STATEMENT OF EIARC ON COVID-19
ON THE OCCASION OF E-MEETING OF 30TH APRIL 2020

The virtual Education International Africa Regional Committee (EIARC) meeting, organized on 30 April 2020, examined the impact of COVID-19 on education across the globe and specifically in Africa. The Committee took note of governments’ decision, the world over, to temporarily close schools in a spirited effort to compact the spread of COVID-19. According to UNESCO, as of 20 April 2020, over 91% of the world’s student population – 1.5 billion children and youth – are affected by school closures across 191 countries. Africa is no exception as over 330,535,859 learners across levels of education from ECD to Higher Education are affected and over 8,532,394 teachers are not able to provide distance teaching. Over 63 million teachers and large numbers of education support personnel have also been affected by the pandemic.

Efforts to mitigate the impact of corona virus on schooling have been impromptu, diverse, and riddled with discrepancies. For many countries this has meant a sudden expectation to switch to the provision of online distance learning for all levels of education. More than any other time before remote learning through technology has found space in different societies to fill the learning gap. While home learning could gain mileage at this time, countries with low levels of technological infrastructure may find it difficult to provide distance learning, especially in rural areas. Currently, access to internet is estimated at 47% globally and only 24% in Africa. The situation is worse in regions experiencing other forms of challenges such as conflicts, epidemics, drought, Jihadist attacks, and in areas where school feeding programs were in place as measures to ensure no child is left behind in learning.

The EIARC takes note of the findings of the EI COVID-19 Survey of March/April which revealed that teachers, learners and education support personnel in Africa and the rest of the world will be exposed to inadequate safety measures if the schools resume in the state they have been. The safety measures are imperative for schools to resume. The survey also revealed that there is a high expectation for distance education. These initiatives need to be guided with the methodological support of the teachers and their unions. It must go in line with the provision of resources and digital training as well as bridging the gap in inequities and funding.
The Committee also notes part-time teachers and education support personnel as well as those employed on temporary contracts, in both public and private schools, have been adversely affected. Majority have been sent on compulsory leaves and will not receive salaries during the crisis.

We commend African governments for the continued efforts to curb and stop the spread. Initiatives such as distance learning continues is welcome. As educators we encourage our members to tap on the opportunities to support our learners as much as possible.

In the recent weeks, there has been promises of reduced spread and whilst the medics are doing everything possible to defeat the virus, uncertainty hangs on in terms of settlement and return to normalcy. School reopening preparedness needs to be well thought out.

We are therefore recommending:

That governments
1. Hasten measures that can flatten the infection curves and give ways to reopening of all schools and to engage educators through their representatives in designing the after COVID-19 back to school strategies.
2. Embrace social and policy dialogues with education unions during this pandemic in making decisions that affect learners, educators, and the education systems with specific emphasis on safeguarding the health and safety of the school communities; provision of clean water and electricity, providing face-masks to the teachers and ensuring emergency precautions are in place in the event of an outbreak.
3. Support private education providers financially so they can pay the teachers just as is the case in companies and industries.

That education unions
1. Engage their members to facilitate faster adaptation COVID-19 guiding principles developed by Education International into the new challenges and ensure our voices as educators is not left behind.
2. Unite and proactively work with governments on the way forward while encouraging the members to not only adhere to the health precautions but to strive to be part of the possible innovations around the pandemic and education.