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*Voiceover:* *A Deeper Look. Exploring what works and what doesn't in development and the changes we can make together to turn ideas into action.*

*Patrick Fine:* This season, the theme of *A Deeper Look* podcast is The Shape of Things to Come — the trends and ideas that will shape the future of human development.

Now, we decided on that theme back in 2019, and little did we know at the time that the world would become engulfed in a global pandemic that would have a profound impact on how human development work is carried out. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and this is *A Deeper Look* podcast.

Today, we're going to explore distance education. We're at a point in time where the global pandemic has caused the shutdown of almost all schools in the world. It is the first time in human history that all education institutions have been closed at the same time. Over a billion children and youth and young adults are out of school. It's projected that in poor countries, up to 50 percent of the children who have left school because of the pandemic will never return. And, in wealthier countries, children have moved almost exclusively to online learning or distance education. And, the world is learning about both the opportunities and the challenges of distance education.

I'm very happy to have Sidiki Traore, the Founder and Executive Director [President] of Distance Education [for] Africa, as my guest today. Sidiki, welcome to *A Deeper Look* podcast.

*Sidiki Traore:* Thank you very much for having me, Patrick. It's really an honor for me to be on your show, and I'm really excited to be talking to you about something which is really dear to my heart.

*Patrick Fine:* Well, we're excited to hear about your experience with distance learning. Now, you founded Distance Education [for] Africa more than nine years ago, so you've been working on distance education for close to a decade.

Now, distance education is the main means for educating these billion children who are out of school. Can you first tell us a little bit about yourself, about what led you to found Distance Education

[for] Africa, and then tell us how the pandemic is affecting the work you do?

*Sidiki Traore:* Patrick, actually, it's more than, you know, almost 20 years ago when I started working at the World Bank. I worked on a project with the World Bank, with distance education. We used to broadcast courses on TV to various African universities. That was a satellite broadcast, one with video and two-way audio, so ...

*Patrick Fine:* Sidiki, let me ask you — were those for specific disciplines, or was it a variety of courses?

*Sidiki Traore:* It was a variety of undergraduate courses — math, physics, English — from various universities.

*Patrick Fine:* How many universities in Africa were participating?

*Sidiki Traore:* At that time, I think we started about 20 and it started growing to 30. We started with Anglophone and then the French came.

*Patrick Fine:* Sure.

*Sidiki Traore:* So, that's how I started. And then, after that project, I created Distance Education for Africa. But, what I realized is, you know, the traditional universities cannot meet the demand of education in Africa, it's impossible. So, I think distance education was a solution to helping traditional universities to meet some of the demand. So, that's how we started.

We started with English courses. I traveled to many countries in Africa to present to them how to use e-books to teach English. So, I went to about 10 universities, presenting my project, and I told them that, you know, we should move to e-books because e-books is really — it's fun, it's interactive, it's easier to learn. I remember one professor showed me a storage room full of English books, you know, and some of them were so old and out of date and I told the professor, "Why don't we move to the e-books, because it's more interactive?"

So, that's how we started, and then from there, we offered courses from Laval University in Canada, in French, for the French-speaking countries, and then cyber security and English and journalism courses. But, after all these courses from various universities in the U.S. and Canada, we finally started our mega

project. It's called the Africa Scholarship Cohort. This project, Patrick, is our flagship. It's using a proven distance education model to create lasting economic impacts.

So, the Africa Scholarship Cohort is a partnership with the University of Virginia, the Darden Business School. It has two main objectives, Patrick. The main objective is to associate the beneficiaries with an innovative educational initiative by bringing top tier education to Africa via modern technology.

The specific objective — we wanted to expand access to high-quality secondary education in Africa. Another specific objective is to develop a network of engaged learners in Africa to train [a] new generation of African leaders to be job creators and enter the global market.

So, we started with business courses. Patrick, I could tell you, students told us, they reported that, you know, they have essential skill sets that are market relevant, enhancing their problem-solving skills, job readiness and employability. Our courses deal with professional development skills.

*Patrick Fine:* And, are the courses offered through universities? Do the students have to be enrolled in an African university?

*Sidiki Traore:* No, it's — you know, we use Coursera to offer the courses. So, we have students who have nothing to do with universities. We have banks, we have ministries, NGOs, we have unemployed, we have business, we have CEOs — you name it. This project, we have students in 51 countries. We have over 7,000 scholarships in 51 countries. Patrick, it's the entire continent. It's so ambitious.

*Patrick Fine:* That's very impressive. Do the students pay a fee to take the course, or the course is free?

*Sidiki Traore:* They don't pay anything. That's the beauty about it.

*Patrick Fine:* So, Sidiki, let me ask you — now that there's so much attention being placed on distance education, what do you see as the main challenges to distance education in Africa today?

*Sidiki Traore:* I would mention three main challenges. I think the biggest challenge is connectivity, because in Africa, 82 percent of the people have no internet. The second challenge is the device,

because it's really expensive to buy [a] tablet or computer, and even to ask teachers to buy those gadgets to use in that profession is very difficult, because some of the teachers are not paid very well. And, the third challenge is the lack of technological skills. I think that's very important, because so many teachers don't have the skills to teach.

So, I think, in terms of challenges in Africa, those are the three biggest challenges.

*Patrick Fine:* What kind of devices do most of your students use? Telephones or iPads or computers?

*Sidiki Traore:* That's a great question. Most other people who have stayed at home in Africa, Patrick, 89 percent don't have computers.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Sidiki Traore:* And, 82 percent have no internet. So, it's really rough, but one of the beauties about our courses, you know, coming from the University of Virginia — with a cell phone, they have the ability to download the course material on their cell phone and watch on offline. The technological barrier on the ground where we work is really hard, but what has happened, Patrick, in this pandemic, 1.6 billion of learners are at home, and it has affected 63,000,000 primary and secondary teachers.

So, in Africa, we have 269,000,000 students stay at home. Everyone has been caught off guard.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Sidiki Traore:* So, the whole world has tried to find a way to solve that problem. Some people have used [a] local medium, like radio, TV, to try to solve the problem, but some manage to use e-learn and cloud-based. But, you know, for me, this pandemic has led to really three main things — the quality, the access and equity. Those are three important aspects, you know, this pandemic has really brought to light, Patrick.

*Patrick Fine:* So, let's take each of those one by one. Let's start with equity. So, how has the pandemic affected equity issues?

*Sidiki Traore:* Well, equity issues, I would say even if you look at the U.S., for instance, people whose parents have means, they have resources, their kids will go further because they could stay at home, they could work with their kids. So, it's not equitable.

*Patrick Fine:* Let me ask you, Sidiki, in Africa, is the pandemic making the equity situation worse? Because, you do have these disparities where, say, people in urban areas or the wealthier people, they're going to have computers, they're going to have internet. Whereas, people who are poorer or in rural areas are less likely to have that technology as you mentioned earlier. They'll be left out. Are you seeing that in your work? Have you seen school systems there trying to move to a remote learning posture like they have in the U.S.?

So, in the U.S., all school districts offered distance education for three months, and now, most school systems will be offering a choice between remote learning and some in-person learning. What are you seeing in Africa in terms of a response to the pandemic?

*Sidiki Traore:* The thing is, you know, the challenge is, some of the teachers were not prepared to do distance learning. What I've seen in Africa is, you caught the Minister of Education off guard, it caught teachers off guard. Luckily, some of the countries are doing better than others, but in most countries, they have increased radio program[s] because, you see, almost everyone has a radio. They have increased TV, so you could see many countries have adopted TV programs.

*Patrick Fine:* Let me ask you about that, Sidiki. So, everybody or almost everybody in Africa, every family in Africa has a cell phone.

*Sidiki Traore:* That's correct.

*Patrick Fine:* And, every family, virtually every family has a radio. I find it interesting that the reaction in Africa was to go back to radio education, which we were doing in the 1980s. Instead of going to e-learning through cell phones, the kind of e-learning you've been talking about, they've gone back to interactive radio education. What do you think about that?

*Sidiki Traore:* No, it's not everywhere, Patrick. Let me clear — you know, it depends on the country. You know, in Kenya, the cell phone

companies are working with the government to put everything online. So, in some countries, they are doing better.

But, for me, the radio and the TV is good for rural areas, but it's not interactive. That's why, you know, I mentioned three big things — the quality and the equity and access. Because even radio, I wouldn't say that everyone has a radio. Some people may not have [a] radio.

So, for me, the TV and radio for distance education, it solves some problem[s], but for me, the quality is not what I would really see as the best quality. Some cell phone[s] are useless because, you know, they are not smartphone[s].

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Sidiki Traore:* Not everyone has a smartphone. That's really one of the problems. You know, the problem with internet, only 82 percent of people have internet. Cloud-based internet solution is really expensive. Radio and TV are basic elementary solution[s]. It's better to do something than not do anything.

*Patrick Fine:* I worked on interactive radio education and some TV education back in the '80s in Africa. And, it was expensive. So, the kind of distance education that you're doing through Distance Education [for] Africa, with those course curriculums already developed and delivered via cell phone or via iPad, that's cheaper than having to go back to studios and produce radio programs and then, you know, buy the air time to transmit them over the airwaves.

It strikes me that going back to TV and radio, I understand the point you're making, that in some places, that may be the best solution that they have right now, but it seems like it's going to an old technology that is less efficient, lower quality and more expensive instead of looking forward to the new infrastructure that exists and exists throughout the continent.

*Sidiki Traore:* You're right. You know, if you look at — you know, now the internet, some people can buy what we call [a] bundle of internet. Our students, for instance, if they don't have the gadget, they don't have [a] laptop, they could go to a cyber café to download and to watch videos. So, I would say some countries are doing better in terms of using the modern technology, even leapfrogging into the 21st century, you know?

*Patrick Fine:* Exactly. Have you heard about any Ministries of Education starting to provide data packages to students or, you know, providing airtime to students so that they can afford to do remote learning?

*Sidiki Traore:* Yes. Yes. I think even in Kenya, the government is trying to provide air time to student[s] — which is really good because, in that case, you know, they would do up-to-date, modern, you know, learning.

*Patrick Fine:* Have they started programs to train teachers to teach remotely?

*Sidiki Traore:* This is one of the biggest challenge[s] — COVID has exposed the weakness of some teachers. Some teachers are not willing to embrace technology, but they're gonna be left behind. You know, one of the biggest challenge[s] is to train lecturers and student[s] on all these distance education technologies. I think that's one of the key[s].

*Patrick Fine:* What do you think the long-term impact of this experience is going to be in Africa? So, for the first time, you have all kids out of school, you have countries, as you've been describing, trying different solutions. Do you think things will just go back to the way they were in the pre-pandemic days, or do you think that this experience will influence the future of education in Africa?

*Sidiki Traore:* Well, it's gonna influence, definitely. Things will change. If I look at the role of the teachers, the role of the student[s], the role of parents — it's gonna change. The teachers will have more work, because right now, I teach online. It's [a] lot of work. So, the teacher will facilitate student learning and create classroom environment[s] that are productive in honing students' 21st century skills. They will have to help students to be technologically savvy, so that's one of the role[s] of the teacher.

For the students, I think they will have to be more independent and student[s] need to be globally aware and digitally savvy. The parents definitely need to learn problem-solving skills, because they are thrown into this. We've seen so many living room[s] change to a classroom all of a sudden — so, the parents will have to learn something completely new in the future.

*Patrick Fine:* Sidiki, that makes me think of all the effort we've put in over the years to try to increase parental involvement in their children's

education. And now, this situation, it forces the parent or some member of the family, maybe it's an older brother or older sister, to be involved in the students' learning.

So, that's interesting, and I like another insight that you just mentioned, which is, this shift to online learning will require students to be more independent and to use and learn the problem-solving skills that also we have been trying to build into curriculums for 30 years now.

*Sidiki Traore:* Definitely, you're right, you know?

*Patrick Fine:* But, it makes me worry a little that you might have, to go back to the equity issue, you might have a situation where those countries that are more capable in adapting remote technologies — and I'm thinking of a place like Senegal. They have good connectivity and they're forward-leaning into technology, and they have been for 20 years. A country like that may burst ahead of a country that is not as oriented to technology, that has not invested in infrastructure, and that doesn't have the personnel in the ministries or in universities and other institutions to lead that change.

So, we could see this situation resulting in a kind of bigger digital divide as some countries move ahead and others lag behind.

*Sidiki Traore:* Mm-hmm. I agree with you, yes. Senegal has a good internet infrastructure and they are working hard to, you know, move ahead. I think what the Minister of Education in every country, at least in Africa, needs to do is understand that the world is going to be digitalized. So, digital literacy is where we are going.

You know, our courses, we've been able to scale it up to multiple communities in Africa through mobile computers. So, we've been able to reach the unreachable, because some of our courses, we have many students at, even the Botswana prison system, we have lots of students there.

*Patrick Fine:* Uh huh.

*Sidiki Traore:* We have students in banks in Rwanda. We have students all over Africa. So, this is the way to train people to get skills that are necessary to address some of the home-grown solutions to social, geopolitical and technological and financial problems in Africa. Because, if you look at some of our courses, we offer, like, cyber



security, design thinking, business strategies — those are courses which help people. Project management is for everyone, whether you're a doctor, an engineer, or jobless, you need project management.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Sidiki Traore:* So, there are business courses, but some of the courses are not specifically for business only. So, if they have an infrastructure, they could do the same thing to train more people to get the skills. I agree with you. It's gonna be a divide.

*Patrick Fine:* I mean, it seems like there's a kind of a[n] irony here, that on one hand, the pandemic is likely to accelerate adoption of remote learning and remote technologies in a way that can expand access and address some quality issues that you've talked about.

*Sidiki Traore:* Mm-hmm.

*Patrick Fine:* So, maybe access and quality and just adoption of new approaches to education will be accelerated by this extraordinary set of conditions that we are living through. But, at the same time, I fear that it's likely to increase inequity. Inequality will grow because, as we've talked about, you have some countries that have invested in remote infrastructure, they're better positioned, and so you may see the digital divide grow.

Sidiki, I want to conclude our conversation by asking you a question that I've been asking all of the guests on *A Deeper Look* this year. When you look at where we are right now, we're in the midst of a pandemic — as you've said, it's changing everything — and you look to the future: Are you an optimist, do you see that we will successfully adapt and overcome these challenges, or are you more of a pessimist with respect to how the pandemic and the conditions we're dealing with right now will affect educational opportunity in Africa?

*Sidiki Traore:* Well, Patrick, thank you very much for this question. For me, there is no hesitation between being pessimistic and optimistic. I've been doing this job for so many years, passing over hurdles, all the difficulties, I've never been discouraged in my life. For me, I've always been optimistic in my life. And, for me, it works because, four or five years ago, if, you know, someone would have said, “Well, Sidiki, you know, what you are doing now — just wait. In

2020, you will see the result of what you're doing, it will have an impact.”

I think I am more optimistic than ever, because something good is coming out of this staying at home, because now, people are focusing on new technologies, they are focusing on new trends — you know, digital literacy, professional development, collaboration. All these things will shape the future of education. So, I am extremely optimistic that things are gonna be better and we're gonna continue to make an impact.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, you know, Sidiki, you share that optimism with most of the guests of *A Deeper Look* podcast, and I think that is a common characteristic of most of us who work in human development. And, I think that we can say that distance education is going to be one of those trends that shapes the future of education, and therefore, the future of nations and of human development.

Sidiki, this is a fantastic conversation. Thank you so much for joining me today.

*Sidiki Traore:*

Thank you very much. I was really honored, Patrick. Thank you very much.

*Patrick Fine:*

Well, it's great talking to you, and thanks to our listeners for joining us for this fascinating conversation about distance education and the role that it's going to play and how it's one of the trends that will shape the future and that it's being accelerated by the extraordinary conditions that the pandemic has created.

I invite listeners to send in their comments. I hope you're subscribing to the podcast. Share your thoughts and comments on this episode. What do you see as the pros and cons of the increased use of distance education? And, please share this episode with others. Tune in next month to continue the conversation about what are the trends that will shape the future of human development. Thank you.

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