

# INVESTMENT MONITOR

## SDG focus: Covid-19's education opportunities

**The fourth UN SDG – based around education for all – appeared to be set back by the Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures, but advancements in remote learning in this time could work in its favour.**

By Sofia Karadima 11 Dec 2020



*The Covid-19 pandemic has added to what was already a difficult education environment in regions such as Africa, making achieving SDG4 all the more challenging. Can FDI help get the goal back on track? (Photo by Amanuel Sileshi/AFP via Getty Images)*

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has presented the education sector with both challenges and opportunities. Widespread school closures across much of the world to reduce the spread of the virus brought about a revolution in remote learning, but saw those with limited or no online access left even further behind. This poses a threat to achieving the fourth of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – “To ensure inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” – by the deadline of 2030.

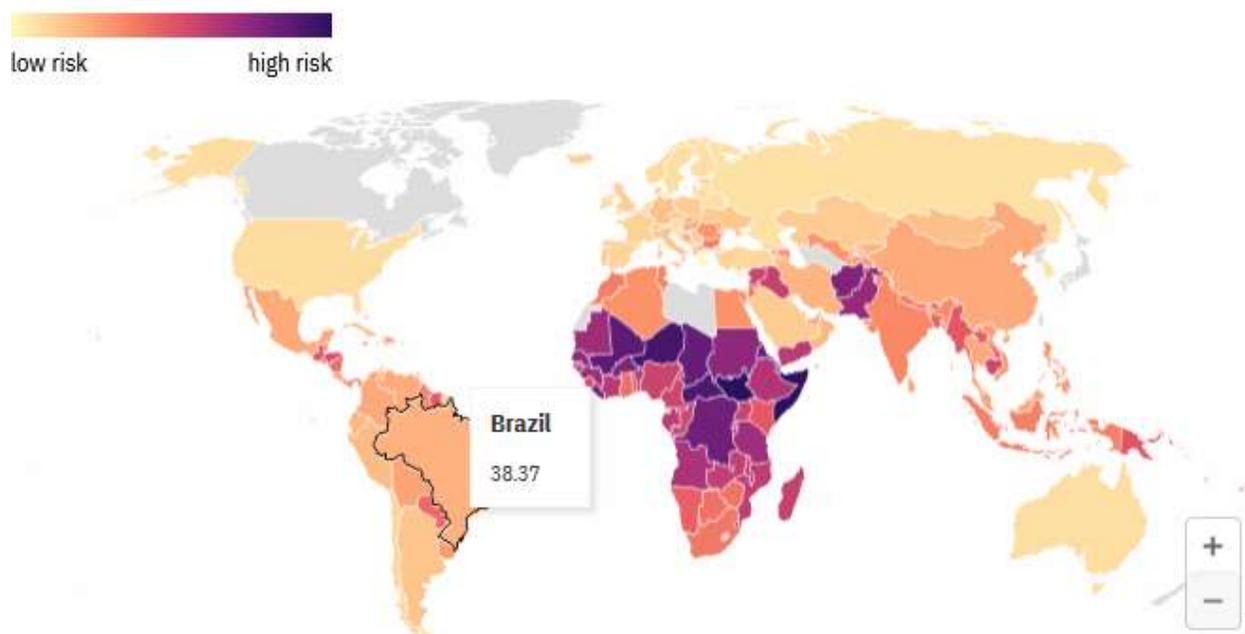
“The pandemic has shut down school systems across the world and moved everyone online,” says Ashwin Assomull, a partner at LEK Consulting who is responsible for advising investors on education matters. “As a result, a lot of the quality of education has been lost... This doesn't apply only to the poorest parts of the world but also to developed countries, where both public and

private schools closed down. Thus, we see that the access to and the quality of education has been impacted, and these are very important indicators for SDG4.”

However, Covid-19 and school closures are not the only factors threatening the achievement of SDG4 by the 2030 deadline. According to the UN: “Before the coronavirus crisis, the proportion of children and youth out of primary and secondary school had declined from 26% in 2000 to 19% in 2010 and 17% in 2018. Despite some progress, 258 million children and youth were still out of school in 2018, of which three-quarters lived in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia.”

## Education risk index 2020

Scores based on rate of children out of school, expected years of school, tertiary enrolment rates and lower secondary completion rates



Source: Investment Monitor based on World Bank and Unicef

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As the above map shows, Africa is the global region facing the biggest issues when it comes to education. Africa scores highly in terms of education risks, based on indicators such as such as children out of school, expected years of schooling, tertiary enrolment, and completion rate of lower secondary education.

### Will technology rescue SDG4?

While regions such as Africa appear to be some way off meeting the SDG4 2030 deadline, ‘ensuring inclusive and equitable education’ is a challenge faced across the globe. So what role

can technology play as a game changer given how it can offer people remote access to high-quality education, especially in developing countries, even during lockdowns?

“Tech tools are enablers of learning and have the capacity to democratise learning,” says Viyon Dansu, an education programme manager at talent hub Access Drive and PhD candidate of engineering education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. “This has been witnessed in developing countries such as Nigeria where the government engaged children using different media, including television, social media and other tech tools, during the lockdown. It can be argued that if these forms of media are strengthened and effectively deployed, it can [help the world in meeting the SDG4] by 2030.”

Educational technology, or edtech, is widely expected to attract a lot of interest from investors in the coming years. Indeed, Vikas Pota, founder of T4 Education, a trust that specialises in meeting the educational needs of the hard to reach, says that there exists a strong opportunity for high-quality technical development in education, and edtech has a role to play in this. He adds that there is considerable appetite among venture capitalists for edtech, particularly in heavily populated countries such as the US, China, and India.

### **The role of FDI in achieving SDG4**

This begs the question: what role can foreign direct investment (FDI) play in helping the world achieve SDG4 by 2030? Dansu says: “FDI can support the achievement of SDG4 by partnering with the many start-ups in developing countries who are at the forefront of helping students to learn, even during the lockdown. FDI can also invest in virtual learning tools, capacity development for teachers, and driving global partnerships that seek not just to provide education for all, but also to deepen quality of that education by embedding the skills needed in the 21st century into today’s curriculum.”

Assomull adds that investors in education are seeking clarity on regulations within the sector, so they know what governments will and will not allow in terms of licensing.

The lockdown has not only affected children and younger adults in education, but also those in need of workforce training, particularly in fields where staff have been displaced such as healthcare, logistics, agriculture, food and beverage supply chains, transportation and environmental management.

John Boyd, principal at location consultancy Boyd Company, says that this presents opportunities for new relationships between the private sector and governments to invest in workforce training programmes or re-entry programmes, particularly in the key science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines.

He adds a “social impact” is playing an increasing role in the private sector and its investment decisions. Governments, businesses and the public want to feel that beyond the jobs and capital investment directly related to a project, some public good will also result.

“This is a major reason why the academic sector is playing an increasing role in the economic development process,” says Boyd. “Above and beyond a university or community college’s role in linking the employer to skill sets and qualified job applicants, the academic community becomes a vehicle for companies to help implement educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. In 2020, we saw Austin in Texas approve a huge tax break for Tesla, and a big selling point for Tesla in its negotiations was the commitment to partner with Huston-Tillotson University, a historically black college.”

## **The role of telecoms in delivering education for all**

FDI is a key factor in achieving SDG4. However, beyond providing the actual education, there is a need for telecommunications-related FDI in developing countries to bring the education to those learning remotely. Poorer areas around the globe need reliable and affordable internet access, but the infrastructure to provide this is often lacking. This leaves many children unable to complete their studies, particularly in circumstances such as the Covid-19 lockdowns.

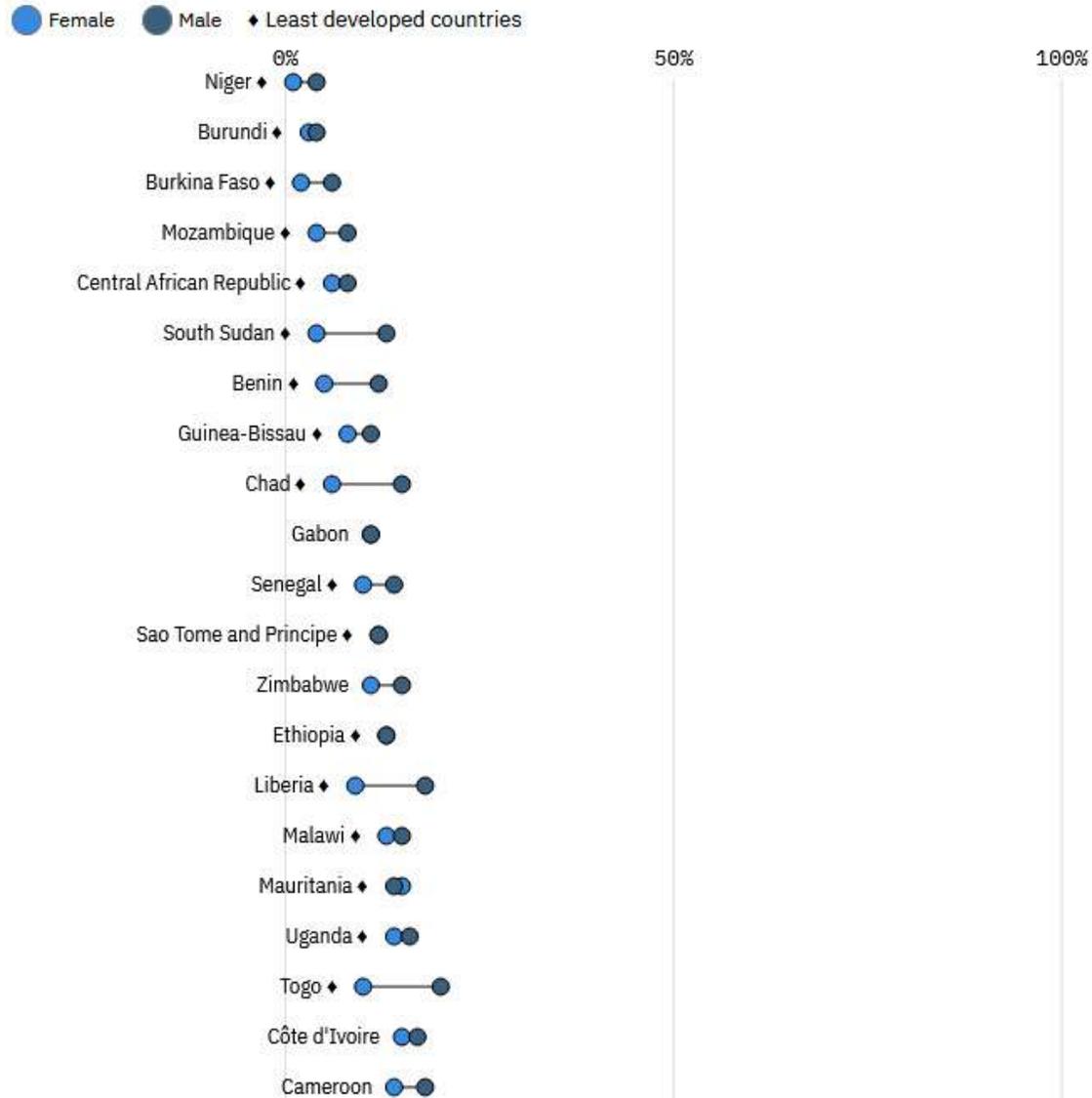
“Covid-19 has had an outsized impact on vulnerable populations, including girls, refugees, and students with disabilities,” says Amel Karbour of Unicef’s Education Outcomes Fund. “Girls are at particular risk of not returning to the classroom, as recent epidemics, such as the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, have shown. We must be particularly mindful to ensure that Covid-19 isn’t exacerbating inequalities in education access and attainment that predated the pandemic.”

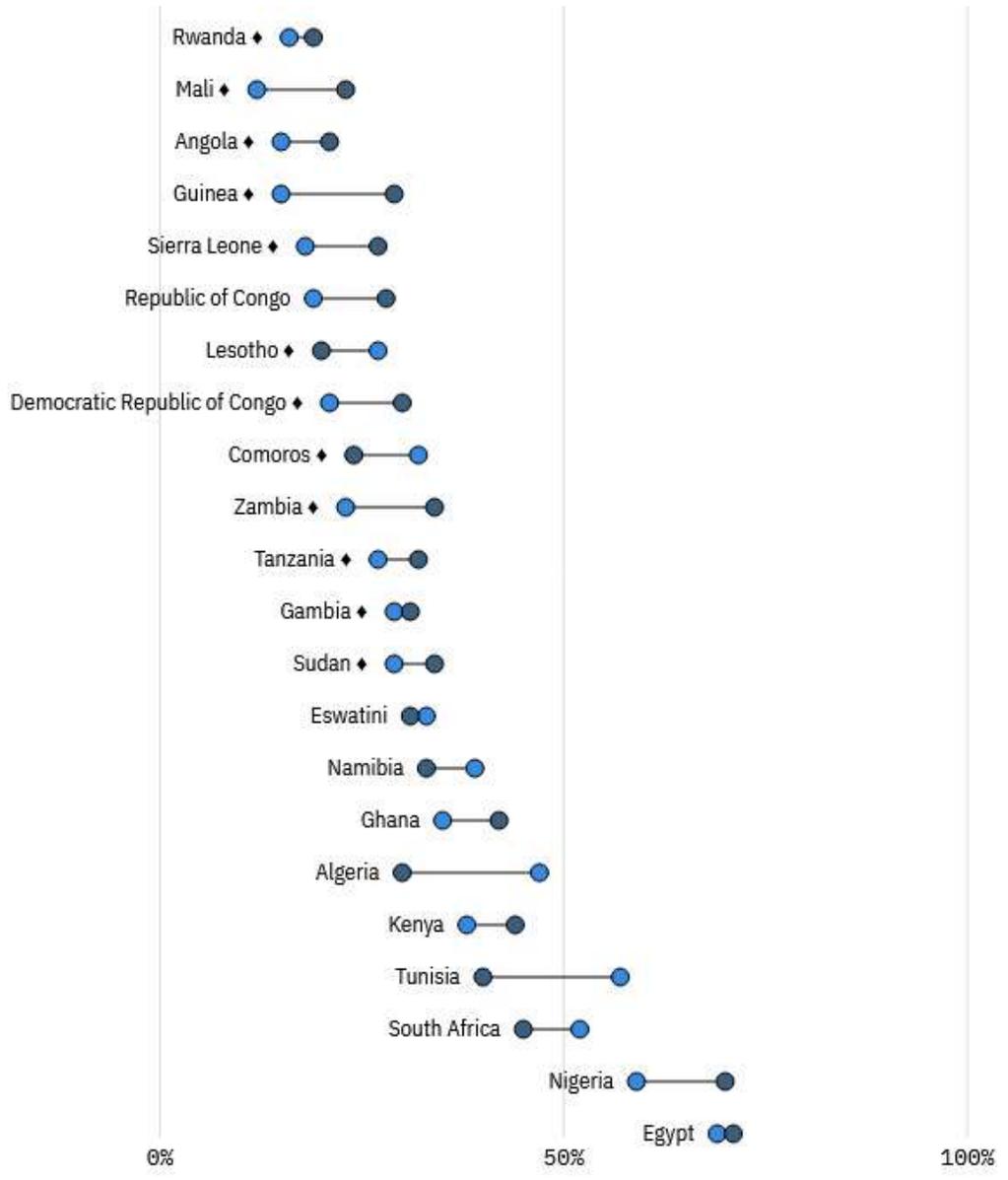
Indeed, girls in Africa are facing larger obstacles in completing education than boys, according to an analysis done by *Investment Monitor*. It also shows that the wealth of students, as well as if they are based in a rural or urban area, severely impacts completion rates for primary and secondary education.

The threat of a lost generation of children lacking basic education is a real danger, and this has clear implications for any hopes of meeting the SDG4 deadline. It will also have an impact on SDGs formed around other issues, such as poverty. The importance of investment in edtech and infrastructure to give children and adults better access to quality education, and enable them to gain the skills that will improve their employment prospects, cannot be overstated.

# School completion rates vary widely across Africa

Percentage of students completing upper secondary school by gender .





Source: UN