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Learning amid War and Crisis:
Will Distance Learning Lessen the Negative Impact of War on Refugees' Learning Loss in Africa?

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Abstract

In today's international governance systems, safe custody of refugees through the provision of humanitarian teaching services underlies the functioning of the international system. Evidence continues to highlight the roles of state and non-state actors in this direction. Governments in different parts of the world are state actors, primarily saddled with the safe custody of refugees through safety camps. Expected to be included in this humanitarian aid is the continuing education of refugees through access to an effective, quality, and conducive learning environment. This is offered through a combination of educational institutions that comprise the university, college, religious, and non-governmental bodies. Among these institutions, the university systems are the leading educational institutions with activities that link host countries with refugees. They are the major, most discernable, and important [and] the gatekeeper of the educational system' and 'the most symbolic formal educational system, with normative expectations of teaching duties to both citizens and refugees. However, the recurrent armed conflicts in Africa have made the education of refugees a critical problem for many host countries, especially developed countries, due to the unending inflows of refugees. This problem became even worse in conflict-affected African countries as COVID-19 struck, increasing Africa's refugee index. This displacement raises serious concerns about refugee learning loss, access to learning, and learning quality and quantity in host countries. Evidence shows that most of the host countries lack the capacity to offer effective learning to refugees due to language, religion, and environmental constraints. While how refugees in host countries can get access to effective, affordable learning in host countries has received more attention, evidence is scanty on the learning channels or models to use, who is gaining or losing customers, and why? Drawing on qualitative methods, this article seeks to expand knowledge on how African countries can limit refugee learning loss through distance learning.

Keywords
Crisis, Distance learning, Learning loss, Refugee, War

INTRODUCTION

Ramifications of war no doubt go beyond displacement, untimely death, economic downturns, and seeking of refuge in safer environments. It includes learning loss suffered by learners, due their displacement by war or armed conflict. Armed conflicts are predominant in Africa and they have had adverse effect on humanity, especially learning loss caused by incessant armed conflicts. Results in Palik et al. (2020) showed that out of 290 cases of armed conflicts in the world between 1946 and 2019, Africa has about 101 of these conflicts. Countries with notable cases of on-going armed conflicts in Africa includes Cameroon, South Sudan, Sudan, Libya, Congo, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire (Ntui Agbor et al., 2022). Indeed, war or armed conflict, has not only led to the closure of schools or educational programmes, but the disruption of physical face-to-face teaching and learning. Evidence continues to highlight the implications of disruption of teaching and learning for learners in conflict or war affected regions across the world (Rajab, 2018; Sherman, 2022; Kuzio, 2021; Ntui Agbor et al., 2022). These implications include inability to continue with degree or diploma programme, lack of access to library, low capacity for, or interest in reading, weak or poor retentive memory, total loss of interest in learning or study, high rate of school drop-outs, and learning loss (Hammond, 2007; Gordon, 2022; Kem, 2022; Lash, 2020). These implications, may have made Sherman (2022) concludes that learners, who are used to face-to-face teaching and learning

system, can hardly learn anything during war, due to the devastating effects of the crises posed by the war. The case in point, is that of Cameroon, where armed conflicts led to the closure of almost 80% of the schools and abduction of over 300 teachers and students (UNICEF, 2019). Similarly, a report from Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2020) showed more ravaging attacks on about 8,300 students, teachers, and other school personnel between 2015 and 2019 in Cameroon. In Nigeria, onslaughts from Boko-Haram insurgents are targeted at mainly the educational system. Boko-Haram armed conflict has destroyed educational system in states like Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, with huge negative effects on basic and secondary education (Zainudin & Darma, 2018). In Nigeria, the abduction of young secondary girls in Chibok, Borno State, received global condemnation and attention. According to the report of the National Emergency Management Agency (2015), it was estimated that by January, 2015, about 254 schools had been burnt and 276 partially destroyed in the attacks in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states (Oduah, 2015; Idris, 2015).

The persistent negative impact of war on learning loss, has stimulated research, which specifically focus on the usefulness of the distance learning as an alternative to face-to-face learning process (Rajab, 2018; Sherman, 2022). Distance learning is rapidly gaining recognition in the 21st and fast becoming a viable platform, where online teaching and learning take place (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). While the developed countries, have effectively utilized online distance learning to carry out teaching and learning, their developing countries counterparts are gradually adapting to the use of distance learning teaching and learning process (Addah, Kpedu, & Frimpong, Kwapong, 2012).

Although, the extent of the recognition and adoption of distance learning in Africa seems to be low compared to what is obtained in developed countries, the recurrent cases of displacement and people seeking refuge outside Africa due to war or conflict, has stimulated the growing calls for the use of online distance learning process. Apart from the war factor, it has been established that the increasing numbers of learners' enrollments or students' population and shortage of teachers, educational technology, teaching aids and materials are factors influencing the online distance learning (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). United Nations (2009) and World Bank (2010) reports, specifically indicated that the growing calls for distance learning in Africa is due to overwhelming population of students and acute shortage of teaching staff to fully administer the face-to-face learning system. For Kumi-Yeboah et al (2017), the need to achieve the SDG 4, which aims at enhancing inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, is partly the reason why many African governments are considering the option of distance learning. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic, which, led to the closure of schools and educational programmes across the world and in Africa, stimulated the rush towards the use of distance learning system (Elmendili & Saaidi, 2020). Relatedly, distance learning has been proven to be conducive and useful to workers, who may not have the enough time to leave office to attend the conventional face-to-face learning system. From the analyses of factors influencing distance learning system, it can be inferred that the major goal of this leaning system, is to salvaged problems associated with conventional face-to-face learning method (Elmendili & Saaidi, 2020). This raises concerns about the utility-value and sustenance of the distance learning.

Across continents, the use of distance learning has generated mixed reactions. While some studies have established that distance learning has had positive outcomes on learners' performance and satisfaction Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2010), others have found that it has no significant positive impact on learners' performance and satisfaction. Despite the extensive studies on the efficacy of distance learning, especially during pandemic, there has been little attention on the impact of distance learning on learning loss by the displaced people or refugees as a result of war in some African states. Previous studies on distance learning in Africa focused more on factors such as students' enrollments, shortage of staff, the need to attain the SDG 4, effectiveness, career development, COVID-19 as the rationale for the utilization of distance learning (Kumi-Yeboah, 2017; Elmendili & Saaidi, 2020). Despite an interest in distance learning throughout Africa, how it is caused by war and its impact on learning loss by war victims is hardly examined. For example, not much studies or research efforts have been committed to investigating how the displaced students or student refugees continue with their education or degree and diploma programmes. This brings to the fore the question, will distance learning lessen the negative impact of war on Refugee learning loss in Africa? This article answers this question by examining how distance learning enhances access of refugees and displaced people to effective learning amid war in Africa. The above section is followed by the inherent problems of war and its effects in Africa. Then conceptual and theoretical underpinnings, depicting the connection between war and learning loss in Africa. Subsequently, the impact of distance learning system on learning loss in Africa is followed by challenges of distance learning system in war regions in Africa. Mitigation strategies against learning loss and conclusion are the last sections in this article.

INHERENT PROBLEM OF WAR AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS IN AFRICA: REFUGEES PERSPECTIVE

Evidence shows that learning loss, that is, the inability of students or learners to continue with their learning, study, or degree and diploma programmes amid war is hardly paid attention to, as a consequence war (Abdulghani et al., 2022). This is so because, overwhelming attention is usually paid to damage of properties, loss of lives, disruption of businesses and total breakdown of economic activities. As war or conflict takes place in many parts of the world, including Africa, its effects on learning or education are enormous (Abdulghani et al., 2022). Although, in some rare cases, while learning may continue amid war, the quality of learning may not be adequate due to fear, risk of violence, and safety concerns. It does not only distort academic calendar, it causes schools to be used for military and shelter purposes for displaced persons and refugees, it puts leaners and teachers at the risk of being killed, kidnapped, poses psychological trauma, and pushes them into seeking refuge in safer environment (O'Malley, 2010). The indirect consequences of war are displacement and lack of social capacity to provide educational services (Abid et al., 2021; Seyed & Saadia, 2021).

Displacement stimulates the movement of people outside war zones to safer regions or refugee camps. While many countries of the world maintain refugee camps to host victims of war, the same cannot be said about their preparedness in the provision of learning services to refugees. They are quick at granting or providing refugees with an asylum, food, water, healthcare services, and security, whereas, the educational welfare of student refugees, is hardly addressed. This has severe implication for learning loss and destruction of the foundation of the education of refugees in Africa. African refugees also include students, who flee their war-torn countries to safer African countries for refuge. As they flee for refuge, they tend to abandon their education and struggle for survival in refugee camps. They tend to be more concerned with their coping strategies than continuing their education in their new abode. They behave this way, according to Ntui Agbor et al. (2022) due to the psychological trauma, emotional upset, excessive fear, grief, and school-phobia imposed on them as a result of the war or armed conflict.

To address the concern of most of the refugees, measures, initiatives, and advocacy such as "Education Cannot Wait" have been put into place to enhance the continuity of education or engagement of refugees in learning, even in war-torn areas, providing supports for schooling and learning to continue, yet, most African refugees prefer to maintain their survival modes over their education in most host countries. This raises serious concern for learning loss among African refugees. Although, this unfortunate circumstance caused by war or armed conflicts have provoked increased research interests on the effects of war on education in Africa. However, these studies concentrated on the effects of armed conflicts or war on learners and students from mainly basic and secondary school level including what happens outside the classroom. For instance, studies have focused on the educational outcomes of learners amid war (Abid et al., 2021) and children's wellbeing (Seyed & Saadia, 2021). Most of these studies focused on the sufferings of learners and teachers in basic and secondary schools, but there is need for a balance of priorities across all levels of education because they form part of the global vision and play key roles in realizing this vision. There is little attention paid to the sufferings of student refugees from tertiary institutions in Africa. Importantly, evidence is scanty on how distance learning can reverse learning loss caused by war or armed conflicts in Africa.

Research on how distance learning can curb learning loss in Africa, has the potential of expanding frontier of knowledge of African countries and governments to invest in ICTs and digital technologies that can be used to administer or provide distance learning services across refugee camps in Africa. This is important because if student refugees have access to online teaching and learning, through distance learning platforms, while in safety camps, they can highly be useful to the progress and development of not only the host countries, but their own countries. It is also imperative to note that while previous studies on this subject matter, have rarely examined distance learning in refugee camps, this article takes a departure from previous extant studies, by examining the utility-value and sustenance of distance learning services in refugee camps as an antidote that can salvage inherent learning loss associated with war or armed conflicts in Africa.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL UNDERPININGS

Refugee or internally displaced persons

Generally, war or armed conflict often, resort into the classification of its victims as internally displaced people or refugees. These two words have been used interchangeably as if they are the same, but they are not. This classification may have been possible because both IDP and refugees leave their original or traditional abode for another, but the difference lies in the fact that, while one (IDP), still find a safe abode within the country, the other (refugees) move outside the country's territory. For IDP, the cause of their removal from their habitual residence is usually connected to armed conflicts (such as Fulani herders-farmers crisis, violence, banditry, Boko-Haram insurgency, communal or clashes over landed resources), natural disasters (Erosion, flooding, and other human-made disasters), and abuse of fundamental human rights (Bello et al., 2022). But for refugees, who crossed international boundaries, may include proven fear for being persecuted as a member of certain race, religion, or fear of membership of social or political group, as well as fear of war or conflict.

From the above comparative analysis, it is evident that war or conflict is partly the cause of a rise in the number of refugees in Africa. The population of refugees of African origin has been on the rise, due to the increasing rate of armed conflicts in Africa (OECD, 2017). This increase poses huge challenges not only to the continent, but the entire world (Adesina et al., 2022). The challenges include health problems learning loss, humanitarian crisis, rape, drug peddling and other varying diversities (Castaneda et al., 2017). The growing effects of refugees-inflicted problems may have led to the ban on refugee as experienced by the Trump-led administration that blocked refugees from all countries including three in Africa (Libya, Somalia, Sudan) (Pfortmueller et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2017) and other varying forms of anti-immigrant hostility (Balakian, 2016; Salehyan, 2008; Whitaker, 2016), from entering the US. Despite, the reduction in inequality across countries of the world, as envisaged by the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG10), many countries, including some African countries are refusing to receive refugees from war-torn regions. Cases in point include the rise of xenophobic attacks in South Africa against African migrants or refugees from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Somalia, among others. Similarly, the expulsion of over half of refugees from Rwanda by the Tanzania government or the Botswana's case, where the government refused to allow refugees in the country (Charman, 2012; Kamanga, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2002; Whitaker, 2017). All these actions from some African states and governments contradict that of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which, had envisaged proper humanitarian care (including, healthcare, education, social security, welfare among others) for refugees and internally displaced persons. This is done with the aim that these group of people have great role to play towards global sustainable development, and as such, there case should

be seen as development challenges that need greater investment and efforts from the international community (OECD, 2017).

In this context, "refugees" were defined as those who were recognized as such by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, the UNHCR statute, those who were granted humanitarian status similar to that of refugees, and those who were temporarily protected. The nationality or citizenship of a claimant is typically referred to as their "country of origin."

Learning loss amid war or armed conflicts

Learning loss data amid war or armed conflicts have rarely come to limelight. Unlike other sectors such as the political, economic, agricultural, and health, school systems usually do not post data at high-frequency intervals. This is because, most school management and tutors find it very difficult to cope with challenges of student enrollments and online-based solutions for instruction, let alone for assessment and accountability (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Grewenig et al., 2020). Survey evidence suggests that learners spend considerably less or no time studying during on-going war or armed conflicts in their country, and some (but not all) studies report differences by home background (Andrew et al., 2020; Bansak & Starr, 2021; Dietrich & Patzina, 2020). This research represents one of the first attempts to quantify learning loss from war or armed conflicts in Africa using empirical systematic qualitative method. As majority of the studies on learning loss have been too focused on the COVID-19 pandemic

The term "learning loss" describes any particular or general loss of information and skills as well as reversals in academic progress, most frequently brought on by protracted pauses or discontinuities in students' educational trajectory (Dietrich & Patzina, 2020. Though there are many different ways that learning loss can occur, but for this context, focus is on war or armed conflict related causes. This phenomenon, often referred to as interrupted formal education, is characterized by major disruptions in students' formal education that can occur for a multitude of causes. A frequently mentioned instance is the loss of learning suffered by newly arrived refugee students, who have been unable to attend school for long periods of time because of social unrest in their home countries. In certain instances, these students may not have attended school at all or may have missed several years because of ongoing wars or armed conflicts in their home countries (Bansak & Starr, 2021). It is evident that the more protracted the war or armed conflicts, the greater the loss of learning. For example, the ongoing war in Cameroon and the Boko-Haram armed conflicts in Nigeria show a clearer picture of how learning loss is caused by war. In Cameroon as a result of the war between organized group of "separatist fighters" and government armed forces, schools have remained unsafe, as they are occupied by armed forces as the base of their operations (Human Rights Watch, 2020). It has resulted in learning loss, as there were decreased in students' enrolment, fear, panic, and the spread of fake news or information, which created in fear in learners and obstructs the effective functioning of the school system (Akame et al., 2021). Similarly, it is the same story in Nigeria, with the Boko-Haram insurgents, who see education as forbidden and ungodly. Majority of their attacks are targeted at schools and students as several reports have shown how young secondary school learners are being kidnapped and killed amid armed conflict. This may have informed the World Bank (2016a) report, which indicates that overall effects of Boko-Haram armed conflict on the education sector of the North East is around US$ 273 million, with 53% of it coming from Borno state.

Distance Learning as an antidote to learning loss

The increasing rate of learning loss caused by the closure of schools, abrupt discontinuation with educational programmes, due to war or armed conflict in many of the African states, has given prominence to distance learning. Schooling and face-to-face learning are problematic in conflicting regions, considering the numbers of attacks and counter-attacks going on daily on the battle grounds. Armed conflicts in some African states have had a predominantly huge implication for learning system, disrupting traditional teaching and learning system, and other learning services, especially for young people in Africa. To address this menace, studies have found that distance learning can bridged the learning gap created by war or armed conflict (Rajab, 2017; Andrade, 2015; Nassuora, 2012).

Distance learning is the process of providing instruction—often one-on-one—to students who are physically not available due to reasons, which may include war, conflict, tight work-schedule, disasters, among others, to attend in person learning classes (Anderson & Dron, 2012). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), it is "a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both." From this definition, war or armed conflict which displaces people including students from their traditional abode, creates tendencies of distance and time, which in the long run are critical components of distance learning. It is a learning system that emphasize removing barriers to education and training and releasing students from location-and time-specific constraints. For both individual and group learners, it provides flexible learning options (West, 2012). Today, it is an area of education that is expanding very fast. With the growth of Internet-based technologies, especially the World Wide Web, the potential impact of distance learning on all forms of education has been highlighted (Marija, 2012). In this sense, it refers to a technique of instruction and knowledge acquisition that is carried out with the use of computers and internet-based technology. Utilizing technology in distance learning has a multitude of opportunities, such as enhancing the caliber of student-teacher contact and student-to-student interaction. It also gives access to an abundance of resources. In

order to improve accessibility and efficacy of their online degree offerings, numerous African universities are about to embrace a greater use of technology.

It is imperative to note that incessant cases of war and armed conflicts in Africa, has partly given rise to the use of distance learning system to bridge learning gap or loss. As the demand of distance learning grows in Africa, especially due to the COVID-19 and lingering armed conflicts in part of Africa, it raises concerns about increased cost associated with infrastructure for this type of learning system; funding issue; accessibility, and capacity to operate this type of learning system by some learners, especially those from rural Africa. While distance learning can offer convenience, flexibility, and affordability what needs to be noted is that, technology usage is also associated with numerous challenges especially in Africa. This tends to be a limiting factor to the use of distance learning in mitigating learning loss in Africa.

Input-Output Systems Analysis

Theoretically, the input-output nexus, within the systems theory, which is usually used to explain the political system of a country, Odeyemi and Obiyan (2018), aptly explains the connection between distance learning system and learning loss caused by war or armed conflict in Africa. Systems theory as popularized by Easton (1965) and later analyzed by Agunyai and Ojakorotu (2022), argue that systems consist of inputs, processes, outputs, feedbacks, and boundaries. Fisher (2011) views inputs as a segment of the systems that receive demands and supports from the public within the environment that enter into the system through articulation and aggregation mechanisms and are processed by the system's 'internal processor' otherwise known as the conversion box known as the processing unit of the system', with successful processed inputs emanating as outputs and feeding back into the system. For the educational system, input–output analysis links duties of, and reactions from, different stakeholders and their impact on outcomes. This is fed into the system through the input segment as either demands or supports, articulation and aggregation by key educational institutions, parents, research organizations, and other educational bodies, into educational action to be processed into effective educational policy as output. A system of feedback also exists through which police actions further influence continuous public demands and supports.

As an interrelated complex whole system that offsets the totality of its parts, inadequate inputs and lack of capacity on the part of educational bodies may limit the effective functioning of the educational system, thus affecting desired effectiveness of teaching and learning. Also, when the people, including learners and teachers, who are the sources of demands and supports are displaced from the environment due to war and schools are shut effective learning is adversely affected. There is also the external environment to the educational system, where occurrences such as war or armed conflicts also determine learning outcomes. The theory is adequate in explaining the connection between distance learning system and refugees learning loss in Africa, vis-à-vis inherent challenges and how incessant war or armed conflicts distort educational system in Africa.

Armed conflicts in some African countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Libya, and other conflict-ridden countries constitute societal challenges that affect almost all the sectors, but in this context, the educational system. Some of the effects of armed conflicts on educational system includes closure of schools, kidnapping of teachers, learners, and in some severe cases burning of schools (Ntui Agbor etal., 2022). This, no doubt could discourage effective learning, resort to low enrollments, massive drop-outs, and ultimately leaning loss (Kouega, 2018). To address the effect of armed conflict on learning loss, largely depends on demands and supports from the public. Demands, as people seek for solution to the lingering conflicts affecting their educational system, they tend to engage government and other critical actors within their political system. In doing this, the public also supports the government or relevant bodies in providing information and assistance that can be useful in finding an end to the armed conflict. In this context demands (which includes an end to war or armed conflict) and supports (providing information that can aid successful end to the lingering armed conflict in Africa), are fed into the system through processes, where the 'withinputs', will articulate and aggregate demands and supports into outputs. The educational system has internal mechanism otherwise known as conversion box segment of the systems theory, which consists of critical key actors (such as teachers, student representatives, school management/administrators, parents, educational bodies, among others), who engage in the articulation and aggregation of demands and supports from the public, in this context, an end to lingering war and armed conflicts in Africa. At this stage, discussions may be centered on how to reduce the effects of the war on the educational system and improve teaching and learning. This becomes important due to closure of schools, learning loss, burning of schools, and killing or abduction of teachers and students during war in Africa (Momodu, 2017). This is otherwise known as the processing stage, where demands and supports from the public are not only harmonized but processed into identifiable pragmatic action or outcome.

Since, evidence has shown that online distance learning system is specifically designed to improve access to learning, even in war and pandemic periods (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Li and Lalani 2020; Arashi et al. 2020; Sokhulu 2021). It is reasonable to infer that online distance learning could be among the likely outcomes of the processed demands and supports that cover an end to, and provision of useful information against armed conflicts in Africa. Generally, according to systems theory, outcomes usually generate feedbacks that could be positive or negative. Thus, in this context, positive feedback, which, may likely come from an outcome that promotes effective utilization of online distance learning by refugees amid war, is likely to stimulate supports from the public towards the educational system. Whereas it may generate more demands for an improvement in the educational sector, if the outcome generate negative feedback. In some severe cases, it may generate stress and instability in the system (Agunyai & Ojakorotu, 2022). Numerous challenges

limit effective learning and trigger learning loss, but war and armed conflicts are negative inputs into the educational system, as war disorganizes, traumatizes, and displaces people, especially students. It creates fear, loss of interest in learning, discontinuation with degree programmes, and massive drop-out of students from institutions of learning (Jones and Naylor, 2014). Cervantes-Duarte and Fernandez-Cano (2016) found that an underlying effect of armed conflict on learning loss, is teacher absenteeism, citing teachers' fear of going to work as one of the leading effects of armed conflicts and resulting in reduced staff and increased teacher/pupil ratio. The literature is exhaustive on learning reform strategies that can address the negative effect of war and armed conflicts on refugees learning loss. Online distance learning system is a tool in this respect. The next section appraises the online distance learning as applicable within armed conflicts affected African countries.

ARMED CONFLICTS, LEARNING LOSS, AND DISTANCE LEARNING SYSTEM IN AFRICA

Armed conflicts have remained one of the greatest challenges confronting Africa and her sustainable development. Since education for all, including refugees and the displaced people, is one of the 17 goals of SDGs, thus; how armed conflicts affect education in Africa, requires a thorough investigation. This is do because, the conflict index or rate in Africa is high and this has continually hampered the progressive development of key sectors such as the educational sector on the continent. Just like the COVID-19 pandemic impugned on education, armed conflict has continually threatened the education sector in Africa. Despite the SDG 16, which calls for an inclusive society that is devoid of armed violence, Africa is still grappling with damaging effects of armed violence or conflicts on the educational system. Armed conflict is the use or arms and ammunitions to carry out attacks and counter attacks between the government of a state or by an armed organized group. In 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross defined armed conflicts as long-lasting, armed attacks between two or more countries (international conflicts) or between the armed forces of the government and the armed forces of one or more organized organizations in a country (non-international conflicts) with a minimum level of severity. These attacks are usually targeted against the state, its citizens, and properties from the side of armed organized group, where as attacks from the government forces are targeted at the armed organized group. Armed conflicts take the form of random attacks by fully armed groups such as bandits, unknown gunmen, insurgents, religious fundamentalists, herders, kidnappers among others, usually targeted at state institutions, properties, citizens, government officials, and other state functionaries (Palik et al., 2022; Bello et al., 2022). The persistence nature of armed conflicts has raised serious concern about its effects on the educational system in countries like Cameroon, Nigeria, Libya, among others in Africa. In Cameroon, it is evidently clear that the on-going armed conflict between the Cameroonian government and Ambazonian separatist movements, has severe ravaging effect on the educational system, especially in the Anglophone speaking area of the country. Akame et al. (2021) reported that between 2017 and 2019, 42 schools were attacked with about 305 students, teachers, and principals being abducted and killed in the affected regions of Cameroon. Similarly, Boko-Haram attacks, bandits' onslaughts, and herders-farmers armed conflicts have all had negative impacts on effective learning by students, especially in Northern part of Nigeria. Cases of kidnapping of students, especially young female learners from various institutions of learning across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa are clear examples of some of the implications of armed conflicts for learning loss in Nigeria.

Although, research have been conducted extensively on the impact of armed conflicts on learner's educational outcomes (Akresh & de Walque, 2008; Shemyakina, 2011), learner's well-being (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008), their enrolment, and so forth, with the process of traditional physical face-to-face teaching system only as a secondary indicator, thus, limiting empirical evidence on online distance teaching and learning system during armed conflicts. Within the context of discourses in this article, issues related to how online distance learning can promote learning capacity and curb learning loss amid war or armed conflicts can be discovered. This is because consequences of war or armed conflicts have been well-documented to include teachers absenteeism, abduction of students from their dormitory, kidnapping of teachers, psychological trauma, loss of interest in studying, inability to concentrate in class amid armed conflicts, therefore, necessitating the need to adopt online distance learning system to bridge the learning gap or loss caused by fear to attend classes, low interest in learning, absenteeism of both teachers and students, as a result of armed conflicts.

Learning loss is one of the biggest implications of armed conflicts in Africa. It is difficult to learn in a chaotic environment, let alone deep-rooted war ravaging regions. This may have informed the report of Human Rights Watch (2020), which indicates that schools are unsafe, converted to refugee camps, or occupied by armed forces. It raises the question such as; can there be effective learning in schools converted to refugees' camps or occupied by armed forces? It is evident that learning loss is the outcome of massive closure schools, teachers' absenteeism, displacement of learners, and abrupt termination of academic programmes due to war and armed conflicts. Conflictual situation, often, result into decreased enrolment, fear, panic, and the dissemination of fake news or wrong information, which also affect effective learning and functioning of the school system (Akame et al., 2021). The persistence nature of armed conflicts in some African countries, raises serious concerns for the recovery of learning loss, especially by refugees or displaced people, who tend not to be bothered with learning activities, but their coping or survival strategy. As a result of deplorable conditions and hardships in most refugees' camps in Africa, much emphasis is paid to survival within these camps than learning or education, as majority of them still nurse the fear and psychological trauma inflicted on them by armed conflicts. In addition, many of these camps lack educational facilities, let alone an online distance learning tool that can aid effective learning. It is clear that majority of the refugees' camps in Africa, do not have the plan for online distance

learning, hence, the persistence cases of refugees learning loss on the continent. This may have informed the conclusion of Sherman (2022) that online distance learning in refugee camps can salvaged the problem of learning loss caused by war or armed conflicts.

Distance learning is different from the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. While tertiary institutions in developed continents have adopted distance learning to provide teaching and learning services, their African counterpart was not fully ready and prepared to adopt this kind of leaning system, until COVID-19 struck. The pandemic, with its damaging effects on education, led many universities across the continent to the adoption of online distance learning. This is similar to a situation of war or armed conflicts in some of the African states, where the on-going war or conflict has halted contact classes or teaching and learning. However, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic, which popularized the use of distance learning by universities across the continent, armed conflict, which predates the pandemic, with its horrible effects, has hardly been investigated from the distance learning perspective. This article argues that just like the effects of COVID-19 on education was lessen with the use of online distance learning, it can also be used to regain or curb refugee learning loss in conflict affected African countries. In conflict-ridden African states, educational welfare (such as continuing education, learning difficulties, psychological trauma, loss of interest in education, access to digitalize learning device, among others) of student refugees or displaced students are hardly considered by government or key stakeholders in the education sector. With adequate implementation or inclusion of the online distance learning services as part of humanitarian aid or assistance in most refugee camps, learning loss could be significantly curb.

Online distance learning platforms enhance the opening of the learning space through the opportunities they provide for learners, which may include student refugees or displace students to 'continue with their learning, ask questions from tutors, express opinions about the subject, deepen learner-tutor relations or learning participation, and expand the horizons of knowledge' (Ndlovu, 2022). It promotes educational or learning transformation by stimulating learners' involvement in an online learning and accelerating their educational development as well as strongly acting as a tool that can aid the attainment of the SDG 4-education for all (Czerniewiez, 2020). From the foregoing, distance learning can only thrive on digital technologies such as computers, internet, mobile phones, among others. While war periods are terrifying and traumatic to refugees or displaced students, their access to the internet and use of mobile phones, while in safety camps, will go a long way in making them a better-informed person, including in areas of their learning. No wonder Ribeiro (2020) concludes that students, including those displace by war, with access to computers and the internet have greater chances of being better trained, better informed and better able to participate in learning, even during pandemic or war. Internationally, one important aspect, where distance learning has vast value for refugees' education is online teaching and learning system. As Hassan & Mirza (2020) has noted, distance learning has prospects in making it 'easier for student refugees or groups and teachers to organize teaching and learning classes and even to highlight and thus, curb cases of learning loss that may have been created due to war or armed conflict in Africa. Distance learning, if adequately implemented can equip student refugees 'with teaching and learning tools', enhancing the effectiveness of learning and reduction of learning loss (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj & Sethi, 2020). Online distance learning can offer new folds, capable of bridging the learning gaps or loss for student refugees and allow increased accessibility to online teaching and learning and smooth relational communication between online instructors and refugees.

Studies have documented the relevance of distance learning to displaced students or refugees amid pandemic or armed conflicts in teaching and learning, effective studying and knowledge, and in liaising with teachers or instructors across countries (Aithal, Rao & Kumar, 2015; Ndebele & Ndlovu, 2020; (Oliveira, Texeira, Torres & Morais, 2021; Huang et al., 2020; Marinoni, Van't Land & Jensen, 2020). Distance learning in both developed and developed countries has been used to enhance effective teaching and learning of those not able to have contact classes due to emergencies. As Chaka (2020) reported that different institutions in South Africa adopted various instructional tools to conduct their teaching, such as Blackboard, Moodle, Institutional Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Coursera, further supported by Zoom and Microsoft Teams, with some institutions even adopting more than two tools. The distance learning platforms can offer access to online teaching and learning to refugees', to support inter-and intra-institutional-universities collaboration and to enable new and innovative forms of refugees' participation and engagement' in online learning (United Nations, 2018).

In Africa, the internet or ICTs, from which, distance learning draw, has continually defied challenges such as poor access to internet, relatively poor technological infrastructure, a social–economic and demographic digital divide, to emerge as the fastest growing sector (Onyedika-Ugoeze, 2016). The growing availability and use of the distance learning platforms are reflected in the access of student refugees to an online learning, participation in google classrooms or zoom lectures, and interactions with lecturers (Maatuk et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). Thse have been applied, for instance, on the Moodle platform by the Lviv National University, Ukraine (Sherman, 2022). In contrast, Canvas is used at the University of Pennsylvania (Sharman, 2022). In the US, Blackboard is another well-liked area. These platforms are useful and practical. This is where you can administer various controls to students, such as exams, interviews, or questions with explanations. Instructors can also post their lecture or seminar materials for all students to see on the Moodle platform. It should be noted that Lviv National University uses the personality-oriented Moodle platform, allowing each student to utilize the instructor's materials on an individual basis and examine their own score (Sherman, 2022). Higher education institutions are becoming gradually aware of the diversity of their learners. The idea of digital pedagogy, which has gained traction in educational circles, has been promoted by war or armed conflict. In this technologically advanced society, this makes education possible. Teachers need to be properly trained and equipped

to effectively reap this benefit (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). According to Orlando and Attard (2015), there is no one-size-fits-all method when it comes to teaching using technology because it depends on the kinds of technology being used now as well as the subject matter being taught. The question in current difficult times is not whether online teaching-learning techniques can deliver high-quality education; rather, it is how academic institutions will be able to implement online learning to such a large extent (Carey, 2020). Although, studies have examined the use of online distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa (Ndlovu et al., 2020; Chaka, 2020), there has been little focus on challenges confronting the use of distance learning to improve learning loss amid armed conflicts in Africa. In subsequent sections, we interrogate these challenges and possible mitigation measures.

CHALLENGES OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN MITIGATING REFUGEE LEARNING LOSS IN AFRICA

Distance learning, no doubt, has strong positive relationship with an online engagement of students displaced by war or armed conflicts. In the process, it has been found that these student refugees can adequately learn and regain knowledge loss from being displaced from their traditional face-to-face teaching and learning as a result of on-going war or armed conflicts in their countries (Maatuk et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). However, while distance learning has some attributes in terms of its ability to enhance accessibility to online teaching and learning, knowledge acquisition, gaining of loss knowledge, interactions with teachers and classmates, as well as access to write exams or complete an academic programme online, it also has some challenges. One of the challenges is the ability and readiness of the conventional universities academic staff to handle and make use of the ICTs, especially the old and established academic staff. Technology advancement such as the use of ICTs to conduct online teaching and learning has great potentials for productivity, it also threatens existing traditional forms of work (United Nations, 2018).

In many of the African states and higher institutions, it was found that, while young academics have full grasp of the use of distance learning, due to their early adoption and use of technology (Chen et al., 2020), their older counterparts, require adequate training and development to be able to handle online distance learning (United Nations, 2018). Since armed conflict also affects academic staff, in most conflicting African states, academics seem to be facing dilemma in terms of which instructional tools to use, most of these armed conflicts prevent them from adjusting to the teaching and learning needs of refugee students at the time of war Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), Mseleku (2020), leaving them with the problem of designing teaching and learning plan that can address the expectations of refugee students in conflict affected African countries.

Within the mayhem of armed conflicts, institutions of learning are left trying to navigate the online distance learning scene, which seems to be a new meadow for some, trying to look for best alternative learning system that can serve the interest of the displaced students or refugees has been challenging within the digital divide that exists in Africa. One of the problems of online distance learning face in improving learning loss, is the unequal access to digital device that can power online teaching and learning (Naidoo & Naidoo, 2021). Already, Africa suffer from digital divide, the incessant cases of war that displaces people or suddenly renders people as refugees worsen the precarious state of accessibility to digital technologies in the continent. For instance, in Africa, men seem to have more access to digital technologies than women, especially in rural areas, even in some instances, poor education of women, often, denied them the access to use of digital devices that can power online teaching and learning (Dhawan (2020).

According to Joshi (2021), the inability to get internet connectivity and the high cost of devices seem to be discriminatory and distortional ways to exacerbate inequality. They also have the potential to dramatically worsen the state of learning loss in Africa. Among low- and middle-income people, it includes issues like inadequate digital literacy and deficiencies in infrastructure. Joshi (2021: 55) argues that it can mitigate the "digital divide" and generate "digital dividends" if executed effectively. The education industry needs to go digital in order to grow. As more businesses become digitally connected, Orlando and Attard (2015) emphasize that new kinds of learners are emerging who, since they are "digital natives," may possess greater digital competency than earlier generations. The resource preparedness of typical refugee students is one of the biggest obstacles facing Africa and higher institutions of learning in their efforts to curb learning loss (Pather et al., 2020). Remedial of societal systems that may exacerbate inequality and restrict access to learning is the challenge (Dlamini, 2018). According to Habib (2016), colleges should be "reactive to the goals of equity, efficiency, democratic participation, and development" rather than rationalizing education. This requires an understanding of the underlying issues.

Importantly, refugee students, often, may feel isolated in their camps, due to the deplorable conditions that may not be conducive for distance learning. This may make them lose interest in learning. Aboagye et al. (2020) suggest that most of the refugee camps lack the infrastructural capacity to provide an online distance learning services and this further hampers the ability of the refugee students to engage in an online teaching and learning. Pather et al. (2020) discovered that given the fundamental role of both devices and access to broadband internet for effective learning, which are very scarce in most refugee camps across Africa, student refugees would be at risk of learning loss as they tend not to have access to these services.

One other challenge is poor funding of digital technologies that would be used to provide online distance learning services in refugee camps in Africa. In conflict affected African countries and most countries with refugee camps, emphasis is paid more and first, to the safety of displaced people or refugees than provision of educational assistance or learning platforms, where they can learn or acquire knowledge. Huge amount of money is spent on food, clothing, healthcare, security, water, and other household sundries. There is usually no plan or provision for learning services in

most of the refugee camps in Africa. This invariably affects refugee students in these camps, as they seem to suffer from learning loss syndrome caused by war or armed conflicts.

MITIGATING CHALLENGES OF DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF LEARNING IN AFRICA

The call for the adoption of distance learning platforms in refugee camps across Africa, especially in conflict-prone regions is symptomatic of certain factors. First, it attests to the expanding importance of online distance learning in regaining learning or knowledge loss. While it can enhance and endanger effective learning and prevent learning loss, the positive use to which it can be applied outweighs the negative. Second, it is indicative of another method in addressing the effects of war on refugees learning loss in Africa. Although, war is a common factor in many continents, Africa's case presents a frightening situation, considering the numbers of countries affected by armed conflict and its effects on humanity. Studies on the effects of Armed conflict on education in some African countries like Cameroon and Nigeria show worsening outcomes (Michael Ntui Agbor et al., 2022; Eleonora et al.,2019). The literature is replete with evidence of negative trends of armed conflicts on students drop-out, school attendance, effective teaching and learning by displaced students or refugees in Africa (Rodriguez and Sanchez, 2012; Bundervoet, 2012; Di Maio and Nandi, 2013), indicating refugees learning loss, which, in the discussion of Eleonora et al (2019), hinders the attainment of the SDG 4 (education for all).

To mitigate associated problems of war on education such as drop-out, low attendance, teachers' apathy, closure of schools, sudden termination of academic programmes, among others, key actors in the educational system including government should include in their humanitarian plan, an online distance learning system, where displaced people or refugee students can have access to an online teaching and learning. Not all the emergencies or humanitarian services put into consideration the educational welfare of refugees in safety camps in Africa. With this initiative, the attainment of the SDG4, "education for all" will not suffer in Africa. It will not only offer the refugees access to effective teaching and learning, but it will address the learning loss problem in Africa.

Stakeholders in the education sector need to deepen the use of online distance learning as this can enable both the instructors and learners know the potency of the platforms in addressing learning loss, continuing education, drop-out, and other related challenges caused by war or armed conflict in Africa. The ability to institutionalize and strengthen the use of distance learning at various refugee camps, amid war will aid sustained efforts at improving access of refugee students to effective learning, which is also one of the targets of SDG 4.

Besides, African leaders should address inherent and primary causes of war and armed conflicts across Africa. There should be an urgent and sincere commitment to peacebuilding through cease fire agreement in countries affected by armed conflicts. Specifically, pushing factors such as poverty, unemployment, governance failure, electoral mal-practices, lack of political will, state fragility, corruption, inadequate funding of the digital technologies and general low budgetary allocation to education, need to be adequately addressed to enhance an inclusive education for all in Africa. This will go a long way in improving not only human capital development, but the much-expected sustainable development of Africa.

CONCLUSION

In this research, focus was on the opportunities that distance learning provides for displaced students or student refugees affected by war or armed conflict in Africa in order to have access to online learning and prevent learning loss. These are sacred to the SDG 4, which advocates "education for all". Unfortunately, in Africa incessant war and armed conflicts have destructively hampered student refugees' education and effective learning, and, thus, continuing education. The displacement of regular students from traditional face-to-face teaching and learning system is an indicative of and contributes to learning loss of the displaced students by war in Africa. Other implications of war and armed conflicts for effective learning and education in general, including lack of access to internet, poor training of online emergency academic staff, administrative structure, and other ethical issues, poor funding as well as poor material and human resource endowment, worsen effective learning and educational development of displaced students and student refugees in Africa. Benefits provided by distance learning are necessary in addressing some of the challenges. This article argues that distance learning will help reduce learning loss and provide avenues that can aid effective teaching and learning by displaced students. Distance learning allows the engagement of the displaced students in an online teaching and learning amid war or armed conflicts in Africa. Learning loss can be alleviated by collective efforts of key actors in the educational sector, at providing adequate fund and conducive safety environment for the displaced students or refugees to learn, relying on access to digital devices in providing distance learning. Distance learning promotes the coproduction of knowledge in which refugees or displaced students bring to an online classroom their knowledge about problems they are facing and support for continuing education, which in the long run, will prevent learning loss.

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