When the COVID-19 pandemic began to rattle the world earlier this year, schools were among the first institutions to be closed. Many schools were able to move instruction to the digital sphere, with classes and even graduation taking place on videoconferencing platforms. In most parts of Africa, however, e-learning is a luxury available to only a few.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) schools have been closed since March. The government, with the help of partners like UNICEF, has set up some radio and television distance-learning programs, but a lack of electricity in remote rural areas, let alone Internet access, deprive students of this opportunity.

Like the rest of the country, the village of Kalebuka in the southeast has been hit hard by the pandemic. Farming, using mainly manual labor, is the main economic activity in the area. There is no electricity or internet in Kalebuka. No tarred roads. No modern hospital.
This is where the all-girls’ school Malaika opened in 2010 with just three classrooms. The school was established by the nonprofit Georges Malaika Foundation, founded in 2007 by Noëlla Coursaris Musunka, an international model and philanthropist born in Lubumbashi to a Congolese mother and a Cypriot father. She was only five years old when her father died and her mother made the difficult decision to send her to Europe to be raised by relatives. She lived in Belgium and later Switzerland, and started modelling as a teenager. Eventually, she realized her dream of establishing the foundation—named in memory of her father Georges and the Swahili word for angel, malaika—to provide girls in the DRC with some of the opportunities she had had growing up.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

Today, the school provides free primary and secondary education to about 350 girls, with classes taught in French and English. The curriculum covers math, science, information technology, art, and more. And the school offers access to the Internet, computers, and television. It provides these girls with the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

The foundation’s aims go beyond education; it has also built a community center and installed twenty wells in Kalebuka.
Malaika installed and refurbished wells in Kalebuka that now provide access to clean water for more than 30,000 people.

The Hunger Virus

“We hope so much that the school and the community center can open up soon,” Musunka says. “We are worried about the children, not only academically but more about their health. If they are lucky, they now get only one meal per day. When they go to school, we give them breakfast and lunch. Not going to school means their health is in danger.”

English teacher Rebecca Mbayo says the lockdown has brought starvation to Kalebuka. “These girls represent all Congolese children. Most of them start the day by asking, ‘When will mom come and cook food for me?’ and get the response, ‘Maybe,’ rather than saying if they will eat or not eat. In general, these children eat once a day or they don’t eat at all. That is why Malaika provides two balanced meals to keep them healthy and prevent them dropping out of school.”

“Our school and community center were ordered closed by the Congolese government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic,” says headmaster Sylvain Koj, “but Malaika continues to support the local community.”

The school has been distributing desperately needed food and necessities to those in need in the community. “So far, we’ve helped about 60 families per week, comprising more than 3,000 individuals,” Koj says. The school also commissioned local women to sew masks, which it distributes along with soap and sanitizer to people in Kalebuka and neighboring villages, many of whom do not have access to basic hygiene products. “We are providing sanitation and prevention education by teaching local people about proper handwashing, safe hygiene practices, and more.”
During the lockdown, Malaika has been distributing food and basic necessities to those in need in the community.

**Learning During Lockdown**

While the school remains closed, the teachers have kept up the education of the girls to the best of their ability by providing lessons to do at home. Normally, the students would finish their homework at school rather than doing it at home by the light of a candle or a lamp. Now, the teachers walk from door to door distributing homework that the children would do by daylight in the absence of electricity.

Malaika has also organized webinars at the school presented by inspirational women such as British actress Thandie Newton; Grammy award-winning singer, songwriter, and actress Eve; and television broadcaster June Sarpong.

The students miss their school, Mbayo says. Despite the lingering danger of the pandemic, she feels it would be best for the present health and wellbeing of the girls to go back to school. “We are resilient. We have lived with war, Ebola, malaria, and cholera, and we adapted. Even with this pandemic, we have to adapt and learn to live with it.”
Noëlla Coursaris Musunka takes a close personal interest in the school that she founded.

A Matter of Survival

Despite the twenty wells that Malaika built with the help of donors, access to clean water continues to be a challenge. In the absence of basic necessities at home, it’s near impossible for these children and their families to follow safety regulations. Of greater risk than COVID-19 or malaria is the risk of starvation.

There is also, as Mbayo explains, the risk of girls being forced into prostitution, begging, theft, and early marriage. “Whatever challenges they face at home, school is a safe environment.”

While they’re not going to school, many of the girls help their mothers sell vegetables on the street to make enough money for their families to eat.

“They work in their parents’ fields, and sell the food in the market and in the center of town,” Mbayo says. “They have to walk long distances and do heavy work, risking accidents, rape, violence, and kidnapping.”

What happens if a child gets sick? Leya, a ten-year-old girl from the community, died during the lockdown period when she didn’t receive proper treatment in time due to poor living conditions. “If Lea had been studying at the school, we would have seen that she was unwell and would have been able to prevent her death.”

Two girls from the school—nine-year-old Edoxie and fourteen-year-old Esether—both fell sick during lockdown and weren’t immediately treated. Edoxie underwent surgery due to typhoid fever and is now recovering. Esther had to have surgery on her leg.

“Parents do not have the money to take their children to hospital, so it falls to Malaika and the community to help them if they’re ill,” Mbayo says. “These interventions are possible thanks to people who support us.”
The students have been making face shields for healthcare workers using the school’s two 3D printers. If these girls can help and contribute with the little that they have, then so too can the rest of the world to ensure their survival.

The students have used the school’s two 3D printers to make face shields for healthcare workers.

If you would like to donate to Malaika, visit www.malaika.org/donate.

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Countries
Democratic Republic of Congo