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POLICY BRIEF

Covid-19 and Education: Emerging Challenges and Way Forward

INTRODUCTION

The ban on social gathering was a key measure adopted by Ghana, as did almost all countries, to control the spread of COVID – 19. This included closure of all schools (pre-school and basic school, junior and senior high and tertiary institutions). As a result, more than 1.6 billion children and youth in 161 countries worldwide are out of school (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Ghana recorded its first COVID-19 case on 2nd March, 2020 and in response, the government announced a series of measures to help control the spread of the virus. Key among these measures was the ban on all social gatherings, which included closure of all schools and educational institutions in the country. This measure has revealed the stark inequalities that exist in Ghana's educational system.

The closure of schools has come along with diverse disruptions that are felt not just by the educational institutions, but also families as well as students. The closure of schools has necessitated home schooling and online teaching, which has

come as a shock to parents' productivity, children's learning, social life and general wellbeing. Almost all aspects of learning, teaching, and academic organisation have been required to move online, in response to social distancing protocols and to control the spread of the pandemic in Ghana. The interruptions caused by the closure of schools may not only last for the period of the lockdown but may have long term consequences on children's academic and physical wellbeing, institutional organisation as well as parents' productivity.

The Ministry of Education, for instance, launched television tutoring for senior high schools and radio broadcasting of junior high and primary lessons on 3rd and 13th April, 2020 respectively. These measures are, however, subject to availability of a television set, radio gadget and electricity in the household. Higher academic institutions have also put measures in place to facilitate their online teaching and learning. The University of Ghana, for instance, has provided Vodafone sim cards to all students, with a 5-gigabyte monthly data bundle. This is to enable students access the online learning platforms.

Despite these measures to strengthen the educational system, there are underlying challenges that can aggravate educational challenges in the country.



This brief outlines the effects of COVID-19 on the educational system, structure and management in Ghana. It specifically focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on children's physical wellbeing, especially in relation to the school feeding programme. The brief further looks at the effect on school organisation and parents' productivity and concludes with possible recommendations to sustain the educational system during the pandemic and beyond.

KEY ISSUES

It is estimated that about 138 countries have closed down schools (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020), which is impacting about 80% of children worldwide. Closure of schools has detrimental effects on children's nutritional health, and exacerbates existing inequalities.

In Africa and Ghana where many families live in poverty, schools are not only a place for learning, but a channel to receive healthy and nutritious meals (Van Lancker et al. 2020). There is evidence suggesting the positive link between school feeding programmes and improvements in students' academic performance. On the other hand, food insecurity has been associated with poor academic performance, and poses risks to children's physical and mental wellbeing.

The Ghana school feeding programme has improved students' academic performance, school enrolment and retention rates

over the years. Basic school enrolment for instance increased from 59.2% in 2003 to about 70% in 2008 after the introduction of the school feeding programme in 2005 (Awojobi, 2019). The closure of schools is likely to impact negatively on children's nutritional health. This is especially so for children belonging to households of the lower quintiles, since they may not be able to provide such meals for their children.

School closure also has the potential of widening the inequality gap, especially regarding academic outcomes. School closure cannot simply be compared to school vacations as learning is required to go on while at home during lockdown. Home learning however requires information and communication technology (ICT) tools, which are not readily available to children in poorer households. Such absolute reliance on ICT for learning is likely to widen the inequality gap because many children lack access to computers, tablets, smart phones and internet broadband, which are key tools for online learning. School closure therefore has a high tendency of raising household inequalities since children from poorer households may not have access to such technology tools and may therefore be stuck, while their counterparts from richer households carry on with their academics.

Again, home learning requires assistance, guidance and monitoring by parents and guardians, which is often only possible in households where parents or caretakers have formal education. In households where parents have no formal education, children are mostly left to be on their own, and in most cases loitering aimlessly about in the communities. In 2014, children with highly educated parents were about 23 percentage points more likely to be in school than children of parents with no education (Wolf, 2020).

Among all sectors, which so far have been mentioned to receive assistance from government as a form of cushion against the adverse economic effects of COVID-19, private schools are the least mentioned. Meanwhile, like many other countries around the globe, one of the major sectors hugely affected by this

pandemic is the private sector, including private educational institutions. Currently, due to the closure of schools, educational institutions are unable to receive any form of revenue at all for paying salaries of both teaching and non-teaching staff. This has led to the downsizing of staff in private schools, with many others only affording just about 50% of staff salaries.

Again, the closure of schools has not only affected productivity and wellbeing, but also academic organisation and assessment. Ghana seems to have made quite some progress in the educational sector in recent years, especially with the roll out of the Free Senior High School Policy. The lockdown period is likely to totally disrupt the double track system, which was instituted to bridge the gap between Senior High School (SHS) educational opportunity and the existing limited infrastructure.

Currently in Ghana, educational progression is mainly dependent on examinations. Therefore, the closure of schools, which coincided with key academic assessments, has required for assessments to either be postponed or be moved online on a trial and error basis. Many internal assessments (end of term exams), which are relatively easier to manage, have simply been cancelled or moved online. This makes it difficult for academic institutions to provide any information about the progress of students. Again, this impacts heavily on households, as students may be required to repeat classes, in order to prepare them well for exams.

Impact on economic productivity of parents

One significant effect the closure of schools has had on households in Ghana is that, parents are required to provide care for children who are at home because of school closure, and at the same time be at work. This affects parents in two ways, namely a likely decrease in productivity and increase in household expenditure. In some instances, parents are required

to rotate staying home to care for the children. In other instances, parents are compelled to take children with them to their respective workplaces. Yet in other instances, some parents are forced to take the risky decision of leaving children home by themselves, and only checking on them through phone calls.

In the case of older children who can take care of themselves, while parents may not be burdened with the responsibility of the care of the child, there are likely to be increases in household expenditure. For instance, increased electricity bills, increased data and internet consumption. Each of the scenarios described above creates divided attention for parents at work, which is

likely to reduce productivity, coupled with the increased expenditure that comes with it.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As difficult as change is, it is important to acknowledge new situations and take advantage of the opportunities they bring. The Covid-

19 pandemic, with all its negative consequences, serves as an eye opener, drawing attention to a lot of lapses in the Ghanaian educational sector. Addressing these lapses and responding to the changes requires the effort of all stakeholders (students, parents, educational institutions and government). To this end, the following recommendations have been proffered:

There should be stringent measures to strengthen the adoption and utilisation of technology in Ghana's educational system.

This should include building the capacity of teachers and instructors for virtual learning, as well as measures to ensure they have the infrastructure required to make this possible.

There should be a well laid out plan on how the state is going to respond to the needs of all students post lockdown.

This should include double track students, and measures to meet their academic needs with limited infrastructure. With regard to assessments and examinations, there is need for a clear-cut road

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map with specific timelines to guide students and all relevant stakeholders to plan accordingly.

The government can also cushion private schools by assisting them to secure financial assistance from both local and international institutions, at favourable terms. This will help in the paying of staff salaries and also keep them in operation.

There must be targeted support for vulnerable children, especially those from poorer households. This kind of support should include measures to ensure continuous and effective access to learning materials and programmes.

Provision of hot meals for children should be an all-year-round intervention and not a termly intervention. In this regard, meals should not only be provided for children when they are in school, instead meals should as well be provided to children in their homes during vacations. This strategy can also help to reduce child marriage, child labour and use of children for other economic activities during school vacations.

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