COVID-19: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT IN GHANA

IMPACT ON GHANA'S EDUCATION

As of 6th May 2020, UNESCO estimated that 177 countries have closed schools nationwide, impacting over 1.2 billion learners globally, who are mainly children and youth. School closures in the context of COVID 19 have been necessary across the globe to slow the spread of the disease and mitigate the effects on health systems.

On the 15th of March, President Nana Akufo-Addo ordered the closure of all education institutions in Ghana, effecting some 9.2 million basic school students (kindergarten, primary and junior high schools) and 0.5 million tertiary education students.

By the 10th May, Ghana had recorded 4,700 confirmed cases of COVID-19. Health experts have predicted that there will be an upsurge in the number of confirmed cases in the coming weeks due in part to increased testing. This implies that the closure of the schools might extend to a longer period than expected.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lives of large numbers of students, teachers, and parents around the world, with millions now teaching and learning remotely from home. Although it is still early days, the pandemic is likely to have significant long-term effects on education.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ghana Education Service (GES) were quick to put in place measures aimed at ensuring opportunities for continuous learning even with schools closed. Soon after school closures were announced, MoE and GES announced the COVID-19 Emergency Support Provision of Distance and Remote Learning Systems Solutions, which was followed by the launch of distance and online learning platforms and the rolling out of lessons broadcast on Ghana Learning television (GLTV) for 1 million senior high school (SHS) students. Digital content developed for 8.2

Highlights

- Ghana was quick to put in place measures aimed at ensuring opportunities for continuous learning even with schools closed.

- Despite the achievements of the remote and distance learning platforms, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to these education services.

- Appropriate teacher training and effective coordination at national and local levels is required in addition to tools for continuous assessment of both teacher and learner performance through remote and distance platforms.

- It is important to identify opportunities within the COVID-19 response that allow for longer-term systemic changes in the sector.

- The development or enhancement of virtual capacity building activities for teachers is paramount.

- It is important to assess the roles and expectations of teachers and parents related to remote planning, teaching and learning.

- A strong focus on back-to-school strategies to prepare students and their families for the re-opening of schools is critical

million kindergarten (KG) through junior high school (JHS) students for TV, radio, and online learning is being launched from the third term.

Despite the achievements of the remote and distance learning platforms, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to these education

services. Many students and their families do not have access to the internet; indeed, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2017/18 indicates that only 22% of households in the country have access to the internet at home and only 15% have access to a computer. In comparison, TV coverage (60.4%) and radio coverage (57.2%) are much higher across the country, with radio coverage more widespread in those regions with higher levels of economic deprivation. In this context, internet and TV based learning serve to accentuate inequalities in access to quality education between the rich and poor and urban and rural students based on their ability to access the internet and TV platforms. Radio broadcasts become a much more equitable tool for reaching learners in more deprived areas.

Other factors affecting equity in access may include economic deprivations at household-level, lack of electricity, high illiteracy rates, lack of local language instruction, and lack of a supportive learning environment in general.   Even where television does exist, children may not have access to programmes during specified broadcast times. Crowding children around a single set may also contravene social distancing protocols. In multi-occupant households, it may be difficult to identify a specific and consistent space conducive to a child's learning.

Quality is another aspect of education service delivery that becomes more difficult to measure in the COVID response. A number of factors present ongoing challenges including: lack of appropriate teacher training for distance and remote teaching;

lack of assessment tools and mechanisms for measuring student learning through remote and distance modalities; insufficient parental understanding and engagement in remote/distance learning practices; and a mismatch of teacher skills for classroom delivery and virtual/remote service delivery.

Critical to achieving quality service delivery is the teacher. But classroom teachers trained and hired to interact daily face-to-face with students are not necessarily sufficiently trained or skilled at teaching remotely through on-line platforms that constrain direct interaction and limit visible cues that normally aid teachers in assessing learner understanding and acquisition in the classroom. Remote learning requires a different skills set and therefore different training for a teacher. Appropriate teacher training and effective coordination at national and local levels is required in addition to tools for continuous assessment of both teacher and learner performance through remote and distance platforms. To bridge the skills gap, a series of purposeful and targeted capacity building programmes for teachers and teacher trainers will be necessary particularly as the 25,000 teachers that are currently not working due to school closures re-engage with the learning processes of students.

Furthermore, the potential adverse effect of the COVID-19 school closures on vulnerable groups, particularly young girls, cannot be overstated. Female learners face increased vulnerability as violence, sexual violence, and teen pregnancy are positively correlated with school closures:

Out-of-School children benefit from Complementary Basic Education in Donkorkrom, Eastern Region (Photo: UNICEF Ghana/2020/Flores)

Students of Accra Girls Senior High School (Photo: UNESCO)

evidence from Liberia shows a sharp increase in teen pregnancy during the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016. In recent years, there have been a number of cases of drop-out due to pregnancy (7,575) among schoolgirls in Ghana and a long period of school closures could exacerbate this problem. Girls who do become pregnant during the time of school closures face multiple challenges to re-entry including stigma, marital expectations, child care, and economic demands of parenting.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 school closures are having an adverse effect on learners and educators. While distance education represents the most appropriate means for reaching students in this emergency period, there are challenges that must be addressed and measures to be taken to ensure that every child benefits from quality learning opportunities.

To this end, the following recommendations are made:

1. Identify opportunities within the COVID-19 response that allow for longer-term systemic changes in the sector. This pandemic has encouraged a greater multisectoral collaboration for a more effective response to its impacts and this can be leveraged for more coordination to support lifelong learning. In addition, the development of remote and distance teaching and learning materials provides opportunity to rethink curricula, teaching. and learning processes and the development of students' competencies.

2. The development or enhancement of virtual capacity building activities for teachers is paramount. This includes planning and delivery of lessons, as well as keeping connected with students to monitor their learning, especially through online platforms, TV or radio programmes. Strategic partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) and private sector operators dealing with remote work might be useful in this respect.

3. It is important to assess the roles and expectations of teachers and parents related to remote planning, teaching and learning.

4. At district-level, a good strategy will be to cluster and organize schools in a way that makes it easier for teachers to receive support from head teachers, coaches or school inspectors, on matters of methodology and- Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT)- pedagogic integration.

5. Targeted support for at-risk children (girls, children with disabilities, Complementary Basic Education (CBE) learners, refugees, low-income families, in remote rural areas, orphans/ survivors) should be implemented to ensure both protection and access to continuous learning including remedial programmes, learning materials for children with special needs, and incentives to ensure girls' re-entry.

6. A strong focus on back-to-school strategies to prepare students and their families for the re-opening of schools is critical including parent/ community sensitization and targeted support to the most vulnerable.

7. 'Build back better', should include ensuring that when schools re-open, they have satisfactory sanitation, handwashing, and water facilities, capacity building for teachers on how to recognize and refer learners who display symptoms of ill health, and health and disability screening at school-level.

By UNESCO, UNICEF