

A Capabilities Response to the Design and Delivery of Distance Learning for the Most Educationally Marginalized Children during COVID-19

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# A CAPABILITIES RESPONSE TO THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE MOST EDUCATIONALLY MARGINALIZED CHILDREN DURING COVID-19

KATE SYKES

## ABSTRACT

*The Transformational Empowerment for Adolescent Marginalised Girls in Malawi (TEAM) project provides complementary basic education to adolescents who have been left behind by the mainstream education system. Its students are primarily girls who face multiple intersecting barriers to learning, including disability, child marriage, motherhood, poverty, and harmful gender norms. Distance learning provided by the Government of Malawi during the COVID-19 pandemic relied on students proactively accessing centrally created lessons through technologies such as radio and the internet. In this field note, I argue that such an approach does not meet the needs of the most educationally marginalized children, who require holistic support to overcome barriers arising from their individual characteristics, available resources, and lived environment. I contrast the mainstream approach with the TEAM Girl Malawi response, which used a capabilities framework that led to three key innovations. First, a paper-based mode of delivery was complemented by in-person support from teachers. Second, the lesson content prioritized resilience and social-emotional skills as the foundation for learning, and teachers adapted a core curriculum to individual students' learning needs. Third, teachers' roles were expanded to include child protection and community engagement. I conclude this field note by identifying learning points based on students' experiences and learning outcomes, which demonstrate how future distance learning responses during a pandemic can be inclusive of all learners.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Malawi closed all schools in 2020 from the end of March through October, and again during January and February 2021. Like many COVID-19 responses around the world, the provision of government-led distance learning relied on students proactively accessing lessons that were provided through technologies such as radio and the internet. In this field note, I argue that such an approach does not meet the needs of the most educationally marginalized students, who frequently face multiple intersecting barriers to learning.

TEAM Girl Malawi provides complementary basic education (CBE) for six thousand of the most educationally marginalized young people who are out of school in three geographic districts in Malawi. The five-year project is funded by UK Aid, and the CBE is delivered by a partnership that includes Link Education International, Link Community Development Malawi, Theatre for a Change, CUMO Microfinance, Supreme Sanitary Pads, and CGA Technologies.

TEAM Girl Malawi is framed within Sen's (1985, 1992) capability approach, whereby a combination of individual characteristics, access to resources, and the lived environment interact to affect a person's opportunity to do and become all that they have reason to value (Mitra 2006)—in this case, to be educated. The capability framework influenced the design of TEAM Girl Malawi's distance learning response, which offers three key elements that the government's offer does not. First, a paper-based mode of delivery is complemented by in-person support from teachers. Second, the lesson content prioritizes resilience and social-emotional skills as the foundation for learning, and teachers adapt a core curriculum to individual learning needs. Third, teachers' roles are expanded to include child protection and community engagement.

## THE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Sen's (1985, 1992) capability approach is a framework for understanding human welfare as the freedom to live a life one has reason to value. Sen distinguishes between "functionings," which are being and doing particular things, and the capability to achieve these functionings. TEAM aims to provide participants with the capability to achieve the "functioning" of being educated. For an inclusive education project, a capability approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of barriers to education than a human capital approach, which

A CAPABILITIES RESPONSE TO THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY  
OF DISTANCE LEARNING

limits understanding of education to its economic ends, and can therefore reinforce gender and disability inequalities (Robeyns 2006; Drèze and Sen 2002; Nussbaum 2000), or a human rights approach, which assumes that equal treatment or the provision of inputs such as books, desks, and pencils will lead to equal outcomes for all (McCowan 2011; Robeyns 2006; Unterhalter 2003). TEAM draws from Mitra's (2006) definition of disability within a capability framework, which maps out the ways in which capabilities are derived from a combination of individual characteristics (e.g., impairment, race, age, gender), resources, and environment (physical, social, economic, political).

**EDUCATIONAL MARGINALIZATION AND THE  
TEAM CAPABILITY APPROACH**

Complementary basic education is community-based, accelerated learning for out-of-school children and youth. In Malawi, the government delivers some CBE and authorizes nongovernmental partners, including TEAM, to extend delivery to specific geographic areas or populations. The government's CBE program is aimed at 9- to 13-year-olds who have dropped out of school, whereas TEAM targets the most marginalized adolescents (ages 10-19) who have never been to school, or who dropped out without gaining functional literacy and numeracy.

The project uses a capability framework to consider how learners' individual characteristics, available resources, and lived environment interact to enable or constrain their learning. The majority of these learners are girls; all are experiencing poverty, 32 percent are orphans, 17 percent have children, 13 percent are married, and 13 percent have a disability. TEAM recognizes that the intersection of these characteristics and barriers increases marginalization. About three in five of the girls who reported bullying as a barrier to education had a functional disability, and 61 percent of those who reported a lack of parental support as a barrier were responsible for doing household chores for six or more hours each day (Reeves et al. 2020).

Before the COVID-19 school closures, TEAM students attended CBE learning centers part-time; the learners and local community arranged the hours classes were held. With the government's support, TEAM adapted its CBE curriculum to ensure that the topics and content were relevant to the learners' ages and life experiences, including their lack of previous schooling. TEAM students also participated in a girls club run by volunteer primary school teachers, where they learned about sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Before the pandemic, students were taught at a learning center in groups of 60, with four teaching staff. The pupil-teacher ratio was 15:1, as compared to the government's CBE ratio of 40:1. In keeping with the government model, teaching was delivered by facilitators, who were high school graduates selected for their good standing in the community and their passion for supporting marginalized young people. The facilitators attended a 14-day residential training on the CBE curriculum, various disability models, how to understand the learners enrolled in CBE and the marginalization they face, and techniques for adapting teaching to be inclusive of all learners. They learned to use local materials to produce additional teaching resources that were based on their students' needs. The TEAM staff provided continuous professional development through lesson observations and feedback, and at end of term meetings, where the facilitators gathered to discuss their challenges and areas needing improvement.

TEAM also strengthened community-based child-protection systems and used interactive radio and drama productions to build community support for the rights of marginalized young people. TEAM provided food packages to all learners, and piloted a training for parents and guardians in which they gained new skills to help reduce family poverty.

### **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE MOST EDUCATIONALLY MARGINALIZED**

In 2020, the CBE centers in Malawi were closed, along with the schools, from late March through October. Prolonged school closures such as this increase the likelihood that the most vulnerable learners will permanently drop out of school (Asim, Carvalho, and Gera 2020). One-third of Malawi's rural workers were unable to continue with their usual economic activities during the shutdown period, and 8 percent of farmers had to delay the harvest (Moylan and Fuje 2020), which increased poverty and food insecurity for the families of learners who were already among the most vulnerable. In some instances, TEAM students were pressured to get married, due to the increased amount of time spent at home and the pressure on the family income created by the pandemic. There also was a risk that some of the learners would become pregnant (Davies 2021), which would affect their ability to attend or focus on their education when the learning centers reopened. In addition, missed time in class led to the fear that learners would not manage to complete the curriculum and graduate from CBE, and then not be able to move on as planned to further education or vocational training. Finally, there were increased concerns about child protection, which

stemmed from the negative effect the pandemic and associated lockdowns would have on adolescents' mental health, the increased risk of domestic violence due to family stress, enforced proximity to potential abusers, and a lack of contact with protection systems (Girls' Education Challenge 2020).

## **DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE MOST MARGINALIZED**

In April 2020, the Government of Malawi and a range of nongovernmental partners collaborated on developing the country's first Education Cluster COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. The first objective of this plan was "to ensure continuity of teaching and learning for all children including those with disabilities and special education needs while schools are closed due to the COVID-19" (Government of Malawi 2020). However, while CBE is part of the government's basic education provision, the plan did not specifically refer to CBE.

The revised National COVID-19 Preparedness Response Strategy and Plan July 2021-June 2022 (Government of Malawi 2021) included a single reference to CBE relative to decongesting classrooms, but none to distance learning. While the government focused on distance education for mainstream students during the school closures, any such provision for CBE students was left to independent nongovernmental projects. This meant that resources were slow to appear, and they varied in availability and quality.

In order to inform adaptations to the project, TEAM Girl Malawi conducted a rapid assessment in June 2020 of learners' access to technology, their preferred methods for continuing to engage with learning, their available time and parental support, and any risks they faced, such as gender-based violence, child marriage, and anxiety. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the survey was conducted with the 287 learners who had mobile phone access, who represented only 12 percent of the project participants. Although all participants are classed as experiencing poverty, TEAM Girl Malawi assumed that the respondents represented those with the highest level of household income in the project and who therefore had better access to learning resources and a lower risk of child abuse related to economic stress (Girls' Education Challenge 2020).

The findings of the rapid assessment, which accounted for the above assumptions, were used to shape the project adaptations within the capability framework. This resulted in three key innovations that differed from the government's provision of distance learning.

**A paper-based mode of delivery is complemented by in-person support from teachers.** As outlined above, the government's provision of distance learning focused on students enrolled in mainstream schools. The first Education Cluster COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan included plans to "review and adapt learning content of education programmes for radio and self-study (including online versions) for ECD [early childhood development], primary and secondary to ensure they meet diverse needs of learners" (Government of Malawi 2020). No specific provision was made for CBE, so an important opportunity to reach the most marginalized learners was missed. Facilitators in the government-funded CBE program were encouraged to help the CBE learners listen to the primary school radio lessons in the areas where they were broadcast, but the program did not align with the CBE curriculum. Care Malawi, a nongovernmental organization, produced radio programs on the CBE curriculum that were broadcast in the limited areas where the organization works.

Another action in the plan was to "promote home learning for all children including girls and children with disabilities and special education needs" (Government of Malawi 2020). This was done by messaging via mass media, phone, and interpersonal communications. These messages emphasized the role of children who, with their parents' support, were guided to proactively access the radio programs. The plan recognized the lack of connectivity (i.e., internet and radio access) in some parts of Malawi, which reflects the experience of about one-third of the world's children (UNICEF 2020). Moreover, a July 2020 U-Report poll in Malawi found that 64 percent of households with school-age children had not accessed the radio programs.<sup>1</sup> The government plan also included "capacity building of teachers...to support home learning for all children including those with special education needs" (U-Report 2020), but this was not implemented during the school closure period.

TEAM participants' access to technologies for distance learning was low. Of those surveyed by TEAM, 44 percent had access to radio (the rate was lower for girls and in rural areas), and 31 percent had access to the internet. The project assumed that access to the internet and radio was lower among the 88 percent of participants without mobile phones who were not included in the survey.

TEAM therefore adapted paper-based CBE and the girls club learning materials for self-guided study, which was complemented by limited face-to-face teaching by the facilitators. Learners were put into groups of five and given guidance on self-study and socially distanced peer support, and they met weekly with the facilitators, each

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1 U-Report is a social messaging tool and data-collection system developed by UNICEF to improve citizen engagement, inform leaders, and foster positive change.

of whom was responsible for three small groups. In-person teaching was achieved as safely as possible with social distancing, masks, additional handwashing facilities, and extra staff training in keeping with government guidelines. These sanitation materials were also accessible via the government's CBE. Similar small group meetings would have been possible in mainstream schools, although they would have been more labor intensive, due to the higher pupil-teacher ratio. At the time, this was not possible in the schools, as the teachers unions were in a dispute with the government over additional risk pay, even when additional sanitation materials were provided. This reflects a long-running tension between the government and teachers over remuneration.

**Lesson content prioritizes resilience and social-emotional skills as the foundation for learning, and teachers adapt a core curriculum to individual learning needs.** Twenty-one percent of the rapid assessment respondents reported feeling more anxious and stressed while the learning centers were closed. The TEAM staff understands that resilience and social-emotional skills are an essential foundation for effective learning, and they worked to emphasize this in two ways. First, the small group girls club sessions included activities to support learners' resilience during times of stress, along with practical knowledge of COVID-19 prevention. Drama activities helped learners identify and express their emotions, share how COVID-19 and the learning center closures affected their lives, deal with challenges, and develop strategies to support one another.

Second, the facilitators continued to employ an inclusive education pedagogy in the CBE classrooms. Rather than taking a standardized approach to teaching learners who have specific challenges, the facilitators are problem-solvers who address the multiple barriers faced by their students. This approach enables a girl who is working to support the family, has a young child, and has a hearing impairment to attend lessons or study at home at a time that accommodates her work schedule; to attend a learning center that has day care for her child; and to receive lessons from a facilitator who uses additional visual communication to ensure that she can access the curriculum. The facilitators also meet regularly with learners who have disabilities and their parents to discuss how best to support them, and to develop an individual education plan if necessary.

During distance learning, students completed a weekly learning journal. They discussed their journals with the facilitators, who were then able to provide individualized support as needed, such as spending more time on specific topics or creating additional learning resources. The facilitators continued to use the project guidance on adapting teaching to accommodate various disabilities, and to receive



support via a WhatsApp “helpdesk” staffed by the project. The Midline Evaluation (DaSilva and Murray 2022) found that 80 percent of the facilitators sampled reported using at least one type of inclusive pedagogy, such as participatory teaching methods, activities for different learning styles, or differentiated teaching.

This focus on social-emotional skills and adaptability contrasts with the government-led mainstream responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which relied on all students being able to access the same centrally created internet and radio lessons. While the government and parents recognized the challenges the students with disabilities would face in accessing content, disabled people’s organizations, such as the Malawi Union of the Blind (2020), criticized the lack of accessible content.

**Teachers’ roles were expanded to include child protection and community engagement.** The increased risks to child safety experienced globally during the school closures have been widely recognized (Minardi, Hares, and Crawford 2020). The TEAM rapid assessment noted that learners perceived an increase in the risk of sexual (8%) and domestic (6%) violence and marriage requests (7%) during the initial period of school closures, as well as the need to engage in paid work (11%). In May 2020, the project received a significant increase in safeguarding reports, including child marriage and pregnancy.

Roles and responsibilities for child protection are broadly distributed in Malawi, including statutory bodies, community groups, and traditional authorities. The government and many nongovernmental partners, including TEAM, are working to increase awareness among parents and the general population of children’s rights and the responsibility to protect them. The government’s first preparedness and response plan states as a priority the “community mobilisation of parents and guardians...[for] addressing violence against children at home” (Government of Malawi 2020). However, sharing these responsibilities widely risks a lack of clarity about who is ultimately responsible for identifying and addressing child abuse.

The loss of the schools as a place where trusted adults would be able to check on children’s welfare on a near-daily basis was detrimental to child protection during the school closures. Recognizing that a facilitator would be the only trusted adult to see most learners on a regular basis, TEAM increased the facilitators’ training via WhatsApp. They also expanded their responsibilities to include being a main point of contact and support for learners with child-protection concerns. In order to ensure that the most vulnerable would stay enrolled and continue

A CAPABILITIES RESPONSE TO THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY  
OF DISTANCE LEARNING

to learn, this was extended to include following up at home when learners were absent and advocating for learners whose family's priorities had shifted during COVID-19. The Midline Evaluation (DaSilva and Murray 2022, 53) noted that "improving child protection is where community members have most clearly felt the project's impact."

The adjustment to teaching approaches enabled the facilitators to fulfill these additional safeguarding roles. Their stipends were maintained throughout this period, which was a strong motivation, as many people lost their income during lockdown.

## IMPACT OF THE TEAM DISTANCE LEARNING APPROACH

### ACCESS

The average attendance rate recorded by the TEAM project during the distance learning period was 57 percent, compared to 60 percent before the school closures. Girls noted that their continued attendance was due to having take-home work to practice learning outside of lessons (48.6%); teachers' accommodation of learners who needed extra support (39.6%); the flexible location of CBE and girls clubs (36.3%); having small groups and study circles during the COVID-19 closures (35.6%); and the flexible timing of CBE and the girls clubs (29.7%) (DaSilva and Murray 2022).

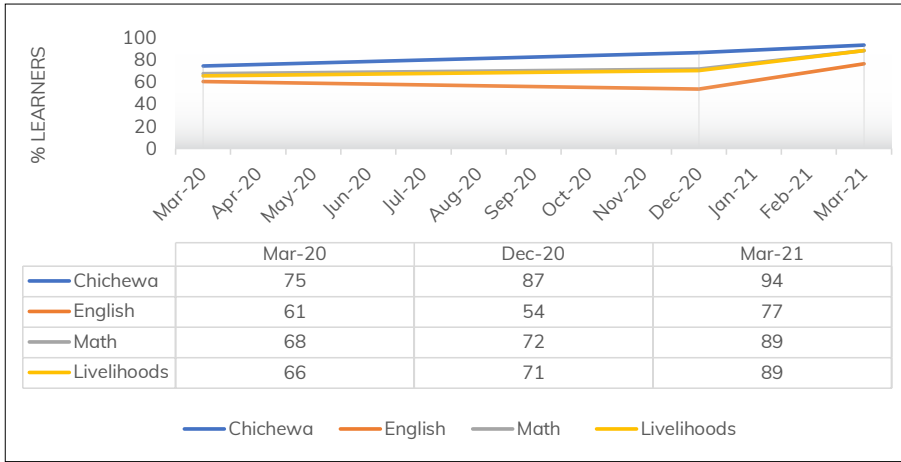
### LEARNING

To assess whether learners are performing "very well" (score over 60%), "fairly well" (40%-60%), or "struggling to cope" (under 40%), TEAM uses their performance on end-of-term tests. Between March 2020, just before the learning centers closed, and December 2020, the end of the distance learning period, the percentage of students performing "fairly well" or "very well" increased slightly in Chichewa (a Bantu language spoken in Malawi), math, and livelihoods and dropped slightly in English.<sup>2</sup> Scores in all subjects improved further between December 2020 and March 2021, when there was a return to larger group teaching and another four-week shutdown in January-February 2021, when distance learning resumed (see Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> "Livelihoods" classes teach a combination of agriculture, home economics/domestic science, and income generation.

Figure 1: Number of Learners Performing “Fairly Well” or “Very Well” on End-of-Term Tests



The Midline Evaluation conducted in July 2020 with learners who were enrolled in the TEAM CBE program during the distance learning period supports the improvement trend, as 88 percent of the girls improved their score in literacy and 86 percent in numeracy between baseline and endline.

Link conducted a tracer study by phone in October 2020 with a random sample of 18 boys and 90 girls who had participated in the original rapid assessment. Of those responding, 94 percent felt that the content covered by the girls clubs was “very useful” or “somewhat useful,” and they provided examples of having applied the knowledge gained there on contraceptives, emotional wellbeing, and COVID-19 prevention. One stated, “Now I do things without fear and with confidence and focus.” While this sample is not representative of the wider cohort, the Midline Evaluation also recorded improved life-skills scores, which are taught through the girls clubs, for 83 percent of girls.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES AND BEYOND

The TEAM experience demonstrates that, to ensure that the most marginalized learners are not left behind, whether during an emergency response or in “normal” times, education planners must consider how learners’ individual characteristics, access to resources, and lived environment interact to affect their capability to engage with distance learning. For the most marginalized learners who are living in extreme poverty and in remote locations, face-to-face teaching delivered in a

## A CAPABILITIES RESPONSE TO THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY OF DISTANCE LEARNING

safe way during a pandemic is the only method that guarantees their continued learning. This becomes even more important for learners who face multiple barriers and need a flexible approach to the curriculum content and pedagogy, which can only be provided by teachers who can adapt to the learners' individual needs. Integrating social-emotional content with academic learning is another essential aspect of supporting the students who experience the most challenges to continued learning, especially during times of increased stress. Finally, integrating child protection into teachers' roles provides young people with continued access to a trusted adult, which helps prevent dropout for reasons of child marriage, pregnancy, and child labor.

In order to achieve these measures, governments responding to school closures should enable teachers to fulfill their students' needs by providing additional training, support, safety equipment, and teaching resources. The Government of Malawi's investment in distance learning focused on radio rather than print materials, which excluded many of the most marginalized. TEAM's focus on the individual learner would be more challenging in government CBE and primary schools, where the pupil-teacher ratio is higher, but it could be achieved if the school staff members were adequately motivated and supported. The Malawi government was able to provide safety and sanitation equipment to facilitate safe face-to-face teaching, but this was undermined by the remuneration dispute with teachers. A capability perspective suggests that investing in teachers, rather than in distance learning approaches that use technology, offers the best value for the money in terms of the number of learners who will be reached, and in ensuring that no one is left behind.

### **DISCLOSURES**

The author is employed by Link Education International, the lead partner on the TEAM Girl Malawi project.

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A CAPABILITIES RESPONSE TO THE DESIGN AND DELIVERY  
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