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Education through Adversity: Meeting the Students at the Malaika School in DRC



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Images: Malaika

For the fifth instalment of [‘The Best is Yet to Come’](#) we meet the girls from the Malaika school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We experience first-hand the fundamental role of education in imagining a better future as we look at how their lives have changed during lockdown and hear their hopes and dreams going forward.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began earlier this year, schools were among the very first institutions to shutter down for the foreseeable future. As governments around the world rushed to put lockdown measures in place, they triggered a chain of closures that have since set many young people around the globe off course with their curriculums.

Yet at [Malaika](#) - a girls' school in the village of Kalebuka in the Democratic Republic of the Congo founded by [Noella Coursaris Musunka](#) - it's not just studies that have been set back. Here, school stands for so much more than simply education; it means empowerment for the whole village. As well as being a school for girls, Malaika is a community centre and agricultural project that has also been behind the installation of 20 clean water wells across the DRC.

“Here at Malaika, it’s like an ecosystem working in different scopes,” explains Rebecca, who is an English language teacher at the school. “We have the school for girls, and the community centre in collaboration with FIFA for the parents and community because they need to be educated too. We give them two meals, as we know that access to food is very difficult. It’s a way to keep them healthy. We also give them health care. We have a nurse, and we can send them to the hospital for free.”



The project’s success is a shining example of how education can alter the prospects of a whole community, leading different generations towards a brighter future. But today, the difficulties caused by Malaika’s closure

during lockdown are an unwelcome reminder of life without schooling. As restrictions from the Congolese government force the centre to close without an end date in sight, early signs of the community reverting back to old ways show just how important the initiative really is.

“This time is very hard for us, and even for the girls because the school is not open,” shares Sylvain Koj, the headmaster of Malaika. “Our main problem is how to keep them learning while staying at home, because they are not authorised to come in and study. So we are working with the teachers on preparing some exercises; we print them and send our teachers to the village to distribute them to the girls so that they can start working on them at home.”

“This lockdown is not good, because the community is facing so many difficulties,” adds Rebecca. “Many of the girls are going to fields far away from the village, working for a long time and coming back tired. They have to fetch water, and on top of that they have to do their homework during the day, because if they don’t do it at that time, they have no electricity and it’s impossible.”



Speaking to the students themselves is a tender reminder of how much the project has given to the community. Elsewhere in the world, school being closed may signify infinite freedom to children that have come to take their education for granted. But the Malaika girls are quick to recognise the value in learning, and how the institution’s temporary closure means missing out on the opportunity to grow.

“I’m so proud of my school, because Malaika gives me a good education,” smiles Lauriane, a pupil in grade three who aspires to one day be an IT engineer. Fourth-grade student Audience is also disappointed to be losing her English and maths lessons as well as the chance to play tennis and read in the library: “I miss school because now I’m not able to practice my program,” she adds.

Without the structure that the school provides, the Malaika girls have no choice but to help their parents with the daily chores at home. When they are not attending their regular classes, they lack protection from child labour, early marriage and domestic violence. For Jeanne, a big part of her day is now taken up by the search for water: “I walk one hour there and back,” she explains. “I can’t do my exercises during the day because it’s really far to go and find the water.”

Meanwhile, Jocelyne is helping her friends with a vegetable-growing project during the days she would usually spend at school. “They have their project in entrepreneurship, to work in the garden and produce vegetables,” she says. “We go in the morning at six, we come back and then go again at four. When I have my exercises from school, I cannot go and help my friends. I stay home, work on everything, then go back to help my friends.”



Yet it’s in the face of adversity that the strength of the Malaika community shines through, and despite the lockdown the school is still playing a vital role in the welfare of the village. The students have been using a 3D

printer to create face shields for the local hospitals, using a configuration created by the STEM team at the school.

“During this lockdown we are making shields to save lives. We aim to make 500 so that we can distribute them to the hospitals in the nearby villages” explains Dorcas, a 13-year old student who aspires to go into medicine herself one day. Her enthusiasm for the mask making program highlights her deep-seated care and concern about her community, which manifests in her future career plans too. “I need to become a doctor so that I can help my country, my community and the world.”

Dorcas isn't the only student with big plans for the future, once the school opens again and beyond. The girls are keen to share their hopes and dreams for the future; from coders to chemists. For Audience, her own school experience has inspired her to give others the same opportunity. “I have a dream to become a good teacher in my country,” says Audience, showing just how her education is set to benefit generations to come.

Perhaps the fil rouge that runs through all of the girls chosen career paths is the desire to help the wider community. It's a spirit encapsulated by 11-year old Ester, who dreams of becoming a businesswoman so that she can “earn money for her family and country.”

The school's reopening now relies on the DRC getting Covid-19 under control – something that remains impossible to predict without knowing what lies on the horizon. “There are lots of cases here, but so far we have under 100 deaths,” explains Sylvain. “It's already becoming very difficult in our cities though, like Kinshasha. We are trying to see how it's going to be here; it's very scary and we are so worried about it.”

So how long will it be until the school is allowed to open its doors full time once again, and the girls can continue to work towards their future careers? For Malaika, the future is surely uncertain. “We don't know,” explains Rebecca, “because it's a government mandate.”

Yet she leaves us with words of hope, encapsulating the school's unwavering determination in overcoming the difficulties in its path: “Together we are resilient. We have had a long war with Ebola, Malaria, and we're still here. We adapted. And now we have Covid-19, we will adapt.”