

Covid-19 Pandemic and Implementation of World Bank Supported Education Initiatives in East Africa

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Abstract

In early 2020, COVID-19 was confirmed as a global pandemic by World Health Organization. Countries rushed to introduce lockdown and quarantine measures so as to minimize infections and deaths. Secondary schools were equally closed; affecting about 1.5 billion secondary school students globally. East African countries similarly followed this trajectory. This was done in the midst of the ongoing implementation of various World Bank initiatives- aimed at keeping and retaining vulnerable students in secondary schools; providing pathways to girls' secondary school education – especially those who had dropped out due to early pregnancy and marriage. Cursory studies had earlier indicated that school closure, necessitated by COVID-19, greatly affected the implementation of this initiative in East African countries of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. This study- based on literature review, examined how World Bank initiatives in these countries was impacted by COVID-19 pandemic. The synthesis of the findings showed that the closure of schools in these countries, together with other socio-economic disruption brought about by COVID-19 had a devastating effect on the World Bank initiatives. It was also reviewed that the pandemic has had a knock-on effect on the girl child; Girls were exposed more to some of the social cultural challenges they had escaped from such as Female Genital Mutilation and Early Marriages. Either too, policy makers were worried that this devastation clawed back on the gains that the region had made in as far as improving retention and completion rates in secondary education is concerned. On the basis of these revelations, this study recommends that World Bank group should carry out a needs assessment to better understand how the initiatives carried out in secondary schools were disrupted and thereafter come up with socially accepted strategies of implementing its initiative in these countries.

Key words: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Implementation, World Bank, Education Initiatives*

INTRODUCTION

According to scholarly evidence, COVID-19 pandemic started in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Hubei province. The first credible reports indicating the number of the affected people was revealed in December, 2019 (WHO, 2020a). From that time- henceforth, this pandemic has been spreading all over the world at an alarming rate- leading to a global closure of various social and economic sectors. Either too, educational institutions were closed in order to arrest this situation. Statistics show that more than one hundred and ninety (190) countries worldwide closed school and colleges (UNESCO, 2020a). This move did not leave out institutions of learning in Africa, and East Africa in particular, which equally suffered from this pandemic.

Scholarly writings show the divesting nature of COVID-19 pandemic to the education sectors. For example, the study done by “*A save the children [survey](#)*” indicates that 8 out of 10 students in 37 surveyed countries showed that they have learned very little or not at all since the closure of schools to the time when they were re-opened. Furthermore, it was reported that almost three quarters of the world's students were unable to access distance teaching (Witter, 2021 &

Jaramillo, 2020). Moreover, girls were reported to have been greatly impacted by this closure. This is because women and girls are always vulnerable to any unfolding in any unpredictable social underpinnings.

Furthermore, empirical literature shows that the educational impact that girls faced, during and after COVID-19 school closures is greater -as compared to the boys. Particularly, girls from marginalized families across the globe were and are still greatly affected (Jaramillo, 2020). This was reported as drawback to the many achievements attained in equity and equality measures of school enrolments and attainments. For example, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the global rate of enrolment for girls in basic education had greatly increased. This increase reduced the gender gap in access to education. However, COVID-19 pandemic- which resulted into the closure of schools, backtracked these achievements and thus has put all progress at risk (Witter, 2021). Equally, other pandemics like Ebola have the same effect on educational practices and process. For example, in 2014 to 2015, over 10,000 schools closed in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia during Ebola outbreak. During this crisis, girls were severely impacted. For example, girls in Guinea had a completion rate of basic education of 0.9% while that for boys was 2.7%; and in Sierra Leone, girls' completion rate was 1.8% against 4.0% for boys (Witter, 2021).

Malala Fund's report revealed that the closure of schools because of COVID-19 pandemic had long effects for girls. It was estimated that more than 20 million secondary school-aged girls could drop out after the pandemic has passed. Malala Fund's report uses insight from the Ebola epidemic of 2014-2015 in understanding the short and long-term effects of COVID-19 for girls. Following the Ebola epidemic and school closures in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, enrolment rates for girls dropped because of household responsibilities, child labour and teenage pregnancy (Malala, 2020).

In East Africa, the closure of institutions of learning such as schools is said to have interrupted educational initiatives supported by various donors- including the World Bank. For example, World Bank had initiated several intervention measures to enhance learners' achievement in secondary schools in East African countries of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda before the onset of COVID-19. When COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by World Health Organization, most countries in the region rushed to declare lockdown and quarantines so as to minimise infections and deaths. Secondary schools were quickly closed (WHO, 2020a). These schools were in the process of implementing various World Bank initiatives on such as Secondary Schools' Improvement Project whose aim was to retain vulnerable students in secondary schools; provide path way to secondary school education for girls who had dropped out from school due to early pregnancy and other social cultural issues. However, due to disruption brought about by COVID-19, cursory studies indicated that vulnerable learners, especially girls, in secondary level of education were directly affected; Lack of school attendance exposed them to some social cultural challenges they had escaped from such as Female Genital Mutilation and Early Marriages. This paper reviews how COVID-19 Pandemic affected the implementation of World Bank supported education initiatives in East Africa countries (WHO, 2020a). The review is based on three countries, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Based on the analysis, conclusion and recommendation for policy and practice are given.

FINDINGS FROM AVAILABLE LITERATURE

COVID-19 Pandemic and World Bank' Educational Initiatives for Girls in East African countries

The available literature shows the impact of COVID-19 on social-economic activities in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Most particularly, the educational process and practices was greatly affected; Students and learners in the region were /are being impacted by school closures and the experience of COVID-19. Particularly, girls and other vulnerable people are facing heightened challenges and disruptions in accessing quality education and opportunities for a hopeful future. Lack of access to internet, technology, and stable electricity are just some of the challenges that this group of learners are facing in the region.

According to the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report, responses to the COVID-19 crisis have not paid enough attention to inclusion of all learners, with only 40% of low-income countries supporting learners at risk of exclusion, including those with disabilities. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), estimates that 20 percent of girls enrolled in secondary school in the region are at significant risk of dropping out for good, while the World Report on Education estimated that half of all secondary school girls will not return when classrooms reopen to full operation.

In Tanzania, the first COVID-19 infection was reported on 16th March, 2020, and on 17th March, 2020 the government announced the closure of all schools and colleges for unknown time (WHO, 2020b). This closure, though done in good faith, is reported to have impacted many educational activities- including the World Bank' Secondary Education Quality Improvement Program (SEQUIP). Most particularly, this programme was aimed at making secondary education for girls to be better, safer, and more accessible. The SEQUIP introduced three measures: (i) encouraging awareness to the community on the risks for girls, (ii) reducing the risks of gender based violence on the way to school and (iii) supporting girl students who become pregnant to be recognized and have right to Alternative Education Pathways (AEPs) - for them to obtain ordinary secondary school certificate and continue with advanced secondary education (The World Bank, 2019). Statistics show that out of the 60,000 secondary school students who drop out 5,500 leave due to pregnancy. The WB programme advocates for pregnant girls to be readmitted in the educational cycle after giving birth if they wish through Alternative Education Pathways. The AEP provided alternative education to the girls who drop out ordinary secondary school to accomplish the secondary education cycle (United Nations, 2020).

However, the plan has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, school girls were subjected to social-cultural practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage and early pregnancy which have a greater impact on school attendance and enrolment (Milišić, 2020). School closures also made girls in the region at risk of getting married and early pregnant which reduced their likelihood of continuing with their education by the time schools were reopened (UNESCO, 2020b). Moreover, girls with disabilities faced barriers due to the absence of supportive equipments that would allow them to follow online sessions; online learning for students with disabilities required some accessibility features, such as audio narration, sign language video to the deaf students, and simplified text. As argued by Jaramillo, (2020), students from poor families are at an advantageous side when it comes to using new innovations

in the teaching and learning process. This scenario was also evident in other East African countries.

In Kenya, learning institutions including secondary schools were abruptly closed on March 15, 2020 (Njenga, 2020). The closure of schools interrupted the implementation of secondary education improvement project supported by the World Bank. The project started in 2018 and it is expected to end in 2023. This project aimed at reducing the challenge of shortage of teachers and improving retention. These distractions have an effect on the service planned to learners, teachers, learning institutions and other educational stakeholders (MoE, 2020). Through this initiative the Government of Kenya has provided remote teaching support using the internet and television and has encouraged academic institutions to adapt teaching material to create a more accessible online learning environment (Ngwacho, 2020). This plan targets both vulnerable students and teachers and aims to capitalize on existing radio infrastructure to enhance the possibility of community-based learning (Global Partnership, 2020).

According to scholarly writings in the country, the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya has disrupted learning for more than 18 million learners- a situation which is said to be affecting and/or threatening the achievement of sustainable development goal No.4 on access to quality, equitable and inclusive education. Moreover, the school closures are also reported to be obstructing Kenya's Vision 2030 National Development Goals which is aimed at achieving quality education for all (Ngwacho, 2020). Additionally, the school closure also affected students from low income families, especially girls and other vulnerable students. Students had to stay a whole day at home, some of the girls claimed were harassed by their parents and guardians. Also they missed distance learning lessons because they were given household chores and childcare responsibilities. Odhiambo, (2020) asserts that school closures harmed girls across the world; Girls faced barriers to accomplish their studies, because schools protected girls from being abused.

Educational strategies used in Kenya during school closure, was also applied in Sierra Leone during the Ebola epidemic. The government announced the use of distance learning during school closure, but these side-lined students in rural areas who did not have access to radio/television and other ICT facilities like internet (Jaramillo, 2020). This group was/is at greater risk of social exclusion compared to boys (Odhiambo, 2020). The closure of schools exposed them to the risk of sexual violence, female genital mutilation, pregnancies and early marriages, and extra restrictions from social expectations such as household responsibilities (UNESCO, 2020b & Jelimo, 2020).

In Uganda, the government announced closure of 51,000 schools from March 20, 2020 to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Tumwesige, 2020). The closure affected 15 million students in different levels of education including secondary schools. The WB has been supporting \$ 150 million for Ugandan Secondary Education Expansion Project (USEEP) which aimed at constructing 116 lower secondary day schools and additional classrooms in 61 secondary schools (Kulubya, 2020). The USEEP also aimed at equipping safe and conducive learning environments which is supportive to personal growth and increases retention for both girls and boys. It also includes special measures to reduce the occurrence of early pregnancies to girls and to assist young mothers to re-join lower secondary education (Kulubya, 2020). Schools protect girls from domestic violence, sexual abuse and exploitative work (Tumwesige, 2020).

Conclusion

The distress of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has been unparalleled. It has pushed the attainment of international education goals and largely affected those aimed at aiding girl's education. From the findings, this paper concludes that, the COVID-19 pandemic had a lot of impact on implementing the WB supported educational initiatives in East African countries. The distance approach which was offered did not engage them fully as it could be done on face-to-face teaching. This approach caused girls to engage and to be forced to early marriages, child pregnancies and to be responsible for household activities which caused them to abandon studies all together. The pandemic had a devastating effect on the practice and process of education as it clawed back on the gains that region had made such as improving retention and completion rates, all aimed at addressing equity and equality measures. It is now the responsibility of governments and the cooperating partners such as the World Bank cooperate in setting up new principles of ensuring that all students especially girls, who have dropped out schooling during the COVID-19 school closure re-gain their future education dreams. Educational officials and stakeholders should also continue finding tangible ways of meeting this goal-taking into consideration the "new norm" created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

The study recommended that there is a need for the World Bank to evaluate their initiatives and to find out how COVID-19 affected their programs. The evaluation report will help in finding possible strategies of implementing the educational interventions in East African countries during school re-open. Since it is evidenced that girls are the most affected by school closure, there is an opportunity to set up a learning structure that could create a room for girls to accomplish their studies. Moreover, through societal dialogue, the World Bank should apply functionalism theory of education strategy in making sure that the introduced initiatives for secondary school girls are implemented and attained their educational goals as planned. This will make girls to become a functioning part of the society.

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