



Brief #7: 15 May 2020

THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN THE GAMBIA

INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the sectors of the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in The Gambia. This is connected to the fact that half of The Gambia's population are children. More than 674,300 school children and nearly 20,000 adolescents and youths in tertiary and higher education have had their education and training interrupted since 18 March 2020 due to closure of the schools, and their right to education and skills development is threatened. More than 223,657 children who are directly benefiting from the school feeding programme are not any more accessing it. School meals were indeed the most reliable meal for many children.

Furthermore, COVID-19 has exacerbated the fragility of The Gambia Education Sector and threatens to backslide the gains made in the past years especially in school enrolment for girls. The proportion of children, adolescents and youths not in education and training has drastically surged. The gains made in girls' education by attaining gender parity in primary and lower secondary are at the risk of sliding back. Long-term school closure could lead to permanent dropout for adolescent girls and some other vulnerable groups with possible consequences on child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence. Under COVID-19 restrictions, children have more time with parents and family members. This new experience puts more pressure on both children and caregivers thus having the potential to create a stressful situation leading to abuse and violence in homes.

The Gambia like many Sub-Saharan African countries is in a learning crisis. In The Gambia, according the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2018, the percentage of children aged 7-14 years who demonstrate foundational reading skills is 11.2 per cent. The World Bank calls it learning poverty, wherein children of age 10 years cannot read simple text. With fewer children accessing alternate forms of curriculum delivery through radio and television, the learning crisis will become a bigger challenge which would require many years for catch up, if it even happens for some children.

STATUS OF THE EDUCATION SECTOR IN THE GAMBIA

The Government of The Gambia has long been committed to education identifying investing in people through improved education, health services and a caring society as one of the strategic priorities of the National Development Plan 2018-2021. The country has four levels of education: (i) basic education, (ii) senior secondary education, (iii) tertiary education and (iv) higher education.



The Gambia Education Sector is managed by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) and the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Research Science and Technology (MoHERST). Their respective mandates are clearly specified in the names.

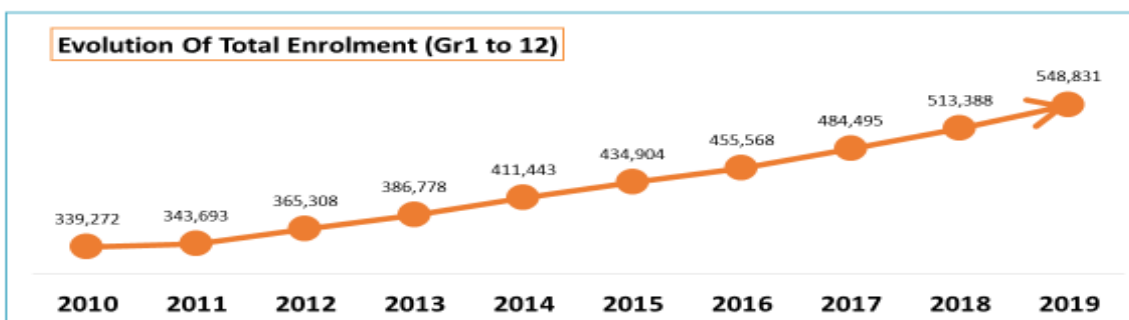
Service delivery in the Education Sector is either directly done by Government agencies and departments; through grant-aided faith-based institutions; or through the private service providers. Prior to the school closure due to COVID-19, the academic year was on track. Many more children could access basic and secondary education due to the School Improvement Grant. The School Improvement Grant exempts public funded schools from levying fees and user-charges. However, fees and user charges continued to be a major access barrier to tertiary and higher education for many adolescents and youths, amidst low national budget allocation for the Education Sector. It must be noted that larger proportion of Government budget is spent on personnel emoluments leaving very little for sector improvement and development.

Data shows that school enrolment had been growing progressively from 2010 to 2019. This is positive in terms of children’s right to education. The challenge is matching the increased enrolment with the appropriate quality standards in learning outcomes.



Global Evolution of Enrolment

Evolution of Enrolment by Education Level					2018 --> 2019	
Level	2016	2017	2018	2019	Level	Growth Rate
Lower Basic	308,729	329,828	350,323	374,962	LBE	7.0%
Upper Basic	90,838	94,357	98,108	104,554	UBE	6.6%
Senior Sec.	56,001	60,310	64,957	69,315	SSE	6.7%
Total	455,568	484,495	513,388	548,831	Total	6.9%



Source: Presentation at MoBSE Coordinating Committee Meeting (April 2019)¹

¹ The Coordinating Committee Meeting (CCM) of MoBSE is held every two months from October to June of the following year. It provides a platform for updating and monitoring implementation of the education sector programme.



The COVID-19 closure of schools and educational institutions means:

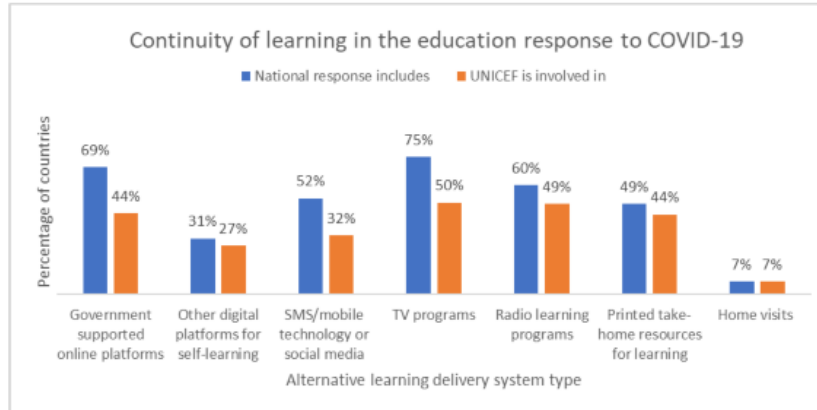
- 674,300 children in pre-primary to senior secondary school levels are temporarily out-of-school. This is accompanied with increased level of exposure to abuse and exploitation.
- 223,657 children who are directly benefiting from the school feeding programme are not accessing it anymore and it is the most reliable meal for many of them.
- Thousands of children who were prepared to sit for critical examinations at Grades 9 and 12, in less than two months before the COVID-19 school had their hopes dashed. These children now have no idea when these examinations will happen.
- More than 5,691 teachers in the private schools have their jobs at risk as a result of COVID-19 school closure. The private schools rely on fees collected to keep the teachers' jobs. Already some private providers are having difficulties meeting their financial obligations to teachers in terms of salary payments.
- The low completion rates at lower secondary school (59%) and senior secondary school (41.9%) are at the risk of sliding back further if the school closure is protracted.

The longer school remains closed, the bigger the impact on learning outcomes and children's right to education. Social crisis relating to adolescents and youths as a result of having too much unutilized time can lure them into engaging in petty crimes and other risky behaviors. Furthermore, more will be at the risk of dropping out of school altogether, and these are likely to be the most vulnerable – children from poor income households, children with disabilities and adolescent girls negatively impacting SDG progress in the country and leaving no one behind.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR FROM COVID-19

- Globally, 1.58 billion children in 191 countries², representing approximately 90.2% of total enrolled learners, are directly affected by national school closures.
- Over 128 million children and youth are directly affected by nationwide school closures in West and Central Africa (all 24 countries closed schools).
- On continuity of learning, 90 per cent of countries (111 of 124) remain focused on continuity of education with 75 per cent using TV as the main channel for alternate learning. Most countries use about three channels including TV, radio and a digital platform as an alternative.

² <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>



TV (93 countries) continues to be the main channel for **alternate learning**.

64 per cent (79 countries) are **monitoring** at least one priority [reach, uptake, learning] on alternate learning.

65 per cent (70/108) are reaching **marginalized children**.

Source: UPDATE 7: GLOBAL EDUCATION UPDATE ON RESPONSE TO COVID-19 [21 April 2020]

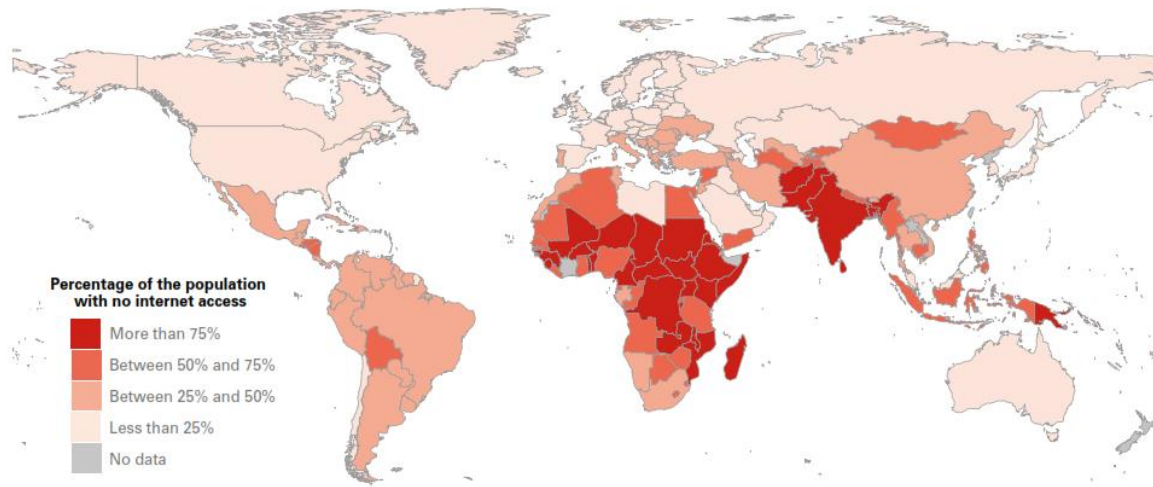
- The UNICEF Office of Research released research briefs exploring the impact of COVID-19 on education, e.g. briefs on *Parental engagement of children's learning*³ and the *Promising Practices for Equitable Remote Learning*⁴
- UNICEF and Microsoft announced the global scale-up of the Learning Passport platform to enable remote learning. (<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-and-microsoft-launch-global-learning-platform-help-address-covid-19-education>)
- The Global Partnership for Education (GPE⁵) stepped up with a US\$250 million COVID-19 Accelerated Funding for its Development Partner Countries. The Gambia is qualified to apply for US\$5 million under this grant. The application is currently under consideration.
- There is increasing global concern to keep schools safe, meeting minimum standards for water, sanitation and hygiene in preparation for the reopening of schools when the restrictions of COVID-19 are either lifted or eased.

³ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-09.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB%202020-10.pdf>

⁵ The GPE is a partnership and a fund that helps the most vulnerable children in about 70 partner developing countries to get a quality education. It mobilizes investments, both external and domestic, to help governments build stronger **education** system.

Figure 1: The Digital Divide: Percentage of population with no internet access



Source: ITU, Datareportal.com (latest data from 183 countries, 2015–2019).

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Globally, COVID-19 presents itself as not only a health emergency but also an education one too. More than ever before unprecedented numbers of children are out-of-school and across so many countries. Also, it has widened existing inequities, where access to education dependent on access radio, TV, electricity or internet connectivity.

DEVELOPMENTS IN EDUCATION SECTOR FROM COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN THE GAMBIA

The immediate fears of the COVID-19 outbreak in The Gambia on the education sector is that it will hamper the significant SDG progress attained especially in Goals 4 and 5 while also exacerbating the existing inequalities in education. According to the 2019 Human Development Report, The Gambia has the highest inequality in education in Africa⁶. This can only be made worse by the closure of schools and technical and vocational education & training (TVET) institutions around the country that will leave many of The Gambia’s majority youth population without the means, access or skills to live a dignified life or earn a reasonable livelihood.

⁶ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>



Education is essential for lifting people out of poverty and without it, many people are left vulnerable to remain or fall back into the poverty trap, already too high in the country at 48.6 percent.

Following the Presidential order that all schools and education institutions be closed, the MoBSE with support from the Local Education Group (LEG), initiated a process that will ensure continuity of learning and defining the overall response strategy of the Education Sector to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following are some of the key developmental initiatives and accomplishments towards the COVID-19 response in the Education Sector:

- The Local Education Group supports the **development of the Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy**. The strategy envisions a three-phase response. In phase 1 it considers a school closure of not more than one month; phase 2 covers a scenario where schools will be closed for several months; and phase 3 is when COVID-19 is over and schools reopen, or schools reopen with adaptation strategies of living with COVID-19. The strategy is now approved by the Ministry and linked to the National COVID-19 Response Plan.
- The Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy intends to **continue the school meals service during the school closure period**. Items will be delivered directly to children's households. Before the COVID-19 school closure 135,897 children had access to food through Government funding and 87,760 children through WFP funding.
- Mass **home-based schooling** is an uncharted territory for The Gambia Education System. COVID-19 extended the frontiers of channels of delivering the school curriculum to all children. For the first time radio and television are the main channel of delivering the school curriculum rather than face-to-face in the classrooms. The Sector understands that alternative modes of curriculum delivery cannot fully replace face-to-face classroom interaction. Therefore, the radio and TV lessons are continuously adjusted based on learning and comments from the end-users. The initial feedback showed that the subjects offered do not meet every child's needs; access is curtailed in some areas because of weak radio or TV coverage; children have no way to ask questions to the lesson presenters leaving them in more difficulties.
- To strengthen the technical support provided to the Education Sector for the COVID-19 response, the MoBSE set a **cross-sectoral technical working group** that meets regularly and helps in developing technical documents. The group elaborated the Education Sector COVID-19 Response Strategy and is currently working on developing a protocol for the safe re-opening of schools. There was a sub-working group on school meals, bearing in mind that more than 223,657 children are fed daily through school meals.
- UNICEF uses the **U-Report platform** to support the MoBSE to secure indicative feedbacks from radio and TV lessons end-user students. The first poll results show that although 3,121 U-Reporters received information about the distance learning only 2,146 (69%) participated

through radio and TV. Furthermore, regional disparities exist with KMC registering the highest participation (62.53%) and URR with the lowest (50.33%). A second poll running 8 – 12 May 2020 focused on assessment of school children’s perspectives and demands in relation to school re-opening following the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The LEG is supporting the **resource mobilization efforts** for The Gambia to access the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) COVID-19 Accelerated Funding of US\$5 million. The programme documents were reviewed and endorsed by the LEG and then submitted to GPE.
- Despite the availability of a response strategy, **funding is still a major challenge**. No central government allocation to the COVID-19 education response has been disclosed. However, the MoHERST received some funding to support Gambian students studying overseas. MoBSE mobilized internal resources to start the radio and TV lessons, and LEG partners are contributing to the continuation of the lessons and the provision of WASH supplies in preparation for the safe reopening of schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the education sector is fragile and extremely vulnerable to shocks. COVID-19 has exposed the structural inequities in education thereby increasing vulnerabilities and marginalization; and the inadequate national capacity to deliver education services leaving no child, adolescent or youth behind. It is urgent that a better, stronger and functional coordination system should exist between the two Ministries of Education.

Whilst the Education Sector looks forward to the reopening of schools and resumption of normalcy, the recommended actions are categorized under short-, medium-, and long-term.

Short-term (0 – 3 months)

- **Continue to support the home-based learning** through radio and TV by providing the necessary technical support and resources. Since some children, especially those in hard to reach areas and with disabilities, may not have access radio and TV lessons. Domestic chores and other types of labor create barriers to radio and TV lessons. There is need to develop and disseminate printed learning materials to children through Regional Education structures to complement the distance learning services. Monitoring and reviewing feedback on the radio and TV lessons will also need to be strengthened through collect and data implementing catch programmes.
- Develop safe **school protocols** that will provide psycho-social training for schoolteachers and school management committees to make all schools safe for the resumption of learning as well as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) standards.
- Government **to consider a financial package to support private schools** at the risk of not meeting their obligation to pay teachers’ salaries. Since such schools are not collecting school-fees now, it is obvious that government’s support will save them from collapse.



Medium-term (less than 6 months)

- The need to **support the capacities of communities to drive and sustain change** is a key lesson learnt from COVID-19. More children would have fully taken part in the radio and TV lessons if the parents and community leaders were fully on board. Instead, many families saw the COVID-19 school closure as an opportunity to access extra labor in their houses or on their fields.
- **Resume the school meals programme** to bring back its benefits in term of availability of a reliable meal for children, reduction in absenteeism and lateness relating to food, and improving children's participation in classroom activities. Before the COVID-19 school closure, 135,897 children had access to food through Government funding and 87,760 children through WFP funding
- Protracted school closures in many parts of the whole exposed children, adolescents and youth to neglect, abuse and exploitation of various kinds. There would be a need **to provide psycho-social support to the affected individuals** and to strengthen community structures and networks to prevent such neglect, abuse or exploitation.
- COVID-19 is also likely to affect **children's early development**. Absence of a stimulating environment due to lockdown, limited physical activities and lack of proper food intake and nurturing care can have immediate and long-term impacts on children's development. The Early Childhood Development programmes need to be strengthened to provide safer play and learning space for children.
- Children should be supported to drive their own development and that of their communities. It would be necessary **to support child-led groups to motivate and drive action** in improving learning outcomes, public health awareness, safe school agenda and community participation.

Long-term (beyond 6 months)

- Primarily, in the long-term COVID-19 should be use advance the **humanitarian-development nexus** through strengthening systems, developing risk-informed programmes, engaging community participation, planning and preparing for emergencies, fostering partnerships and mobilizing vital resources.
- During this phase the pre-occupation should be around **building resilience through system strengthening and capacity building** to deliver education services of certain minimum standards especially during emergency. These will include but not be limited to:
 - ✓ Upgrading the distance learning programme through radio and TV as a complement and a viable alternative to the face-to-face classroom-based medium
 - ✓ Significantly invest in digital connectivity of schools and ensuring that all curriculum materials are uploaded and accessible through the internet.



- ✓ Explore corporate partnership to enable all schools and learning institutions to have access to affordable and reliable internet connectivity.
- ✓ Institutionalize real-time data collection.
- Strengthen the **education sector inter-ministerial coordination system** for better planning and service delivery, subscribing to one education sector policy and plan.
- Improving quality learning and relevant life and livelihoods skills – especially at the post-secondary level.
- In the same vein, provide support to strengthening non-formal and adult education – the national adult literacy rate is 55 percent.

NEXT STEPS

For every child, parent, education sector personnel and society at large the burning question is when and how will schools and educational institutions be reopened. The following are critical next steps to guide the re-opening of schools in The Gambia:

Building an inter-Ministerial and inter-sectoral partnership to drive the safe school agenda. This will require development of SOPs and standards, provision of safety nets for the most vulnerable and the reducing the dropout rate and impact of COVID-19 on children. It is equally important to allow children and teachers to get education in a safe and protective environment.