and the overall health and well-being of Haiti's students and their families. The limited scope and capacity of the government's response to distance learning failed to reach the majority of learners and while individual actors worked to address these gaps, they were unable to scale and share innovations in real-time to meet the immediate needs of the crisis. Schools reopened in August and September 2020 with no apparent adjustments or plans in place by the MoE for future crises. Despite the impact of COVID-19 on learners and their families in Haiti, the question of how the system will respond to future crises and ensure all students have access to learning and learning adjacent needs continues to loom and must be addressed.

The research from this exploratory study exposed serious problems and inequities in the Haitian education system; however, it also revealed potential assets in the form of innovative programming and responses. These efforts were primarily driven by non-governmental actors and more accurately reflected the reality of Haitian learners and families than the response of the government. However, while promising, these initiatives were small in scale and did not have the funding or necessary coordination to achieve high impact on the entirety of the system. Therefore, more comprehensive and in-depth research is needed to understand how to identify initiatives and mechanisms with the greatest potential for efficacy while simultaneously reflecting the realities of the Haitian context. Future research should also address how to scale and build upon promising innovations and mechanisms as well as how to forge the best partnerships to do so.

While MoEs in many countries are well positioned to lead comprehensive education initiatives, that is not currently the case in Haiti. Eighty-five per cent of Haitian schools are run by non-governmental actors, and ultimately, it was a subset of these actors that initiated the more promising responses to COVID-19 school closures that addressed not just academic needs but learning adjacent needs as well. Careful thought is required to fully understand how to build a more resilient and equitable Haitian education system that leverages the experiences of non-governmental actors and addresses the holistic needs of learners.

What will the state of education in Haiti look like in 2030? Without any plan put in place now, the answer to this question could be grim. An ecumenical commission is needed to oversee further in-depth research and thoughtful deliberation on how to organise the many different Haitian education, religious, civil society and private sector actors into a coherent and resilient system that better serves the interests and rights of all Haitian children.

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