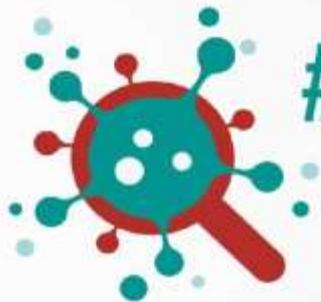


# RESEARCHERS BOOTCAMP



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## Education Researchers Respond to The COVID-19 Pandemic Research Report

### Theme 2:

A comparative study on the response of NPOs in education to the COVID-19 pandemic

Project Lead: Dr Rooksana Rajab

29 April 2020

Standard Bank  
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SERVICES



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**A comparative study on the response of NPOs in education to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concomitant uncertainty globally and the announced lockdown in South Africa**

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# CONTENTS

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List of Figures.....	4
List of Tables.....	4
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Purpose .....	5
3. Research roadmap .....	6
3.1 Research design .....	7
3.1.1 Research team.....	7
3.1.2 Data collection.....	7
3.1.3 Data analysis and presentation .....	8
3.1.4 Quality control.....	9
3.2 Profile of Online Survey Sample Group .....	9
3.3 Profile of NPO Interviewees.....	10
3.3.1 South African NPOs interviewed .....	10
3.3.2 NPOs interviewed from other countries .....	11
4. Findings .....	13
4.1 Priority response.....	13
4.2 Policy influence on NPOs .....	14
4.2.1 South Africa .....	14
4.2.2 International insights.....	18
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>19</b>
4.2.3 Leadership and governance.....	19
4.2.4 Alignment of strategies to COVID-19 .....	21
4.2.5 Stakeholder engagement / public communication .....	21
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>22</b>
4.3 Organisational management.....	22
4.3.1 Effects of the shutdown on daily operations .....	22
4.3.2 Working remotely.....	24
4.3.3 Employee management.....	24
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>25</b>



4.4	Funding challenges.....	25
4.4.1	Current financial reality and challenges for local NPOs in education .....	26
4.4.2	Lessons from similar crises .....	29
4.4.3	Strategies to address funding challenges .....	29
	<b>Summary</b>	<b>30</b>
4.5	The role of technology .....	30
4.5.1	Online learning .....	31
4.5.2	Virtual communities .....	32
4.5.3	Tech-related challenges.....	32
	<b>Summary</b>	<b>36</b>
5.	Conclusions .....	37
6.	Recommendations .....	39
	References .....	42
	Acknowledgements .....	45
	Annexure 1: Survey Questions .....	46
	Annexure 2: Interview Questions – NPOs from other countries.....	51

## List of Figures

Figure 1:	Research Roadmap.....	6
Figure 2:	Triangulation mixed methods design process.....	7
Figure 3:	Types of SA NPOs.....	10
Figure 4:	Total 2018/19 income of SA NPOs .....	10
Figure 5:	NPOs from other countries interviewed .....	12
Figure 6:	Priority Responses by SA NPOs.....	13
Figure 7:	Effect of lockdown on SA NPOs .....	23
Figure 8:	Financial Impact of the Lockdown on SA NPO Operations.....	27
Figure 9:	SA NPO Access to endowments, grants and other financial support.....	27
Figure 10:	SA NPO Emergency Funding/Grant Application Status .....	28
Figure 11:	Vodacom 1GB tariffs across Africa 2019 .....	33
Figure 12:	MTN 1GB retail data tariffs across Africa 2019 .....	34
Figure 13:	SA NPOs experienced difficulties in these tech-related areas .....	34
Figure 14:	Summary of Study Scope.....	37

## List of Tables

Table 1.	Primary foci of SA NPOs.....	10
Table 2.	Concerns with the proposed Recovery Plan15	



# 1. Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Many countries introduced restrictions to reduce interaction among citizens in order to control the spread of the virus. As a result, people's livelihoods, education and access to services have been affected. South Africa, too, following the announcement by the President of a lockdown starting on 27 March 2020, has had to contend with the effects of physical disruption on organisations, both public and private. Non-profit organisations (NPOs) in education are no exception, and have had to take decisive action at short notice for the sake of their organisations and especially their beneficiaries who would be hard hit if their services were halted.

In order to ensure that their organisations survive a highly disruptive period, NPOs in education would ideally try at all costs to avoid suspending their core projects, programmes and activities. Will they display the typical resourcefulness and grit, and innovate to find new ways to continue their work? This study, as one in a series of twelve undertaken by JET Education Services, provides an overview of the investigative journey that analysed the responses of NPOs in education to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concomitant uncertainty globally and the lockdown in South Africa.

It became evident to the ten researchers involved in this study that many NPOs share similar experiences of uncertainty in this unnerving and rapidly changing time, often in isolation. There is value and comfort in articulating such shared challenges. The education ecosystem has innovated in response to the shifting landscape and challenges; and this research sought to identify the lessons of what is being done to weather the storm of the pandemic. Surfacing these lessons also assists the sector to frame the "opportunity" provided by the crisis to solve complex problems, avoid unintended consequences and achieve lasting change. These insights will contribute meaningfully to developing coherent evidence of what is working, and where the gaps are, to allow for real time inputs to be made into other national education processes led by government departments – such as the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) – as well as several other organisations, such as the National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE)<sup>1</sup>, the Independent Philanthropy Association of South Africa (IPASA)<sup>2</sup> and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Purpose

The main purpose of the research was to investigate how NPOs in education, as a valuable stakeholder group in the education ecosystem, were responding to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis, with an emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> NASCEE - <https://nascee.org.za/>

<sup>2</sup> IPASA - <http://ipa-sa.org.za/about/>

<sup>3</sup> NECT - <http://nect.org.za/>



on those operating in South Africa. A secondary purpose was to make recommendations for long term changes essential for the future sustainability of NPOs.

The study focused on the following key areas:

- the influence, on NPOs in education, of governmental policies put in place in response to COVID-19;
- the response of the NPO leadership and governance processes with regard to
  - stakeholder engagement due to the emotional nature of the crisis, and
  - short term strategies adopted from an organisational perspective;
- funding implications during the lockdown period; and
- the uses of technology while working remotely.

Although learning and resource materials are fundamental to the work of most NPOs in education, these are covered in depth by another theme in JETs Research Bootcamp<sup>4</sup> and were therefore not part of the focus of this study.

### 3. Research roadmap

A summary of the research process is outlined in Figure 1 overleaf, which included an inception phase, gathering of evidence, analysis and presentation of findings.

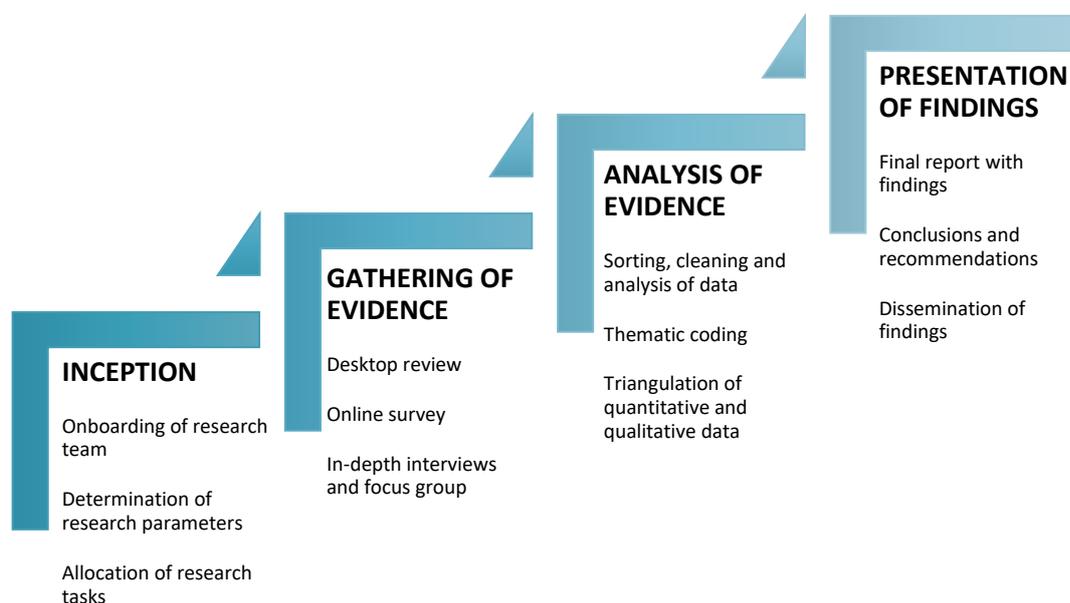


Figure 1: Research Roadmap

<sup>4</sup> Research Bootcamp - <https://www.jet.org.za/research-bootcamp/overview>



## 3.1 Research design

The study adopted a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, and adopting a triangulation design in the collection, analysis and interpretation thereof. This approach was selected as it allows for different but complementary data to be collected on the same topic (Morse, 1991:122), which enables heightened knowledge and validity. The triangulation design compares and relates findings and analyses of qualitative and quantitative data toward the identification of corroboration and correspondence (Creswell et al, 2003).



**Figure 2: Triangulation mixed methods design process**

### 3.1.1 Research team

A thematic lead assisted by a co-lead guided the research process. A total of eight young independent researchers with diverse experiences volunteered to participate in the study following an online application. Alongside this, two peer reviewers ensured quality control throughout the study process and gave input at various stages. The team was supported by administrative staff from JET Education Services.

### 3.1.2 Data collection

**Desktop review:** The desktop review followed an integrative approach. Given the immediacy and ongoing nature of the crisis which served as the phenomenological context of the study, the research team recognised that the incorporation of peer-reviewed and academic literature *only* would limit the search findings, particularly as the research questions called for an understanding of practice and on-the-ground efforts. With an integrative approach, the team was able to review secondary and grey<sup>5</sup> literature beyond a purely academic scope, including NGO, NPO and government reports, newsletters, websites, social media and other relevant publications that may not be recorded on peer-reviewed platforms.

The desktop review was conducted as per the following research parameters:

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<sup>5</sup> Materials and research outside of traditional academic publishing and distribution channels



- *Policy Influence* - NPOs responses to the strategies that the government put together for schools, colleges and universities during the lockdown period;
- *Organisational Management* – Changes internal to NPOs from governance, leadership and operations perspectives as well as challenges faced; and,
- *Service Delivery* – Changes external to NPOs in the form of stakeholder management, operations and other challenges, and their actions in response.

**Online survey:** The team developed a survey (see Annexure 1) consisting of both closed and open-ended questions, based on the broader research parameters described above as well as insights developed through the initial desktop review and the personal expertise of the research team members. The survey was distributed online to the National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE) and also utilised the databases of the UCT Graduate School of Business' Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship in order to reach out to more than 3 000 NPOs in education across South Africa. The survey thus focused particularly on NPOs within the South African education sector.

**In-depth interviews:** In-depth interviews were held with purposely selected local and international NPOs (NPOs based in countries other than South Africa) as well as key stakeholders within the education sector. While these did not form the primary source of research data, the interviews were used to enrich and enhance the data gathered through the desktop review and the survey. The interviews were semi-structured and involved in-depth exploration of the survey questions (see Annexure 2). A total of fourteen (14) interviews were held, two with local NPOs and 12 with foreign NPOs; all were conducted online.

**Focus group discussion:** To further enhance the depth of the study, a focus group discussion was conducted with the NASCEE Board. The focus group was conducted online through the use of Google Hangouts and was recorded with the permission of the participants. The focus group allowed for a more in-depth exploration of some of the open-ended survey questions.

### 3.1.3 Data analysis and presentation

The survey findings were collected via Google Forms; data generated from closed-ended questions were presented statistically; and open-ended questions were thematically coded. For the desktop review and qualitative data generated through the in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and open-ended survey questions, the team made use of manual thematic coding and analysis. The research parameters (policy influence, organisational management and service delivery) served as broader theme categories in which emerging patterns were identified (Nowell et al, 2017). Findings were then triangulated, whereby quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and corroborated (Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017).

Findings that focus on the South African education NPO sector have been collated from survey responses, in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion; these findings and related analysis are



presented in the report through graphs, narrative and desktop review. Findings from the international context were qualitative in nature and have been collated through desktop review and in-depth interviews with a select group of NPOs from 12 different countries. These findings are presented in the form of analyses and discussion throughout the paper where relevant to specific themes.

### 3.1.4 Quality control

The study was guided by the following quality control principles:

**A proficient team:** The research team had diverse expertise and experience, and the use of independent peer reviewers further ensured quality control throughout the research process.

**Resource Management:** The team committed itself to the appropriate and effective use of resources in this study to achieve optimal delivery.

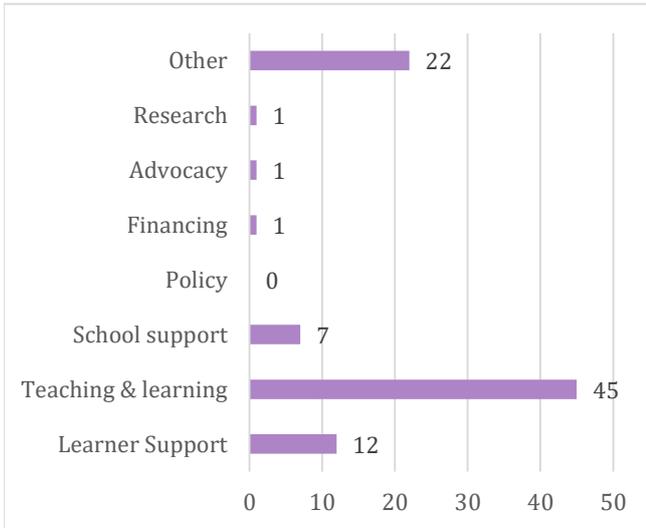
**Ethical Research:** The team adhered to sound research ethics for collecting, using and storing data and communicating with the respondents. The team ensured that all the individuals involved in the project were treated with dignity and respect. Individual participation in the online survey, interviews and focus group discussion was voluntary and based on informed consent. Privacy and anonymity were maintained where requested; the use of NPO identifying information was only done with the organisation's consent. The analysis of data incorporated all results, both positive and negative (Vanclay, Baines and Taylor, 2013).

## 3.2 Profile of Online Survey Sample Group

A total of eighty-nine (89) South African NPOs responded to the online survey circulated through the NASCEE and Bertha Centre databases.

Just over 50% of the respondents were involved in teaching and learning services; the remainder were divided amongst varying services that support education, such as learner support, teaching & learning school support and research, financing and advocacy (Figure 3). Some did not specify their primary area of work and were therefore described as undefined, 'other'. Well over half of respondents (51 of the 89) had a total annual income of between R2 million and R20 million in 2018/19; 16 NPOs earned more than R20 million and six had no income or made a loss (Figure 4).





Sample size: n=89

Figure 3. Types of SA NPOs



Sample size: n=89

Figure 4. Total 2018/19 income of SA NPOs

The primary focus/core objectives of the participating NPOs are summarised in Table 1. Their target groups included school children, from Grade R to Grade 12, school dropouts, young professionals, youth and parents.

Table 1. Primary foci of SA NPOs

NPO CORE OBJECTIVES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afterschool programmes</li> <li>• Community development and advocacy</li> <li>• Digital learning and support</li> <li>• Early Childhood Development</li> <li>• Funding, capacity and infrastructure support</li> <li>• General teaching support, education and training</li> <li>• Higher education and empowerment for women</li> <li>• Life skills and empowerment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy development</li> <li>• Poverty alleviation</li> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Skills training, employment preparation and enterprise support</li> <li>• Social protection/welfare</li> <li>• Subject-specific support (i.e. Maths, Science, Accounting)</li> </ul>

### 3.3 Profile of NPO Interviewees

#### 3.3.1 South African NPOs interviewed

In addition to the survey conducted with education NPOs in South Africa, five local NPOs in education were approached for interviews of which two confirmed; these NPOs participated in the survey. The



depth and experience of the two well established education NPOs contributed deeper insights into strategic decisions taken as the lockdown was announced.

In addition, a focus group discussion was conducted with the NASCEE Board, whose members represent a diverse range of NPOs. The depth of knowledge and experience expanded the understanding and enriched the data on the key focus areas of the study.

### **3.3.2 NPOs interviewed from other countries**

Twelve well established NPOs in education from other countries around the world were also interviewed (see Figure 5). The purposeful selection rationale of the non-profit practitioners interviewed was driven by the comparative nature of this study. Understanding the education non-profit experience in North America, South America, Europe, Asia and Africa enabled the research to reflect on patterns emerging globally and whether South African organisations are experiencing unique challenges. Moreover, the diversity of thought contributed enriches a deeper understanding of the organisational, political and systemic reverberations of COVID-19 and national lockdowns internationally.





- |                                   |                          |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. United Kingdom –London         | 7. Bulgaria –Sofia       |
| 2. United States – Washington, DC | 8. Kenya – Nairobi       |
| 3. Haiti – Ouest – Port-au-Prince | 9. Tanzania – Arusha     |
| 4. Malaysia – Kuala Lumpur        | 10. Uruguay – Montevideo |
| 5. Nepal – Madi Mulkharka         | 11. Bolivia – La Paz     |
| 6. Austria – Vienna               | 12. India – Mumbai       |

**Figure 5: NPOs from other countries interviewed**

The purposeful extension of twenty-two invitations to NPOs from other select countries to participate in the research study yielded twelve responses. Five of the respondent organisations belong to an international network of education NPOs, adding an additional comparative layer to the data, indicating the advantages and disadvantages of having access to a complex ecosystem during a global crisis. It should be noted, however, that the insights provided by these NPOs into their country contexts are specific to their particular experiences and cannot be taken as representative of the whole country.

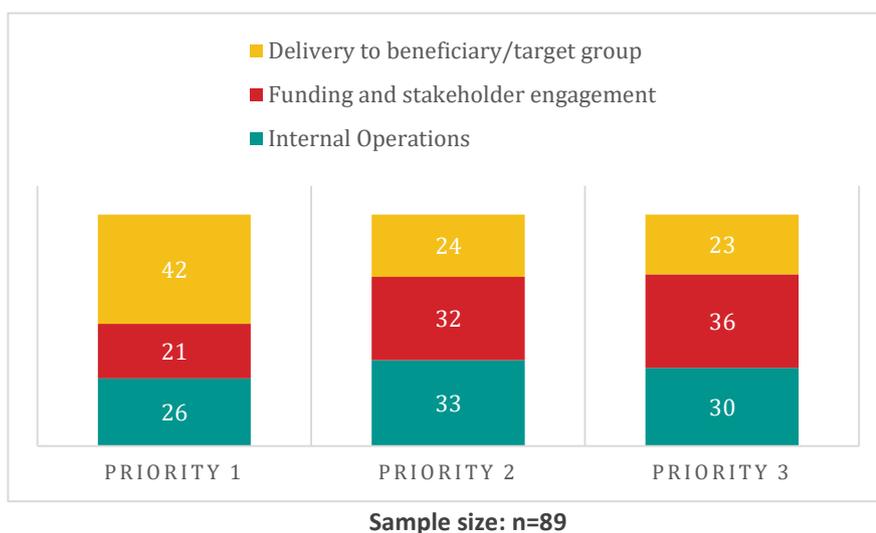


## 4. Findings

The findings are presented according to the five broad focus areas of the study (policy influence, leadership and governance, organisational management, funding and use of technology). The section begins, however, with an account of what the surveyed NPOs believed to be the most critical response(s) to the lockdown.

### 4.1 Priority response

Of particular interest to the researchers was to find out which area of responsibility South African NPOs believed required immediate attention in response to the COVID-19 lockdown. Survey participants were asked to list the following three areas in order of priority (i.e. priority 1, priority 2 and priority 3): internal operations and leadership; funding and stakeholder engagement; and service delivery to the beneficiary/target group.



**Figure 6: Priority Responses by SA NPOs**

The majority of surveyed NPOs (42/89) considered that changes and strategies around delivery to the beneficiary/target group as the first area that required attention, followed by internal operations (33/89) (Figure 6). Funding and stakeholder engagement is seen as the last aspect to deal with. It can be extrapolated from this that the well-being of learners is at the centre of NPO concerns, which also correlates with the fact that most NPOs provide teaching and learning services. By contrast, ten out of the twelve international interviewees cited funding as their most pressing issue, followed by a desire for more clarity on future government regulations so as to adjust their strategic planning around service delivery in the coming months.



## 4.2 Policy influence on NPOs

Analysis of the COVID-19 impact by UNESCO reveals that “nationwide closures are impacting almost 70% of the world’s student population. Several other countries have implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional learners”<sup>6</sup> Governments and organisations across the world, including NPOs, are attempting to counter the effects of the lack of learning during this period of lockdown and save the current academic year.

### 4.2.1 South Africa

At the time of this report, South Africa had 4 793 cases, including 1 473 recoveries and 90 deaths. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has developed a multifaceted post COVID-19 Recovery Plan<sup>7</sup> in conjunction with Provincial Education Departments and Deputy Director-Generals and in consultation with teacher unions, aimed at ensuring that the academic year is recovered.

The outline of the proposed plan is as follows:

- Principals, School Management Teams, educators and officials of the Department should assume duty at least two weeks prior to the opening of schools to ensure proper planning, with full orientation for teachers in preparation for the post COVID-19 environment.
- Other organisations within schools (dealing with school nutrition programmes, scholar transport, communication with parents, etc.) will also be given attention and preparation.
- A phased approach will be adopted, starting with the critical grades 7 and 12 as they are your exit grades from primary and secondary school, so as to allow schools to trial-manage the approach with a reduced number of learners; additional learners will only return once the current grade/s have fully adapted to the post COVID-19 environment.

Table 2 summarises some of the concerns expressed by a range of education stakeholders with the proposed recovery plan:

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<sup>6</sup> COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response - <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

<sup>7</sup> Schooling during COVID-19 Lockdown: update with Deputy Minister - <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30116/>



**Table 2. Concerns with the proposed Recovery Plan<sup>8</sup>**

CATEGORY OF THE PLAN	COMMENTS / CONCERNS RAISED BY TEACHER UNIONS <sup>9, 10</sup> AND A CONSORTIUM OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS <sup>11</sup> IN SOUTH AFRICA
Extension of teaching and learning time and the school day; school holidays; term dates; phasing in approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need strict guidance by Department of Health.</li> <li>• Consider transport limitations for learners, if school day extended.</li> <li>• Consider safety (in winter it gets dark early).</li> <li>• Teachers and learners should not be overwhelmed with work.</li> <li>• More information on benchmarking criteria and the exact procedures to be followed is needed.</li> <li>• Clear allocation of responsibilities.</li> <li>• Some learners being at home while others are at school is of concern. The absence of a plan to support sustained e-learning is concerning given that many learners will only return to school weeks into the phased approach.</li> <li>• The matter of reopening school hostels has not been addressed. If these hostels are not reopened once school starts that will “impact learners who currently attend residential schools far from home and has a particular impact on learners with disabilities attending special schools”.</li> </ul>
Curriculum intervention strategies and review of examinations/assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers need clear guidance on what is expected of them.</li> <li>• Grade 12s should be prioritised.</li> <li>• Timelines should be adjusted for later submissions and exams.</li> </ul>
Safety measures for learners and teacher-enabling conditions;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sanitizing at home and at school may be insufficient, since infection could take place between these two places.</li> <li>• Teachers should receive on-line training on COVID-19 mitigation</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Joint Labour input on the DBE “COVID19” document- April 2020 -

[https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10158880921286988&id=236102046987&\\_tn\\_=-R](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10158880921286988&id=236102046987&_tn_=-R)

<sup>9</sup> Teacher unions working with Education Department on plans to open school after lockdown -

<https://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/kwazulu-natal/teacher-unions-working-with-education-department-on-plans-to-open-school-after-lockdown-46678021>

<sup>10</sup> Department of Basic Education must find a way to balance the equation -

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-29-department-of-basic-education-must-find-a-way-to-balance-the-equation/>

<sup>11</sup> Equal Education - <https://equaleducation.org.za/2020/04/29/statement-basic-education-authorities-have-not-convincingly-demonstrated-that-all-schools-will-be-provided-with-the-necessary-resources-and-support-to-reopen-next-wednesday/>



CATEGORY OF THE PLAN	COMMENTS / CONCERNS RAISED BY TEACHER UNIONS <sup>9, 10</sup> AND A CONSORTIUM OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS <sup>11</sup> IN SOUTH AFRICA
standard operating plans; health and hygiene packages; social distancing	<p>strategies, including school preparation for the return of learners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some classrooms are small or overcrowded; there is insufficient furniture; and repairs are required due to theft and vandalism during the lockdown.</li> <li>• Some schools have poor water and sanitation services.</li> <li>• More teachers may be needed because seating arrangements will require the use of more classrooms.</li> <li>• Will there be enough basic sanitation and hygiene packages for each school?</li> </ul>
Psychosocial support and human resource shortages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychosocial support should be provided when teachers and learners return to school.</li> <li>• Screening needs to be ongoing and basic equipment should be provided in the case of those who display little or no symptoms of the virus but have it.</li> </ul>

In addition to the above, surveyed NPOs were concerned about:

- A lack of clear guidance by the DBE, the lack of direct communication channels between NPOs and government, and the failure to create an environment to enable NPOs to maximise their contribution.
- Poor collaboration between organisations and communities, which often operate in silos.
- A lack of accurate and defined communications, poor understandings of ground level management and the absence of procedures in the event of emergencies.

Upon reflecting on the collaborations evident in this time, one interviewee representing a South African NPO, expressed the expectation that ‘the other’ will lead the change so all parties seem to hold back until a clear directive is given.

It was noted that higher education institutions have taken rapid action during the lockdown. Government strategies announced by Higher Education Minister Nzimande to manage the estimated 2.5 million students and staff in the higher education sector prior to and during the lockdown included:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> South African Government website: Government’s intervention measures on Coronavirus COVID-19 - <https://www.gov.za/speeches/response-covid-19-24-mar-2020-0000>



- All universities and colleges had to complete a survey, on 26 March 2020, on how they would conduct online learning. The Department of Higher Education and the Tertiary Education and Research Network (TENET) analysed the surveys the following day in order to identify institutions needing assistance with their online learning programmes.
- All Skills Development Providers were informed to stop training activities but to continue paying stipends to learners for the month of the lockdown.
- Preparations for short to medium strategies, including online study, were underway at most institutions.
- Research continued at most institutions, with academic staff working from home and only essential staff remaining on campus. Support staff were working on a rotational basis to limit contact and avoid spreading the virus.
- Some universities are allowing students with exceptional circumstances to stay on campus, including international students who cannot travel.
- Some universities are assisting students with financial difficulties to get home.

The Minister added that all universities were to assess the situation at the end of April 2020 and make decisions on when students may return to campuses. On 30 April he clarified that "we have decided not to resume with campus-based academic activity throughout the PSET sector, including all universities and TVET [Technical and Vocational Education and Training] colleges, both public and private, during the Level 4 lockdown period".<sup>13</sup> Earlier, President Cyril Ramaphosa had introduced a risk-adjusted strategy, composed of five levels of lockdown, in order to allow for the reopening of the economy while at the same time managing the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the country would shift from Level 5 to Level 4 on 1 May 2020. Separately, the Minister of Higher Education announced that laptops will be provided for all 730 000 NSFAS students at college or university.<sup>14</sup>

While higher education institutions wish to salvage the first semester, and most have the ability to deliver their teaching and learning commitments using online platforms, not all students have data or reliable internet connectivity, especially if they have gone home during the lockdown to places without connectivity.

There is some evidence of collaboration amongst NPOs and between NPOs and government. An example of this is a meeting between social change entities in education, represented by the NASCEE, and the DBE, which was facilitated by the NECT on 22 April 2020. NECT CEO Godwin Khosa was invited to all strategic planning meetings as part of an Intelligence Committee intended to address the challenges in education during the crisis. He mentioned that "the lessons prepared for learners will be broadcast on radio and TV in both mainstream and community media and network providers will

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<sup>13</sup> South African Government News Agency - [www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/higher-education-announces-interventions-covid-19](http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/higher-education-announces-interventions-covid-19)

<sup>14</sup> Skills Portal - <https://www.skillsportal.co.za/content/laptops-all-nsfas-students>



provide content through SMS and video streaming and ... we need to involve the NPO community to assist government".<sup>15</sup> Dedicated funding opportunities for NPOs would help them contribute to this initiative to ensure that learners are equipped with learning material and can continue to learn at home - a welcome and a necessary puzzle piece in this commitment to partnership. However, government has encouraged philanthropic associations to assist NPOs in this regard.

## 4.2.2 International insights

NPOs from other countries shared their experiences of government interventions and policies. A common NPO perception emerged from the qualitative research: governments are too slow and bureaucratic to efficiently support students, so the responsibility often falls on education NPOs as well as educators to ensure that children continue learning and that lessons are accessible. Yet, serving all students at scale is a complex matter, and something unlikely to be done apart from government processes and plans.

Respondents from other countries expressed some anxiety about how to operate amid or in spite of government actions. Common activities by these NPOs include:

- Advising government policy and implementation of digital solutions.
- Advocating for government intervention for underserved youth (those with no access to technological means to continue learning) through research, media campaigns and social media.
- Supporting the digital literacy of educators attempting to execute government policy on remote lessons.
- Circumventing government policy to meet the needs of beneficiaries, including providing food and educational resources.
- Modelling low-cost accessible design of digital solutions and interventions for the government to mimic.
- Lending human resources, in the form of NPO volunteers, to the public sector to implement government policy around education.

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<sup>15</sup> NECT DBE webinar, 21 April 2020.



## Summary

Nationwide closures are impacting almost 70% of the world's student population. Governments around the world have put different strategies and policies in place during the COVID-19 crisis, in which NPOs have been included to varying degrees. Most interviewees from NPOs in other countries stated that their government was not prepared with the relevant education policies and systems needed during a pandemic. To some extent this is to be expected, as the situation is unprecedented in the majority of contexts.

In South Africa, plans by the Department of Basic Education are being well-received by the different sectors involved. However, there is widespread concern amongst NPOs as well as unions about how these plans will be implemented. The key areas of concern are uncertainties around the national school feeding programme, the availability of water and toilets, personal protective equipment for all schools, extra classrooms and extra teachers, the continued reliance on e-learning and the absence of any plans regarding the reopening of school hostels.

### 4.2.3 Leadership and governance

Due to the pandemic, many NPOs are being forced to restructure their organisational operations in order to ensure their continued survival. Like most other businesses, they have to consider their budgets, and communications with stakeholders, as well as the continuation of their programmes. Leaders of education NPOs need to find ways of adapting to the crisis. Some have had to take preventive measures to keep their employees and the surrounding communities safe from the contagion. Many were unprepared and, having no contingencies for working remotely, completely shut down their organisations.

While some NPOs have noted a shift in leadership toward innovation and change management, others have listed leadership as a gap in the current crisis response, particularly in terms of the provision of adaptive training and skills development for NPO staff. For some, leaders have been absent in this area. Some leaders took immediate action and informed both their boards and their employees of plans to be put into place; others adopted a "wait and see" approach. In the first approach, employees were consulted, received some direction and felt better prepared to deal with working remotely; in the second, stakeholders believed that there was no adequate communication or clear course of action. According to members of the NASCEE Board during the focused group discussions held, a consultative approach seemed to have had a better effect on how employees are responding to the crisis, and these organisations may be better prepared to adapt their operations to the future of work.



Some NPOs noted that, under the impact of the lockdown, responsibility has increasingly shifted to NPO managers, CEOs and directors. Small teams are driving NPO operations in order to keep doors open during the financial crisis. While some have seen this leadership shift as being one of individual responsibility (i.e. leaders are being looked up to for direction), others believe that leadership is becoming more collaborative and inclusive in nature:

*We normally have a very democratic approach to decision making. With the changes happening very fast and staff being at home in lockdown the director had to make some quick decisions alone.*

*It has always been a laissez-faire approach, recently more autocratic style where certain decisions and implementation had to take place immediately.*

*More of a shared leadership with staff members.*

*Become even more collaborative.*

Several NPOs noted that organisational leadership was scenario-driven, focusing on crisis management and survival. Many have focused on the wellbeing of staff:

*...there is more empathy and tolerance as I realise that staff are 'dealing with their own demons'.*

*More encouraging/supportive and intentional about relationships.*

*The focus is on ensuring that all staff are supported emotionally during this period of uncertainty.*

In other countries, immediacy and innovation appear to be watchwords in changes in leadership. For example, an NPO in the United Kingdom has yielded operations to a COVID-19 taskforce – an entirely new intra-organisational structure – composed of decision-makers at headquarters. A large percentage of staff reports daily to this taskforce in “all hands-on deck” style, temporarily foregoing their original roles in order to focus solely on coronavirus efforts. In contrast, a large NPO in the United States has seen leadership at headquarters follow the lead of the younger, more agile leadership of satellites, and are now recognizing the value of appeals for remote work arrangements and the use of digital tools requested over the years. Scenario driven leadership also appears, in Bolivia for instance, where a “personal plan” method is used to keep each staff member focused on doing their individual part to serve the entirety of operations. To do this, the area manager was replaced completely, in the name of “more flexible leadership who can understand [a] situation like quarantine”.

Overall, the leadership of NPOs has focused on alignment of their strategies in the short term to COVID-19, communicating with their stakeholders as a matter of urgency and ensuring the safety of their staff.



In a radio interview (702, 2020), Nazeema Mohamed, the Executive Director of Inyathelo, a local NPO that works to sustain and strengthen civil society organisations, suggested that NPOs should pay close attention to two key areas of change management during this crisis:

1. The first looks **inward**: reviewing organisational development and strengthening governance, leadership support from board members, financial management abilities and fundraising capabilities. NPO leaders need to have a long-term comprehensive understanding of their organisation's finances and review whether their existing financial strategy is still relevant at this time. Klotz, Director of Non-Profit Innovation at CLA, an accountancy firm in the United States, advises NPOs to run out their cash forecast "as many as twelve months" and "consider when exactly each bit of revenue is received as cash and when each bill must be paid". He further suggests that NPOs should look at retrenchment as the last option to cutting down costs, and instead look at reducing "related benefits layered on top of ... salaries and wages" (Klotz, 2020).
2. The second key area of intervention looks **outward**: maintaining and building strong external relationships including with the constituencies served by the organisation. NPOs should step up their communication with stakeholders, keep them informed about what actions the organisation is taking as well as what financial support is needed so that funders are given the opportunity to respond in a flexible and empathetic manner where possible. During this time there is also immense value in working on "revitalising the commitment" of stakeholders to one's cause (Bam, 2020) and building relationships with allied organisations at this time of great uncertainty.

#### 4.2.4 Alignment of strategies to COVID-19

In the study, several education NPOs have extended their responsibilities to focus on measures that can assist in controlling the spread and raising overall awareness of the dangers of the pandemic. This is done both on their websites and through social media where communities and large numbers of people can access the information. NPOs have immediately aligned their strategies with the policy changes announced.

#### 4.2.5 Stakeholder engagement / public communication

For 24 of the 89 NPOs participating in the survey, stakeholder engagement and communication was a priority, so as to allow organisations to be "*accessible and transparent*" and so that funders could be informed. Various approaches were used by the NPOs in communicating with the public and/or engaging with stakeholders: for example informative newsletters addressed to funders, blogs, articles and downloadable resource documents pertaining to COVID-19, as well as YouTube video links. These resources were available directly on NPO websites or via specific portals. Additionally, announcements were made to the public via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Such activities are comparable internationally, with well-resourced NPOs in other countries generating research and advisory reports



and newsletters on their websites and conducting informative or training webinars online via Zoom, Facebook and Instagram Live. As previously indicated in Figure 6, when NGOs were asked in the survey to prioritise their responses following lockdown, funding and stakeholder engagement is seen as the third aspect to deal with, after delivery to beneficiaries and addressing internal operations.

## Summary

From a leadership perspective, many NPOs have responded positively to the crisis and the new regulations promulgated by governments, despite needing to restructure their operations. This becomes clear when we compare the alignment of NPO strategies. It seems that while many NPOs have reframed their approaches to both governance and communicating with employees, some have not been able to do so and have shut down their organisations. There is a need for both internal and external change management to weather this storm as well as agility in how decisions are made.

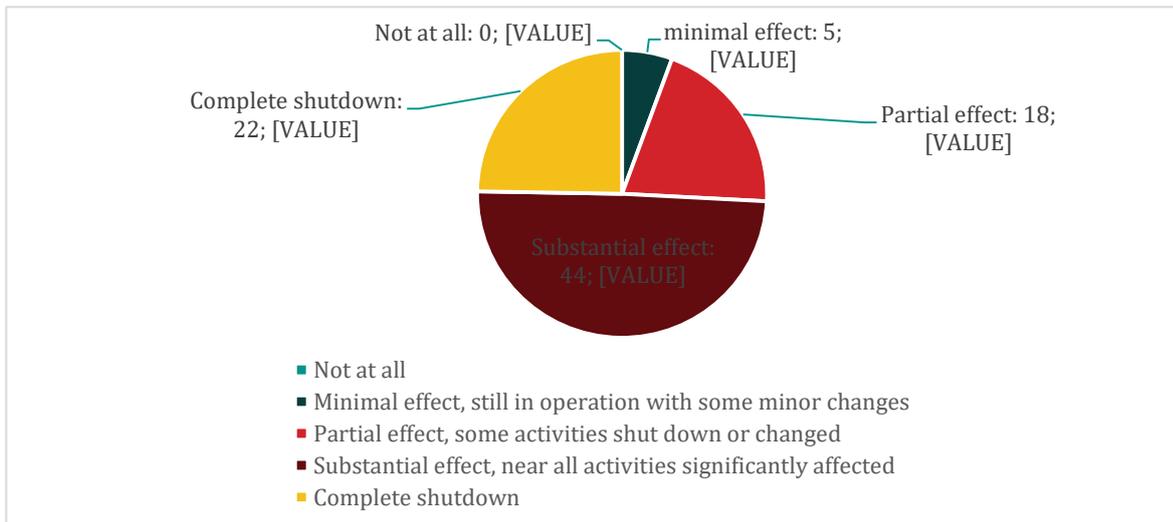
## 4.3 Organisational management

Whilst it is important to review the strategic approach of NPO leadership, it is equally important to analyse what effect the pandemic has had on the operational functioning of NPOs.

### 4.3.1 Effects of the shutdown on daily operations

The novel coronavirus outbreak, along with the economic strain and the lockdown in South Africa, has immensely changed the operations of many education NPOs. In this regard, many education NPOs had to make some operational changes to keep their organisations running while still following regulations. Those that hold large conferences, fundraise largely in-person or provide educational training sessions in-person have been the most disadvantaged. The lockdown creates backlogs and inabilities for NPOs in education to achieve their organisational objectives, sometimes resulting in the complete dissolution of the entity.





Sample size: n=89

**Figure 7: Effect of lockdown on SA NPOs**

As per Figure 7, South African NPOs were affected in varying degrees by the nationwide lockdown. Notably, 22 of the 89 NPOs surveyed (24.7%) were forced into complete shutdown, and 44 (49.4% of the) NPOs have been affected substantially, leading to a temporary suspension of and/or reduction in service delivery. Some NPOs indicated the reason behind shutdown or service reduction was that the essential components of their services required direct contact; for others, there was insufficient revenue to migrate to virtual platforms for service delivery. Some indicated that they were waiting out the lockdown period;<sup>16</sup> for others funding was simply too big of a challenge to continue operations. It is unclear whether the indicated shutdown for these NPOs is relative only to the lockdown period, or whether the impact is permanent.

For those NPOs which were partially affected, with only some activities shutdown or changed (20.2%), this effect was largely limited to funding availability and lockdown extensions.

*One of our biggest programmes that is tied to our biggest funding is school based and further extensions to the lockdown and impact on the school calendar will have substantial effect, as if the funding is withdrawn, we may have to cut the programme, staff associated to it ... there's a lot we have to consider.*

A few NPOs indicated that they were minimally affected by the lockdown (5.6%), as major components of their services are delivered through non-contact interaction via the internet and virtual seminars with which they are continuing. Some NPOs have even experienced an increase in their programmes.

<sup>16</sup> Note: this survey was distributed during the initial 5-week lockdown period.



*Our systems are online, and our office dispersed, we've been working like this for more than a year.*

*Indefinitely - our main programme is online, and that programme is expanding.*

However, no NPOs indicated that they were unaffected by the lockdown. Internationally, the findings were similar with some education NPOs focused on school-based interventions unable to resume programming. However, well-resourced and under-resourced organisations alike routinely engaged in efforts to reach their beneficiaries (such as through an accessible platform like WhatsApp), and by designing a digital version of their service offering. Unfortunately, not all learners could be reached due to a lack of phones or of internet connectivity.

### **4.3.2 Working remotely**

Working from home has become the “new normal” during the lockdown. NPOs in South Africa, and internationally, that have the necessary technology to keep in touch with co-workers, schedule online meetings, or continue to conduct teaching and learning online, have been in a position to continue operations as usual. Many stated that the use of technology brought its own challenges, such as lack of data, devices or electricity. These will be discussed below in the section titled ‘The role of technology’. Employees in some cases do not have the expertise to use technology and may need to be reskilled to become responsive and adapt to the current situation. The main focus was to continue learning despite the organisations being under lockdown. It can be concluded that keeping the organisational activities running through the use of remote or virtual learning depends on the capability of each NPO and the fundamental strategies developed by NPO leaders within the organisation.

Instagram and WhatsApp are currently vital tools for NPO leaders to communicate with their staff, stakeholders and beneficiaries. Internationally, leaders most cited Zoom, Slack and Google Teams in addition to Instagram and WhatsApp.

### **4.3.3 Employee management**

In a time of crisis, the impact of reduced funding, an inability to deliver services and additional strain on existing organisational budgets to accommodate these changes may force NPO leaders to retrench staff, which will in turn react negatively on job security. According to Bell and Dubb (2020), a recent *Non-profit Quarterly* survey found that 20% of respondents had already limited hours, furloughed, or laid off staff. It is worth acknowledging that this may be attributed to funding pressures or a change in the demand or nature of implementation.

NPO leaders are changing the way they lead and operate their organisation due to the lack of funding and inability to achieve their fundraising targets. According to Bell and Dubb (2020), many NPO leaders are faced with difficult decisions in terms of staffing and the choice of staffing will depend on different



aspects such as programming and financial reserves/ organisational budget. NPO leaders globally are facing the same choice. One Kenyan interviewee expressed concern that her job in addition to the jobs of her staff would be evaluated against the budget on a weekly basis. Another respondent, speaking of operations in Haiti, captures this new leadership obligation brought on by the global crisis:

*The staff is nervous about their jobs, and we are too. We were just doing our budget ... to send ...to our finance committee tonight, and we have to wait to hear if they say you have to lay off...staff or if [you] can operate for another month.*

As the country lockdown continues in South Africa and NPOs continue to re-evaluate their operational style and staffing procedures, it is important that NPO leaders wait before they lay off staff, if possible, because skilled and valuable staff could be permanently lost.

## Summary

Almost one quarter of the NPOs surveyed were drastically affected by South Africa's lockdown and were forced into complete shutdown (Figure 7) with zero indicating that they were unaffected. This is to be expected given that large components of services delivered by education NPOs traditionally require contact interactions.

From the responses in the survey, it was evident that the effect on the daily operations of those NPOs moving a significant part of their internal and external operations online, was dependent on how technologically advanced the organisation was. However, technology was not the only deciding factor in remaining functional. It also depended on the financial sustainability of the organisation. A decision to lay off staff comes with budgetary constraints and affects the ability of the NPO to retain competent employees.

## 4.4 Funding challenges

Stringent protective measures adopted by world leaders to curb COVID-19 will have a disastrous impact on the global economy, slowing down business, and leading to many people losing their sources of income (World Trade Organization, 2020). Particular to the NPO sector, the economic disruption and instability caused by the pandemic will shake or even crumble the financial foundations that many NPOs rely on for sustainability (Klotz, 2020). We have already seen in a previous section that 24.7% of surveyed NPOs have shut down their operations during this time and it is likely that many may struggle to recover from the financial impact in the long term. Although it is too soon to measure the magnitude of the inevitable impact on local NPOs, there is much to be learnt from previous financial crises.



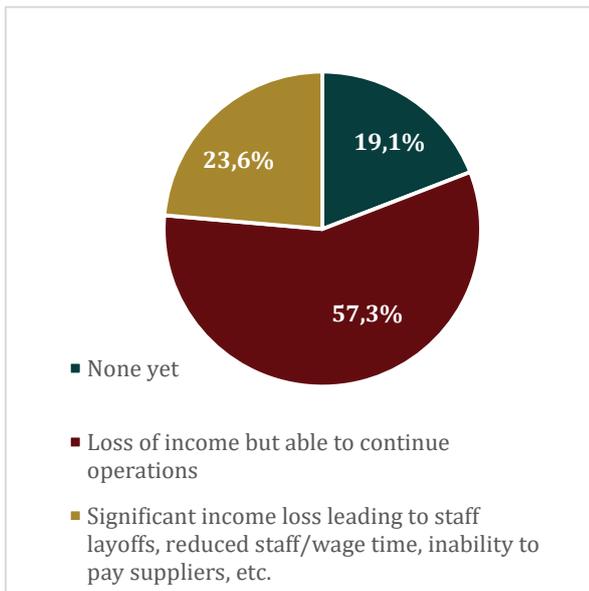
During the Great Recession, a period of marked general decline observed in national economies globally during 2008/2009, numerous NPOs in South Africa had to close their doors, due to a decrease in financial support (Naidoo and Nkuna, 2009). NPOs continued to feel the impact of the recession up to the year 2012, with many of these organisations experiencing a decrease in corporate social investment and private donations (Davis, 2012, and Charities Aid Foundation Southern Africa, 2012, cited in Stuart, 2013).

Funding trends often shift during a crisis. In their interview, the Director of a large and well-established national NPO offered their reflections on the perceived shift, observing that, currently, institutional as well as private and individual donors have prioritised organisations and initiatives with missions related to health and security, failing to recognise education as an important, and urgent, offering that needs to be sustained. Consequently, education NPOs globally were required to dismiss or furlough staff, generate funding appeals, call donors individually, and reduce any unnecessary spending in order to continue programming or to survive as an organisation. Similarly, eleven of the twelve education NPOs outside of South Africa cited funding as their biggest need mid-crisis. A survey carried out by Bond, the UK network for organisations working in international development, revealed that 60% of its member NPOs are already cutting down on staff, 86% are cutting back on operations and 37% mentioned that they could not survive longer than six months without additional funding (Bond, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that non-profit leaders provide strong financial leadership during this period of uncertainty (Klotz, 2020).

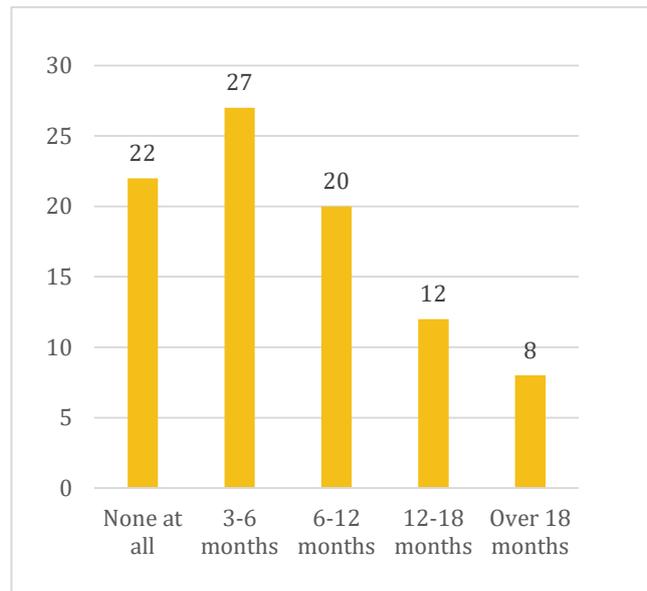
#### **4.4.1 Current financial reality and challenges for local NPOs in education**

The effect of the lockdown in South Africa is such that only 19.1% of NPOs in education surveyed have been able to continue operations as usual, in terms of financial implications (Figure 8). This, in turn, hampers NPOs' ability to continue delivering services to their end users. While the government continues to earn revenues from taxes and large income-generating organisations can rely on financial reserves, it is clear that donations and fundraising remain a key contributors of growth and continuous operation of the NPOs, and these funds can be difficult to accumulate and access in the current time. At the time of this report, no formal funding support from government for NPOs in education had been announced.





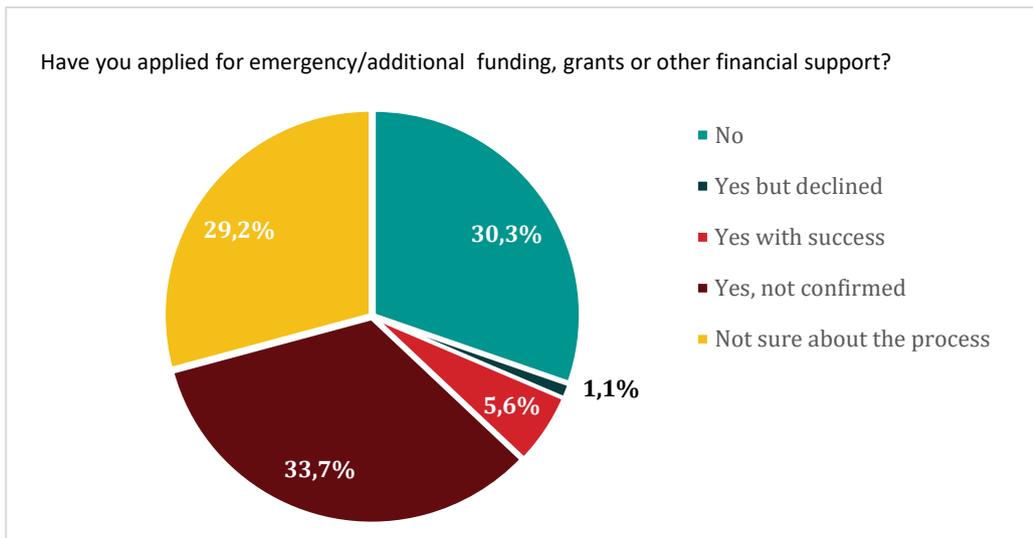
**Figure 8: Financial Impact of the Lockdown on SA NPO Operations**



**Figure 9: SA NPO Access to endowments, grants and other financial support**

Financial pressures are increased by the need to buy and provide NPO employees and stakeholders with safety necessities such as masks, gloves and sanitizers so as to prevent the spread and infection of the virus during lockdown and even more so as the lockdown is gradually lifted. This additional funding is urgently needed given that most organisations were not financially prepared for this difficult time. At the start of April 2020, 27 of 89 NPOs surveyed had only 3-6 months of access to endowments, grants and other financial support (Figure 9). As organisations seek ways to secure funding (Figure 10), NPOs are warned to guard against schemes whereby individuals fraudulently gain access to the NPOs finances by claiming that they can help NPOs qualify for international funds, by pretending to convert “their certificates to NGO certificates” (DSD, 2020).





Sample size: n=89

**Figure 10: SA NPO Emergency Funding/Grant Application Status**

Some of the funding and stakeholder constraints mentioned by NPOs in this study were:

- Dependence on monthly grant payments and the difficulty of accessing alternative funding;
- Loss of income due to missed school fee payments;
- Absence of NPO-specific funding mechanisms released by government;
- Funding mechanisms focused on face-to-face activities or reaching set beneficiary targets have been directly affected by the lockdown;
- Slow implementation of new funding contracts;
- Uncertainty from funders regarding the post-lockdown climate and regulations;
- Existing funding commitments cancelled, delayed or reduced; and
- Difficulties funding the use of technology and related activities, since most funding has been directed to matters of survival (i.e. staff payments and beneficiary support).

The same constraints emerged from interviews with international respondents, who also added that:

- There is high competition for grants issued by large institutional donors prioritizing health and safety interventions; and
- There is an inability to court new donors due to the climate of financial panic pervasive among businesses as well as individual would-be donors.



#### 4.4.2 Lessons from similar crises

The economic catastrophe caused by COVID-19 will likely be far worse than the 2008/9 financial crisis (Rogoff, 2020). It is acknowledged that the economic consequences of an unprecedented global pandemic are incomparable to other more well-understood financial crises, but there is still value in understanding potentially relevant mitigating strategies. NPOs which were able to survive the 2008/9 financial crisis and even increase revenue (Rude, 2016) attributed their success to:

- having and nurturing strong relationships with their major donors,
- being able to rapidly make significant strategic changes to their organisational development (Lin and Wang, 2015),
- reducing non-essential expenses,
- improving organisational efficiency, and
- forming partnerships with other NPOs (Gebreselassie-Hagos and Smit, 2013).

Mature organisations demonstrate robust, sophisticated ecosystems that allow them to leverage the resources of strategic partners and private sector donors as well as grant-makers and high net-worth individuals to adjust and adapt their programming. Smaller (and not as well-funded) organisations will continue to face the reality of discontinuation of their offerings on a daily basis coupled with an urgent need to manage cash flow and seek additional sources of funding.

#### 4.4.3 Strategies to address funding challenges

In the responses to the survey, three primary themes emerged – the transformation of NPOs by embracing digital and tech-based delivery means; submitting applications or lobbying for emergency funding; and, concerningly, a lack of any long-term strategy or plan. For many NPOs, the focus seemed to be on survival, rather than future planning. Their strategies are detailed as:

- Attempting to source funds from emergency and other funding organisations or bodies.
- Maintaining staff productivity through remote work.
- Shifting to the use of digital platforms and online service delivery (one interviewee highlighted the value of collaborating with other education stakeholders in sharing “HOW” to most effectively carry out these shifts).
- Reducing staff hours, numbers and salaries in order to keep minimal operations running.
- Fundraising through stakeholders, parents and private donor support.
- Changing or realigning objectives, service delivery and strategy to match current demand.
- Reducing delivery targets of programmes.
- International expansion (given the exchange rate, allocating time to trying to secure international funding could be cost-effective).



Locally, the funding issues faced by NPOs can be addressed by better collaboration and coordination between key stakeholders such as NASCEE (as the representative voice), IPASA (representing philanthropists) and corporate social investment investors. Such collaboration will bode well for liaison with government.

The primary research data suggests that internationally, education NPOs are utilising the same strategies mentioned above. Membership of an international network of organisations offers a clear advantage with regard to sourcing emergency funding and appealing to international donors. However, interviewees also shared strategies not mentioned above. In Uruguay, for example, one executive director is calling individual donors daily, very sincerely communicating their needs. While this strategy doesn't prevent reductions in commitment, it has been successful in preventing cancellations of financial commitments altogether. It may be tedious, but the success achieved drives the interviewee to continue. In contrast, an interviewee co-leading an operation in Tanzania mentioned appealing to international individuals for donations and receiving feedback questioning the relevance of raising funds for education amid a global health crisis, especially when there is immediate need in their own locales. Other organisations look to government funding to ease the financial strain. One education NPO in Haiti also has a base in the United States and is able to apply for an Economic Injury Disaster loan as well as payroll protection; another NPO, in Austria, will implement a model called *Kuzarbeit*, developed during the 2008 financial crisis, which allows an organisation to temporarily lay off workers, but keep them on the payroll while the government subsidises 60-80% of their pre-COVID-19 salary.

## Summary

Funding trends, behaviours and pressures shift during times of significant economic change so it is to be anticipated that global pandemic with the concomitant uncertainty will bring a fair share of funding challenges. The COVID-19 outbreak coincides with an increased need for funding as NPOs need to innovate and adapt to changing protocols and responsibilities whilst funds can be difficult to accumulate and access in the current time. This perfect storm requires more communication, more transparency and more collaboration across the education ecosystem (including representative bodies, funders and government), along with dedicated funding support for NPOs at a government level, to ensure that quality learning continues.

## 4.5 The role of technology

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, several education NPOs were heavily focused on in-person activities: operating from their offices, holding conferences with large numbers of people and meeting their beneficiaries to conduct teaching and learning. Some organisations did not introduce new means of



virtual communication and found the adoption of technology within their organisations difficult for various reasons. For those businesses where employees can work from home, it is important to ensure that employees have access to as much as possible of the organisation's technology. This is to support employees to operate remotely and to try to implement electronic options to deal with things once done easily in the office, such as signing, dating, scanning and sending documents. However, challenges remain.

Externally, , with the sudden change in the environment of NPOs, most are required to look for new options in order to continue with their services. Technology has been the enabler of the "work and study from home" solution instituted by NPOs in the country and around the world, with growing recognition that technology is a critical part of the 'new normal' moving forward. Below are some of the responses from South African NPOs on the role technology has played during the lockdown:

*Technology has been a key factor with the successful ongoing of important work processes. Those that are technology disadvantaged have been having more difficulty in staying connected.*

*As part of our 2025 Strategy which includes being tech savvy we had already moved all our documentation and storage on to Salesforce and G Suite....*

*We are accelerating our technology scale strategy that was already in place. We are actively seeking to provide data at grassroots.*

*We have realised that we have to go online and adapt, or shut down completely.*

#### **4.5.1 Online learning**

Numerous education NPOs in South Africa are predominantly focusing on remote learning. This approach is being coupled with online and offline resources to ensure that learners are still able to learn, complete required curricula and ask questions from their homes. There is a large amount of resources being made available on NPO websites, which include downloadable resource documents, educational libraries that offer access to books and study materials, and sections that include videos, tips and activities on how to keep children educationally and creatively occupied during the lockdown period and how to set online tutoring sessions. Moreover, education NPOs are also leading social media campaigns to disseminate material in a diversity of formats. This shift is rippling through the global education non-profit community as well. One vivid example, illustrated by a Malaysian respondent, describes crowdsourcing videos of adults reading children's books of varying levels and posting them on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram with the unifying hashtag "ReadAtHome", to alleviate the absence of books at home and encourage a national literacy movement. Additionally, certain NPOs involved in professional teacher development and advocacy have collaborated with other organisations to offer additional support and resources to teachers to ensure they maintain contact with learners and enhance their teacher development strategies.



*Technology has been our only solution. We make use of Google classroom, YouTube and Meet to continue teaching. The Grade 10 to 12 students also use WhatsApp.*

It was suggested by one interviewee that educators will play a pivotal role in facilitating the learning process and discovering new and innovative ways of assisting learners into the future. This “new way” of working is here to stay and is one of the major changes that NPOs believe will continue even after the lockdown.

#### **4.5.2 Virtual communities**

Education NPOs have made some drastic changes in terms of the way their organisations operate during these unprecedented times. For example, one of the members of NASCEE has recently introduced a “Virtual Communities of Practice (CoPs)”. This method enables participants to login online and participate in sharing and learning activities, so as to sustain pre-existing CoPs. This format was never utilised before the outbreak of COVID-19. Working remotely may sometimes be difficult for education NPOs with limited resources to ensure that employees have connectivity. Some NPOs made working at home and remotely possible by providing employees and beneficiaries with laptops, airtime and data. Others have recognised the value of virtual community creation through the use of WhatsApp groups and other accessible platforms that are data friendly.

*We have started provincial WhatsApp groups to stay connected with our grantees and have also completed some surveys to get a sense of their needs and responses.*

Our Malaysian interviewee described a literacy platform designed entirely around WhatsApp that allows the NPO to continue programming via the exchange of voice messages through volunteers and supervised by parents. This proves to be an effective way to reach the majority of the children served by the organisation.

#### **4.5.3 Tech-related challenges**

As much as technology has been an enabler for many solutions instituted by NPOs during the lockdown, the use of technology brings quite a number of challenges which NPOs have had to confront. “As many of us start to work from home, we are learning of the immediate challenges we are facing,” says a spokesperson from Corporate AV (ESI Africa, 2020). According to the General Household Survey completed by Statistics South Africa in 2018, 84.7% of South African households had access to electricity and 89.5% exclusively used cell phones, but barely one-tenth (10.4%) had access to the Internet at home and only 21.5% owned a computer (Stats SA, 2019).

The majority of the population thus has limited means for working and studying from home, and even when they do connect to the internet, they are faced with high connectivity costs. To mitigate these harsh realities, NPOs need to provide employees with equipment that ensures continuity as they move



from working in the office to working from home. This sentiment was echoed in the interviews with NPOs in other countries. For instance, a Bulgarian NPO aiming to work with education practitioners to facilitate digitization, describes scenarios of about 30% of students with no internet connection, low connectivity or one device per household.

- **Internet Access**

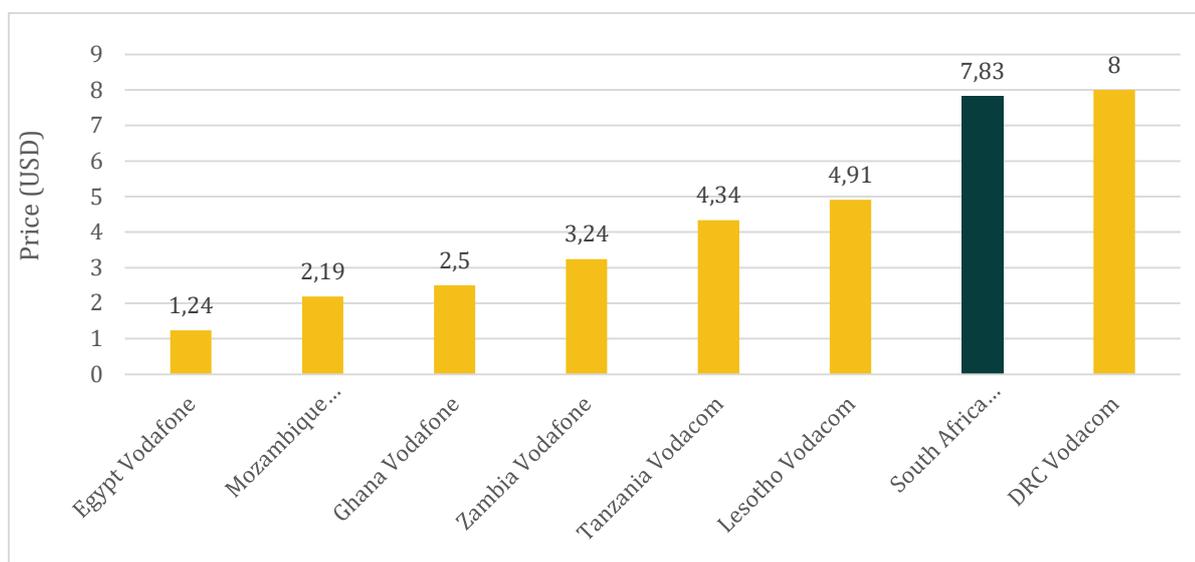
Internet access is a key priority for many NPOs, for both their staff and beneficiaries.

*Good internet access is critical to our operations. Prior to lockdown that was our main priority - ensuring that all staff had good and reliable access to the internet.*

One of the primary challenges identified in the survey and interviews in relation to the use of technology was data access and availability. The main issue with data access is the cost associated with accessing data. Internationally, an additional theme was poor connectivity, even if data is accessible.

- **Cost of connectivity**

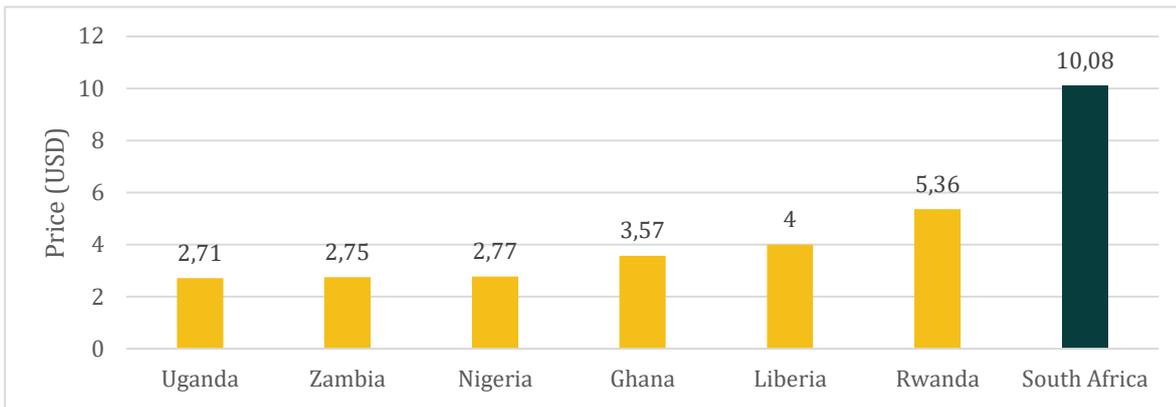
Mobile data in South Africa is expensive. South Africans pay more for data than in other countries where their service providers (Vodacom and MTN) operate (Figures 11 and 12).



Source: Competition Commission (cited in Masweneng, K, 2019).

**Figure 11: Vodacom 1GB tariffs across Africa 2019**





Source: Competition Commission (cited in Masweneng, K, 2019).

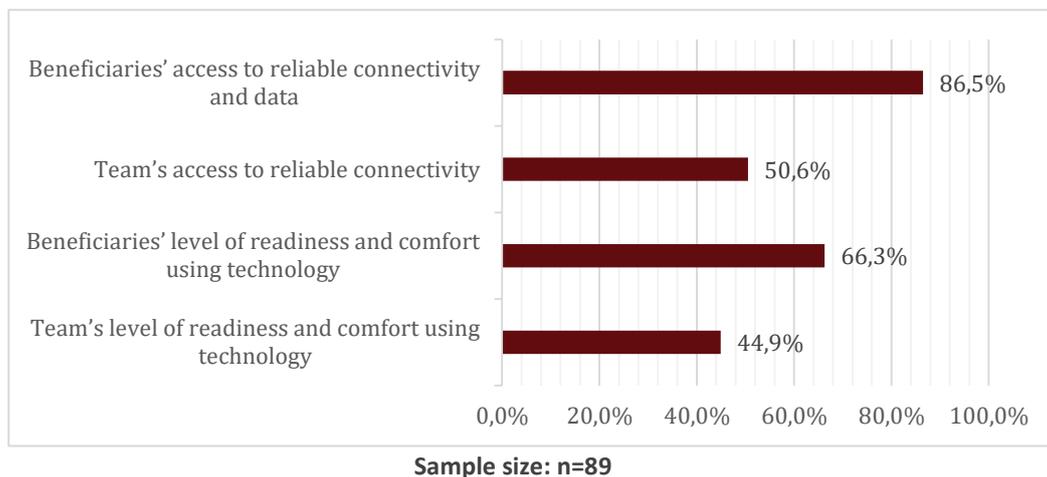
**Figure 12: MTN 1GB retail data tariffs across Africa 2019**

As seen in Figure 13 below, 86.5% of NPOs participating in the survey experienced difficulties with regard to beneficiaries’ access to reliable connectivity and data, and 50.6% experienced challenges when it came to staff internet access.

While access to the internet via online platforms has been steadily growing, primarily through mobile technology, it is data availability during this crisis that has been notably limited:

*Our challenge is not in our operations but rather that our target stakeholders do not have access to data, or digital access with personal devices to connect to digital sessions; this is perpetuating the inequality and inadequate support for those that are most in need.*

*Access to data continues to expose the inequality that exists in access to quality education.*



**Figure 13: SA NPOs experienced difficulties in these tech-related areas**



- **Mobile connectivity**

Unlike working from the office and sharing a central connection, those working from home working without a fibre or an ADSL line have had to use mobile data. Mobile data relies on reception for it to work well, and some employees reside in areas without much network coverage. This then translates into poor Zoom, Skype and Google calls, causing multiple disconnects during meetings and in turn affecting communication and leading to time being wasted.

*Technology enables us to do many creative things; however, our biggest concern is that our beneficiaries 1) don't have access to technology 2) don't have money to use a lot of data 3) signal is often a problem in many areas. The potential if everyone had equal access to technology though is huge.*

This sentiment is echoed across the majority of international interviews. In the words of a Tanzanian respondent, “many [students] don't have a smartphone or an individual phone, but a family phone. It will definitely be harder to check in on them on a weekly basis”.

- **Digital transformation**

The importance of digital transformation, particularly in terms of organisational management, internal operations and online service delivery, was raised by NPOs several times in the survey. Many highlighted the value of remote work, online meetings, e-learning and WhatsApp as a means of beneficiary, stakeholder and community engagement, and for the collaborative development and sharing of online material.

*The lockdown has created a demand for planning and preparing more deeply for digital learning and this will certainly help the cause to achieve systemic changes in digital education.*

The eagerness of NPOs to make this shift was apparent; for many, a move to a digital platform had been on the table for some time. For these NPOs and others, it is unlikely that they will return to previous “normality” – this is the “new normal”.

*We don't believe life will return as it was, so we are preparing for a new normal and post COVID-19 scenario in all we do.*

Given the above, discussions around data and internet access are likely to begin gaining significant traction.

*Technology enables a lot, but the NPO sector largely exists to serve those who have some shortage, and technology is often that shortage.*



- **Education and the Digital Divide**

The education community's response to the COVID-19 crisis highlights the large disparity in access to education between the poor and the wealthy in developing as well as developed nations. A similar narrative emerged in interviews with practitioners in North and South America, Europe, and African countries when it came to comparing the lessons, during lockdown, received by private school children as compared to public school children. Often, poorer children are unable to participate in digital approaches to the curriculum due to the lack of a cell phone, landline, laptop or internet access. In India, one education non-profit practitioner cautioned that the already high school dropout rate will get higher post-COVID-19, as parents of beneficiaries lose their livelihoods and "students will also have to work alongside their parents to support themselves". Parents in the United States as well as Kenya and Tanzania who attend public schools with smaller budgets are urged to personally collect schoolwork distributed in paper packets at school buildings (where possible) while wealthier schools are able to seamlessly switch to digital distance learning during the national lockdown.

## Summary

Generally, NPOs are faced with huge technological challenges and constraints. For those organisations in which employees can work from home, it is important to ensure that they have access to the organisation's technology and infrastructure wherever possible to support the continuation of internal operations. This is to support employees to operate remotely. However, challenges remain:

- Slow and unreliable internet for remote working and digital service delivery.
- Technological training (challenging under the circumstances, and costly) needed for stakeholders, beneficiaries and staff members in order for service delivery to continue
- Virtual support programmes and online shifts require additional funding and resource access, which for many NPOs is scarce.
- A general lack or shortage of psychosocial, technological, data and emergency response resources.

As countries globally are developing a national approach to digital education and technology connectivity for the first time, this means that education NPOs are on the frontlines of resourcing, training and implementation.



## 5. Conclusions

This research has been informed by desktop research, an online survey completed by 89 South African NPOs, in-depth interviews with two NPOs in South Africa and 12 NPOs in other countries and a focus group discussion with the NASCEE Board.



**Figure 14: Summary of Study Scope**

The purpose was to highlight the realities currently experienced by NPOs and how they are responding to the global lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also provided an opportunity to collect real time data that can shape long term changes essential for the future sustainability of NPOs.

The research has revealed the complexity of the crisis, highlighting the varying responses and detailing the multi-faceted strategies being employed at the operational, financial, leadership and technological levels. The recommendations made (below) are intended to ensure that SA NPOs maintain or regain their capacity to continue their valuable contributions to society. Their contributions are valuable in themselves in a country characterised by grave inequalities and needing sophisticated and widespread education support, but are also valuable to the extent that they help government to provide quality education.

Despite all the challenges, it is evident that more than half of NPOs surveyed continue to deliver their services and believe that the current situation is an opportunity to reframe and redirect their efforts. These NPOs indicate that their focus is on continuing with teaching and learning and finding new and innovative ways in which to do that. The second priority expressed by the majority of the NPOs in the survey was the safety of, and communication with, the employees of the organisation. Funding was least important since these NPOs believe that they have the funding reserves to continue in the short to medium term, from between three months to a year with their current contracts, and that while funding will become an issue in the long term, they are working on putting strategies into place that will allow them to continue operating.

On the other hand, some NPOs that participated in the survey have been forced to shut down their organisations and are unable to continue operating, for various reasons which include a lack of technology to communicate with employees, stakeholders and beneficiaries. Some cited insufficient



funds to acquire more computers or software, the cost of data and uncertainty as reasons for their closure. For these NPOs, retrenchment of staff is a reality.

Where NPOs have made concerted efforts to maintain operations, this has usually required significant changes, for which some were more prepared than others (i.e. in terms of tech-readiness). The need for collaboration and partnerships between the government and the education sector has been recognised and shared with government.

In order to transform the system and “Build Back Better”<sup>17</sup> we need to sustain this commitment to collaboration amongst education NPOs. This collaboration indicates a willingness to coherently and equitably contribute to improved access to quality education during this time of COVID-19, to “coordinate the collective contribution of NPOs in education to support and guide decision-making by government and our counterparts as part of the national preventative process to minimise the impact of COVID-19” (NASCEE, 2020). Collaboration also offers value in sharing not just “what” is being done, but also “how” it is to be done, which often requires a commitment to reflecting on and being vulnerable with process (for example, by sharing not only the content created for online learning, but also the process whereby meaningful learning is sustained via the electronic medium).

As we move from the current reality to a future education system that has not only survived, but even evolved into an improved state, NPOs have highlighted their ability to remain resilient, innovative and agile by working towards:

- Increased advocacy.
- Retaining some elements of remote working.
- A commitment to digital and online learning.
- Embracing technology for operations and communications.
- Increasing the use of social media use and access.
- Improving parent engagement, communication and support.
- Maintaining community partnerships and collaborative engagement with the education sector.
- Enhancing self-directed/independent learning skills and confidence.
- Collaboration with government.
- Funding strategies.

However, digitizing education will broaden the wealth gap globally if technology (including hardware, stable and reliable internet connectivity and the training to utilise it) is not made available to the most vulnerable. Those learners who have access to these resources have been able to continue their learning and will continue to have an advantage in a post-COVID-19 world because of this access. Those who

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<sup>17</sup> As presented by Godwin Khosa at the NECT DBE webinar, 22 April 2020.



currently do not are unlikely to soon – especially if their parents are facing unemployment. The pandemic has thus highlighted the economic divide within communities and the lack of resources to use technology to continue teaching and learning.

When we review the responses in other countries, organisational resilience within education NPOs is illustrated in the form of 1) directing efforts away from forms of fundraising where success is improbable, and toward strategies to tighten spending, manage expectations daily and give clear, consistent and transparent communication to employees and volunteers; 2) tapping into the insight and resources of robust networks and partnerships; and 3) deliberate and explicit efforts to care for the individual needs and social emotional well-being of staff and volunteers.

This study of the responses of education NPOs amid a global crisis highlights the vulnerability of a donation-based business model, as individual donors are forced to re-evaluate their budgets and private companies are forced to prioritise the survival of the organisation over social impact. The greatest expressed need of the education NPOs outside of South Africa, which were examined here, is financial. Larger NPOs, and especially those belonging to an international network, are taking on an advocacy role in addition to their core mission, in order to ensure that ordinarily disadvantaged beneficiaries aren't further neglected by governments, policymakers and the public.

Finally, education NPOs work with the underserved and consequently are attempting to work with learners, teachers and parents experiencing some of the worst social and economic consequences of COVID-19. Many governments are liaising with large, well-connected or technical education NPOs to implement interventions nationally. In South Africa the dialogue that has been initiated by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) in response to COVID-19 must be seen as an opportunity to strengthen relationships and enhance the success of all endeavours.

## 6. Recommendations

1. Education NPOs play a vital role in the education system of South Africa by providing critical resources, finances and educational support to disadvantaged communities. The world is currently facing a catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic and it is of utmost importance to recognise that while some education NPOs have remained resilient and adapted to the crisis, many have not. For education NPOs to survive, **organisational agility** is necessary. New strategies and approaches need to be adopted, and funders and the public need to be made aware of these if they are to take advantage of them. It is also worthwhile exploring partnerships with other NPOs through a mentoring process.
2. **Closer collaboration between NPOs and government** is required to ensure education gaps are addressed systemically in the short and long term. The innovation required to respond to the challenges of an unprecedented time can be co-developed, shared and improved on to scale up



effective strategies for greater collective impact. Working together, both parties can Build Back Better.

3. **Closer collaboration between NPOs**, nationally and internationally, proves to be a method to mitigate the destructive effects of a crisis like COVID-19. Such partnerships and community provide access to scarce resources, to financial support, and to information leading to strengthened strategies and agility.
4. The need for **better prepared leadership** of NPOs for crisis situations cannot be overemphasised. CEOs and directors must have contingency plans in place, especially on how they communicate with their governance structures as well as how they will support and provide guidance to their staff at short notice. Therefore, looking *inwards* at the structure and preparedness of their organisations to respond, as well as *outwards* to ensure that all stakeholders and beneficiaries are well informed of the organisation's actions, policies and strategies will contribute to the sustainability of the NPO.
5. For NPOs to remain functional during this pandemic, **funding strategies** to sustain the organisation through the lockdown period are essential. Unless this factor is sufficiently addressed, the organisation may be driven to institute retrenchments of much needed and skilled staff and be at risk of permanently shutting down. In this regard closer collaboration with the Independent Philanthropy Association of South Africa (IPASA) and other funding associations such as the International Education Funders Group (IEFG) and the African Venture Philanthropy Alliance (AVPA), drawing on the NASCEE Guidelines for Unrestricted Grants and the NASCEE National Compact, to protect the sustainability of NGOs during this period must be adopted.
6. The steps taken to address the realities of lockdown, such as remote learning, must not be allowed to further exacerbate the inequalities in our country. **Strategies for inclusiveness** to address inequalities in the distribution of hardware, training and connectivity must be put in place.
7. Both government and businesses must **consider strategies to address data costs**, particularly for educational purposes (i.e. online learning). NPOs recommend that mobile operators zero-rate educational sites and NPO portals, that digital learner platforms are developed with minimal data usage, and that more concerted efforts are made to develop or provide free education resources.
8. Public and private funders, including the government, are called upon to **expand new and existing grants and funding windows** to include and make available unrestricted components that can specifically be utilised by NPOs for expenses directly related to COVID-19 preventative measures, loss of income and, in many cases, increased costs.



9. With an eye on the future, NPOs in education need to use this pandemic to **assess their core business and operations** and investigate how they can automate some of their services in order to better navigate the “new normal.”
10. The findings of this study should be further built upon and utilised in order to understand the **long-term impact** on and/or responses from NPOs and stakeholders within the education field.
11. **Further research** on those NPOs that indicated that they had completely shut down their operations is highly recommended. It is envisaged that the rationale and duration of their shutdown will shed light on the broader consequences of lockdowns. Other issues worth researching include how NPOs are adjusting to the phased or staggered reopening of the economy; and what lessons might be gleaned from those NPOs that, notwithstanding limited funding, found new ways to continue operations. In other words, this study should be seen as the start of a new conversation.



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# Annexure 1: Survey Questions

## Identifying Particulars

1. Name of organisation

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2. Type of Service Provider

Learner Support	Teaching & learning	School support	Policy	Financing	Advocacy	Research	Other
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3. What was your organisation's total income for the financial year 2018/19?

R0 or loss-making	Less than R500 000	R500 000 - R2 000 000	R2 000 001 - R5 000 000	R5 000 001 - R20 000 000	More than R20 000 000
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4. Primary Objective of your organisation and end beneficiary/target audience

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## Crisis Response



5. a) How has the **current lockdown** in response to the Covid-19 crisis affected the daily operations of your organisation?

Not at all	Minimal effect, still in operation with some minor changes	Partial effect, some activities shut down or changed	Substantial effect, near all activities significantly affected	Complete shutdown
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b) If you selected one of the first four responses to 5a, how long do you think you can/will continue that response if current lockdown conditions are extended?

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6. a) What impact has the crisis had on the financial strategy of your organisation?

None yet	Loss of income but able to continue operations	Significant income loss leading to staff layoffs, reduced staff/wage time, inability to pay suppliers, etc.
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b) What, if any, strategies are you implementing to overcome the negative impact?

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c) As an NPO, do you have endowment, grants and other financial support for the next:

3-6 months	6-12 months	12-18 months	Over 18 months	None at all
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d) Have you applied for emergency/ additional funding, grants or other financial support?

Yes with success	Yes, not confirmed	Yes but declined	Not sure about the process	No
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7. Changes made as a response to the COVID-19 crisis may include a) internal operations and leadership b) funding and stakeholder engagement and c) delivery to beneficiary/ target group. Please arrange these changes according to priority order within your NPO.

<p>Priority Engagement 1:</p> <p><i>(Drop-down select of a, b, c or other)* If they select other, this should give them the option to further elaborate</i></p>	<p>Priority Engagement 2:</p> <p><i>(Drop-down select of a, b, c or other)</i></p>	<p>Priority Engagement 3:</p> <p><i>(Drop-down select of a, b, c or other)</i></p>
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8. How has your/the head of the organisation's leadership style changed in this time of crisis?

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9. a) How, if at all, has technology enabled the changes you are making during this time?

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b) Please indicate via the boxes below whether your organisation experienced / is experiencing difficulties in any of these tech-related areas? (more than one may be selected).



Team's level of readiness and comfort using technology	Beneficiaries' level of readiness and comfort using technology	Team's access to reliable connectivity	Beneficiaries' access to reliable connectivity and data
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10. Which one of the key changes made by your NPO during this time do you think you are likely to keep going forward and why?

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11. In trying to make the above changes in response to the crisis, did you as an NPO experience any of the following hurdles? Please tick the box(es) that apply.

Funding constraints	Procedure constraints	Stakeholder constraints	Resource Constraints	Legislative constraints	Technological constraints
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12. Please provide a brief explanation for the box/es you have ticked in question 11.

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### Sector Changes

13. What is, in your opinion, the most glaring gap/change in the education sector, as made apparent by this present crisis?

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14. What policy and/or NPO responses, if any, would you propose based on the gaps/changes



identified?

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**Closing Questions**

15. Is there anything you wish to add that you feel has not been covered?



## Annexure 2: Interview Questions – NPOs from other countries

### Particulars

1) What is the mission of your organization?

2) Who do you aim to serve and what type of service do you provide?

### Crisis Response

3) What operative challenges have you faced as an organization since the national lock down?

a) Funding? Donor Attention?

b) Remote work?

c) Organizational challenges?

d) Communication?

e) Technological?

f) Accessing learners?

g) Monitoring & Evaluating performance?

e) Leadership?

*b) Which of these was of highest importance and which were least significant?*

4) What actions have you taken to diminish harmful effects or boost positive effects?



5) Do any of these actions/changes require the incorporation of technology?

6) Has your organization's crisis response required a change in leadership style or the incorporation of change management frameworks? If so, please elaborate.

7) What are your biggest needs during this crisis? Post-crisis? If financial, how do you plan to amend your strategy?

8) Which platforms are you employing to get help? Have you been successful?

9) Have you considered collaborating with other organizations in your ecosystem to overcome some of your challenges? If so, how was the response?

### **Sector Changes**

10) Do you feel education practitioners and policymakers are well equipped to handle this situation? According to your observation, what have been the biggest successes and failures of the national and regional education system in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis?

### **Closing Questions**

11) What actions do you plan to take post-Covid-19 to strengthen your organization and services or to keep them afloat?

12) How has Covid-19 affected the lives of the individuals and communities you serve?

b) Have you adapted your service to suit new needs?

