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SPECIALIZED TECHNICAL COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY,
(STC-EST 3)

Virtual Meeting

30th April, 2020

AFRICAN EDUCATION, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION RESPONSE
TO COVID-19

MINISTERIAL DECISIONS (STC-EST 3)

AFRICAN EDUCATION, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION RESPONSE TO COVID-19

WE, the Ministers of the 3rd African Union Specialized Technical Committee On Education, Science and Technology (STC-EST 3), held our virtual ministerial meeting on 30th April 2020, to promote and maintain a high-level African ministerial dialogue to facilitate consensus on the Education, Science, Technology and Innovation response to COVID-19 and adopt urgent, radical and transformative measures to ensure continuity of education on the continent and mitigate the disruptions caused by the coronavirus disease;

1. **DEEPLY CONCERNED** with, the spread of COVID-19 globally and in Africa, the exponential figures of cases, the number of deaths recorded daily and the serious wider gap in education, health, gender, food security, water, economic and political consequences especially given the level of preparedness, response capacity and existing disease burden on health systems on the continent;
2. **ACKNOWLEDGE** the actions taken by the AU, Member States, RECs and other stakeholders including development partners to curb and contain the spread of COVID-19 at the national, regional and continental levels since the declaration by the World Health Organisation (WHO) of the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), and their efforts in implementing public health policies and strategies such as total lockdown, quarantine, social distancing, infection control and containment, clear and transparent communication as well as complementary multi-sector response actions;
3. **EXPRESS APPRECIATION** for the positive role played by the World Health Organization (WHO) in coordinating a global response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Africa CDC for empowering Member States to take the necessary measures in combating the outbreak of the disease and in mobilising responses from partners;
4. **TAKE NOTE** of the need to close learning institutions, schools, colleges and universities by governments to protect the population and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. However, this is worsening existing weaknesses in Africa's Education systems including disruptions of the education calendar, and social safety nets such as school feeding programmes, and millions of school children and young people who no longer have access to education on the continent especially in areas that do not have remote-learning capabilities and systems;

5. **RECOGNIZE** that the longer children and young people stay away from school, the less likely they are ever to return to school; that closure of schools should not be an end to learning and that the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate existing inequalities and risks facing children, girls, disabled persons and other vulnerable populations;
6. **ACKNOWLEDGE** that unless we collectively act now to protect education systems by providing alternative learning platforms and complementary programmes, societies and economies will experience the burden of COVID-19 long after it has passed;
7. **STRONGLY UNDERSCORE** that the current coronavirus outbreak crisis in the whole world challenges our continent to provide rapid and strong responses from all disciplines of science, technology and innovation and deploy novel approaches underscored by evidence based policies and scientific advice for decision-making, to combat COVID-19 and other future deadly pandemics, by joining the entire world in the co-creation of knowledge and generation of cures, vaccines, new treatments, diagnostic tests and medical preventive systems among others;
8. **REITERATE** the need to effectively implement the continental strategies (a) Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) and (b) Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA 2024), to create strong education and science, technology and innovation systems on the continent that are crucial for the attainment of Agenda 2063 boosting socio-economic recovery from the current crisis, drawing on the lessons of Ebola and other humanitarian responses on the continent.

WE HEREBY AGREE TO:

1. **FOSTER** an Education Sector Response to COVID-19, where Members States should:
 - a) Based on the DOTSS¹ approach endorsed by the 3rd Specialized Technical Committee on Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, ensure continuity of learning online and offline, particularly for children, girls, disabled persons and vulnerable populations in deprived communities without access to electricity and internet, recognising the role of parents in home schooling, and ensuring that teachers are skilled, capacitated and motivated to support learners offline and online and ensure that their physical, professional and emotional wellbeing are safeguarded.

¹ DOTSS is an acronym for Digital connectivity, Online and offline learning, Teachers as facilitators and motivators of learning, Safety online and offline, Skills focused learning

- b) Prioritise investments in Internet infrastructure and facilitate broadband connectivity coverage to all education institutions, schools, universities and colleges, particularly those in rural areas, and remote learning and teaching platforms and tools through digital technologies and traditional media such as radio and television, and advocate for access to free data for a period and education content available through Telecom companies and other digital service providers such as search engines.
- c) Document the impact of school closures on children, girls, disabled persons and vulnerable populations, including those living in vulnerable conditions such as refugees, migrants, IDPs and asylum seekers. Member states should also document good practices, and monitor learning engagement with support from local and international partners, and with the view of sharing information with AUC to facilitate inter-country learning and up scaling of good practices.
- d) Collaborate closely with the UNICEF, UNESCO and other multisectoral partnerships including the Global Education Coalition to provide appropriate support to AU Member States to implement the education Response to COVID-19.
- e) Plan for re-opening schools with appropriate strategies to catch-up on the lost period of learning with time periods for catching-up on work identified, implement back to school campaigns and measures to curb further infections in educational institutions, schools, universities and colleges. To this end, Ministries of Education should work closely with ministries of finance to safeguard the education sector funding including establishing a Contingency Fund for Education in emergencies.
- f) Underlined the need to embrace and promote the creation and use of freely available and accessible Open Sources platform for learning, course and teaching materials, research, publications and information pertaining to the curriculum at school and university level in the continent;
- g) Urged Member States to take advantage of the opportunity for online teaching and learning to ensure continuity of education on the continent, improvement of education systems and robust e-learning infrastructure, ensuring quality and integrating lessons learnt and good practices from COVID-19 response as espoused by the DOTSS approach, and conceiving a model roadmap for post COVID-19 which integrates continuity of education in the different regional and national responses.
- h) Implored Member States to consider establishing accelerators for innovation in support of remote learning which is different from online learning. Other ways of

facilitating access to learning material also need to be explored particularly for learners, students and vulnerable groups that may not have access to material provided online. Governments need to take steps in making municipal buildings and public libraries available for learners that may not have access to online connectivity and remote learning.

- i) Africa to harmonize and adapt school calendars and speak with one voice on assessment and the organization of state examinations to give credence to student degrees; call for a joint African response to address the examination during the on-going school year which is affected by the pandemic and decide jointly on the cancellation or postponement of the school year.
- j) Call for the creation of a network of online and distance learning institutions in the continent.
- k) Called upon the public and private actors, technical and financial partners, development partners, civil society, elected officials and local communities to support and accompany the educational continuity policies implemented in the various countries to maximise impact and ownership and take into account the concerns of private schools.

2. **RECOMMEND** a concerted STI Policy and R&D Response to COVID-19 building on African national and regional organisations and networks such as the African Academy of Sciences and national academies of science, and science granting councils, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, the AUDA-NEPAD STI Flagship Programmes, and specifically the African Medicines Regulatory Harmonization (AMRH) Initiative, and the networks of centres established by the Africa CDC, and the African Scientific Research and Innovation Council (ASRIC) underpinned by the following measures:

- a) Establish R&D platforms at national, regional and continental levels for:
 - Sharing best practices, information, mutual learning, and upscaling initiative with a regional dimension, and minimising duplication of efforts on COVID-19;
 - Conducting and documenting scientific priority setting including R&D activities, identifying gaps and promoting networking, coordination and intra-Africa collaboration on COVID-19 R&D and future outbreaks
 - Establishing, strengthening and supporting networks of Biosafety and bio-security laboratories in the continent, and
 - Promoting human and institutional capacity building; and

- Evaluating and promoting treatment protocols and other experiences by African researchers in line with the demographic and climatic realities of the continent;
- b) Establish a Strategic African Research and Innovation Emergency Response on epidemiology of COVID-19, therapies, vaccines and technologies; identification and testing the efficacy of existing and potential drugs and vaccines for clinical trials, and novel treatment combinations including traditional medicine and practices on COVID-19 as well as population behavioural studies. Furthermore, promote global co-creation through programmes such as the European Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnerships (EDCTP) and generation of knowledge by African researchers, with a long-term view on future outbreaks;
 - c) Streamlining the Africa's strategic research and innovation response on the epidemiology of COVID-19 to focus on (i) Scientific Understanding of Corona Virus and COVID19; (ii) Pharmaceutical and Biopharmaceutical Engineering; (iii) Biomedical Engineering; (iv) Clinical Understanding of Corona Viruses and COVID19 and (v) Formulation of National Health Strategies in Member States on COVID-19 and other epidemics;
 - d) Invest in data science capacity for modelling and analysis and promote data collection, access and sharing of COVID-19 research and development through Open Science principles to bridge the science, technology, and innovation inequalities in Africa's R&D landscape as per the STC-EST 3 decision of December 2019, and Call on UNESCO, WHO, UNFPA and other UN agencies as well as initiatives such as the African Open Science Platform to advance Open Science in the continent as a game changer; and boost intra-Africa research collaboration, including South-South, and North-South;
 - e) Put in place a mechanism to access funding for research and development for COVID-19 and other disease outbreaks from continental and international funds established to mitigate and fight pandemics. In line with the Executive Council Decision of 13 April 2020, the continental fund should fight the socio, economic and humanitarian challenges arising from Covid-19, and be used to further boost the capacity of the Africa CDC and also support research and development capacity especially for multi-disciplinarian work involving the social sciences. Further invite the international development partners, the Private Sector, Direct Foreign Investments, Public Sector and contributions from philanthropic organisations and individuals to resource R&D for COVID-19 and future outbreaks;
 - f) Strengthen research ethics reviews and timely regulatory approvals as part of health systems strengthening to enhance Africa's capability to use new therapies,

vaccines and technologies for public health pandemics and neglected tropical diseases affecting the continent;

- g) Develop and strengthen regulatory framework to support innovation and the commercialization of biotechnology products;
 - h) The rapid improvement and development of productive capacity in Africa for supportive medical, supplies and personal protective equipment (PPEs) on a commercial scale, including ventilators, masks and gloves to support frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19. In the process promote the development of African technologies and solutions to respond to the crisis and minimise over-dependence on countries outside Africa;
 - i) Leverage the critical role that space science, technology and innovation especially Earth Observation Systems and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to monitor disease outbreaks and encourage national, regional and continental actors to deepen Earth Observation cooperation within the framework of the African Space Policy and Strategy to support governments' interventions in combating the COVID-19 pandemic as well as sharing technology solutions, Earth Observations data, spatial information and lessons learnt, including tools to support evidence-based decision making to mitigate pandemics;
 - j) The Commission in close Collaboration with the RECS to translate the STI policy response into a coordinated program at all levels in a form of roadmap with clear timelines and role of all relevant continental and national actors and partners including AAS, WHO, Networks of AUDA, ASRIC and Africa CDC, UNESCO's Networks- Category I and II Centers and Chairs in Microbiology and Life Sciences, with the view of building and exploiting synergies for a continental inclusive STI Response to COVID-19;
3. **URGE** the Commission, Regional Economic Communities and Member States with the support of Development Partners to carry out socio-economic and environmental impact evaluations and assessments and also develop response strategies for COVID-19 and Ebola Outbreaks;
4. **URGE** Member States to provide adequate data-communication network infrastructure backbone, for Research and Education connectivity in Africa to support zero-rated digital platforms for zero-rated online learning and research; including exploring, with telecommunication providers, the possibility of zero-rating of apps and content dedicated for education. Member states are also urged to make use of existing media infrastructure such as television and radio, which may

have a wider reach than online learning platforms, in order to ensure that learning continues;

5. **APPRECIATE** the technical and financial support from Development Partners, and **CALL UPON** them to continue working to support the efforts of the AU Commission, Member States and Regional Economic Communities in contextualising the Education, Science, Technology and Innovation response to COVID-19, and future epidemics to the needs of Member States;
6. **CALL UPON** on a broader scale, the UN Agencies and all partners to work closely with AUC, RECs and member states to strengthen national and regional STI systems in Africa to build robust ecosystems for research and innovation, evidenced based policy making for sustainable development as a long-term response and preparedness to current pandemic and future environmental threats;
7. **UNDERScore** the importance of prioritising funding for education across Africa, and deliberate investment in research and innovation. **RECALLED** the on-going efforts to establish and operationalize an African Education, Science, Technology and Innovation Fund (ESTIF) and **REQUEST** the Commission, the African Development Bank to take appropriate action to expedite the process;
8. **ACKNOWLEDGE** the virtual meetings as platform for information exchange, sharing experiences and best practices and **AGREE** to convene non-binding informal Webinars involving the participation of the Development Partners once every month or until the pandemic is over; and
9. **EXPRESS** profound appreciation to the Commission for timely organisation of this virtual STC-EST 3 meeting to galvanize and harmonize continental efforts towards a comprehensive response to COVID-19 through Education, Science, and Technology.