

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: IMPLCATIONS FOR SUBSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS IT CONCERNS PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic poses a threat to the economy and educational sector of nations. Countries are taking various measures to control the spread of Covid-19. As at 9th September, 2021, Nigeria had 197,773 confirmed cases, of which 9,591 were active cases and 185,597 discharged cases. The country has recorded 2,585 fatalities. To contain the spread of the virus and promote social distancing in Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education directed the closure of all institutions, which lasted for over four months (23rd March 2020- 4th August, 2020). This paper aims to discuss the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on an already battered Primary Education sector in Nigeria. Reputable organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC) and researchers as well as information obtained from the media provided data for the study. The findings revealed that Nigeria education system has been affected by corona virus pandemic through disruptions in academic programme, impacts on online classes, impacts on parents, and leaving more kids behind and loss of access to vital school-learning. The study recommended amongst others that governments and education stakeholders should immediately implement learning recovery programme to ensure that pupils who have fallen behind receive the support that they need to catch up to the expected learning target and integrate all public and private schools into online education.

Introduction

There is currently a serious Covid-19 pandemic that threatens the lives of all the people of the world. On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was informed of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, Peoples' Republic of China. This was subsequently confirmed as an outbreak of a new type of coronavirus, 2019 novel coronavirus (2019-ncov) by the National Health Commission, peoples' Republic of China and WHO (Puego, 2020). In response to the health emergency, on 30th January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (covid-19) a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) (WHO, 2020). As of 9th September, 2021, the number of global covid-19 confirmed cases was 222,406,582 and death toll was 4,592,934 (WHO, 2021). A total

of 5,352,927,296 vaccine doses were administered (WHO, 2021). In Africa, however, 5,777,044 cases were confirmed (WHO, 2021).

In Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Health announced the confirmation of the first case of coronavirus disease in Lagos, on 27th February, 2020. Since then, the number of cases has been rising steadily. As at 9th September, 2021; 2,884,034 samples had been tested in Nigeria; of which 197,773 were confirmed to be covid-19 positive. 185,579 victims were discharged and 2,585 fatalities recorded. (NCDC, 2021). Cases have been reported in all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with Lagos and FCT reporting the highest number of cases.

This study has become necessary due to the fact that the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the global educational system as most countries around the world had temporarily closed all educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic (Adeoye, Adanikin & Adanikin 2020).

In Nigeria, for instance, on 19th March, 2020 a circular from the Federal Ministry of Education granted approval for the closure of all schools for a period of one month with effect from Monday 23rd March, 2020 to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Each state in Nigeria contextualized this circular. Later in April 2020, a prompt assessment of the Covid-19 situation by the Federal Government of Nigeria led to the indefinite closure of all schools and learning facilities in the country (NCDC, 2020). On the 27th July, 2020, the Chairman of the Presidential Task force on Covid-19 (PTF-COVID-19) announced a further extension of phase two of the lockdown by one week. It was also announced that secondary schools would reopen from the 4th of August, 2020. However, this only applied to students in exiting classes ahead of the West African Examinations starting on the 17th of the August, 2020 (NCDC, 2020).

According to the report by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), the closure of the educational institutions impacted over 91 percent of the world's student population. The ripple effect of this pandemic was felt by both the educators and students in primary, secondary, colleges and universities as academic sessions were disrupted after the coronavirus was declared a public health emergency. That left many students, parents and educators in a rude shock (Adeoye, et al, 2020) as some of these institutions was at the point of preparing for examinations, admitting freshmen, or beginning of a new semester or term, amongst others.

Conceptual Clarification Coronavirus/Covid-19 Pandemic

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) coronaviruses are families that cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). These viruses were originally transmitted from animals to people. SARS, for instance, was transmitted from civet cats to humans while MERS moved to humans from a type of camel (WHO, 2020). Novel coronavirus, identified by Chinese authorities on 7th January 2020 and since named SARS-Co V2, is a new strain that had not been previously identified in humans. Little is known about it, although human-to-human transmission has been confirmed (WHO, 2020).

Countries around the world are struggling to halt the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. The Covid-19 was declared a global health emergency by the WHO on January 30th 2020; raising the alarm further on 25th March 2020 when it declared the crisis a pandemic.

Primary Education

Primary education is the education given to children aged 6-12 years. The objectives of primary education according to National Policy on Education (FGN, 2013) are to:

- a. Inculcate permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively,
- b. Lay a sound basis for scientific, critical and reflective thinking,
- c. Promote patriotism, fairness, understanding and national unity,
- d. Instill social, moral norms and values in the child,
- e. Develop in the child the ability to adapt to the changing environment; and
- f. Provide opportunities for the child to develop life manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capability.

In pursuance of these objectives; Primary education shall be compulsory, free, universal and qualitative. Elementary education covers grade one through six. Pupils are awarded the Primary School Leaving Certificate on completion of grade 6, based on continuous assessment.

COVID-19 and Sustainable National Development

The pandemic has had adverse impact on almost all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as socio-economic problems have worsened in most developing countries because of measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus (UNDP, 2020). Given the limited resources and fiscal space, the pandemic has pushed Nigeria into severe financial difficulties. The contraction of international trade, travel and domestic consumption, resulting from intervention measures adopted. These measures which include lockdowns, and suspension of economic activities, have suppressed tax revenues from consumption taxes on which most low to middle-income countries rely including Nigeria (Kapoor & Buiter, 2020; IMF, 2020). The decline in public revenues has caused unemployment, theft and other socio-economic issues to escalate. Also, as the health crisis demand huge financing to cushion the adverse health, economic and social consequences, SDGs financing gap has widened. (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020)

COVID-19 and Vaccination to Curb Fatalities

Vaccines save millions of lives each year. Vaccines work by training and preparing the body's natural defenses, the immune system, to recognize and fight off the virus and bacteria they target. After vaccination, if the body is later exposed to those disease causing germs, the body is immediately ready to destroy them preventing illness.

There are several safe and effective vaccines that prevent people from getting seriously ill or dying from Covid-19, in addition to the main preventive measures of staying at least one metre away from others, covering a cough or sneeze in your elbow, frequently cleaning your hands, wearing a mask and avoiding poorly ventilated rooms or opening a window

On 3rd June, 2021, WHO declared that the following vaccines against Covid-19 have met the necessary criteria for safety and efficacy; Astrazeneca/Oxford vaccine, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, Pfizer/BionTech, Sinopharm and Sinovac (WHO, 2021).

According to WHO, these vaccines are safe for most people 18 years and older, including those with pre-existing conditions of any kind, including auto-immune disorders. Children and adolescents tend to have milder disease compared to adults, so unless they are part of a group at higher risk of severe Covid-19. It is less urgent to vaccinate them than older people, those with chronic health conditions and health workers. As at 6th September, 2021,

Nigeria had accessed 5.18m doses of the vaccine and at least 3,600,858 persons had received 1 dose of the vaccine and 1,576,011 were fully vaccinated (NCDC, 2021).

Impact of COVID-19 on Primary Education

In order to control the spread of the novel coronavirus, the Nigerian Government immediately closed schools and colleges across the country after recording cases of Covid-19. It was announced in the third week of March 2020 as a temporary measure to avoid crowding, especially in public places. In this study, we examine some of the immediate and long-term impacts and consequences on an already weak Nigerian primary education system.

1. Missed Learning for a Whole Term: Schools were closed for the whole of third term 2019/2020 academic session. Pupils stayed at home learning nothing. Though some private schools offered online lessons to their pupils the public schools did nothing to keep the pupils busy throughout that period of closure. In Nigeria, school opportunity is correlated to income level, and public schools differ from private schools in the population 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 pupils from lower socio-economic households and low income areas. In cases where distance/online opportunities are available, uptake will be low from the pupils in the public school's category, as a result of poor infrastructures such as lack of electricity, or poor/or no internet connectivity, etc (Obiakor Adeniran, 2020).

This situation will exacerbate the already low quality of education in Nigeria. An assessment of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on quality of education is scary. According to Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller and Woelm (2020), the quality of education system offered is poor (it ranks low in terms of quality measures) as only 20 percent of the pupils that complete primary school can read a three sentence passage correctly or fluently, while insufficient funds, inadequate infrastructure and lack of materials by teachers significantly contribute to this. As a result, in the index employed to measure education performance, Nigeria's score fall far below, (Ozili & Arun, 2020). They indicate that given the school closure policy, the Covid-19 outbreak could be detrimental to the quality of education.

2. Loss of Access to Vital School-Provided Services: Pupils in Nigeria are also losing access to the daily meals supplied by the federally-funded school feeding programmes. Nigeria has one of the largest school feeding programmes in the world, with the World Food Programme (WFP) estimating that in 2019, Nigeria's home grown schools feeding initiative provided access to daily meals to over 9 million in over 40,000 public schools (WFP, 2019). The benefits of school feeding programmes extend beyond the immediate education benefits of meals provided, such as encouraging enrollment in schools and boosting learning. School feeding programmes yield larger socio-economic benefits for children, their families and society at large (Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020), two of which are pertinent to children of low socio-economic groups; boosting health and nutrition and providing social protection and safety nets.

3. Leaving More Kids Behind: A longer-term impact of these school closures would be deepened educational inequality. While some international development partners e.g. UNESCO have put together and provided access to ICT-based resources to boost learning, uptake will depend largely on the level and language accessibility (as most programmes are available in English or other non-native Nigerian languages) (UNESCO, 2020).

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 phones connections; however, of these 50 percent - around 84.5 million people reside in urban areas (The Next Web, 2020). 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 pupils 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 inequality 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 the school closures, these pupils would continue to fall behind. For pupils with learning disabilities, and those living in fragile and conflict-affected regions, the outlook is even bleaker.

4. Impact of Covid-19 on Online Classes on Parents: Parents were compelled to buy laptops or smart phones to enable their wards maintain the attendance or not miss out too much. Children were forced to continue their education at home online and generally had no time to play at home.

Bjorklund and Salvanes (2011) opine that major inputs into a child's learning are provided by the families as these are treated as central to education. Parents faced issues in understanding the new methodology of teaching. Some parents were not very techno friendly, thus they were not able to guide their wards to take classes online. Connectivity of the internet was also a big challenge for all the teachers, pupils and parents. Many hitches have to be faced due to poor connectivity (TNW, 2020).

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria and its attendant national lockdown of educational institutions has a major interruption in pupils learning and disruption in the academic programme. It has impacted negatively on online classes parents/pupils and has left more pupils behind. However, Covid-19 school closure is the crisis that has enabled us to identify some crucial sector wide gaps. It is therefore, imperative that the government creates a holistic contingency plan that goes beyond addressing school – based safety measures but also identifies ways to ensure learning continuity and provide support for both pupils and teachers during time of crises.

Recommendations

Based on the finding of the study, the paper made the following recommendations to ameliorate the harsh economic effect of Covid-19 pandemic on primary education.

- 1. Implement learning recovery programmes:** Governments and education stakeholders must ensure that pupils who have fallen behind receive the support that they need to catch up to expected learning targets immediately. The first step must be to carry out just-in-time assessments to identify those pupils or students and their support needs.

2. **Protect the education budget:** Given the significant financial strain that economics have been under during the pandemic, some countries may face budget cuts that could jeopardize access to education and improved learning outcomes. To ensure a resilient recovery, it is essential that the education budget be protected and that the schools that need financing the most are supported.
3. **Prepare for future shocks by building better facilities:** It is imperative that we not only recover from the pandemic but that we use this experience to become better prepared for future crisis. To achieve this aim, Nigeria needs to build capacity to provide blended models of education in the future. Schools should be better prepared to switch easily between face-to face and remote learning as needed. This is a huge task but is achievable if the political will is there. This will protect the education of pupil not only during future pandemics, but also during other shocks that might cause school closures such as natural disasters or adverse weather events.
4. Curriculum planners should develop flexible curricula that can be taught in person or online.
5. Teachers should be better equipped to manage wide range of information technology devices in the event of future school closures. Offering short training courses to improve their digital skills will help.
6. With Covid-19 experience, there is every need for all tiers of government in Nigeria to improve on health and sanitation. Modern health facilities should be procured to mitigate the effect of other contagious diseases in future.

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