

Reengineering education in a changing landscape

By [Kanyisa Diamond](#), issued by [Trialogue](#)

30 Jun 2020

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived on our shores earlier this year, Old Mutual's seven-year Education Flagship Project (OMEFP) had come to a close (in December 2019), and we were applying our minds to a new strategy for our CSI work in education. Because our funds were not yet committed to any specific programmes, we were in a position to be exceptionally responsive to the crisis and able to allocate the funds to much-needed Covid-19 relief efforts.



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When the president announced Level 5 lockdown, the Old Mutual Foundation engaged with some of the Provincial Departments of Education (PEDs), the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) and some of our colleagues to understand how the sector was responding to the crisis and how best to allocate the available funds. We are part of a group of companies contributing to the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Covid-19 Education Support Intervention Plan to help the DBE to reach more than 13 million pupils at home through integrated online and broadcast platforms such as TV and radio.

What was immediately apparent was that we were not willing to respond at the expense of existing contracts, putting them at risk. Instead, we asked our service providers to look closely at their projects and see how they could provide value during the crisis. Reviewing and restructuring certain activities

was essential and our service providers had to consider whether their projects would be manageable once schools resumed, particularly as teachers and learners are under significant pressure, and to manage funders' expectations for their projects.

How service providers have adapted

We saw our beneficiary organisations adapting quickly to a new reality. Many considered offering online programmes but had to think carefully about how this would work practically. Not all teachers are comfortable with technology and many learners do not have access to online digital resources.

One of the programmes that did adapt quickly was the Govan Mbeki Mathematics Development Centre (GMMDC) at Nelson Mandela University. Learners already had handheld devices containing content so there was no need for data and internet connectivity. The Centre did however respond quickly by providing learners with data so that they could continue their lessons via Zoom and WhatsApp. They engaged confidently with learners and tracked the use of content.

Clearly, this crisis will provide an opportunity for non-profits to reaffirm their commitment to the schooling system by streamlining their offering and ensuring they remain relevant. There is so much that the schools, districts, and provinces need to manage as learners gradually return to schools. Now more than ever, the sector will need cooperation and support from NGOs. Those who are able to should consider becoming 'thinking partners' with the districts, provinces and schools they have been working with, in order to reengineer education.

Go back to basics – but innovate and collaborate

With children in rural schools mostly unable to connect to the internet, we require innovative thinking for access. In Kenya, Google's Loon, in partnership with Telkom Kenya, has introduced internet-by-balloon for rural communities, which means expensive infrastructure might no longer be an impediment. This approach is something South Africa could consider in future. Closer to home, it has been suggested that petrol stations could be used to house servers and act as Wi-Fi hot spots

in rural areas since these garages are widespread, and it's an option one of our service providers is currently exploring.

Introducing technology in rural schools has always been a challenge and the pandemic has only heightened this. For online learning to work you need access to devices, data, and the internet, as well as parental support and the ability for learners to self-direct their learning. Designing content for online learning versus presenting in front of a class is also very different. Introducing virtual learning in under-resourced schools is a dual challenge because teachers not only need access to platforms and software, but their teaching methods will require skills capacitation.

Another important area is instructional leadership. Schools must communicate regularly and effectively with parent bodies and their learners, providing plans for each grade and guiding parents on how to support their children's learning while at home. Being a parent myself, I found that the support and constant communication I received from my children's schools was reassuring. I knew what I needed to support my children with on a daily basis, but I wondered whether the same was happening across the board. It will be necessary for all schools to put together databases of parent's phone numbers, for example, and update this regularly to keep the lines of communication open.

The SA School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) can store parent information, but are schools using the functionality? Are they in a position to access the data when they need it? Besides cell phones, what other platforms can be used, and are school websites dormant or active? The system was not ready for this shock. Now more than ever the teaching profession has an opportunity to take charge, and school leadership and teachers need to work together to direct their pupils' learning.

I also observed with interest how provinces differed in their response to the crisis. I would have expected to see a seamless reaction, given that they all work for the same department, but some were more agile and responsive than others. Each province was pulling in a different direction, and this was evident on the various online learning platforms. Some websites were zero-rated for data, and some were not. We need to strive for an education system that offers every learner in South Africa the same experience, regardless of their geographical location. If we cannot achieve that through bricks and mortar, we can at least begin to explore it through access to online learning opportunities of a consistent quality and accessible to all.

Key learnings for funders

- Given where we are, funders will need to think carefully about the kind of outcomes they expect from non-profit organisations. NPOs are closest to beneficiaries and we must be flexible to allow them to meet changing needs. We can't be stuck on what we expected from them before Covid-19, since the funds allocated to them may now be used best to help with other needs.
- When we needed to be highly responsive, we realised that our administrative processes were tedious, in terms of contracting and loading vendors onto our system. We had to adapt quickly, and I am sure most funders had similar experiences. It's worth asking whether the CSI application and funding processes needs to be simpler going forward, without contravening governance, compliance, and risk mitigation processes. We have learnt so much over the past few months and I hope that, as a sector, we will continue to reflect on these experiences to improve the responsiveness of the CSI community.

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