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Mitigating and turning challenges caused by impact of Covid 19 pandemic to Nigerian education

Isah Umar Usman¹ and Nuruddin Sambo²

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest economic disruption worldwide, most especially education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries. The crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities by reducing the opportunities for many of the most vulnerable children, youth, and adults, those living in poor or rural areas, girls, refugees, persons with disabilities and forcibly displaced persons – to continue their learning. Some 23.8 million additional children and youth (from pre-primary to tertiary) have dropped out or not have access to school due to the pandemic's economic impact alone. Similarly, the education disruption has had, and will continue to have, substantial effects beyond education. Closures of educational institutions hamper the provision of essential services to children and communities, including access to nutritious food, affect the ability of many parents to work, and increase risks of violence against women and girls. The past few weeks have ushered in a range of government sanctioned and structure-shifting risk-control directives across Nigeria and the Globe, in an attempt to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus disease- COVID-19. From international airport closures, to a nationwide closure of all schools, and about seven months lockdown of major states starting with the the ramifications from the slowdown/shutdown of economic activity are poised to be severe for Nigeria. It is especially critical, because in the backdrop of COVID-19, the global economic crisis and the recent slump in oil prices are further expected to intensify the impending economic crises, and create sharp shocks that reshaped the economy. In this piece, we would examine some of the immediate and long-term impacts of the closures, and proffering suggestions as to how the government can mitigate these consequences. Additionally, we are looking towards the future, and making prescriptions for how they might turn this disruptive crisis into an opportunity to address several of its pre-pandemic supply side education problems.

Keywords: Covid-19, education, economy, security

¹Biological Science Department, Federal Polytechnic Bida, Nigeria.

Correspondence Email: baisah1990@gmail.com

²Biological Science Department, Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State, Nigeria

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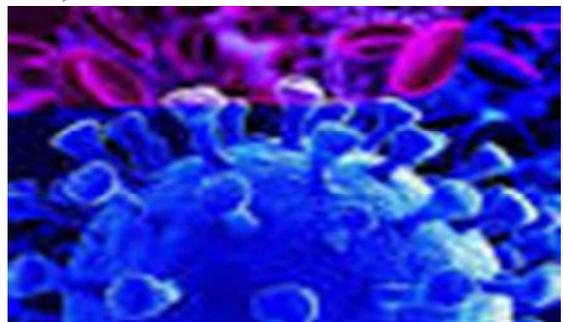
Introduction

The 2019 novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in China as an infectious upper respiratory disease. The virus has since spread worldwide presenting one of the most serious global health crises in history, with high socio-economic costs. While the health impacts are directly through contagion, the economic impacts are largely a consequence of the preventive measures adopted by the respective governments to curtail its spread. Key measures adopted by most countries to curtail the spread include the closing of their frontiers and partial or complete lockdowns of economies which among other things, have seen the temporary closure of businesses, schools and social services. (Marinoni et al 2020). The past few weeks have ushered in a range of government sanctioned and structure-shifting risk-control directives across Nigeria and the Globe, in an attempt to curtail the spread of the novel corona virus disease- COVID-19. From international airport closures, to a nationwide closure of all schools, and now, a two-week lockdown of three major states - Lagos, Abuja and Ogun, the ramifications from the slowdown/shutdown of economic activity are poised to be severe for Nigeria.

It is especially critical, because in the backdrop of COVID-19, the global economic crisis and the recent slump in oil prices are further expected to intensify the impending economic crises, and create sharp shocks that will reshape the economy in the near term. (African Development Bank 2020). For some sectors, the immediate ramifications are evident. One of such sector is the basic education sector, the impact of which has been largely felt by students. The nationwide school closures have disrupted learning and access to vital school-provided services for a record number of students in Nigeria. According to UNESCO, almost 40 million learners have been affected by the nationwide school closures in Nigeria, of which over 91 percent are primary and secondary school learners. In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Nigeria by

limiting how students can access learning across the country.(African Development Bank 2020). For an already fragile education system, the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges on the government, students, and parents that will highlight and could amplify some of the cracks in the system.

As the nation begins to grapple with these challenges, a key question arises: Is the Nigerian education system designed to adapt rapidly to the changing world? Given the state of affairs in the world today, the nation's ability to ensure continuation of learning will depend largely on their ability to swiftly harness available technology, provide adequate infrastructure, and mobilize stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programs. (IMF 2020). Generally, Nigeria's education sector is not adapting, and is expected to struggle on that front for the foreseeable future. However, the consequential socio-economic burden will be borne disproportionately by students in public schools, as compared to those in private schools. While several private schools have begun to initiate distance learning programs, and taking advantage of the myriad of ICT-learning opportunities provided by the international community, the government limited by funds and persistent deficiencies in planning, is yet to announce any official plans for providing distance learning opportunities, especially for public schools. The implication being that these students in public schools currently have no formal learning plans and could be missing learning altogether. (World Bank 2020).



Covid 19 picture 1 by (IMF 2020).

Objectives

In this piece, we examine some of the immediate and long-term impacts of the closures, and proffering suggestions as to how the government can mitigate these consequences, and Additionally, we are looking towards the future, and making prescriptions for how the government and other authorities might turn this disruptive crisis into an opportunity to address several of its pre-pandemic issues side education problems.

Main body

The method adopted for this work is using content analysis.

Research questions

By tracing chains of these effects the following important questions could be ask:

- How has education been impacted due to covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria?
- What are the immediate and long term impacts of schools closure due to covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria?
- What are the possible ways through which Nigerian government and other authorities across the globe can mitigate impacts of covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the possible ways through which Nigerian government can turn crisis caused by covid-19 pandemic into an opportunity to address several pre-pandemic supply aside education problems?

Discussion of result

How has education been impacted?

Missed learning for the majority of pre-pandemic in-school-students: According to UNESCO, about 35.9 million primary and secondary school learners are currently out-of-school as a result of the school closures. For primary schools, this number totals approximately 25.6 million students, of which about 87 percent (23.5 million) are students

enrolled in public schools. The numbers are just as stark for secondary school learners. Of the roughly 10.3 million secondary school students who are out-of-school as a result of the closures, approximately 81 percent (8.4 million) of them are public school students. In Nigeria, school opportunity is correlated to income level, and public schools differ from private schools in the populations they serve.

While private schools serve learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds who are willing and able to pay more to access the better resources offered by private schools, public schools which are usually free, comprise students from lower socio-economic households and low-income areas. In instances where distance learning opportunities are available, uptake will be low from the students in the public schools category, as a result of poor infrastructure such as lack of electricity, or poor/no internet connectivity, etc. Opportunities to learn within the homes are also limited, given that a parent's ability to provide education support to their children will be shaped by their own level of educational attainment, general literacy level, and other commitments.

Given the significant relationship between educational attainment and income level, and the correlation between parental income level and school choice, we can infer that the literacy level of parents in public schools in Nigeria might be lower than their private school counterparts. In instances where the parents are educated, investing the time to train their children during this time might be a luxury. For Nigeria, the reality is simple - while the school closures are necessary to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus, until the ban on movement is lifted and schools are reopened, majority of students will not be learning.

Loss of access to vital school-provided services: Beyond the missed learning opportunities, students in Nigeria were also losing access to the daily meals made available by the federally-funded school

feeding programs. Nigeria has one of the largest school feeding programs in the world, with the World Food Programme estimating that in 2019, Nigeria's Home-grown Schools Feeding Initiative provided access to daily meals to over 9 million children in over 40,000 public schools. The benefits of school feeding programs extend beyond the immediate education benefits of the meals provided, such as encouraging enrolment in schools, and boosting learning. School feeding programs yield larger socio-economic benefits for children, their families, and society at large, two of which are especially pertinent to children of low socio-economic groups: boosting health and nutrition, and providing social protection and safety nets.

Health and nutrition: For some students, especially those from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds, the daily meals provided at schools are their primary source of healthy and nutritious meals. With schools closed, over 9 million public school students are currently being deprived of this benefit. Beyond feeding, Nigeria's feeding program also offers health services, including deworming and immunizations for students in public schools across 17 states. This closure would unfortunately also affect access to some basic health services for poorer children.

Social protection and social safety nets - Over 50 percent of students accessing free meals fall into first and second wealth quintiles, representing the poorest 40 percent of the population, in a country where over 50 percent of the country live below the poverty line. As empirical evidence has revealed, people living below the poverty line usually spend between half and three-quarters of their income on food, representing a significant proportion of a poor household income. For each individual meal provided, the value can represent up to 10 percent of a family's income; for families with more than one child in school, this small figure can represent significant savings for families. The school feeding program can provide safety nets by boosting income for households. The absence of these daily

meals is likely causing posing potential challenges for households, especially at this time where there has been a shut-down/slowdown in economic activities across the country.

Leaving more kids behind - A longer-term impact of these school closures would be deepened educational inequality. While some international development partners (UNESCO, for example) have put together and provided access to ICT-based resources to foster learning, uptake will depend largely on the level and quality of digital and internet access, and language accessibility (as most programs are available in English or other non-native Nigerian languages). According to the Digital 2020 Global Overview Report published in January 2020, about 60 percent of Nigerians are not connected to the internet. The statistics for mobile phones, which could also be used as a learning medium, are more hopeful. According to the report, around 169.2 million people - 83 percent of Nigerians have access to mobile phone connections; however, of these, 50 percent - around 84.5 million people, reside in urban areas. For the population with access, the proportion would be skewed towards high socio-economic households and urban households; an overwhelming majority of whom are private school students who already have a learning advantage over their public school peers.

For children from poorer backgrounds who tend to have less access to internet connectivity, computers, and other devices, and reside in rural areas where local languages take dominance over English, ICT-learning uptake will be limited. The inequity in access to ICT-based learning has the adverse effect of further intensifying the existing disparities in learning outcomes along socio-economic lines, and the urban-rural divide. Given that the school closures are currently indefinite, these students would continue to fall further behind. For students with learning disabilities, and those living in fragile and conflict-affected regions, the outlook is even bleaker. This raises a major challenge around educational inequality

- given the technological landscape and income driven digital-divide, how do we harness available technology to support already marginalized students during these closures? If this is unaddressed, the gap in education quality, and inadvertently socio-economic equality could become more extreme as a result of the school closures.

Impacts on gender issues

Closing schools will obviously not impact all students equally. This is evident in the disproportionate impact it will have on girls¹². School, beyond simply being a place of learning, also represents a safe haven for many children who live in difficult situations at home. Girls are particularly at risk of sexual violence and problems surrounding reproductive health during school closures: when schools were closed due to Ebola, there was a sharp increase in teenage pregnancy and many pregnant girls were refused entry to school at the start of the school year¹³; unfortunately, the same thing is likely to happen again in the current crisis. In addition, throughout the world, women provide the vast majority of unpaid household labour (cleaning, cooking, childcare, etc.). This is equally true for young girls: even before confinement, girls aged 5 to 14 years already spent 40% more time than boys on household chores at home¹⁴. Forced to stay at home, girls are likely to see a disproportionate increase in the amount of work they have to do, leaving them less time than boys to devote to academic homework. This increase in work may encourage parents to push their daughters to drop out of school altogether. Finally, like many other NGOs, organizations working to advance the situation of girls and in the education sector in general face a lack of funding. In May, nearly half of the educational organizations contacted by CGDev reported that their budgets had already been reduced, largely as a result of a drop in private and philanthropic donations¹⁵. This decrease in budget may come at the most inopportune time: more than ever, children and especially girls will need additional support in order to

achieve MDGs 4 (quality education) and (gender equality).

Other effects beyond education

Notwithstanding the fact that school closures will result in significant loss of learning for children, educators and psychologists alike point out that this will not be the only impact felt by students. In the context of school closures, and with the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis more generally, it is unfortunately quite likely that many students will experience significant trauma, additional stress and anxiety. Many children and adolescents will potentially find themselves confined in unsuitable and/or unsafe housing, especially if parents are also confined and still have to work. Family ties have been placed under greater strain, with mandatory confinement and the need to live together with few alternatives. The economic impact of the crisis has greatly aggravated the stress felt by many, posing psychological difficulties for parents and, indirectly through them, children. Finally, with the number of deaths from SARS-CoV-2, close to 700,000 at the time of writing, families around the world will find themselves in mourning. All of this will add to the emotional and psychological consequences of the current crisis in general, in which students around the world are temporarily losing, unexpectedly, a comforting routine. While the WHO indicates that in order to combat these psychological consequences, parents should devote time to help and support their children, this is not necessarily possible in all cases. Such support is particularly difficult, if not impossible, for families where parents have significant employment problems, or where they have even been affected by the disease itself.

These impacts will potentially have significant consequences during the back-to-school period, and even beyond. Based on past studies conducted in post-disaster contexts, it would seem that the psychological impact of the disruption of routine due to disasters, as

observed in Australia⁷ in Ethiopia, in India and in Vietnam⁸, have a severe impact on educational outcomes. It has been proven that stress can have a strong negative impact on mental ability and memory⁹. The impacts of school closures due to COVID-19 are not likely to be any different. It should also be noted that these psychosocial impacts will not be the same depending on the age of the students, or for those with pre-existing mental problems or special learning-assistance needs¹⁰. Any plan put in place to continue education during COVID-19 must take these particularities into account, including an assessment of the additional stresses faced by students, and putting in place programs to deal with them. Teachers, too, may suffer some psychological consequences during this crisis. The impact of crises (epidemiological, natural/technological disasters, generalized violence, and others) on teachers has been only partly studied¹¹. However, as many children's first point of contact outside the home, they are often very important for the emotional and psychological support of students. It is therefore important that school officials, as well as governments more generally, find ways to assist them in managing this socio-emotional burden, which is added to the new workload of managing remote teaching systems in which the most rewarding part of teaching, the direct contact with pupils, is replaced by a virtual setting.



Covid 19 Picture 2 by (World Bank 2020).



Covid 19 Picture 3 by (World Bank 2020).



Covid 19 Picture 4 by (World Bank 2020).

Recommendation

However, in order to adhere to its goal of halving learning poverty by 2030, it is necessary for the international community to recognize that the consequences of school closures tend to have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized students, especially in countries with significant pre-existing gaps in their education systems. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly at risk: more than 20% of 6-11 year olds, more than 33% of 12-14 year olds, and more than 60% of 15-17 year old adolescents were already out of school before the arrival of COVID-19: numbers which are likely to increase as a result of the health crisis and its economic and social consequences. Students in these contexts have fewer options for education at home, with only a certain few of them having access to computers, a stable connection, the means to pay for educational tools, and other resources available to those living in developed countries. With school closures and the additional financial stresses caused by the economic downturn associated with COVID-19, the risk of dropping out of school is likely to be especially high in sub-Saharan Africa particularly Nigeria and other impoverished regions.

Mitigation strategies to stem the rising learning crisis

Distance learning through low-cost technology

Reaching the vulnerable population in Nigeria will require adopting multiple learning delivery modalities ranging from television, radio and SMS-based mobile platforms that are more easily available to the poor. With over 80 percent of the adult population having access to radios and phones, it would be possible to reach most children left behind with targeted instructions via these mediums. However, while online platforms offer personalized learning, other delivery modalities require a central planner, as well coordination between all three tiers of government, and the private sector (media platform owners). This is where the role of the Ministry of Education will crucially extend beyond traditional policy making and regulations. The commissioners of education could help in the deployment and use of these tools within states, while the federal government coordinates the state efforts by plugging capacity and finance gaps. The government could draw on the experience of Sierra Leone, where the Ebola crisis led to school closures for about 9 months. To reach the most vulnerable and excluded children, the Government of Sierra Leone harnessed radios and televisions to deliver lessons. Whatever strategy the government chooses to incorporate, they must ensure that it is cost-effective (at least available within the home) and easy to use (children and their parents/guardians have some knowledge of it beforehand or can easily learn to use them).

Empowering and supporting parents

Parents/guardians irrespective of their education level will be required to play a pivotal role to ensure learning is unencumbered. In order to ensure proper uptake of the available resources, the government will also need to ensure that parents are equipped to create a conducive learning environment, and support children in this new mode of learning. At this time,

parents would be required to act as intermediaries between the school management/government and the children in learning delivery. In some instances, parents would need to take on the role of a teacher in home schooling their children, although relying on guidance from school. Additionally, most of the learning mediums would be shared amongst household members, and the responsibility will fall on the parents to determine and allocate usage among family members. Therefore, it is essential that the government supports them in understanding and executing their roles during this crucial time.

Ensuring access to nutritious meals and vital services

As part of palliatives to cushion the economic effect of the lockdown, the government announced that it intends to sustain the school feeding program to children. While this is reassuring, it is not yet known how this would be implemented. For example, will the government send daily prepared meals to households, or would the cost of the meals be monetized? By extension, there is a need to design a strategy to keep other educational support programmes flowing. The pandemic already underscores the importance of vaccinations, hence windows to vaccinate children for protection against diseases need to be open. Given that all children are at home, house-to-house vaccination could be deployed. Other vital services, such as providing sanitary pads for girls, can also be distributed via this means. Given that these services are an integral part of learning, scaling them up during these difficult economic times might be crucial. Since the major beneficiary of school feeding programmes are the poor, and given the economic shocks facing the entire household, it might be insufficient to reach only children within the household; the government might need to seek ways to provide meals for entire households.

Reaching the most vulnerable

In keeping the flow of these education support programmes, the educational needs of the hard-to-reach families could also be met. Lessons and homework can go together with physical deliveries of additional education support, while each family develops their home grown strategy to cover the materials.

Education financing

The fiscal space to fund education has further shrunk with the shock on government revenue and economic downturn arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many items in the 2020 Education Sector appropriation bill, will not be implemented due to the drastic financial shortfall. Yet, more funding is required to keep learning going or scaled-up education support programmes as part of the government's palliative measures. For the government, reducing costs will require re-prioritising its plans in light of this new reality. The most urgent needs at the moment will be improving teachers' motivation, learners' preparedness and galvanizing domestic digital and media enterprises. This needs to be complemented with innovative sourcing of learning infrastructure during this period. For example, reaching children through existing school and home appliances and gadgets will be more cost-effective. Greater involvement of domestic philanthropists and digital entrepreneurs can reduce the financial burden of sustaining learning through the crisis.

How do we turn challenges into opportunities due to Covid-19 in Nigeria

The immediate consequences of the pandemic might be dire, but this crisis offers a unique turning point; an opportunity to learn, reshape, and build resilience into the educational system in Nigeria. Policymakers have a unique opportunity to explore how this emerging reality could usher in a new education architecture that tackles two of the nations most urgent pre-pandemic education crisis: access (as the country has the highest out-of-school children in the world); and quality (as

majority of children in school are not learning). The following stepwise procedures are to be considered:

Universities should work together via new or existing networks

Regional and global networks of higher education institutions and research collaborations are integral to mitigate reductions in research flexibility and mobility. Higher education institutions are in a prime position to capitalise on their existing networks or to form new ones, including institutions and countries that may not have had a reason to work together before, as interest in collaboration has increased.⁴⁸ The inclusivity of the digital world provides a platform for open source software to be shared and developed to support learning in all corners of the world.

Higher education and research funders should help prevent a 'lost generation' of scholars through the provision of research grants, positions, mentorship, and other forms of support:

As an example, Africa to Patagonia: Voices of Displacement is a collaborative effort of 40 faculty and students from the United States and abroad to further humanities research. This online initiative has provided an opportunity for students to revive their interest and strengthen their employability despite the pandemic.⁴⁹ Other forms of support mechanisms are needed such as postdoctoral fellowships to support early-career researchers across disciplines and countries.

Expansion of digital connectivity and access to hardware for both researchers and students:

Some countries are working with local communications companies to provide free or low-cost access to students, but these efforts must be accelerated and scaled up.⁵⁰ National governments should also partner with international agencies, where feasible and relevant, such as the UN Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development that is connecting Africa through widespread broadband

access.⁵¹ UNESCO's Global Education Coalition could also be a potential partner as it is working with telephone companies to provide free internet access or mobile phone data to students in countries throughout Africa and the Middle East.

Senior and young academics should act proactively to advise policymakers on post- COVID-19 higher education policy reforms and investments at the national and regional levels:

National academy members have extensive local experience as researchers, instructors, and administrators, and collectively cover a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds. Senior and young academics, and their individual members, representing many of the most respected scholars in the world, can draw on this experience to help inform evidence-based higher education policies that promote equity in the provision of online learning as well as help identify opportunities for promising regional collaborations to mitigate local impacts.

International aid organisations should prioritise the education Sustainable Development Goals to expand access to technology and online learning:

International aid organisations can help promote free access to high-quality courses online and access to technology, through partnerships with local universities and UNESCO should expand access to vetted, high quality MOOCs while bridging the resource gap in areas where basic technology is unaffordable.

Universities and governments should prioritise quality education that is student-centred and guided by a vision for the long-term success of students:

When safe and feasible, facilitating personal interaction should be a priority. Governments should ensure valid credentialing of online education platforms that promote equity and do not further exacerbate inequalities of students who struggle to learn at home. Recent and soon-to-be graduates should

also be further prepared by universities to ensure they are skilled for the workforce and the COVID-19 impacted job market. All teachers and faculty should be provided additional support and training in order to acclimate to new modes of teaching and adapt to the constantly changing work and research environment.

Universities should review systems of assessment of students and researchers:

The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities between groups and utilising the same assessment models for all risks increasing these disparities. Rather, assessments of students and researchers should carefully consider how COVID-19 has affected them, particularly when considering vulnerable populations.

Conclusion

Solutions

In order to mitigate the potentially devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and stakeholders are encouraged to pursue the following policy responses:

Suppress transmission of the virus and plan thoroughly for school re-openings:

The single most significant step that countries can take to hasten the reopening of schools and education institutions is to suppress transmission of the virus to control national or local outbreaks. Once they have done so, to deal with the complex challenge of reopening, it is important to be guided by the following parameters: ensure the safety of all; plan for inclusive re-opening; listen to the voices of all concerned; and coordinate with key actors, including the health community.

Protect education financing and coordinate for impact

The pandemic has pushed the world into the deepest global recession in living memory which will have lasting effects on economies and public finances. National authorities and the international community

need to protect education financing through the following avenues: strengthen domestic revenue mobilization, preserve the share of expenditure for education as a top priority and address inefficiencies in education spending; strengthen international coordination to address the debt crisis; and protect official development assistance (ODA) for education .

Build resilient education systems for equitable and sustainable development

Strengthening the resilience of education systems enables countries to respond to the immediate challenges of safely reopening schools and positions them to better cope with future crises. In this regard, governments could consider the following: focus on equity and inclusion; reinforce capacities for risk management, at all levels of the system; ensure strong leadership and coordination; and enhance consultation and communication mechanisms.

Reimagine education and accelerate change in teaching and learning

The massive efforts made in a short time to respond to the shocks to education systems remind us that change is possible. We should seize the opportunity to find new ways to address the learning crisis and bring about a set of solutions previously considered difficult or impossible to implement. The following entry points could be to the fore of our efforts: focus on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, particularly of marginalized groups; offer skills for employability programmes; support the teaching profession and teachers' readiness; expand the definition of the right to education to include connectivity; remove barriers to connectivity; strengthen data and monitoring of learning; strengthen the articulation and flexibility across levels and types of education and training.

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